

Life Under Communism in Eastern Europe

After World War II, communists took control of eight Eastern European nations. Communism in these countries ended democracy, made limited economic and social progress, and finally collapsed.

At the end of the war, Eastern European countries had been devastated. Millions had been killed. Famine threatened the survivors. Unemployment and inflation demoralized the people. The Nazis and the Soviet Union had wiped out the pre-war democratic leadership. National communist parties moved quickly to fill the political vacuum.

The communists promised the people of Eastern Europe a new era of equality and economic plenty under a socialist system. Helped by Stalin, most East European communist parties made temporary alliances with non-communists until gaining control of government power centers like the national police.

The communists who had fought the Nazis in Yugoslavia and Albania were the only ones to use military force to seize power. By 1948, with the occupying Soviet Red Army always in the background, the communists had taken over the governments of eight Eastern European countries.

The communists swiftly established "People's Democracies" in Poland, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, Albania, and Czechoslovakia. Eastern Germany was at first a Soviet military occupation zone, but soon became the German Democratic Republic under German communist party rule.

Stalin wanted Eastern Europe under his thumb both as a defense buffer to protect the Soviet motherland and to expand socialism, the communist economic system. He believed that "scientific laws" of history determined that the world would eventually become socialist. The Soviet Union had already developed a socialist system. Stalin, therefore, demanded that all the communist countries of Eastern Europe adopt the Soviet model.

The Stalinization of Eastern Europe began. The communist party in each country held a complete monopoly of political power. This permitted no independent political parties, no meaningful elections, and no criticism of the ruling communist party. Ultimately, the lack of political accountability to the people led to communism's collapse in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union itself.

Stalin imposed a socialist economic model. The government, in the name of the people, owned the factories, farms, mines, and other means of production. People could no longer own their own profit-making businesses and farms, as in the capitalist system. Government economic planners decided what and how much should be produced each year, what the prices should be, and what wages should be paid to the workers.

Following Stalin's model, planners emphasized heavy industry such as steel making and coal mining. Consumer goods like automobiles, clothing, and TVs became scarce and expensive. The government guaranteed everyone the "right to work," but this often meant a low wage doing a dirty job.

With the emphasis on industrial production, smoke billowed from factories and industrial waste flowed into rivers. Pollution became a major problem, but little was done about it. Factory managers were under pressure to meet production quotas. Consumers demanded more goods. Planners mainly ignored environmental problems.

In most countries, the government took over privately owned farms. It combined them into large, state-owned agricultural enterprises or cooperatives where farmers shared the land and equipment. Eastern European farmers often resisted this collectivization of agriculture, but the communist governments applied special taxes and denied health benefits to force them to comply.

In 1956, Hungarians revolted against their communist regime. The Soviet Union invaded Hungary and brutally put down the revolt.

The Hungarian Revolt shocked Eastern European communist leaders, forcing most to enact economic reforms. The reforms placed more emphasis on producing consumer goods, eased up on farm collectivization, and even allowed some private free enterprise.

Economic and Social Conditions

By 1980, economic reforms had somewhat improved the standard of living in most countries in Eastern Europe. In general, Eastern Europe (except for Romania and Albania) had a higher standard of living than the Soviet Union. Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and East Germany had the highest standard. But even these countries still fell way behind the West.

A small minority of people were members of the Communist Party. They held almost every important government post. They also enjoyed many privileges such as better housing and special access to Western consumer goods. Others "voted with their feet" and fled their homelands. Some risked open dissent. Most Eastern Europeans, however, conformed to life under communism.

Shortages of goods constantly occurred. Even when in stock, there was little variety of goods. Often there was only one type of laundry soap, one flavor of ice cream, and one

kind of coffee. But most families owned a television set and a washing machine. Many owned cars. But cars and appliances required long waits.

In fact, lines were a part of daily life. Shopping was an ordeal, especially in the Soviet Union. Every day, women would go from shop to shop to get items. It is estimated that a Soviet woman spent two hours in line every day, seven days a week. Shoppers paid in cash. People did not have credit cards, charge accounts, or checking accounts.

In the workplace, almost everyone had a job. Wages, however, lagged far behind those in the Western democracies. A common joke was, "They pretend to pay us, and we pretend to work." But rents, goods, and services were far cheaper than in the West.

Most industrial workers belonged to labor unions. But the unions were run by the government mainly to help factory managers achieve their production goals. Farmers resented having to give up their land and work for the government on collective farms. Many left to work in city factories for higher pay or better working conditions.

Housing, built mainly by the government or group cooperatives, was always in short supply. Often, two or three generations of a family lived in a three-room apartment. Newlyweds usually had to wait years for a small apartment of their own. But everyone had a home. Homelessness was not a problem.

Public transportation was affordable and extensive. Most cities had a web of subway, streetcar, and bus lines that carried people everywhere in the city. Railroad transportation between cities was also low priced. Officials, however, forbid travel outside the Eastern bloc.

The government subsidized entertainment. The government paid the salaries of theater companies and athletes. Box office prices were low. Everyone could afford to go to the theater, movies, the opera, the ballet, or sporting events.

Universal public health systems ("socialized medicine") covered everyone. The government and state-owned businesses paid the costs of doctors, health clinics, and hospitals. As a result, the health of the population generally improved. The quality of health care, however, still fell short of that provided by public health systems in most Western European nations.

The communist governments offered many benefits for child care. They provided paid maternity leave, grants of money for childbirth, monthly childcare allowances, and low-cost pre-school.

All education--from elementary school through college--was free. The government in most Eastern European countries required all children to attend school until age 16. At the end of the eighth grade, they entered high schools. Students who wanted to go to special language or science schools took exams for entry. As in most Western European countries, a government education ministry created a uniform curriculum taught in all the

schools. Entrance exams and students' high school records determined admission to the state universities. By the 1980s, illiteracy had been eliminated in most Eastern European countries.

All Eastern European countries established a social security system. It included government health insurance, welfare services, and pensions. In most countries, men could retire as early as 60; the retirement age for women was generally a few years earlier.

The rate of violent crime was low. The streets were safe. But crimes of corruption, such as bribery, flourished. People paid off officials and even shop clerks to get ahead in line or get an item in short supply. Theft was a problem for items that were in short supply. For example, car owners routinely removed their windshield wipers when they parked their cars. Otherwise, the wipers might be stolen and replacement parts were hard to find.

Human Rights

Under the communist systems of Eastern Europe, the "collective interest" of the people, as determined by the communist party, overcame any claims to individual rights. Thus, the government harshly suppressed freedom of speech, press, and assembly. The government licensed newspapers, other media, and even churches in order to control them. The practice of religion was discouraged.

The communist regimes established civil and criminal court systems. In most cases, the trial courts consisted of one professional judge and two citizen "assessors," not specifically trained in the law. Public prosecutors acted as defenders of the state, public defenders, and prosecutors of crimes. They, like the judges and assessors, were accountable only to the government officials who appointed them. The officials, of course, belonged to the communist party.

A fair trial might take place if the communist party had no interest in it. But otherwise the system was stacked against those accused of crimes. Defendants could be charged with political or economic crimes. The crime of "economic sabotage" included such offenses as failing to achieve a factory production quota. The courts vigorously prosecuted anyone dissenting against communist-party rule. As in the Soviet Union, Eastern European countries weeded out those suspected of disloyalty. This happened in "show trials," where the government forced defendants to confess their supposed crimes.

All the Eastern European countries established extensive secret police organizations. Soviet "advisors" occupied key command positions in each of them. Moreover, secret police agents from the Soviet Union worked throughout Eastern Europe and could arrest anyone.

The German Democratic Republic's State Security Service (called the Stasi) was probably the most terrifying secret police organization in Eastern Europe. Official documents stated that the Stasi was "entrusted with the task of preventing or throttling at

the earliest stages--using whatever means and methods may be necessary--all attempts to delay or hinder the victory of socialism." By 1989, the Stasi employed about 100,000 people.

The Stasi kept files on an estimated 6 million people. Stasi agents regularly used phone taps, bugging devices, and video cameras to spy on their fellow citizens and even on the Stasi itself. A huge number of informers passed on information and rumors about their neighbors, fellow workers, and relatives. Even church ministers sometimes informed on members of their congregations. A climate of fear chilled the daily lives of the people.

The Collapse of Communism

Communist rule in Eastern Europe depended on Soviet military support. The Soviet Union intervened militarily in Hungary in 1956 and again in Czechoslovakia in 1968. Even under this threat, the people of Eastern Europe increasingly complained about their lack of political freedom and the failure of socialism to bring their standard of living up to that of the Western capitalist democracies.

Starting in the early 1970s, Polish workers joined food riots and called strikes that led to the formation of Solidarity, a nation-wide pro-democracy movement. After the reformer Mikhail Gorbachev took power in the Soviet Union in 1985, even the Russian people began to demand radical changes.

By the late 1980s, it became clear that the Soviet Union would no longer use its military to keep the Eastern European communist parties in power. People had lost all faith that the communist system could deliver a better way of life. In 1989, people everywhere in the region took to the streets and overturned the communist regimes one after another. In a matter of months, the system imposed on the countries of Eastern Europe by Stalin for 40 years disappeared as if it were a bad dream. Two years later, even the communist system in the Soviet Union collapsed.

For Discussion and Writing

1. Compare the rights people had under communism in Eastern Europe with the rights people have in Western democracies.
2. What do you think were the best and worst aspects of life under communism?
3. Do you think a socialist economic system could be compatible with a democratic political system? Why or why not?

Life Under Varying System

1. Fill out the chart below as completely as you can.

	ADVANTAGES	DISADVANTAGES
Democratic political system		
Capitalist economic system		
Communist political system		
Socialist economic system		

2. Answer the following questions:

- a. What is the greatest advantage of democracy? Why?

- b. What is the greatest disadvantage of democracy? Why?

- c. What is the greatest advantage of capitalism? Why?

- d. What is the greatest disadvantage of capitalism? Why?

- e. What is the greatest advantage of communism? Why?

- f. What is the greatest disadvantage of communism? Why?

- g. What is the greatest advantage of socialism? Why?

- h. What is the greatest disadvantage of socialism? Why?