The distinguished French historian Ernest Denis once observed: “1648, 1748, 1848—three times, always after a hundred years, Bohemia underwent a crisis which decided her fate for a long time.”

Professor Arnost Klima has written about all of these crises and periods. A prolific and knowledgeable writer, his books and articles are rich in details and information. His main field of interest, evident in all his writings, is economic history. From his impressive list of publications there are only a few items that have as their common denominator the political history of Bohemia, at least in their main parts. The few publications which deal with Bohemian history proper span mainly the period from the Thirty Years War to 1848. They provide a detailed economic and social background to the tremendous historical events and changes that occurred in this period. Klima published his first books in 1948, one of them a history of the revolutionary year 1848. In 1958 he published a book about the era from the Thirty Years War to 1781; another about the period from 1781 to 1848 appeared in 1979. The intent of this essay is to acquaint the English-language audience with some of Professor Klima’s historical works and to evaluate them critically. In order to proceed chronologically, we shall start with his coverage of the Thirty Years War and continue until 1848. In addition, Klima published another book on 1848 in 1974, and that same year he produced an interesting article on Marx and Engels in 1848. These will be discussed below together with his first book, Rok 1848 v Čechách. Finally, Klima’s history of the Czech labor movement will be considered last because it ranges from the eighteenth century to 1878.


Many-sided as Klíma is—his knowledge is amazing in breadth—there runs through most of his writings the same leitmotiv: The constant emphasis on the transition from feudalism to capitalism, the rise of the new classes, the bourgeoisie becoming privileged and the proletariat exploited and eventually achieving class-consciousness. He stresses the Czech national awakening and the ever-present nationality question. These two problems give Czech history a special quality.

In examining these works one has to disregard the ideological trimmings and the frequently repeated attempts to magnify the revolutionary activities of the workers of Prague in 1848, who in reality had very little significance for the revolution and who fought far less on the barricades than their comrades in Vienna or Berlin, or especially those in Paris. After eliminating the ideological ballast, one can see that Klíma's narrative flows along traditional lines, but with the addition of an incredible amount of detail which he inserts into the portrayal of the historical events.

The main subject of the above books is not economic history. Klíma's concern with the transition from feudalism to capitalism and the rise of the proletariat, however, comes to the fore again and again. While Klíma occasionally refers to Marx, Engels, and Lenin, he conducts very little theoretical discussion but rather emphasizes the real situation and specific developments. Marx actually did not discuss the transition from feudalism to capitalism. The Communist Manifesto points out that in their historical growth the capitalists have pitilessly destroyed the old feudal relations and that the bourgeoisie has "burst asunder" feudal society.3 The question is, how did the bourgeoisie succeed in doing it? There really is no clear answer. Engels in Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of the Classical German Philosophy explained that "bourgeoisie and proletariat both arose in consequence of a transformation of economic conditions, more precisely of the mode of production. The transition first from guild handicraft to manufacture and then from manufacture to large scale industry . . . became incompatible with the existing order of production handed down by history . . . that is to say incompatible with privileges of the guild and the numerous other personal and local privileges . . . of the feudal order of society. The productive forces represented by the bourgeoisie rebelled against the order of production represented by the feudal landlords and the guild masters."4

Of course, as Klíma often indicates, with the change in the mode of production, the social condition had to change, too. In The Poverty of Philoso-

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