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The Soviet Union and the Establishment of Communist Regimes in Eastern Europe, 1944-1956: A Documentary Collection

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Abstract

Historical studies of Soviet influence in Eastern Europe after World War II have undergone a radical transformation as a consequence of the fall of communism. This is due in part to the ability of historians from the region itself to ask fresh questions and offer new judgments about their own past free from the strictures of Marxist-Leninist historical orthodoxy, party control, and the strict injunctions of state-sponsored censorship. Even more important is the loosening of state control over archival collections that document the Soviet role in the establishment of communist states, 1944-1956. Restrictions vary from country to country in Eastern Europe. In Russia, the chief repository of materials on Soviet actions in this period, the politics of de-classification has shifted since 1991, from relative openness to selective de-classification. Despite the availability of a plethora of documents to tell the story of Soviet efforts to create communist regimes in postwar Eastern Europe, some archival collections remain closed to scholars both from the region and from the West.

These limitations aside, our understanding of Soviet intentions and actions in Eastern Europe can be deepened and widened as a consequence of a decade of research in these newly available documents. This project – intended to provide a fully annotated translation of nearly two hundred seminal documents – offers the reader the essential materials related to Soviet policies in Eastern Europe. We learn about Stalin's explicit instructions at the end of the war to destroy the Polish Home Army underground and to cut off the Warsaw Uprising from any outside help. The documents illuminate the direct role of Andrei Vyshinsky in Romania, as he pressured the king to bring the communists to power, despite their weakness and unpopularity in the country. Newly available archives explore Stalin's intentions in creating the Cominform in September 1947 and document his explicit instructions to the East European parties about how to deal with the temptations of the Marshall Plan.

Shifting Soviet instructions are matched, in almost every instance, by complete East European compliance. For the first time, we have the complete correspondence between the Soviets and Yugoslavs, amply demonstrating the fundamental causes of the Stalin-Tito split. The integral part played by Soviet "advisors" in the design of the show trials in Hungary, Romania, and Czechoslovakia, is matched by their day-to-day involvement in the actual interrogations, prosecutions, sentences, and executions. And we see in the newly available documents the pressures that incomplete de-Stalinization put on the East European party leaders, creating the political crises that resulted in the East German uprising of June 1953, the Polish October, and the Hungarian Revolution of 1956

As a consequence of these and other Soviet policies, the face of Eastern Europe was profoundly changed after the Second World War. The Soviets did not invent East European communism, nor did they control many of its aspects. However, the newly accessible documents from previously secreted archives, which are made available often for the first time in English in this volume, demonstrate that Soviet influence, control, and manipulation were at the heart of the creation of communist regimes in the region.