

What is Communism?

Grade Levels: 9-12

Time Commitment: 40 Minutes

Subject(s): World History, U.S. History, Civics/Government, Economics

Overview: Students will work in small groups to explore seven primary sources to create their own definition of Communism. The sources include excerpts from The Communist Manifesto, the Russian Revolution Decree on Land, Vladimir Lenin's The State and Revolution, Joseph Stalin's Five-Year Plan Speech, and more.

Materials:

- Student Handouts
- Smartboard or Projector (Optional)
- Printer
- Whiteboard/Chalkboard

Opener (10 Minutes):

1. Hand out the Activity Handout (Page 3). Have students individually write down their own definition of Communism on the sheet.
2. When everyone has finished their definitions, tell the students: "When the United States began engaging in the Cold War, they were fighting against the spread of Communism."
3. Ask:
 - a. What do you think Communism means? (Students should share what they originally wrote down).
 - b. What words come to mind when you hear "Communism"?
4. Write key responses on a board or giant sticky note. Tell students to take notes of responses in their Activity Handout (Page 3).

Activity (15 Minutes)

1. Divide the students into seven different groups.
2. Assign each group one of seven primary sources (Pages 4-10), and provide about five minutes for the groups to read and annotate their assigned primary source.
3. Provide five minutes for the students use their primary source to revise their answer to the opener question ("What does Communism mean?") in the Activity Handout (Page 3) and discuss as a group.
4. Students should select one spokesperson to share on behalf of the group during the closer.

Closer (15 Minutes)

1. Call on the spokesperson from each of the seven groups, and ask: "What does Communism mean according to your assigned document?" Add onto the key answers on the whiteboard.
2. Use the key answers to create a concise definition of Communism as a class, which the students can reference back to throughout future lessons.
3. As an exit ticket, ask students to write one "Pro" and one "Con" of Communism on a notecard to submit on their way out the door.

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Tips & Tricks for the Activity

- Some students likely need more guiding questions to fully understand these documents. In the opener, briefly introduce each of the seven sources by reviewing contextual information to help students better understand the speaker's point of view.
- If this is done with multiple classes, write each definition from each class onto giant sticky notes to post around the room, demonstrating each class's own definition of Communism.
 - From these class definitions, create a uniform definition that bridges common themes seen throughout the day.

Extension Activity Ideas

- Ask students to think of countries that are currently Communist or have been Communist in the past. Ask students: Do you know anyone from, or who has visited, these countries?
 - Encourage students to talk to older relatives, friends, or neighbors about their experiences with Communist countries. How is their experience in the United States similar or different to their time in a Communist country?
 - Ask students who are comfortable to share what they learned with the class.
- Ask students to consider: Why might some people think Communism is a good idea? Why do you think the United States fights against Communism?

Modified Activity Ideas

- Higher-level students can read entire key documents, such as the Northwest Ordinance, rather than short excerpts.
- If possible, group students who are new to the country together to read the United States Constitution as their assigned document.
 - High school students who attended U.S. elementary and middle schools have likely read these documents previously and could explore new sources.
- Define key words together, including bourgeois, totalitarian, and police governments.

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Activity Handout

Name: _____

Block: _____

What do you think Communism means? Reflect and answer in one or two complete sentences in the box below.

What words come to mind when you hear “Communism?” List at least three in the box below.

My group’s primary source is: _____

According to your primary source, what does Communism mean?

After reading your primary source, rewrite and revise your answer to “What does Communism mean“ in the box below.

As a class, come up with a definition of Communism. Write that final definition here.

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Primary Source Readings

READING #1: The Communist Manifesto

“The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles.

Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guild-master and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, a fight that each time ended, either in a revolutionary re-constitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes.”

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Primary Source Readings

READING #2: The Russian Revolution Decree on Land

“We maintain that the revolution has proved and demonstrated how important it is that the land question should be put clearly. The outbreak of the armed uprising, the second, October, Revolution, clearly proves that the land must be turned over to the peasants. The government that has been overthrown and the compromising parties of the Mensheviks and Socialist-Revolutionaries committed a crime when they kept postponing the settlement of the land question.”

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Primary Source Readings

READING #3: Vladimir Lenin's The State and Revolution

“The state is a product and a manifestation of the irreconcilability of class antagonisms. The state arises where, when and insofar as class antagonism objectively cannot be reconciled. And, conversely, the existence of the state proves that the class antagonisms are irreconcilable.

It is on this most important and fundamental point that the distortion of Marxism, proceeding along two main lines, begins.”

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Primary Source Readings

READING #4: Joseph Stalin's Five-Year Plan Speech

“The fundamental task of the five-year plan was to transfer our country, with its backward, and in part medieval, technology, on to the lines of new, modern technology.

The fundamental task of the five-year plan was to convert the U.S.S.R. from an agrarian and weak country, dependent on the caprices of the capitalist countries, into an industrial and powerful country, fully self-reliant and independent of the caprices of world capitalism.”

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Primary Source Readings

READING #5: Mao Zedong's On the People's Democratic Dictatorship

“Thus Western bourgeois civilization, bourgeois democracy and the plan for a bourgeois republic have all gone bankrupt in the eyes of the Chinese people. Bourgeois democracy has given way to people's democracy under the leadership of the working class and the bourgeois republic to the people's republic. This has made it possible to achieve socialism and communism through the people's republic, to abolish classes and enter a world of Great Harmony.”

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Primary Source Readings

READING #6: Nikita Khrushchev's We Will Bury You Speech

“If you don’t like us, don’t accept our invitations and don’t invite us to come see you. Whether you like it or not, history is on our side. We will bury you! ...

We tell representatives of capitalist countries: If you like, you can come and visit us; if you do not- you need not come. This will not upset us unduly. Coexistence is necessary to us all... We Leninists are convinced that our social order, socialism, will in the long run conquer capitalism. Such is the logic of the historical development of mankind.

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Primary Source Readings

READING #7: Winston Churchill's Iron Curtain Speech

“The Communist parties, which were very small in all these Eastern States of Europe, have been raised to pre-eminence and power far beyond their numbers and are seeking everywhere to obtain totalitarian control.

Police governments are prevailing in nearly every case, and so far, except in Czechoslovakia, there is no true democracy. Turkey and Persia are both profoundly alarmed and disturbed at the claims which are being made upon them and the pressure being exerted by the Moscow Government.”

This Lesson Plan was:

Created by Josie Bradshaw
2026 Summer Teacher Fellow
DCTI 2025 Participant