

[MUSIC PLAYING]

**ROBERT W.
STRAYER:**

Chapter 21, the rise and fall of Communism. A few years ago, I was teaching a world history class, and a young woman asked me an honest question. What is the big deal, she said, about Communism? Chapter 21 is an effort to answer her question.

Communism was a big deal because it grew out of enormous revolutionary upheavals in Russia, China, Vietnam, Cuba, and elsewhere and also because it posed a challenge to the capitalist world by providing-- for a time-- a new and more rapid path to a modern industrial society. It was also a big deal because Communism, especially in the Soviet Union and China and Cambodia, gave rise to some of the most murderous regimes of the 20th century, despite their proclaimed socialist intentions.

Communism was also a big deal because it generated a global conflict that we know as the Cold War-- a conflict that shaped so much of world history during the second half of the 20th century. That conflict sent schoolchildren, including me, hiding under our school desks during air raid drills that were supposed to prepare us for a nuclear war that could vaporize entire cities in a single instant.

And finally, Communism was a big deal because of the way it ended-- far more peacefully than anyone might have imagined. By the early 21st century, Communist economic policies were abandoned almost everywhere, and the original home of Communism, in the Soviet Union, had self-destructed.

For people of my generation, Communism was a central fact of international life. But for my young student only a few years ago, it was history barely remembered. The task of historical study always is to bring that past back into the conscious memory of those who never experienced it.