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## RED CENTURY

*From the 'October Revolution' in 1917, communism swept the globe. Now, North Korea may be the one true survivor.*

by [Will Englund](#)

A century, exactly, has passed since Communists first came to power. It happened in Russia, reeling from three years of world war and the overthrow eight months before of Czar Nicholas II. Few outside Russia thought the Communist government could last for long. But in fact that “October Revolution” was the vanguard — to use a favorite Communist term — of a worldwide movement, one that inspired millions around the globe and repelled millions more.

Pure communism would, in theory, entail common ownership of the means of production and a withering of the state. Unsurprisingly, it was never achieved. But an ideology that promised to overturn the power of capital, and the distortions that the accumulation of capital wrought on society, attracted followers from Korea in the east to Cuba in the west. Its adherents believed that building communism required the uprooting of capitalist beliefs and the purging of those who clung to bourgeois or counter-revolutionary ways of thinking. Many millions were packed off to prison camps, and millions more died of starvation, exposure and executioners’ bullets in the quest to build a communist future.

And then it all began to unravel. It was done in by cynicism, exhaustion and the inevitable comparisons with the prosperous market economies of the West. Worldwide Communism was America’s most fearsome enemy in the middle decades of the 20th century. But since 1989 one country after another has either thrown off communism entirely, or pushed it discreetly aside in the pursuit of business. Today it lives on in only the most attenuated forms. North Korea is the one ferocious holdout among the remaining Communist nations, but even there markets have been changing the nature of the economy.

Here we present a timeline of the milestone moments in the 100-year history of Communism in power, a record of a movement that sought worldwide revolution, industrialization on an epic scale, and the creation of a new form of society. It grew from an urban uprising in northwest Russia, spread around the globe, developed deep rot, and finally retreated like river ice during the spring thaw.

Nov. 7, 1917

### The Great October Revolution

A revolutionary Marxist faction called the Bolsheviks seized power in Russia, led by Vladimir Lenin. (It took place on Oct. 25 under the old Russian calendar, hence the name.) After a brutal civil war, the Bolsheviks established what became the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. It was the first communist government in the world. The Soviets intended to export communism to the other great industrial nations, which made them pariahs among capitalists.



June 30, 1929

### Founding of Magnitogorsk

Soviet leader Joseph Stalin ordered the construction of a new city that would house the largest iron and steel works in the Soviet Union. It was part of a five-year plan to lift Russia out of its feudal, farming economy and turn it into an industrial giant. Magnitogorsk, in the Ural mountains, was built with help from American engineers, and modeled on Gary, Ind. It became a showpiece of Soviet economic achievement.

But there was another side to the Soviet economy: A man-made famine struck Ukraine, and millions of men and women disappeared into the gulag. Prison labor was employed to dig canals, cut timber, and mine coal.

May 9, 1945

### Victory over Nazi Germany

The Soviets bore the brunt of World War II in Europe. Their eventual triumph has been exploited ever since as a justifying event, one that bestows glory and legitimacy on the U.S.S.R. — and its Russian successor. At the end of the war, Moscow established friendly communist regimes throughout Eastern Europe, creating what Winston Churchill called the Iron Curtain, as the Cold War with the West descended.



Oct. 1, 1949

### Mao declares Communist victory in China

The long-running conflict between Nationalists and Communists finally came to end with a near-total Communist victory. Mao Zedong, the Communist Party leader, was welcomed in Moscow as the tribune of Asian communism. But it wasn't long before tensions led to a break, sundering communism's two most important countries.

Over the decades to follow, millions of Chinese would die in labor camps and from hunger.

July 27, 1953

### Korean War ends in stalemate.

With the Japanese defeat in World War II, Korea had been divided between a Communist North, under the wing of the Soviet Union, and a West-friendly South. The Korean War erupted in 1950, pitting Koreans against one another and drawing in the United States and its allies on one side, and the Communist Chinese on the other. It finally ended in a draw, though to this day North Korea presents it as a victory.

Nov. 4, 1956

Soviets crush Hungarian uprising

After the death of Stalin in 1953, the advent of Nikita Khrushchev as Soviet leader seemed to portend a thawing of repression. Restive Hungarians, eager to break free of Moscow, staged an uprising that led to the collapse of their government. President Dwight Eisenhower cheered them on. But the United States stood by when the Soviet military poured into the country, smashing the rebellion.

Jan. 1, 1959

Fidel Castro seizes power in Cuba

Castro and his revolutionaries came out of the mountains to overthrow the corrupt regime of Fulgencio Batista, who had strong links to American organized crime. At first willing to deal with the United States, Castro turned to Moscow for support within a year, in the face of U.S. hostility. American leaders were shocked to see communism take a foothold in the Western hemisphere.

April 30, 1975

Saigon falls

The bloody and protracted war in Vietnam, which had destroyed the administration of Lyndon Johnson and contributed to Richard Nixon's downfall, ended with a communist victory. Saigon was renamed Ho Chi Minh City. This was close to the high tide mark of global communism, though few suspected it at the time.



Aug. 31, 1980

Solidarity is formed in Poland

The first independent trade union in postwar Eastern Europe was established at a shipyard in Gdansk, led by, among others, an electrician named Lech Walesa. First the government in Warsaw tried to negotiate with it. Then the union was outlawed. But it never disappeared, and it was to rise up in the pivotal year of 1989.



June 4, 1989

Tiananmen Square protests are crushed

Pro-democracy protesters occupied Beijing's central square, inspired by a program of changes that Chinese leaders had been cautiously pursuing. The challenge was too great for the Communist government, and it sent in troops and tanks to sweep the square clean. Hundreds, perhaps thousands, lost their lives. The lesson was learned, and nothing like it has happened again in China.



Nov. 9, 1989

Berlin Wall falls

Five months later, Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev signaled to the Communist East German government that Moscow — concerned with economic decline and the hollowing out of ideological fervor — would not come to its aid in the face of rising popular protests. Solidarity had already taken a seat in the Polish government, and Hungarians were streaming across the border into Austria. But when the Wall came down and Berliners were once again united in joyous demonstrations, it was clear to the world that the communist era in Eastern Europe was over.

Aug. 19, 1991

Failed coup in Moscow signals end of U.S.S.R.

Soviet hard-liners attempted to overthrow Mikhail Gorbachev out of fear that his policies of *glasnost* and *perestroika* — openness and restructuring — were putting their country in danger of falling apart. Their failure gave a major boost to Russia's foremost anti-Communist, Boris Yeltsin, and it led instead to the outlawing of the Communist Party just weeks later. The Soviet Union did fall apart, and ceased to exist on Dec. 25, 1991.

Aug. 16, 2010

### China's economy overtakes Japan

Government figures released on this day showed that China had surpassed Japan to become the world's second-largest economy. Beijing's turn away from Marxism and toward state-sponsored capitalism had been underway for the better part of two decades, and now it was showing dramatic results.

Sept. 3, 2017

### North Korea says it can hit U.S. with hydrogen bomb.

Three generations of leadership by the Kim family have turned North Korea into a rogue state, more of a monarchy than a truly communist nation. The introduction of market reforms — though on a smaller scale than in China or Vietnam — has helped the economy. But hostility toward the West, and especially the United States, has if anything sharpened. North Korea views nuclear arms as the only means by which it can maintain its sovereignty in the face of what it calls American aggression. One hundred years after Lenin seized power in Russia, it is communism's most prickly redoubt.

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