February 1948 and the Czechoslovak Road to Socialism

In the period from 1944 to 1948 the hard uncompromising substance of Stalinism fell upon the countries of Eastern Europe. Following the iron-bound dictums of Stalin, they became tailored to the tone and ambitions of Moscow under the form of People's Democracies. The emergence of communism as the ruling system from within the bounds of a single country presented one of the most important events in the history of the international Communist movement. In the writings of Communist Czech and Soviet historians the era has developed an identity of its own as a distinct, interim phase in the transition from capitalism to communism. They see the coup d'état of 1948 in Prague as crucially important because of the Czechoslovak strategic position, which "was of immense significance" for Moscow because the outcome of the conflict between the Communist and democratic forces in the Czechoslovak Republic could have either helped definitively establish Communist power in Eastern Europe or could have blocked at least temporarily the path to Soviet expansion not only in Czechoslovakia but in other countries as well. In fact, in the late 1940s both the East and the West...
attributed great importance to the fate of the republic. For the East, Czechoslovakia was a show window to attract the Western countries, and for the West, the amount of independence that the country was allowed to exercise was an excellent indicator of Stalin’s real intentions in all of Eastern Europe.3

Communist policies manage to mold themselves around specific historical phases.4 The German invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941 changed abruptly the course of the Soviet-Nazi rapprochement initiated in the summer of 1939. As a result of a reexamination of Communist strategy, in 1941-43 Stalin returned to the old policy line of the popular front.5 In 1943 the Comintern was dissolved and Stalin endorsed the more flexible and diversified concept of national roads to socialism. He went so far in this direction that in the aftermath of the war he felt justified in expressing the view that under certain circumstances it was possible to achieve socialism without recourse to the dictatorship of the proletariat. In the summer of 1946 in his conversations with the chairman and undisputed leader of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (KSC) Klement Gottwald, the Soviet ruler expressly set the stamp of his approval on the KSC course, which emphasized the democratic process.6 This line came to a sudden end in the summer of 1947.

The events of the Prague Spring of 1968 and the present debate on the policies of the Communist parties in Italy, France, and Spain focus interest on the way in which the indigenous Communist parties have in the past endeavored to resist or ultimately to espouse the establishment of Soviet power in Eastern Europe. While the West European Communist parties insist on retaining their independence, the KSC views—apparently not without some

On the communist side the most recent work is Miroslav Bouček and Miloslav Klimeš, Dramatické dny Únor 1948 (Praha: Svoboda, 1973). The most up-to-date and best study is the unpublished manuscript written after 1969 by Jan Švec (anon.), Československý Únor 1948.3 The Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (KSC) views the takeover as part of a worldwide process of transition from capitalism to communism, similar in nature and chronology to revolutions in other People’s Democracies. Miroslav Bouček and Miloslav Klimeš, Únorové události roku 1948, Československý časopis historický [hereafter ČČH], No. 1 (1973), p. 8.

4. Zbigniew K. Brzezinski correctly stresses that the communists were never “forever committed” to their policies. “To a Communist every situation is fluid.... Once a new situation arises ... the preceding phase must give way and a new phase, with its own imperatives of action, begins.” The Soviet Bloc: Unity and Conflict (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1960), p. 49.


6. Gottwald at the Central Committee (CC) plenum, 25 Sept. 1946, in Miroslav Soukup, Některé problémy vzdělání výchova mezi komunistickými stranami, [Příspěvky k dějinám KSC], 4 (Feb. 1964), 13. Gottwald’s observations on his visit to Stalin were not reprinted in his Spisy (Praha: SNPL, 1957), XIII, 122. The concept of the special national way to socialism with emphasis on national specifics had been shared by other People’s Democracies.