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INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND AND SUMMARY

What do the countries of Eastern Europe have in common for them to be the subject of a composite history of this type? The land mass given that name comprises Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, Albania, Yugoslavia and Bulgaria – and at certain times East Germany as well – some seven or eight countries each with very different cultural traditions and backgrounds. Yet, throughout this century, historians have consistently written about them as a single unit, as if they did, after all, have a great deal in common. Why?

There was a certain logic to treating Eastern Europe as a whole in the interwar period. From 1919 to 1939, these were the ‘successor states’: Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, Albania, Yugoslavia and Bulgaria were the nation states carved out of the wreckage of the German, Russian, Austrian and Turkish empires. While for some of these states formal political independence had come before 1919, in the years leading up to the outbreak of the Second World War, all the ‘successor states’, despite their manifest differences, faced similar social, economic and political problems.

The only ‘successor state’ to have anything like a developed industrial base was Czechoslovakia, and there most of this wealth was concentrated in the Czech lands rather than in Slovakia. The Slovaks were predominantly a peasant people, and the same could be said for the Poles, Hungarians, Romanians, Albanians, Yugoslavs and Bulgarians as well. Peasants formed 80 per cent of the population in Bulgaria, 78 per cent of the population in Romania, 75 per cent of the population in Yugoslavia, 63 per cent of the population in Poland and 55 per cent of the population in Hungary. To quote Robin Okey: ‘peasant Eastern Europe was a hopelessly under-capitalised, over-populated bottom-rung of the European economy’.¹

The industrial development which did occur in interwar Eastern Europe was largely the product of foreign investment. While in the 1920s such investment tended to come from Britain and France, in the 1930s it was more likely to have come from Germany. Wherever it came from, however, it was from abroad: in Poland 60 per cent of capital was foreign owned; in Hungary 50 per cent of capital was foreign owned; and in the Balkans between 50 and 70 per cent of the economy was foreign financed. And, as Hugh Seton-Watson noted, most foreign capital was invested in Hungary, the least egalitarian of East European societies; least foreign capital was invested in Bulgaria, the most egalitarian of the countries.²

This link between social inequality and the failure to resolve economic problems was a product of the political system that dominated Eastern Europe in the interwar period. These were peasant societies that were crying out for land reform and economic investment. Despite being universally promised in 1919, progress on implementing land reform remained stalled throughout the region; it remained stalled because the democratic regimes that made the dramatic promises of reform in 1919 soon found themselves replaced by right-wing dictatorships. Only in Czechoslovakia did multiparty democracy become established in the Westminster sense, and only in Czechoslovakia did the land reform make steady progress; in Bulgaria it was the successful implementation of land reform which prompted the 1923 counter-revolutionary coup against the democratically elected government, a parallel that would be followed throughout the region until, by the early 1930s, the whole of Eastern Europe barring Czechoslovakia was ruled by dictatorships of one kind or another.

Such a combination of circumstances was bound to provide a good breeding ground for communism among East European intellectuals. The region was backward, prey to the whims of foreign capitalists when it came to investment decisions, and ruled by self-interested cliques: what Lenin's followers seemed to be achieving in peasant Russia in the interwar years, spectacular economic growth on the basis of peasant cooperative farms, was bound to be attractive. A generation of young people grew up in interwar Eastern Europe convinced that Lenin's message had meaning for them.

This shared Leninist ideology was what enabled historians to consider the varied states of Eastern Europe as a composite whole after the Second World War. The logic for treating the countries of Eastern Europe as a single unit remained, although the justification was now very

different: after the Second World War, the states of Eastern Europe were no longer the 'successor states' but the states which 'went communist'.

Between 1945 and 1989 the countries of Eastern Europe were governed by communist parties proud of the fact that they were following in the footsteps of Lenin. Back in October 1917, when Lenin's Bolshevik Party had seized power in Russia in a revolutionary coup, it had been confidently assumed that this would be the start of a world communist revolution. That was not to be. Although the old autocratic order in Germany and Central Europe was overthrown, communists won only transient victories. By 1923 the revolutionary wave accompanying the end of the First World War had ended and communists were everywhere on the defensive.

The interwar period was a paradox for communists. Everywhere they were seen as a growing danger – the threat of Bolshevism was the rallying cry of demagogue and democrat alike – and yet nowhere did they make any progress. In Germany, Europe's largest communist party crumbled before Hitler's onslaught, while in Spain, despite the governmental power they exercised within the Republic, they were unable, or unwilling, to consolidate their position; for a second time they were defeated by a fascist regime. The defeat of fascism by the wartime Allies, Britain, the United States and the Soviet Union, provided communists throughout Europe with a new opportunity to see if Lenin's prediction of world revolution would come true.

Between 1945 and 1948 the whole of continental Europe experienced a dramatic increase in communist activity. Even in the 'West', communists were members of the coalition governments in France and Italy, and only the prompt deployment of British troops prevented a successful communist insurrection in Greece at the start of 1945. Not since 1919 had the prospects of world revolution looked so good, and in the 'East' the chances for communist revolution looked even better. With the exception of the Czechoslovak Communist Party, all the East European communist parties had been illegal during the interwar years, and the young idealists who made up their ranks had found it almost impossible to make contact with the mass of workers and peasants in whose interests they always claimed to act. Participation in the resistance to Hitler and his allies changed all that: communists suddenly found themselves popular in a way they had never been before, the masses were no longer an abstract force about which communist students debated in smoke-filled rooms, but people that they led.

However, what really strengthened the position of communists in postwar Eastern Europe was the presence of the Red Army. At the end of the Second World War the Soviet Red Army had played an important role in liberating every East European state except Albania from fascist rule. In Yugoslavia its presence had been transitory, and in Czechoslovakia only short-term; these states were, after all, closely linked to the wartime Allies. In Bulgaria, Romania and Hungary the Red Army stayed on until 1947 while peace treaties were negotiated with Hitler's former satellites; thereafter it left Bulgaria, but remained in Hungary and Romania to secure communication lines with its occupation forces in Austria. For the similar purpose of maintaining contact with occupation forces in East Germany, the Red Army remained in Poland despite that country's status as a nominal wartime Ally. Throughout Eastern Europe, the presence of the Red Army meant that local communists had a powerful and sympathetic friend by their side.

It was this duality, of local communists and the Soviet Red Army, that was to characterise the East European revolution. By the 1960s it was easy to look back at the East European revolution and deny that any such thing had occurred: the Red Army had simply imposed Stalin's rule on all the countries it had marched through. It was not as simple as this. The Red Army was the key factor in Poland, and scarcely less important in Romania; but the Balkan revolutions were carried out largely without the support of the Red Army, and in Czechoslovakia the Red Army withdrew leaving the local communists to seek power through the ballot box. Commentators in the late 1940s were happy to use the term 'East European revolution' to describe the years 1945–47 when it looked as if the states of Eastern Europe were planning to address the legacy of peasant backwardness in a variety of different ways.

After 1947, the history of Eastern Europe was increasingly dominated by the Soviet Union. As the Cold War between Britain and the United States on the one hand, and the Soviet Union on the other, became more and more intense, Stalin determined to consolidate his hold on Eastern Europe. By the winter of 1946–47 it looked as if the successful socialist revolutions in the Balkans might spill over into Greece and even Turkey; the American President Truman responded by announcing his 'doctrine' in February 1947, that everywhere free peoples would be defended, and backed this up with the offer of Marshall Aid in July 1947, which attempted to kill communism with kindness by dramatically raising the standard of living in those countries that came under the American umbrella; the first triumph of this

policy was the ousting of the French and Italian communists from government in May 1947.

Stalin's response was to establish the Cominform in September 1947 and bring all of Eastern Europe under his direct control, a tactic which succeeded brilliantly in Czechoslovakia with the coup of February 1948, but which backfired disastrously when in the same month the Yugoslav leader, Tito, refused to submit to Stalin's demands. Until Stalin's death, the Cominform served both as a vehicle for disciplining Eastern Europe and a propaganda machine to blacken the name of the one communist who dared to stand up to Stalin.

After Stalin's death in March 1953, the degree of Soviet control over Eastern Europe fluctuated considerably. In the years between Stalin's death and the Soviet invasion of Hungary in November 1956 there were moments, particularly during the autumn of 1956, when it looked as if Soviet dominance might come to an end. Yugoslavia had remained free from Stalin's control, and when Stalin's successor Khrushchev began the process of de-Stalinisation, it appeared for a while as if the two leaders might be going to establish a more relaxed order in Eastern Europe, allowing the communist regimes to adopt aspects of both the Soviet and the Yugoslav experiences.

The crushing of the Hungarian revolution by Soviet troops in November 1956 brought this period of relaxation to a dramatic end. For the next 33 years of their rule, East European communists were firmly under Moscow's thumb, kept in check by the formation of the Political Committee of the Warsaw Pact. This did not mean that there had been no change since the Cominform years, but the limits of what was and what was not possible had been clearly set out after 1956. When in Czechoslovakia in 1968 or in Poland in 1980–81 attempts were made to revive political pluralism, the Soviet Union made clear it would and could intervene: in Czechoslovakia, foreign armies were used to restore order, while in Poland, Soviet pressure prompted the local military to declare martial law. On both occasions the key decisions were taken by the Warsaw Pact.

Increasingly, by the end of the 1960s, the history of Eastern Europe became a history of economic reform, or rather the failure of economic reform. Despite the success of the economic reform in Hungary in 1968, it was built on neither by the Hungarians themselves nor any other of the East European states. Instead, all the countries of the region entered a period of prolonged economic crisis. The planning system that had achieved some success in dragging the East European economies out of their peasant backwardness, proved incapable of

adapting to the demands of an urban consumer society. As a result both economy and society stagnated, since those who administered the existing planning system had no incentive to bring to an end a system in which they had a significant personal stake.

Under close Soviet tutelage, prevented from embarking on political reform and hampered in the extent to which they could reform their economies, East European communists steadily shed the ideology that had once inspired them; more dramatically, during the 33 years from 1956 to 1989 a whole generation grew up to whom communism did not mean the struggle against fascism and the vagaries of the free market, but economic stagnation and political oppression. The gulf between leaders and the led meant that the ruling communists were quite incapable of responding effectively when a new Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, told them history had come full circle and Soviet control over Eastern Europe was a thing of the past. They were again free to pursue their own roads to socialism, but those plans had been abandoned so long ago that they proved impossible to revive.

Even before Soviet control over Eastern Europe ended in 1989, it was clear that Eastern Europe as a concept was no longer adequate to describe events in Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, Albania, Yugoslavia and Bulgaria. Increasingly in the last two decades of Soviet control, two Eastern Europes had emerged, Central Europe comprising Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary, where force had been used to retain Soviet influence, and the Balkans, comprising Romania, Albania, Yugoslavia and Bulgaria where the communist revolutions had had more legitimacy. The experience of Stalinism and neo-Stalinism had produced different degrees of industrialisation, urbanisation and cultural development, despite all the attempts by communists to achieve economic integration and uniformity.

As a consequence, this should be the last history of Eastern Europe ever written, for the concepts of 'successor states' and 'communist satellites' which once justified such an approach are now themselves part of history: when a successor volume is planned some years hence about the region's history since 1989, it is certain the potential authors will insist on writing two volumes, one for Central Europe and one for the Balkans, and start by commenting on how both these regions emerged from the years of Soviet control in a rather different shape and with rather different prospects for the new era of political pluralism; this is the approach adopted in Chapters 9 and 10 that assess how the countries of Eastern Europe adapted to capitalism.

Our Approach

The history of Eastern Europe since 1945 is essentially the history of a socialist experiment which failed. It is impossible in the space of one volume to chronicle all that happened in Eastern Europe during 40 years of communist rule, and no attempt has been made to write a comprehensive history of each of the countries that go to make up Eastern Europe. Rather our focus will shift from country to country as the issues of socialist construction and collapse evolve. Some of these issues are essentially ideological and a little obscure, but that is the nature of communism; the rulers of Eastern Europe did worry about the nature of popular front politics, the leading role of the Party, the labour theory of value, the 'law of value' and commodity production, and so on. However, the main themes addressed are fairly clear cut, corresponding roughly to the chapter headings: the road to power, diverse paths to socialism, Stalinist uniformity, the impossibility of democratised communism, the attempt at economic reform, bureaucratic resistance, and economic and social collapse.

Such an approach has resulted in what might appear an unbalanced treatment of certain countries. The Yugoslav question dominated the first four of these themes. As only the second country in the world to experience a successful communist insurrection, the Yugoslav experience is central to a discussion of the road to power; during the period of diversity, Yugoslavia was the most Stalinist state in Eastern Europe, the model Stalin hoped the rest of Eastern Europe would follow; in the period of sovietisation, Yugoslavia refused to give in to Stalin and established its own rival version of communism; and so, in the period of de-Stalinisation, Yugoslavia was inevitably to the fore in the arguments about the future form communism should take. Then, after Yugoslav support for the Soviet invasion of Hungary in November 1956, East European communists lost interest in Yugoslavia. This reality is reflected in our study.

For similar reasons, coverage of East Germany is unbalanced. Just as Yugoslavia hardly merits a mention after Chapter 4 after having dominated the first few chapters of the book, East Germany is mentioned infrequently in the first half of the book, but features extensively thereafter. This, again, simply mirrors reality. Until the mid-1950s a question mark hung over the future of East Germany; thereafter, it developed into one of the most successful economies of Eastern Europe and is given extensive coverage on those grounds.

Although a one-volume history offers little scope for innovation, there are two elements to this study that could claim to have altered traditional interpretations. First, Chapters 1–3 go a long way to challenging some of the assumptions of Hugh Seton-Watson's *The East European Revolution*. In this and other works Seton-Watson developed a theory of the pattern of Soviet domination of Eastern Europe: genuine coalition, false coalition, followed by total Soviet control.

This approach is challenged in two ways: first, Seton-Watson's approach implies 'sovietisation' was always Stalin's goal in Eastern Europe, and second, he assumes that the same pattern can be discerned in all East European countries, though occurring at different times. Because we argue the Balkan revolutions were carried out by the Balkan communists themselves, Stalin's desire to sovietise them or not was neither here nor there; they were keen to follow the Soviet path but their model was Yugoslavia and genuine coalition was never on their political agenda. Elsewhere in Eastern Europe, Seton-Watson's pattern is similarly open to challenge. A clear distinction can be drawn between Poland and Romania, where Stalin ruthlessly 'sovietised' from the moment the Red Army crossed into those countries and where genuine coalition was never seriously attempted, and Czechoslovakia and Hungary where Stalin was initially happy for the communists to have influence but not power in coalition governments. Sovietisation of Czechoslovakia and Hungary began in earnest only after the formation of the Cominform in autumn 1947, and was part of Stalin's response to the American Marshall Plan; there transition, it is suggested, was straight from genuine coalition to Soviet control, without the intermediary stage of false coalition.

The second area of innovation comes in Chapter 6. Here we address the complex question of economic reform in Eastern Europe. We not only chart clearly the limits to reform under neo-Stalinism, but also identify four stages of economic reform. These are categorised as the simple restructuring of priorities associated with the period immediately after Stalin's death; the removal of one whole layer of the economic planning pyramid, a feature of the 1960s; using the market for current distribution but relying on planning for decisions concerning the future; and, finally, radical market socialism where even decisions about the future are left to the market.

While writing the first edition of this book, the post-war political structure of Eastern Europe progressively unravelled until, on Christmas Day 1991, Mikhail Gorbachev resigned as President of the Soviet Union; on Boxing Day a rump of the Soviet parliament voted

the state out of existence. Such dramatic developments might have tempted us to adopt more radical restructurings in subsequent editions. However, four chapters are still devoted to the formation of the socialist political system which operated in Eastern Europe, for it is central to our argument that Soviet control was not simply established by right of conquest in 1945; the politics of Eastern Europe remained dynamic, even volatile, until 1956 if not later. Chapter 5, which fully describes the political system of Eastern Europe, is more necessary than ever in a world in which the mechanics of communist politics have almost been forgotten.

One other point explains the relative wealth of material devoted to the first decade after 1945. First, for many members of a generation now departed, communism was a liberating ideology, it signified idealism rather than corruption, and the attempt to build an East European version of Soviet socialism deserves to be recorded in terms other than those of post-Cold War triumphalism. Even Stalinist bureaucrats such as Erich Honecker and Gustáv Husák, who resisted reform to the end, had revolutionary pasts. Honecker spent much of the 1930s in Nazi prisons; and Husák participated in the Slovak National Uprising in 1944. In the post Soviet era, when privatisation of the economy is widely accepted as a cure for all economic ills, it is important to remember that for an earlier generation, whose only experience of the free market was the economic failure of the 1930s, the communist ideal of a planned economy offered much that was attractive.

On the other hand, historical perspective has lessened the significance of the Brezhnev years: the period from 1968 to the early 1980s was a 'long decade' during which East European society was held in aspic and change seemed inconceivable; although, as the Polish experience showed, force could always be used to maintain the *status quo*. Yet, 'all that is solid melts into air', as Marx wrote in the *Communist Manifesto*, and a single chapter remains sufficient to cover an era that, for those who lived through it, seemed as if it would go on forever.

Conventions Used

In writing this book we have adopted a number of conventions that require explanation. We use the conventional terms 'Comecon' and 'Warsaw Pact' since these less than accurate terms have entered everyday speech. Likewise, the term 'communist party' is used for the ruling parties between 1948 and 1989, even though most parties

were differently named. The full official names of the ruling parties are given in Table 5.9 in Chapter 5. 'Party' with an upper case initial invariably refers to these communist parties. For similar reasons of clarity, all socialist and social democratic parties in the pre-1948 period are termed socialist.

For the sake of brevity, the term 'countries of the region' refers to all eight countries including Yugoslavia and Albania; 'Comecon countries' refers to the countries of the region excluding Yugoslavia; and 'Warsaw Pact countries' refers to the countries of the region excluding Yugoslavia and Albania.

Wherever possible we have cited readily accessible sources. This has not always been possible since for many historians Eastern Europe remains a collection of states 'about which we know little'. However, every effort has been made to refer the reader to English language sources and standard reference works.

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