



ORIGINAL PAPER

**Comparison of the Process of Establishment of the
Communist Regimes in Central European Countries**

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Abstract

The article deals with the process of formation of communist regimes in Central Europe after WW2. The author traces the causes of the rise of these regimes in Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland and East Germany. This process analyzes with the comparative method, and trying to show the similarities and differences between developments in these countries. The analysis is based on a comparison of conditions in frame of three keys factors: experience / inexperience with parliamentary democracy, social and economic conditions after WW2, and the way of establishment of a communist regime in the relevant country.

Keywords: *Rise of Communism, Central Europe, Second World War, Social Transformation*

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The communist regimes in Central Europe were a historical phenomenon and, secondly, the phenomenon of the political science. Theory of totalitarianism, emerging from the 50s of the 20th century as the Western concept of Political Science, tried to show above all common features of these regimes. The key problem which, however, these concepts of totalitarianism in professional debates crashed, were either of these modes changes that occurred since the 50's almost until 1989, and the differences in the characteristics of these regimes in each country of Central Europe. They were not only given by the current socio-economic conditions or situation of communist elite, but also by profound differences in historical traditions of each country. These differences are already fully reflected in the way the communist regimes in the countries of Central Europe after WW2 raised. Differences between these regimes consisted mainly in the way the Communist takeover and the public's attitude, in dependency of the power elite on the Soviet leadership, and the ability to promote the national interests of the state, the extent and way of applying repression, the position and perception of opposition groups, including the Church, in their ability to respond demands for reform and the changing situation on the international scene.

In the following article we will show the similarities and differences of the key factors that influenced the creation of Communist regimes in Czechoslovakia, Poland, Hungary and East Germany. In particular, we should analyze: 1. Actual geopolitical situation in CE as a consequence of the WW2; 2. Differences in previous development of each country (national, political, economic, cultural, religious); 3. Different perceptions of radical changes in recent history (results of WW1, experience with the interwar regimes of 1918-1938, WW2 – resistance vs. collaboration); 4. Different position of communist parties in each national society in CE; 5. Different level of un/modernity of each national society in CE. In order to outline these differences, we must research (at least) the following three factors: 1. In/experience with Parliamentary Democracy; 2. Social and economic conditions in the relevant country after WW2; 3. The way of establishment of a communist regime in the relevant country

In/experience with Parliamentary Democracy

Czechoslovakia and East Germany certainly had, from reporting countries, the richest experience with the regime of Parliamentary Democracy. In both countries, since the last third of the 19th Century and especially during the interwar period was richly developed party and social life; after 1918, both countries developed in the frame of liberal democratic constitutional system and the rule of law. However, in both countries observed in this period also strongly opposing tendencies, notably on the restriction of Parliamentary Democracy. In Czechoslovakia, these tendencies were manifested in the form of too strong role of party elites and rather passive membership of political parties. Constitutional and political practice, this corresponds to the conception of tied candidates lists and tied parliamentary mandate. Although in Czechoslovakia did not exist a strong republican tradition, has managed to build up quite quickly, among other things. And because this idea had a strong support especially in the Czech elites and public. To support the building of the republican form of state were political and cultural elite also used the historical traditions (the references to the Hussite Revolution, social reforms, the struggle for cultural autonomy in the 19th Century).

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In Germany, after 1918, there were too many obstacles to building a strong republican and democratic traditions. Formally existing Weimar Republic was being swayed by political extremists, whether it represented a nationalist, radical left-wing (Communists) or right-wing populist parties eventually in the form of NSDAP. How much exactly once wrote historian Golo Mann, it was "a republic without republicans and democracy without democrats" (Mann, 1993: 24-25). The prestige and authority of the republican authorities in Germany after 1918, decreased steadily depending on the deteriorating economic, social and international political situation. Significant support of Stresemann's centrist governments in the second half of the 20's proved to be a very short episode. In both countries also existed uncontrolled domination of political parties and economic elites, and strong tradition of party-controlled press, which kept the public support to the Political System. Both countries have been characteristic by strong social stratification of society, different social class closely perceived their collective identity, and it basically corresponded strong linkage of voters to "their" political party, which built its policy strictly on defending of particular interests of the social class. This also corresponds to the political practice in the Parliament: we can observe "militant" approach of political parties to the solution of key problems and their weak willingness to reach a compromise.

Parties were living in the environment of a sort of permanent cold civil war, able to always go to the hot phase, as seen from the street battles of the Communists and the Nazis since the late 20's. Even in the face of the Nazi threat in January 1933 other political parties with a majority in the Reichstag were not able to agree on such a joint approach by the Nazis came to power prevented.

In Czechoslovakia, the situation was apparently different (strong tendency of parties to a mutual agreement, the governments of broad coalitions, which, however, strongly qualified the importance of the elections), and the result was quite different from Germany. Majority of citizens criticised, questioned, and finally refused (by massive support for the Nazi Party, other nationalists, and communists) this form of ("Weimar") party democracy in Germany. The citizens in Czechoslovakia also criticised the actual form of democracy and the ruling political system, but majority of them supported democratic political parties until 1938 (with the exception of the majority of ethnic Germans in Czechoslovakia). However, in Czechoslovakia after the Munich agreement (1938), and after the experience of the occupation and creation of Nazi Protectorate (1939) and WW2 prevailed among the public and politicians in 1945, convinced of the impossibility of returning to discredited "party state" from the time of the interwar republic (Judt, 2005: 64). It also greatly facilitated the success of the Communists to power.

In the case of Poland and Hungary, the situation was more complicated. Poland wants its statehood began in 1918 to build an entirely new and largely not political traditions something to build on. Poland started building its statehood and its system of Parliamentary Democracy "from square one" after 1918 and had no older democratic traditions (excepting the First Republic in 16th – 18th century). Thus, when opting for the most commonly used form of republican and Parliamentary Democracy. In the face of external threats Bolshevik Revolution, however, found themselves facing the need to fight for the survival of their national independence - and it is too early to have enough to build a little stable foundations of the democratic system (Davies, 2003: 13).

General social and economic catastrophe, even inherited from WW1, and the weakness of the newly established democratic institutions meant that after the defeat of

the Red Army Tukhachevsky gained on the Polish political scene, the dominant position of the architects of victory, headed by Marshal Pilsudski. This resulted in the establishment of an authoritarian regime, seeking inspiration in Mussolini's Italy, that in Nazi Germany, but always ready to find common ground with anyone in a negative relation to the USSR. Maintenance of national and state independency, Anti-Russian and anti-Soviet tendencies were pivotal axis of Polish politics since the twenties until the period just after WW2 (Rupnik, 1992: 46-47). The Pilsudski's Army becomes the main guarantee of Polish political independency; this led to the preference of authoritarian regime. Safety of state had priority over preservation of democracy. It was also typical the economic decline, strong role of traditional elites and absence of political liberalism for Polish society.

Hungary was (in the time after 1918) characterized by both tremendous frustration with the results of the war, and in particular the results of the Paris Peace Conference, and the Treaty of Saint-Germain-en-Laye. The political situation in Hungary determined the postwar chaos caused by the reluctance of local elites to come to terms with the new situation in Europe, as well as frequent violent upheavals and political adventures, culminating in the form of so-called "Hungarian Soviet Republic". Establishing Horthy's regime in this context appeared to be a stabilizing factor that has enabled Hungary gradually absorb too radical changes in its national, political, social and economic organization, which in 1918 was clearly not ready. This was done at the cost of restriction of Parliamentary Democracy and the establishment of an authoritarian regime. Thanks to this in interwar Hungary was not much place for a moderate liberal policy; their positions rather renew old traditional conservative social class with its defeatist approach to politics and with Anticommunism.

Generally, we can thus summarize this aspect so that in 1945, while - in the case of Germany and Czechoslovakia - there was some experience with parliamentary democracy, but they were both very short, and because of its many systemic weaknesses not enough and did not strongly rooted in society, nor in the social and political institutions. Moreover, it was not accompanied by economic democracy, which was the citizens in both countries perceived as one of its key weaknesses. The German society, of course, entered the post-war period, both after twelve years of experience with brutal tyrannical regime, and secondly, the situation of economic, social, moral and general human catastrophe in the form of defeat in war and the almost total destruction of the entire country. Of course, it played its role well as the fact absence of state independence, which was a logical consequence of the occupation of Germany by the Allied armies (Weber, 2003: 10). Poland was in 1945 the country liberated by the Soviet army and became a battleground on which he had yet to decide the struggle between the forces of anti-Russians more than the pro-democratic (Mikolajczyk's People's Party) and the Polish Communists, who had some very scant public support, but strong support for the Soviets. Sharp anti-Russian mood of the public, even complemented the WW2 experience with the pact Molotov-Ribbentrop, murders in Katyn, not help of the Soviets to Warsaw Uprising and the mysterious death of General Sikorski, it could be assumed that in Poland after the war pulls a sharp political struggle for power.

Very similar situation was in Hungary, which was like Germany the country in the war militarily defeated and occupied. The position of the Communists in Hungarian society was also rather weak, which resulted mainly from the social structure of society and also from the fact that during the inter-war period the communists were illegal (as in Poland), and could not therefore broadly develop political activities. Most citizens of

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Hungary after the war supported the Peasant Party (Smallholders’), which represented a large part of the countryside, but also had considerable support in the cities. On the left dominated the rather moderate social democrats with a traditionally strong position in Budapest and larger cities. All this gave a sense that here the way of the Communists came to power will be very difficult – they had only one powerful helper - Allied Control Commission, controlled by the Soviets and headed by Marshal K. Voroshilov.

Social and economic conditions in the relevant country after WW2

Generally, of course, it was possible in 1945 noted the extensive devastation of post-war economies of the four surveyed countries. Pre-war Czechoslovakia and Germany were definitely the industrial countries, Germany was in the 30’s even the most dynamically developing industrial powers of Europe. It had large stocks of raw materials and consumables developed heavy industry, extensive research and development, and also excelled in a developed transport infrastructure. A large part of the industry was concentrated in the east of the country, which was occupied by the Soviets at the end of the war. Wartime destruction, of course, led to a significant weakening of the industrial potential of the country, which was further reduced by post-war expropriation, the Soviets realized within the wound healing for the victims, which the Soviet Union brought the defeat of Nazism in the war.

Czechoslovakia was also developed industrial country, but with significant regional differences in the level of industrialization; almost entirely agrarian Slovakia strongly contrasted with the industrial areas of Bohemia, Moravia and Silesia. Wartime devastation, although significantly damaged the country, but not so much as in the case of Germany. Poland and Hungary were more agrarian countries, with a relatively small share of the industry. Wartime occupation of Poland greatly damaged the country economically, moreover Poland in the war lost almost all the intelligence, the social elite as well as extensive eastern territories which were only partly offset by earnings former German Silesia (Kosman, 2011: 38). Hungary is particularly towards the end of the war became a vassal of Nazi Germany rather, which of course it also cost significantly damage. The country has however retained a considerable part of the intellectual elite. In all the above mentioned countries took place after the war nationalization of key industries, mineral resources, banks and insurance companies, which expressed the faith of local (often non-communist) elites in the possibility of realization of socially just society.

The way of establishment of the communist regime

As we have already indicated above, the conditions for the emergence of communist regimes in our surveyed countries varied. In Germany, the division of a unitary state and the establishment of the Communist regime in one of them was the result of the post-war power structure. East German Communist elite was not long after the 1949 master of the situation in his country, in which decided Soviet generals and politicians. Creating of the GDR was not originally Stalin's intention; Soviet dictator favored maintaining of the unified Germany, but with a strong influence of the Communists to the politics.

But when the three Western allied governments agreed to merge their zones and the creation of the West German state, the Soviets had no choice but to respond to the situation similarly, if they did not want lose their influence in Germany completely. But

East German Communist regime still quite long served the Soviets as an instrument for negotiations with the West.

Stalin and yet also Khrushchev were ready to accept the sacrifice of the GDR in a few specific historical situations, and to accept also its reintegration into a unified German state in exchange for a strong Communist influence in such Germany (Vykoukal, Litera & Tejchman, 2000: 418). West German leaders never accepted such offers, even if that they undoubtedly met the expectations of many East German citizens (Fullbrook, 2010: 115). Until the entry of West Germany into NATO in 1955 put an end to these Soviet affair with the existence of the GDR - indeed, it was no coincidence that only after that act gained the GDR full sovereignty from the Soviets, as demonstrated also agree to set up its own army of the GDR. Czechoslovak case is perhaps known well enough, but we note the basic factors of its development. The establishment of the Communist monopoly on power have contributed to our mind these basic factors: significant influence of the war exile (in Moscow) leadership of the Czechoslovak Communist Party for talks on postwar arrangements of the political system of liberated Czechoslovak republic, held in Moscow in March of 1945. At these meetings the Communists enforced whole their version of the new government program (ie. The Košice's government program), which meant a fundamental changes in the political system, economy, social affairs, security and foreign policy of the state. Other political actors (non-Communist parties, the President Beneš) more or less respected dominant influence of the Communists, or they faced it rather ineffectively; in addition they have agreed with many measures proposed by the Communists, especially in foreign and retributive politics, as well as the vast majority of the measures in the economy, and - in the case of the Social Democrats - the have proposed an even more radical steps (Kaplan, 1993: 19-20); disappointment of the population from the political and economic system of the pre-war Republic, which was perceived in the context of the Munich agreement as a politically corrupt and socio-economically unjust; the election in 1946 - it was the only election in Central European countries in which the Communists won (40 % of votes) in relatively democratic conditions; the Communist Party seized control of key ministries (interior, army, justice, Secret police). The communist takeover in February of 1948 was certainly perceived by the public less fatal than we perceive it today. From the former perspective it was mainly the solution of the government crisis, caused by the demise of leaders of non-Communist parties. The Communists used the advantage of the crisis for the powerful reversal in their favor. Within a few days, they activated the public support on their side, activated thousands of its officers in the village and towns who took power in "national committees" (town halls), and they neutralized the President. Through its allies in other political parties they made an upheaval of these parties that added to the "revived" National Front in a few days after 25th of February of 1948. (Rataj & Houda, 2010: 55).

Although we can certainly speculate on the constitutionality of this process, it is obvious that the basic building block of success of the Communists was both surprise (non-communist parties were not sufficient to recognize the intentions of the Communist Party, and when it is observed, they were already in principle unable to prevent their implementation) and, secondly, passivity of majority of the public, which in principle also was unable to see the consequences of the ongoing changes. All this gave the communist leaders reason to believe that the silent majority of the public actually supports their progress. This proposition was defeated also by President Beneš, who accepted all of communist's proposals for solving the crisis (Bureš, 2004: 118-120). The real power reaching breakeven however, it was up agreement (March-April of 1948) of the other

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political parties to form a so-called "Unified list of candidates" for the upcoming parliamentary elections, which practically meant the resignation of the parties in the electoral fight against the communists (Kaplan, 1997: 498).

The takeover of Communists in Poland and Hungary was much more complicated, it is because we limit ourselves only to its main features. Communism was in both countries restored clearly against the will of the majority of inhabitants. Post-war Poland was tossing about violent political struggle between the communists (who had strong support from the Soviets, but the minimum support among the public), and popular politicians, who organized domestic and exiled resistance against the Nazis, and who were in 1945 led by war exile Prime Minister and Chairman of the People's Party Mikolajczyk. He thought, moreover, that he will be able to create a political alternative to the pro-Soviet government (ie. Committee in Lublin). But the Soviets forced (through rough coercion and terror against the leaders of Polish wartime resistance movement) the formation of a government in which the Communists and their Allies occupied the overwhelming majority of seats. This new government was finally also recognized by the Western Allies. This is why the exile democratic leaders (with their pro-Western policy) were eliminated and lost the influence on events in postwar Poland.

The Communists with Soviet support postponed democratic elections, required especially by the party of Mikolajczyk, to obtaining an advantage in terms of realization of irreversible personal, economic and social changes in Polish society. The Christian Democrats refused to join the joint list of candidates with the Communists in 1946. It followed by a referendum on the government's economic policy, organized by the pro-Soviet government. The Polish government lost this referendum at the end of June 1946 when it voted against 75 % of voters. However, the results were falsified and the government announced that it had, on the contrary, 68 % support. The Communists started a discrediting campaign against the opposition Christian Democrats. The government's candidate list (communists and socialists) won the elections, held in January 1947, with 80.1 % of the votes; the opposition Christian Democrats were defeated. It followed the adoption of the new constitution that undermined the principle of separation of powers and concentrated most of the political power in the hands of the executive (in the form of the newly established Council of State) (Paczkowski, 2000: 120-121). Subsequently, the Communists carried out the discrediting campaign against its previous allies, the Socialist Party. The enforcement of the next wave of nationalization (services, trade and commerce), liquidation of the autonomy of universities, arrests and show trials of the leaders of the Socialists was the result of it. People's Party was officially disbanded in autumn 1947 and Mikolajczyk emigrated from Poland. In March 1948, the Socialists (under pressure of the Communists) agreed with unification of their party with the Communist Party. The monopoly of the Communists was completed.

In Hungary, the situation was different practically only in the official position of the country at the end of the war: while Poland was allied countries, liberated by the Red Army, Hungary was a hostile, defeated and occupied country. This situation, of course, considerably eased the communists their path to power, because the country was effectively ruled by the Allied Control Commission headed by Soviet Marshal Voroshilov. At the end of the war, all Hungarian political parties including the Communists agreed to form a National Front of Independence that should manage the country to the holding of elections (Kontler, 2001: 360). The government, formed on the basis of this agreement, however, conducted a major political and economic changes: the confiscation of the property of traitors, nationalization of industries, agrarian reform, introduced the

principles of planned economy and system of controlled democracy (Irmanová, 2008: 247).

The Communist Party, originally tiny, illegal and without significant public support, was quickly picking up new members and with the support of the Soviets occupied key power ministries (Applebaum, 2012: 70). Conservatively Agrarian Peasant Party (“Smallholders”) had the strongest public support, but this party was now led by the young and inexperienced politicians. The political atmosphere in the country was very sultry, both major political camps were bored against themselves with the threat of disaster in case of victory of the enemy. The Smallholders convincingly won the elections in November of 1945 to gain 57 % of votes, Communists ended up with nearly 17 % to third place behind the Social Democrats.

However, the real power position of the Communists has not changed. The Soviets after the election gave a strong indication of their interest in the continuation of the coalition of National Front. Communists “had to” remain in the government, and although Smallholders occupy the highest constitutional positions of the prime minister and president, communists retained power ministries, including control of the secret police AVO. In the following months they tried to decompose the Smallholders Party, which they did in cooperation with the Soviets in the Allied Control Commission, and finally they met this goal with help of the unions and the secret police and manipulated justice.

The Government of Smallholders in Hungary ended up with a touch bizarre thriller: after Prime Minister F. Nagy went on holiday in Switzerland in May of 1947, he was accused of preparing the conspiracy in Hungary, and was warned not to return. Communists blackmailed him for his son, who remained in Hungary. Ferenc Nagy thus remotely from Switzerland resigned as Prime Minister, the Communists sent him a son and he remained in exile. Meanwhile, Hungary rejected the Marshall Plan and carried out massive nationalization.

The Communists won 22 % of votes in the manipulated parliamentary elections held in August of 1947, disorganized Smallholders party ended up in third place with 15.4 % of votes. Subsequently, the parliament headed by a communist Imre Nagy, gave most of its powers in favor of the government. The Communists immediately completed the process of nationalization of property. In June of 1948, virtually the same time as in Czechoslovakia, the Hungarian Communists united with the Social Democrats and became party of power monopoly.

Conclusions

The way the communist regimes emerged in the surveyed countries remained firmly imprinted on the way they were perceived by the citizens as well as the local communist elites.

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