



# *The Basics of Communism*

For someone completely unfamiliar with the idea of communism and the forms that it took across the Eastern bloc in the 20th century, exploring the specifics of each country or the way that its ideology and execution changed in time has the potential to confuse rather than explain. Rather than go exhaustively through the specific details of how the communist period unfolded in Czechoslovakia and elsewhere, this pathway will examine certain key features of the communist regimes that generally applied across both decades and borders.

The four features we will explore are the centralization of power, the state's tendency to reach into its citizens' lives, resistance to communism, and the contested legacies that it left behind across the entire region. The clips presented take us across the different eras of Czechoslovak communism to paint a general picture of the forces that affected the lives of people living in communist regimes and the memories that those people are left with now.

1. „Friends from Moscow“
2. „Rewriting History“
3. „What We Don't Talk about“
4. „Back to the Past“



## Socialism Realised

Life in Communist Czechoslovakia, 1948-1989

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### Friends from Moscow

<http://www.socialismrealised.eu/catalogue/friends-from-moscow/>

#### Questions:

- Who do you think is arriving on the plane, and who is there to greet them?
- What is the atmosphere of the meeting and the clip in general?
- Imagine yourself as one of the men coming off the plane, one of the men greeting them, one of the people behind the barricade, one of the children in red scarves. How do you feel in each situation?

This clip, which was part of a short propagandistic film made about a Soviet delegation's visit to Prague, illustrates just one example of how power was concentrated in the Eastern bloc. Each country had its own government, but Moscow was a driving force across the whole region, and loyalty to the Soviet Union was of paramount importance. This centralization of power did not just apply across state lines, however. A key feature of communism as a system was a centrally controlled economy, which meant that the government dictated the activities of each industry and there was no room for entrepreneurship or advancement for those not loyal to the party.



### Rewriting History

<http://www.socialismrealised.eu/catalogue/rewriting-history/>

#### Questions:

- What are the children doing?
- Why are they doing it? Where do you think the order for them to do it comes from?
- How do you think that action could have affected their lives overall, or the lives of their parents and families?

We can use this clip from the 1990 film *Lenin, the Lord and Mother* to discuss two important elements of the communist regimes in the Eastern bloc. First of all, the scene is placed at a key moment in history – the early 1950s, when the show trials were taking place in Czechoslovakia. In the early years of the communist regimes, under the leadership of Soviet leader Joseph Stalin, the show trials were a strategy that the regimes used to demonstrate the penalties for being disloyal to the Communist Parties. Thousands of “disloyal” Party members were chosen to be very publically purged, and these purges reached even to the highest echelons of the Parties. Those deemed to be the worst traitors were then sentenced in the show trials, trials where the verdict was decided before they even began and which were broadcast widely for the whole country to see.

The action in the clip, of the children tearing out pictures of one of these so-called traitors, illustrates the degree to which the regimes required that their citizens outwardly agree with them. The students, of course, would have had no particular opinion about the man in question and whether he betrayed the country, and then the teacher passes on the party line, dictating what to believe. The teacher herself, then, brings up another interesting question – does she believe that the man in the picture betrayed the country? There were undoubtedly many staunch communists and Party supporters throughout the communist period, but it was not always easy to tell the difference between those people and the people who merely acted like Party supporters just to achieve their own personal and professional goals. Tearing out the pages also, however, illustrates the level of control that the regimes attempted to hold over all areas of life, to the point of even attempting to adjust the history that children would learn in schools.



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### What We Don't Talk about

<http://www.socialismrealised.eu/catalogue/what-we-dont-talk-about/>

#### Questions:

- Why did the student get in trouble?
- What do you think are some potential consequences of his action?
- What does this scene and the reactions in it tell you about how the regimes treated resistance in general?

Resistance to communism took many forms across the Eastern bloc. On the larger scale, this included attempts at revolution like the Hungarian Uprising in 1956, or the Solidarity movement in Poland; on a smaller scale, dissident communities in the various countries tried to spread their ideas, while the Party kept a very close eye on them and their activities. This scene, however, shows something entirely different. The student, by parroting his father's statements about unsuccessfully trying to cross the border and calling into question the textbook and teacher's pronouncements on the subject, has unknowingly committed an act of resistance. The teacher, acting as a mouthpiece of the state, then punishes him for it. Large and public acts of resistance were roundly quashed and often brutally punished — the Hungarian Uprising ended in a Soviet invasion and its leaders were executed amid the arrests of thousands of people who had taken part; the Polish communist government imposed a period of martial law in order to quell political opposition in the aftermath of Solidarity's initial success; and the dissidents were often arrested or exiled in response for taking part in dissent. However, even on a smaller scale, those who resisted even through such small acts as not publically displaying their loyalty were punished far more quietly — they were barred from the best jobs, their children could not attend the best schools, and they were never permitted to travel abroad. These sorts of unwritten rules led to a strict boundary between the public life, where one had to stick to the rules completely, and the private life, where speech could be more free. The child in question here has not yet learned the importance of that boundary.



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### Back to the Past

<http://www.socialismrealised.eu/catalogue/back-to-the-past/>

#### Questions:

- Do the women enjoy the video? Why or why not?
- How did the cooperative change their lives? How have their lives changed since the collective?
- Based on this video, what can you guess about how people remember the communist period in general?

This is an excerpt from a documentary made in the post-communist era, and the clip shows first a propagandistic film from the 1950s and then the people who appeared in that film, over 40 years later. The propagandistic film came from the period of agricultural collectivisation in the early 1950s, when the smaller scale farms were claimed by the government and melded together to form large, government-owned agricultural collectives. For the farmers who were driven off their farms and sometimes exiled or sent to work camps, this is of course a period remembered with animosity. As the video shows, however, some people greatly benefitted from the new system. Collective memory of the communist period and its legacy are fraught with nuance, but they are nonetheless often oversimplified in the public discourse to serve current political aims, leaving outside observers with the impression that communism as a system was bad for all of its citizens. This impression, however, leaves out the experiences of those whose lives during the communist period changed for the better — which was not an insignificant group.