swift. What can be said is that the vision of a Europe closely bound together in common purpose, premised on democratic governance, the free exchange of goods and services, and enduring transatlantic ties to the United States has been more fully realized than anyone could conceivably have imagined when George Marshall sketched out a plan to help Europe at the Harvard commencement on June 5, 1947.

The great Soviet victories at Stalingrad (January 1943) and Kursk (July 1943) reversed the tide of the war against the Nazis and made it likely that Soviet armies would occupy vast stretches of territory in Europe. Allied conferences at Teheran in November 1944 and Yalta in February 1945, and the notorious “percentages agreement” between Iosif Stalin and Winston Churchill in October 1944, confirmed that Eastern Europe, initially at least, would lie within the sphere of influence of the Soviet Union. Communists in the region also assumed that their countries would fall under Soviet sway in one form or another. Milovan Dijlas famously recorded Stalin’s assertion during a wartime conversation: “This war is not as in the past: whoever occupies a territory also imposes on it his own social system. Everyone imposes his own system as far as his army can reach. It cannot be otherwise.”1 Georgi Dimitrov, head of the Soviet Central Committee’s Department of International Information, noted in late January 1945 that Stalin expected a war with the capitalist world within two decades of the Nazi defeat, and therefore it would be necessary to maintain a strong alliance among the Slavic countries of Eastern Europe to counter that aggression.2

Yet there is very little evidence that Stalin had firm notions in 1944–45 about developing some sort of Communist bloc in Eastern Europe after the war. Instead, he probably shared many of the suppositions of two of the major policy-planning documents to emerge from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs during World War II, Maxim Litvinov’s “Memorandum” of January 11, 1945, and Ivan Maisky’s “Note” of January 10, 1944. The Litvinov document was prepared in association with the Yalta Conference and explored the possibility of establishing an agreement about three spheres of influence on the continent. Linked to

the Soviet Union would be a zone in the east and north, including Finland, Sweden, Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Romania, Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, and Turkey. A second zone would be dominated by Britain and would include the Netherlands, Belgium, France, Spain, Portugal, and Greece. Most interesting was the "neutral" sphere, which included Germany as well as Denmark, Norway, Austria, and Italy. In this sphere the great powers would share responsibility for the security of the area, cooperating on issues of reparations and trade. According to the Maisky note, continental Europe would inevitably transform itself into a series of socialist states, but, barring armed conflict, it would take somewhere between thirty and fifty years for this evolution to take place. Meanwhile, cooperation with the United States and Britain was critical for setting up democratic regimes and functioning economies in formerly Fascist and Fascist-occupied countries.

To those East European Communists who spent the war years in Moscow, the advance of Soviet armies into Eastern Europe meant that they would have the opportunity to vie for political leadership in their homelands. They did not take it for granted that they would instantly come to power as a result of Soviet victory and occupation. Instead, in Moscow, in the underground, and in prison camps, East European Communists developed strategies to cooperate with other anti-Fascist parties of the Left and center to form national fronts to liberate their countries and to build new and "truly democratic" political systems. They would cooperate with socialist, populist, and democratic parties to bring about an anti-Fascist democratic revolution.

This was also Moscow's line at the end of the war, which was implemented by Dimitrov and his staff of mostly foreign-born Communists. Broadcast over radio and communicated by telegrams, brochures, and newspapers all over Eastern and East Central Europe, the policy was unambiguous. There would be no Communist revolution in Eastern Europe and no dictatorship of the proletariat; no workers' councils (soviets) were to be formed. Instead, the East European revolution would see the completion of the 1848 bourgeois democratic revolution, bringing to an end the remnants of feudalism in the region. Free of the influence of the landholding class and big capital, the will of the people would be expressed through democratically elected parliaments. The rights of peasants and workers would be guaranteed by constitutional law.

Communist Parties would operate in coalitions with agrarians, socialists, and true democrats to bring about a new stage in these countries' histories, that of "people's democracy."

The beginnings of "people's democracies"

The initial period of the foundation of the people's democracies, 1944–45, was one of the most important in the entire history of postwar Eastern Europe. But it is also one of the most difficult to categorize, since the Soviet Union followed flexible policies in establishing its influence. Given their geopolitical importance and the traditionally anti-Soviet and anti-Communist traditions of their political elites, Poland and Romania were fated to be controlled and manipulated by their Soviet occupiers. Here, Soviet involvement was absolutely central to the development of people's democracies. The same could be said of Hungary, though its geographical position was not as critical to Moscow as that of Poland and Romania and its political opportunities were more open-ended. Eastern Germany (the SBZ, or Soviet Zone of Occupation) was fully controlled by Soviet military and political authorities, but Soviet insistence on the unity of Germany prevented concrete moves toward building a people's democracy in this period.

Soviet involvement was also important in Bulgaria and Czechoslovakia, but this was coupled with the significant and sometimes equally important influence of purely internal social and political factors. Although to different degrees, the Bulgarian and Czechoslovak Communist Parties cooperated with other resistance forces during the collapse of Nazi rule, which portended decent relations with non-Communists in the postwar period. Still, it was the entry of Soviet troops into both of these countries and Moscow's support for their native Communist Parties that facilitated their eventual Sovietization. The success of the Communist-led September 9, 1944, coup in Bulgaria and the subsequent domination of the country by the Communist Party would not have occurred without Soviet help and encouragement. During the liberation of Czechoslovakia, the Communists, urged on by Moscow, promoted Edvard Beneš and the left-liberal forces he represented as partners in the formation of a new Czechoslovak government.

5 For Stalin's foreign policies, see Vladimir O. Pechatnov's chapter in this volume.
In Yugoslavia and Albania, the creation of people’s democracies took place predominantly due to internal social and political causes rather than to Soviet influence. The local Yugoslav and Albanian Communist Parties had successfully resisted the Axis occupation of their countries, leading large, popular, and effective left-oriented national liberation movements and, eventually, armies, which freed their respective countries. To be sure, Soviet foreign policy aided their efforts. In Yugoslavia, the Red Army provided important, though not essential, military support. In Albania, Yugoslav advisers and military aid were significant in the outcome. The earliest and most blatant case of Soviet involvement in East European politics occurred in Poland, where the so-called Polish National Liberation Committee (PKWN) was secretly formed by Stalin from the ranks of former Polish Communists living in Moscow. According to plan, the PKWN accompanied Red Army troops as they poured into Poland in late July 1944. Then, the Soviets arranged for the PKWN to form a Polish national government in Lublin, which was formally recognized by Moscow. Polish Communists, organized in the Polish Workers’ Party (the PPR), and other Polish leftists, including the socialists in the Polish Socialist Party (PPS), enjoyed the support of only a very small fraction of the Polish population. They were nevertheless called upon by the Soviets to serve as leading personnel in the PKWN, which increasingly asserted its power over those parts of Polish territory liberated from the Nazis by the Red Army. Already at the beginning of 1944, Stalin created a Central Bureau of Polish Communists from the ranks of the leading Polish émigré Communists residing in the USSR. This secret organization became a key instrument in guaranteeing that the Kremlin controlled the political platform of Polish Communism in these years. After the liberation of the country from Nazi occupation and the formation of the Politburo of the Central Committee of the PPR in early September 1944, the Soviets made sure that the majority of its members previously belonged to the Central Bureau. This way, Stalin was able to ensure that the “Muscovite” segment of the Central Committee held the upper hand over those “native” PPR members, like Władysław Gomułka, who had participated in the resistance in Poland and tended to follow their own political inclinations.

Soviet military forces and special services protected the new postwar Polish government and administration from opponents in the Polish underground. Soviet forces eliminated groups attached to the London Polish government-in-exile, which had earlier fought against their Nazi occupiers. NKVD (secret police) units were extremely active in attacking, killing, and arresting underground activists. On August 23, 1944, Red Army troops were also ordered to take “urgent measures” against Home Army units in areas occupied by the Soviets. These units were to be immediately arrested and disarmed, thus preventing them from making their way to Warsaw to aid the ongoing uprising. This signifies, as does other evidence, that Stalin preferred that the uprising, which was organized by the émigré government, be put down by the Nazis, which indeed happened in September–October 1944, rather than achieve success and serve as an impediment to the imposition of Moscow’s authority in Warsaw and in Poland as a whole.

The Kremlin followed similarly forceful tactics in Romania. During the breakthrough of Soviet troops into Romania on August 20, 1944, the royal court and a number of Romanian generals staged a coup, removing General Ion Antonescu’s regime and joining the Allied cause. Even when the country was fully occupied by the Red Army, the king, his military allies, and his administration stayed in power. However, as early as the fall of 1944, the Communist Party, at the head of a Left coalition—the so-called National Democratic Front (FND)—unleashed a Soviet-approved campaign to move the government further to the Left. The FND leaders went so far as to demand that the government transfer power to themselves, even though they could muster very little support from the Romanian population as a whole. The Soviets also applied considerable pressure within the Allied Control Council in Romania, through their chief representative Andrei Vyshinsky, insisting on concessions to the “democratic forces” of the country, which meant the Communist-led FND. Continuing intimidation of the government culminated in a Communist-inspired coup in February–March 1945, which was backed by the Kremlin’s ultimatum to the king. King Michael had no choice in these circumstances but to appoint a new government on March 6, one that relied primarily on the FND and its Communist leaders.


See Sewtowar Rajak’s chapter in this volume.

During these dramatic events, Soviet military commanders and representatives of the Soviet administration in the Allied Control Council countered attempts by Romanian government forces and police to prevent FND-led demonstrations. In Bucharest, where skirmishes between FND protesters and Romanian government forces signaled the beginning of an acute political crisis, Soviet representatives intervened to support the FND. In collusion with the Romanian Communist Party, the Soviet special services made ready to create an FND government on their own should Vyshinskii fail to bully the king into proclaiming it himself. Additional Red Army units were moved toward Bucharest, including, on Stalin’s orders, two divisions of NKVD troops. In the end, there was no need for the direct application of force. Vyshinskii’s relentless pressure on King Michael broke his resistance and the coup was accomplished under the veneration of royal legitimacy.12

The Soviets formed three German Communist “initiative groups” in Moscow to follow Red Army troops into occupied Germany in April and May of 1945: one led by Walter Ulbricht, the second by Anton Ackermann, and the third by Gustav Subbotka. Although some German Communists, most notably Ulbricht, played an important role in building a pro-Soviet political base in eastern Germany, this task fell primarily to the Soviet Military Administration in Germany, and in particular to the head of its Propaganda Section, Colonel Sergei Tiul’panov, and to its political adviser and representative of the Foreign Ministry, Vladimir Semenov. Tiul’panov was responsible for the political development of the SBZ and instituted a series of political initiatives favoring the Communists. But Soviet policy in Germany was characterized by a combination of restraint and control, which reflected the Kremlin’s ambivalence toward the future of Germany. As long as there was the possibility of negotiating an agreement with the West over the future of Germany, Moscow held back efforts by Tiul’panov, Ulbricht, and others to go ahead with the Sovietization of the SBZ.13

In Hungary, the German overlords removed the wartime government of Admiral Miklós Horthy, who had tried to conclude a last-minute truce with the members of the anti-Hitler coalition, and replaced it on October 15, 1944, with the Arrow Cross leader, Ferenc Szalasi. Meanwhile, the Soviets created a provisional government that was to take power in the wake of the Red Army’s advance into Hungary. Stalin was satisfied with placing Hungarian Communist Party members in prominent positions in the new government. The Communists were a minor political force in Hungary and the Soviets sought allies from anti-Nazi and anti-Szalasi Hungarian parties of the Left and center, and even some pro-Horthyite groups which offered to cooperate with the Soviet side.14 Stalin’s policies toward Hungary seemed more pragmatic and flexible than those he promulgated in Poland and Romania.15

There is relatively little evidence that the Soviets directly interfered in the postwar political development of Czechoslovakia. In negotiations between Beneš and the Soviets in March 1945, there was general agreement that the Czechoslovak Communists would play an important, if not decisive, role in the new government after the liberation of the country from the Nazis.16 The Soviets neither pressured the new Prague government to engage in violence against its non-Communist opponents nor insisted on specific domestic policies. This did not mean, of course, that the Soviets were without influence. The very fact of the Red Army’s entry into Czechoslovakia changed the situation on the ground. But the withdrawal of Soviet troops in late 1945 gave Beneš and his allies unusual latitude within Moscow’s developing “sphere of influence.”

The national road to Communism

The Soviets and their East European Communist allies understood that they could win over the local populations only by paying attention to their national goals and needs. Similarly, in their foreign policy, the Soviets tried to reinvigorate ideas of Slavic brotherhood by reviving nineteenth-century pan-Slavic ideas. The Poles were as suspicious of Stalin’s pan-Slavism in the postwar period as they had been of the tsarist original in the late nineteenth century. But among the Czechs, Slovaks, Bulgarians, and Yugoslavs, the ideas about a greater Slavic community of peoples, led by the great Slavic Russian brother

12 Ibid., pp. 100-01, 105.
to the east, found considerable resonance as the Red Army marched into Eastern Europe.

In the mix of slogans involving Slavic unity and anti-Fascist democratic revolutions, the Soviets encouraged Communists to pursue their own “national roads” to Communism, meaning they should adjust their demands to local conditions and share political power with other “patriotic” socialist and democratic parties. This program served Soviet aims in two ways: first, it contributed to good working relations with Western Allied governments, and, second, it helped build a popular following for what were - in the prewar period - very small and very insignificant Communist Parties. National roads meant that the individual Communist Parties could unambiguously bear the shields of patriotic causes, while vying with populist and social democratic parties in claiming to represent the best interests of the “nation.” In this spirit, Stalin supported the plans of the Czechoslovak and Polish governments to expel Germans from their countries. Communist Party promotion of ethno-nationalist causes, at least when they did not damage Soviet interests, were generally welcomed by the Kremlin.

Part of the rationale for supporting patriotic causes was to win the support of the mass of voters in electoral contests. The Soviets took these elections seriously, in some cases more seriously than the East European Communists themselves. As a consequence, they were bitterly disappointed with the results. In Austria and in Hungary in November 1945, and in the eastern zone of Germany and Berlin in the fall of 1946, Soviet-sponsored Communist Parties suffered unexpected setbacks. Even with all the pressure applied by the Polish Communist forces against Stanislaw Mikolajczyk and the PSL (Polish Peasant Party) in the crucial nationwide referendum of June 1946, including outright falsification of the returns, the Poles managed to register their displeasure with the Communists by voting “no” on the symbolically crucial first question. The Czechoslovak party did well in the elections of May 1946, garnering 38 percent of the vote. But its popularity noticeably receded thereafter, which no doubt played a role in the planning of the February 1948 coup. It is unlikely that the Soviets would have allowed Communists to be voted out of positions of power in Eastern Europe. In that sense, the anti-Fascist democratic revolution, as understood by many non-Communists, would have been hard-pressed to succeed.


The electoral defeats of the Communists were in part the result of the Soviets’ own actions. There was considerable receptivity to socialism and even to Soviet liberation and occupation at the end of the war. But the combination of the miscreant behavior of the Red Army soldiers in foreign lands and the rapaciousness of Soviet reparations officials responsible for dismantling factories and seizing agricultural products for the army and home front led to anger and resentment on the part of local populations. In Hungary and Germany, the liberators were seen as thieves and rapists. In Poland, Slovakia, Romania, and Germany, the Soviets dismantled factories as reparations and seized grain from farmers. Even in Bulgaria and Yugoslavia, the behavior of Soviet troops created “great disillusionment” among the common folk, who earlier had genuinely admired, even idolized, Soviet Red Army soldiers. 18

Electoral “campaigns” aside, everywhere in Eastern Europe Communists seized control of the interior ministries and their police functions, especially those having to do with secret police and armed internal police units. Working in tandem and sometimes at the behest of the Soviet NKVD (after 1946 MVD) and NKGB (after 1946 MGB and later still KGB), domestic secret police pursued alleged counterrevolutionaries and Fascists, and arrested, tortured, exiled, and sometimes executed democrats and socialists who opposed growing Soviet influence. 19 If in 1945 and 1946 one could not talk about a Communist seizure of power in what were formally parliamentary democracies, Communists used their control over the secret police apparatus to make sure that there would be no serious internal opposition to their policies. In this sense, the timing of the Great October Revolution was reversed; in postwar Eastern Europe, the civil war, where it existed, was fought and won by the secret police and its Soviet backers before – rather than after – the Communists actually seized power.

The Sovietization of Eastern Europe

After the initial formation of the people’s democracies in Eastern Europe in 1944-45, the next stage of Sovietization involved the establishment of Communists’ predominance. This process varied from country to country and differed significantly in its pace. It is also important to note that there was

18 Irwin Sanders, Balkan Village (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 1949). 196, 207. See also Naimark, The Russians in Germany, 68-140.
considerable fluidity between these periods within individual countries. Still, the task of Sovietization was essentially completed in all of them by the end of 1947 and 1948.

The regimes in Bulgaria, Poland, Romania, and the SBZ developed mixed political systems in which the Communists accepted non-Communist parties as junior partners in multiparty coalitions. Controllable opposition parties were also sometimes acceptable in this schema. In Bulgaria, non-Communist parties that participated in the government were allies of the Communists within the Left bloc. In Poland and Romania, the allied parties in the Left bloc supplied the overwhelming majority of the government ministers. Some centrist forces also took part in the political life of these countries, but they were insignificant minorities in their respective governments. In Poland, this was the case of the Polish Peasant Party under Mikolajczyk. In Romania, the centrist forces were represented by the National Liberals, headed up by Gheorghe Tătărescu; but they soon abandoned their oppositional stance and joined with the FND.

In the SBZ, as well as in Poland and Romania, there can be little question that the leftist governments and the leading position of the Communists in them resulted primarily from Soviet military and political domination rather than from internal developments. In Bulgaria, on the other hand, the leadership of the Left bloc with the Communist Party at its head enjoyed substantial popular support. In Czechoslovakia and Hungary, coalitions were formed between the Communist Parties and their leftist allies on the one hand and the democratic and even some conservative parties on the other. The coalitions were more genuine than the ones in Romania, Poland, and eastern Germany, and were based on a rough parity between leftist and center/rightist parties. Despite the growing pretensions of Josip Broz Tito, Moscow tended to be quite satisfied with the evolution of the Yugoslav regime and its Albanian client.

In most of Eastern Europe, Moscow opted for a strategy that emphasized the gradual evolution toward a socialist order. This meant gradually increasing the role played by the Communist Parties in the national governments and eliminating or marginalizing opposition forces in or outside the ruling coalitions. The Communists complemented these policies with the subordination of their partners on the Left. Meanwhile, the Communists strengthened their control over the economic and social spheres, expanding the realm of government-owned industry, taking over transportation, finance, and trade, and implementing radical land reform. Still, on Soviet instructions, they stopped short of fully nationalizing industry and collectivizing agriculture. The façade of democracy was to remain in the form of political coalitions, multiparty systems, and parliaments. The idea, which Stalin articulated in discussions with a number of leaders of East European people’s democracies, was for these countries to move toward socialism without going through the stage of the dictatorship of the proletariat.

Stalin was far less specific about the length of time it would take for the East European states to reach the stage of a socialist order by this non-Soviet route. Nor did he indicate how long a multiparty and parliamentary system should be preserved, including a legitimate opposition and elements of genuine coalition politics. Some historians maintain that the Soviets intended to drop the democratic façade as soon as possible and replace it with a transition to socialism on the Soviet model. Others contend that Stalin seriously considered the possibility that the countries of the region could develop democratic paths to socialism, distinct from the Soviet example.

The argument about the Kremlin’s long-term intentions aside, the documents made available in Russia and Eastern Europe over the previous decade make it apparent that the means by which socialism would be built had little to do with democratic politics and parliamentary procedures. On the contrary, the implementation of socialist policies by the Communist Parties and their Soviet mentors relied from the beginning on administrative pressure, subversion, and direct repression, including attacks on the opposition and leftist allies if they proved too independent. At the end of 1944 and beginning of 1945, the Bulgarian government persecuted the leader of the Agrarian Union, Georgi Dimitrov (Gemeto), who was not only removed from his post as a result of behind-the-scenes Communist pressure but was subsequently arrested and brought to trial. Also in Bulgaria, Stalin ordered that the defense minister and a leader of the Zveno (Link) Party, Damian Velchev, be removed from power.

In Poland and Romania, the security organs arrested and interrogated opposition leaders and subjected others to restrictions and intimidation. To these actions in Poland and Romania should be added the blackmail, threats, and falsified results that accompanied the Polish referendum of

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23 Dimitrov, Diary, 409, 406-07.
June 1946 and the parliamentary elections in Poland in January 1947 and in
Romania in November 1946.

Having falsified the Polish parliamentary elections of January 1947,
Communist authorities set out to destroy Mикolajczyk’s PSL through force
and repression. This produced a crisis within his party, which ended when
Mикolajczyk and other PSL leaders fled for their lives to the West in October
1947, leaving control of the party to those members who opted to side with the
Communist authorities.24 In Bulgaria and Romania in June 1947, based on
fabricated accusations of plotting against the government, the chief leaders of
the opposition were arrested, accused of a variety of crimes in a series of show
trials, and sentenced to long prison terms.25

At the turn of 1946/47, the Hungarian Communist-controlled secret ser­
vices initiated a campaign against the leaders of the Smallholder Party, which
held significant positions in the government and in the parliament. (In the 1945
elections the party had received 57 percent of the vote.) The Smallholders
were accused of fomenting an antigovernment conspiracy. As a result, the
Soviet military authorities arrested the party’s general secretary, Бёla Kovács,
in February 1947 and, in the course of the investigation, produced materials
regarding the alleged participation in the plot of several party leaders, inclu­
ding the prime minister, Ferenc Наги. The Hungarian Communist leader
Matiyas Rakosi used these allegations to force the Smallholders to transfer the
party’s leadership and the post of prime minister to Left-leaning members
connected with the Communists. As a consequence of splits within the
opposition engineered by Rakosi (his so-called salami tactics), in August 1947
new parliamentary elections were held in which the leftist bloc collected 60
percent of the vote. Communist Party members officially held a third of the
positions in the new government but, counting secret members and sympa­
thizers who nominally represented other parties, they controlled more than
half of the government posts. Relying on their strengthened position in the
government, the Communists used well-tested police methods of accusing
opposition politicians of engaging in antistate activities to eliminate political
dissidence altogether.26

Similar methods were used in Czechoslovakia. During the second half
of 1947, the Communist-controlled secret police leveled accusations of
antigovernment conspiracy against several non-Communist parties in the
ruling coalition. This offensive concluded with the February 1948 coup,
which was orchestrated by the Czechoslovak Communists themselves and
led to the destruction of all of the other parties.27 In Bulgaria and Romania, the
legal opposition was entirely eliminated in 1948; in Hungary, this process
extended until the beginning of 1949.

In most of the East European countries, the domination of the Communist
Parties over their social democratic “allies” was an important part of achieving

25 Mitro Issayov, Stalin i Bulgaria [Stalin and Bulgaria] (Sofia: Izdatelstvo Sv. Kliment
27 Karel Kaplan, The Short March: The Communist Takeover in Czechoslovakia (New York: St.
total control over the domestic political situation. In the SBZ, this process began already in the spring of 1946, when the forced “unification” of the KPD and SPD produced the new, Communist-dominated SED (Socialist Unity Party). By 1948, the elimination of social democratic parties by merging them forcibly with the Communist Parties, often heralded by noisy “unity” campaigns, was completed in all of the countries of the region. The Communists reorganized and eliminated the other parties of the Left bloc during 1947–48, merging some into new formations, splitting others, and leaving some to survive as “stage props,” which unreservedly supported the preeminent role of the Communist Party in the building of socialism. Now all of the countries of Eastern Europe essentially had Communist one-party systems like Yugoslavia and Albania. The monopoly on political power was combined in all of the East European countries, including the SBZ, with corresponding measures in the social, economic, and cultural spheres.

Soviet representatives were involved in virtually all of the political machinations described above. Soviet advisers shaped electoral campaigns, selected government ministers, and approved secret police actions. Stalin sent a team of Soviet Interior Ministry experts to Poland to provide “technical advice” about the legal and extralegal methods to achieve the appropriate results in the elections of January 1947. Stalin also personally approved political trials, unification campaigns with the social democrats, and important government appointments. East European Communists fully expected to work with the Soviets on political matters.

The East European comrades were also closely watched and sometimes carefully micromanaged by Moscow. Communist functionaries expected to be instructed, and they learned to ask their Soviet patrons for permission to undertake initiatives or for directives regarding even trivial internal or external policy questions, including appointments to positions in the party and government. Competing factions within the East European Communist Parties played out their rivalries in Moscow, providing alternative policy or appointment suggestions to their Kremlin patrons. One can see this in particularly sharp relief in the competition between Gheorghiu-Dej and his group in the Romanian party and their rivals Ana Pauker, Vasile Luca, and Teohari


Georgescu. The conflicts between Enver Hoxha and Koçi Xoxe in the Albanian Communist Party were similarly articulated in their alternative presentations to Moscow. In these cases and others, internal party rivalries on the one hand, and Stalin’s unwillingness to make an unambiguous choice on the other, often left the East Europeans with a measure of autonomy. Differences between Soviet advisers in the region also left room for maneuver.

Where Stalin allowed the East Europeans very little autonomy was in the realm of foreign policy. Instructive in this connection were the measures taken by Moscow at the end of June and beginning of July 1947 to ensure the desired response of the people’s democracies to the Marshall Plan. In a little over two weeks, the Soviet leadership changed its directives three times in encrypted telegrams sent to the leaders of the East European Communist Parties. Initially, the instructions stipulated that all the people’s democracies should express interest in the plan. Later, the Soviets suggested that their representatives should participate in the conference of European states convened to discuss the plan, but should disagree with its substance and withdraw, trying to persuade the other small European states to leave with them. Finally, Moscow directed the people’s democracies not to participate at all in the conference or in the implementation of the plan. The East European Communist leaders accepted seriatim all of these directives without question. The only serious complications emerged with the Czechoslovak government, which had a non-Communist majority. Beneš and his associates were completely committed to the Marshall Plan process. But at a meeting in Moscow on July 9, 1947, Stalin ruthlessly pressured the Czechoslovak government delegation, forcing them to reject outright the Marshall Plan and refuse participation in the upcoming conference. Jan Masaryk wrote: “I went to Moscow as a Foreign Minister of an independent sovereign state; I returned as a lackey of the Soviet Government.”

31 Naimark, The Russians in Germany, 340-52.
34 Bruce Lockhart, My Europe (London: Putnam, 1952), 125.
The Sovietization of Eastern Europe, 1944-1953

The Stalinization of Eastern Europe

The Soviets countered the perceived threat of the Marshall Plan by calling a meeting of European Communist Parties in Poland at Szklarska Poręba in September 1947. A new organization was set up, the Communist Information Bureau (Cominform), ostensibly to share information among Communist Parties, but in fact to monitor compliance with Soviet directives. Stalin's deputy for ideological questions, Andrei Zhdanov, delivered his famous "two camps" speech, in which he insisted that Communist Parties line up with and, by implication, mimic the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.35 This brought to an end the period of "the anti-Fascist, democratic revolution" and the idea of national roads to Communism. Soon after the Cominform meeting, Soviet officers took a more active part in the development of East European armies. Economic relationships between the East European countries and Moscow were tightened, symbolized by the formation of the Council of Mutual Economic Assistance (CMEA; also known as the Comecon) in January 1949. The Communist Parties were also instructed to intensify the struggle against so-called kulaks in their countries and to emulate the Bolshevik model of rooting out the bourgeoisie. Those Communist politicians who thought otherwise and were wedded by conviction to ideas of national Communism were soon removed from their posts and purged from their parties.

After Szklarska Poręba, the policies of the Soviet Union were to serve as the policies of the Communist Parties of all of Europe. The Italian and French Communist Parties, severely criticized at the Cominform meeting for meekly succumbing to their respective partners in democratic coalitions, were enjoined to radicalize their programs and destabilize the bourgeois governments of the West. The Yugoslav Communists were pleased by the call for the sharpening of the "class struggle" in Western Europe and for vigilance against alleged counterrevolutionary forces within Eastern Europe indicated by the discussions of Szklarska Poręba.36 By the spring of 1948, however, the Yugoslavs learned that Moscow's demands for conformity in the bloc included Stalin's insistence that they rein in their own aspirations, which they were

36 See the attack by Milovan Dijas on the French Communist Party in Procacci et al. (eds.), The Cominform: Minutes, pp. 353-63.
unwilling to do. The subsequent Soviet–Yugoslav split in the summer of 1948 heightened tensions within the East European parties, as Soviet fears of the spread of "Titoism" led to denunciations and arrests throughout the region.

If the Cold War was born in the tensions surrounding the development of the Marshall Plan, its angry rejection by the Soviets, and the establishment of the Cominform, it was accelerated by the February 1948 coup in Czechoslovakia, the beginning of the Berlin blockade in June 1948, and the eruption of the Soviet–Yugoslav split in the summer of 1948. Stalin's worries about enemies within the East European Communist Parties grew exponentially as it also became clear in late 1948 that the Yugoslav deviation was turning into heresy and defiance. Discipline in the newly emerging Soviet bloc would have to be ensured by the traditional Stalinist means of purges and show trials. Communist Parties "of the new type," meaning Bolshevik and Stalinist, would be forged in the fires of denunciation, interrogation, self-criticism, and purges. Stalin and Beria dispatched NKVD "advisers" to the capitals of the people's democracies in order to quicken the hunt for "enemies of the people."9

The conflict with the Yugoslavs also intensified Stalin's determination to maximize Soviet control over the other East European countries. With a new level of ruthlessness, the Soviets urged their East European satraps to crush non-Communist opponents and purge the Communist Parties of dissidents. The "case against Gomulka" constitutes one of the emblematic moments in this struggle. Gomulka had already been identified in the spring of 1948 as belonging to a faction of the Polish Politburo that was chauvinistic and prone to anti-Soviet statements and attacks. He was accused of holding an indifferent attitude toward the Soviet experience and of being a nationalist. Although Gomulka was unable to protect his position in the party and government, he cleverly used the politics of anti-Semitism with Stalin to bolster his case against the Polish party leadership. Nevertheless, the Polish secret services continued to build a case against Gomulka and others in his so-called clique. In 1951, Gomulka was arrested and was fortunate to escape with his life. Stalin died before there was enough evidence (and/or desire) to bring him and his associates to trial.

Communist leaders in other parts of Eastern Europe who fell from favor with Moscow did not fare so well, especially those of Jewish origin. Everywhere else in the region except for Poland there were show trials, which were meant not only to punish alleged offenders but to bolster the legitimacy of the Communist authorities. (In the German Democratic Republic [GDR], analogous trials of Paul Merker and others were held in secret.) Much as Lev Trotskyi was the main defendant in absentia of the Moscow show trials, so was Tito the phantom defendant of the East European trials. This was particularly apparent in the May 1949 trial of former Albanian Politburo member and minister of interior, Koçi Xoxe. Xoxe was convicted as a Titoist and executed. László Rajk, the important Hungarian Communist and former minister of the interior, was similarly condemned as a Titoist and a Western spy and executed. Leading Hungarian Communists, many of Jewish origin, were tried and hanged. In December 1949, Traicho Kostov, an important Bulgarian Communist figure and economic specialist, was accused together with a number of his comrades of participating in a Titoist plot against the government and was executed. Lucrețiu Pătrășcanu, former Politburo member and minister of justice in Romania, was the central figure in a plot concocted by Gheorgiu-Dej against alleged Titoists and spies. Because he refused to confess, he could not serve as the center of a show trial. He was later condemned to death and shot.

The increasingly open manifestations of Soviet anti-Semitism in the early 1950s lent the October 1952 show trial of Rudolf Slansky, former general secretary of the Czechoslovak Communist Party, an ugly anti-Jewish aspect. Many of his alleged Zionist co-conspirators were also of Jewish background. They were accused of having dealings with the American Central Intelligence Agency agent Noel Field, who figured in many of the East European trials. For this and other alleged crimes, the accused Czechoslovak Communists were sentenced to death and hanged.

The show trials victimized not only Communist Party leaders who had fallen from favor, but also non-party government specialists and military leaders. In every case, Soviet "advisers" helped prepare and mastermind the purge trials, a job at which they were ostensibly expert. They sometimes

38 See William I. Hitchcock's and Vladimir O. Pechanov's chapters in this volume.
39 See the documents on Soviet interference in: "Delo Slanskogo" [The Slansky Case], Voprosy istorii, nos. 3 and 4 (1957), 3-20 and 3-18.
directly participated in the interrogations and drew up lists of those to be
arrested. The East European parties, as well as security and judicial adminis-
trations, asked for advice from the Soviets and expected directions. Because
historians still do not have access to the archives of the Soviet secret police,
there is a lot that remains unknown about direct ties between the Soviet and
East European security organs. Certainly, Soviet preferences during the trials,
sentencing, and execution of alleged traitors made a difference. But domestic
Communist politics, in which one rival group or leader attempted to remove
opponents, dominated the calculus of political repression. The result of the
purges was that “Little Stalins” emerged throughout the region, Communist
Party chiefs such as Boleslaw Bierut (Poland), Rákosi (Hungary), Gheorgiu-
Dej (Romania), Ulbricht (GDR), Klement Gottwald (Czechoslovakia), Hoxha
(Albania), and Vulko Chervenkov (Bulgaria). Although their powers and
domestic images resembled that of Stalin, their persons and policies were
strictly subordinated to the Kremlin.

The Soviets used a host of other means short of repression and political
manipulation to impose their will on the East European parties and states.
Soviet participation in the organization of the power structures of these
countries, in cadre politics, and in implementing economic, cultural, and
social policies all served the cause of the successful Sovietization of Eastern
Europe. Soviet advisers in the region — ranging from guest professors of
philosophy in the universities to artillery specialists in the militaries — also
played a crucial role in developing institutions that would mirror the suppos-
edly superior Soviet counterparts. Soviet advisers were also important when
the East Europeans undertook special projects, whether currency reform, the
revocation of the rationing system, the launching of important economic
projects, or the building of cultural institutions. Since in Stalinist Eastern
Europe the “Soviet way” was the only right way to do things, the East
Europeans often found it easiest to import Soviet specialists to show them
how to accomplish concrete tasks. All the countries of Eastern Europe, from
the most highly industrialized, such as Czechoslovakia and the GDR, to the
least developed, such as Albania, imported Soviet advisers for an astonishing
variety of purposes. Moscow often provided them with instructions on how to
transform parts of the government apparatus, judicial and police systems, and
educational and economic institutions, according to the Soviet model.

Equally important to the penetration of Soviet influence in Eastern
Europe was the explicit transfer of Marxist-Leninist (Stalinist) ideology. In
the era of “high Stalinism” at the end of the 1940s and beginning of the 1950s,
the Soviets demanded thoroughgoing ideological imitation, to ensure con-
formity in Eastern Europe as well as to confirm their superiority over and
the subordination of the East Europeans. They closely monitored East
European ideological developments, whether in local party journals or in
the arts, education, and the mass media. Local Soviet representatives sent
“report cards” back home on how well the East Europeans matched up in
their understanding of Marxism-Leninism. They discussed ideological ques-
tions with members of the local intelligentsia and nomenklatura, constantly
harping on the need for the complete adoption of Soviet cultural norms
and political ideas. Reporters from various agencies in Moscow emphasized
not only the need for locals to learn better from their Soviet teachers but
also the critical importance of countering the ideological influence of the
West.

Sovietization or self-Sovietization?

Some scholars criticize the concepts of Sovietization or Stalinization because
they overly simplify the complex processes of give-and-take between the
Soviet Union and its East European subordinates. They prefer the idea of
“self-Sovietization” or “self-Stalinization,” terms that capture the fact that the
East Europeans adapted and used Soviet models themselves without direct
instructions or coercion. John Connelly is right to note that both processes
were at work. The Soviets, given their exaggerated security concerns, “kept
channels of information to Eastern Europe narrow, and left communists there
no choice but to discover and implement the Soviet system themselves.”
Thus there was plenty of room for East European leaders to set their own

45 Andrew Janos, East Central Europe in the Modern World: The Politics of the Borderlands from
46 See T. V. Volokitinina, et al., Narodnaia demokratiia: mif ili realnost’? [People’s Democracy:
Myth or Reality?] (Moscow: Nauka, 1993), 4–6, and T. V. Volokitinina, et al., Moskov i
vostochnia Evropa: stanovlenie politicheskikh rechimov sovetskogo tipa, 1949–1953. Ocherki
istorii [Moscow and Eastern Europe: The Creation of Political Regimes of the Soviet
47 John Connelly, Captive University: The Sovietization of East German, Czech, and
Polish Higher Education, 1945–1956 (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina
Press, 2000), 55.
by Stalin and the Soviets.

A related question that suffuses the historiography, both traditionally and more recently, has to do with Stalin’s original objectives in Eastern Europe. Was he, from the very beginning, interested in the development of Soviet-style regimes throughout the region, or did other factors, such as the interests of East European Communists themselves or threats from the West in the increasingly menacing atmosphere of the Cold War, prompt Stalin to clamp down on his East European allies? Most examples of recent Russian historiography tend to take the latter view.48 But many historians in the West and a few in Russia think that Stalin developed his programs for anti-Fascist fronts and people’s democratic governments as so much eyewash for the British and Americans and as a sop to the electoral sensitivities of the East Europeans.49 The next stage, a fully Stalinist Eastern Europe, was the inevitable result of his political planning, with or without the Cold War.

The arguments by Soviet foreign-policy specialists Vojtech Mastny and Vladislav Zubok tend to support this latter view, though they attribute Stalin’s policies in Eastern Europe to his pragmatic understanding of the spread of Communism within the traditional framework of spheres of influence. As acceded to by the Allies during the war, Stalin sought to nail down a belt of dependent countries on the Soviet European borders, while essentially turning over Western Europe and Greece to the British and Americans. Mastny emphasizes Stalin’s fears and exaggerated needs for security as the motivating factors in constructing what came to be known as the “Soviet bloc.”50 Zubok places the primary weight on what he and Constantine