

Building Socialism

War wrought economic and human devastation on an unprecedented scale, but it also acted as the midwife of political transformation across Eastern Europe. The nature and direction of this transformation was not immediately clear. The new Soviet occupation forces and their Communist allies proclaimed something they termed ‘peoples’ democracy’ in 1944 and 1945. Until the late 1940s the region (with the exception of Yugoslavia and Albania) found itself in a state of political transition. For most of the region, single-party socialist dictatorship did not emerge until the period between 1947 and 1949. Despite the deployment of considerable repression by the state after 1949, the single-party dictatorships found it difficult to generate circumstances of political stability given the limited nature of the legitimacy on which their rule rested and considerable economic failures, which had become painfully apparent by the mid-1950s. While economic failure stemmed from the radicalism of policies of forced industrialisation and collectivisation that impoverished populations, limited legitimacy had different roots. It stemmed from the way in which Eastern Europe’s new rulers attempted to govern post-war society in the region.

The Soviets’ policy of initially installing broad anti-fascist coalitions to power across the region, in which the local Communist Party was *primus inter pares*, was rooted in the approach of Communist parties internationally to the threat of fascism. From the mid-1930s onwards, Communist parties across the continent abandoned the strategies of revolutionary sectarianism that had pushed them towards isolation. The shift in policy had been mandated by the *Comintern* (the international organisation of Communist parties) in Moscow due to Stalin’s increasing fear of fascism in general, and Germany’s National Socialist regime in particular. This shift resulted in Communist parties adopting a ‘popular front’ approach of unity with all ‘anti-fascist’ parties. While during the 1930s this included only other left-wing parties, the ideological formula did not explicitly exclude cooperation with some groups on the bourgeois right. While this policy was temporarily abandoned in the face of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact in 1939, it was renewed with a vengeance following Hitler’s invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941. Communist parties were to subordinate

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revolutionary goals to those of defeating fascism, and thus advocated collaboration with all anti-fascist forces in each country. Georgi Dimitrov, then secretary general of the Executive Committee of the *Comintern*, stated clearly what this shift would mean: 'In Czechoslovakia, we earlier classified Beneš [the pre-war President of Czechoslovakia] as an agent of English imperialism. Now the fire has to be directed against traitors like Hácha'.¹

As the Red Army occupied Eastern Europe, this policy of cooperation had to be translated into an ideological formula, which would enable Communist parties to govern in broad anti-fascist coalitions. For parties that had argued for the revolutionary transformation of the existing order, this was a difficult manoeuvre to undertake. The concept fashioned was that of the 'peoples' democracy' – a state that rested on a definition of democracy that relied on social equality as much as, if not more than, Western concepts of representative government or a state based on the rule of law. Dimitrov, installed as secretary of the Bulgarian Communist Party, argued in September 1946 that 'Bulgaria will not be a Soviet republic but a people's republic in which the functions of government will be performed by an enormous majority of the people – workers, peasants, craftsmen, and the people's intelligentsia. In this republic there will be no dictatorship of any kind'.² His Hungarian counterpart, Mátyás Rákosi, used the term 'new democracy' and defined it through the need to effect radical changes in the balance of class power in Hungarian society. In the villages, 'the acid test of the new democracy is the land question. He who does not want to see land given to the peasants, who wants to retain the system of great estates, is an enemy of Hungarian democracy'. For industrial communities, 'the basic demand of Hungarian democracy is the immediate abolition of any obstacle to the full economic and political realisation of the power of the working class'.³ This tension between the need for a broad coalition on the one hand, and social radicalism on the other, would dog Communist parties in implementing popular front policies in the region.

Popular front policies based on notions of broad coalitions of all 'anti-fascist forces' were unevenly implemented across the region. This approach was taken least seriously in south-eastern Europe where Communists had taken power through military victory in partisan struggle. In Albania, the Communists under Enver Hoxha governed through a Democratic Front, which maintained the pretence of unifying the Communists and other anti-fascist forces – at least until the Front's 93 percent victory in the rigged elections of

1 Quoted in Mevius 2002, p. 36.

2 Quoted in Brzezinski 1967, p. 27.

3 Rákosi 1950, p. 47.