

## Spread of Communism after 1900

*The road after the revolution will be longer, the work greater and more arduous.*

—Mao Zedong, 1949

**Essential Question:** How did communism and land reform affect China and other countries?

**T**he Cold War provided the context in which many countries wrestled with the legacies of their past. The combined heritage of feudalism, capitalism, and colonialism often resulted in societies with a small class of powerful landowners and a large class of peasants who owned little or no land. When socialists or communists sought to make more people into landowners, they got caught up in the U.S.-Soviet ideological battle. **Land reform** was a vital issue in China, Iran, Vietnam, Ethiopia, India, and a number of Latin American countries, including Mexico, Bolivia, and Venezuela.

### Communism in China

In China, the Communists and the Nationalists began fighting for control of the country in 1927. However, after the Japanese invaded, the two sides agreed to focus on fighting them instead of each other. (See Topic 7.5.)

**Victory by the Communists** After the defeat of the Japanese in 1945, the Chinese Civil War resumed. The Communists, led by **Mao Zedong**, won popular support because they redistributed land to peasants, opened schools and hospitals, and punished soldiers who mistreated civilians. Peasants saw the Communists as more nationalist and less corrupt than the Nationalists. In 1949, the Communists defeated the Nationalists and set up the People's Republic of China. Mao ordered the nationalization of Chinese industries and created five-year plans based on the Soviet model. Like the Soviets, the Chinese plans emphasized heavy industry instead of consumer goods.

**Great Leap Forward** In 1958, China went through more land reform as part of the policy called the **Great Leap Forward**. Peasant lands were organized into **communes**, large agricultural communities where the state held the land, not private owners. Those who protested this policy could be sent to “reeducation camps” or killed.



Even though failing harvests caused severe food shortages, China continued to export grain to Africa and Cuba. Mao sought to convince the outside world of the success of his economic plans. Some 20 million Chinese died from starvation. By 1960, the Great Leap Forward was abandoned.



Source: Wikimedia Commons.

During the Great Leap Forward, China set up small-scale backyard steel furnaces. However, they produced steel of very poor quality, and the effort was dropped.

**Cultural Revolution** In 1966, Mao attempted to reinvigorate China's commitment to communism, an effort called the **Cultural Revolution**. In practice, the Cultural Revolution silenced critics of Mao and solidified his hold on power. Its impact on China was similar to the impact of Stalin's purges in the Soviet Union. Mao ordered the **Red Guards**, groups of revolutionary students, to seize government officials, teachers, and others and send them to the countryside for reeducation. Reeducation involved performing hard physical labor and attending group meetings where Red Guards pressured them to admit they had not been revolutionary enough.

**Relations with the Soviets** Although China and the Soviet Union were both communist states, they were often hostile to each other. From 1961 onward, the two countries skirmished over their border. They also competed for influence around the world. For example, Albania, a Soviet satellite, took advantage of the split by allying with China against the Soviet Union, thereby receiving more autonomy and additional financial aid from China.

## Turmoil in Iran

The modern country of Iran fell under foreign domination in the late 19th century. Britain and Russia fought to control the area. The competition grew even keener when oil was discovered in Iran in the early 20th century.

**Foreign Influence** Early in World War II, the leader of Iran considered supporting Hitler's Nazi regime. Determined not to let that happen, Russia and Britain invaded Iran. They forced the leader to abdicate power to his young



son, Shah **Muhammad Reza Pahlavi**. They kept their forces in Iran until the end of the war.

Iranian nationalists objected to the new shah as a puppet of Western powers. In 1951, they forced him to flee the country. Two years later, Iran selected **Mohammad Mosaddegh** as prime minister. He vowed to nationalize the oil companies. The United States and Great Britain engineered an overthrow of the democratically chosen Mosaddegh and returned the shah to power. The shah ran an authoritarian regime that relied on a ruthless secret police force.

**Land Reform in the White Revolution** Despite his harsh rule, the shah instituted several progressive reforms, known as the **White Revolution** because they came without bloodshed. They included recognizing women's right to vote, creating a social welfare system, and funding literacy programs in villages.

The most important reform dealt with land ownership. The shah wanted to undercut the power of traditional landowners and increase his popularity among peasants. Under his plan, the government bought land from landlords and resold it at a lower price to peasants. The program helped many peasants become first-time landowners, but it failed to reach a majority of peasants.

Many Iranians—both landowners who had been forced to sell their land and frustrated peasants who received nothing—opposed the land reforms. Religious conservatives opposed modernizing the country, particularly changing the relationship between men and women. Advocates for greater democracy opposed the shah's harsh rule.

**The Iranian Revolution** In 1979, a revolution toppled the shah. Many Iranians supported the revolution because they vividly remembered the overthrow of the Mosaddegh government in 1953. The leaders to emerge from the revolution, though, were ones who rejected the shah's secular worldview for one that viewed Islam as a key part of the individual-state relationship. The new government was a **theocracy**, a form of government in which religion is the supreme authority. The new government was headed by a cleric and a Guardian Council, a body of civil and religious legal experts who were responsible for interpreting the constitution and making sure all laws complied with shariah (Islamic law). The clergy had the right to approve or disapprove anyone who ran for office. Iran opposed Western policies in the Middle East and the state of Israel.

## Land Reform in Latin America

Throughout Latin America, leaders saw the concentration of land ownership as a barrier to progress. Hence, as countries freed themselves from colonialism, they considered land reform. Mexico's effort dates back to the 1930s, but much of the land reform in Latin America took place in the 1960s or later.

**Venezuela** In Venezuela, for example, the government redistributed some five million acres of land. Some of the land was state-owned and not previously under cultivation, while other pieces of land were seized from large



landowners. The land reform, begun with a 2001 law, was not popular with the landowners who claimed that the state seized their property while it was under cultivation. Additional problems arose from illegal squatters who moved in to settle on lands that were not scheduled for land reform. Land reform efforts had political repercussions as well; those who benefitted were more willing to vote for the government instituting the reforms, while those from whom land was confiscated tended not to support the states that seized it. Land reform in Latin America varied in its details in each country, shaped partly by environmental factors, partly by a legacy from colonialism, and partly by the ideology of the rulers instituting the reforms.

**Guatemala** A democratically elected government under Jacob Arbenz in the Central American country of Guatemala began efforts at land reform. Feeling threatened, the United Fruit Company lobbied the U.S. government to remove the Arbenz. In 1954, he was overthrown.



**Source:** Diego Rivera, *Glorious Victory*, 1954. Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow, Russia. Wikimedia Commons

The U.S. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles called the overthrow of Guatemala's government a "glorious victory for democracy." Diego Rivera used this phrase ironically for the title of his mural condemning the action. Rivera portrayed Dulles holding a bomb that featured the face of U.S. President Dwight Eisenhower.

## Land Reform in Asia and Africa

**Vietnam** During World War II, Japan occupied Vietnam, which France still claimed as a colony. At the end of the war in 1945, Vietnam declared independence from Japanese and French control. Vietnam was an agricultural society. A few people controlled most of the land. Communists vowed to seize land from the large landowners and redistribute it among the peasants. This pledge won them great support among peasants. When Communists took power in the north, they carried out their policies—sometimes violently. In South Vietnam, the government was slow to implement land reform, which was one reason it remained unpopular.



**Ethiopia** Other than a short period from 1936 to 1941 when it was under Italian occupation, Ethiopia had remained an independent country, but it suffered problems similar to those of many colonies. During World War II, exiled Ethiopian leader **Haile Selassie** returned to power. He aligned the country with the western powers after the war, and Ethiopia enjoyed economic success based largely on its coffee trade. This led to western-style political and cultural reforms. Selassie was unable to effectively implement land reforms in Ethiopia. By the 1960s, the country was souring on his leadership. Many people saw him as a pawn of U.S. imperialism.

In 1974, a group of military and civilian leaders deposed Selassie. One of the primary figures was **Mengistu Haile Mariam**, an Ethiopian native and major in the military. He ordered the assassination of 60 former regime officials. The new government declared itself socialist and received aid and weapons from the Soviet Union and other communist countries. Famine, failed economic policies, and rebellion marred Mengistu’s leadership. By 1991, he had resigned and fled to Zimbabwe.

**India** Southern Asia had been under British rule since 1858. That changed in 1947. Mahatma Gandhi had led the independence movement against England since the 1920s, but it wasn’t until after World War II that India became independent. India was partitioned in 1947, creating two countries: Pakistan and India. Pakistan was overwhelmingly Muslim, and India was largely Hindu.

Both countries struggled to establish their new relationship and economies. India undertook economic reforms. It instituted land reforms and tried to redistribute some land to the landless, abolish the overwhelming power of rent collectors, protect land renters, and promote cooperative farming. The results were mixed. However, in Kerala, a series of policies had some success:

- 1960: The state passed land reform, but they were overturned by courts.
- 1963: Tenant won the right to purchase land from landowners.
- 1969: New laws allow tenants to become full owners of land.
- 1974: Laws provide for fixed hours of work and minimum wages.

Despite the popularity of the land reform program, the Indian central government took direct rule of Kerala in order to slow down or reverse the program.

| <b>KEY TERMS BY THEME</b>   |  |   |
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| <p><b>SOCIETY:</b> Global<br/>land reform<br/>commune<br/>theocracy</p> | <p><b>GOVERNMENT:</b> Asia<br/>Mao Zedong<br/>Great Leap Forward<br/>Cultural Revolution<br/>Red Guards<br/>White Revolution</p> | <p><b>GOVERNMENT:</b> Middle East<br/>Muhammad Reza Pahlavi<br/>Mohammad Mosaddegh<br/>Haile Selassie<br/>Mengistu Haile Mariam</p> |