The Organizational Strategies of Communist Parties in East Central Europe, 1945-89

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Introduction

The organizational strategies of the communist parties during the era of state socialism (1945-1989) are among the lesser-documented aspects of the parties’ rule. Yet these strategies, consisting of the means of party control over society and internal personnel policies within the party, underlied the communist parties’ ability to reform and negotiate under communism. The less the parties relied on the loyalty of party members and extensive organizational networks as a way to control society, and the more pragmatic and skilled their elites, the more able the communist parties to innovate and implement policy reforms (however meager), and to negotiate with the anti-communist opposition. Moreover, these strategies also influenced politics after the collapse of communism in 1989: they formed the collective historical record and the elite skills which determined how the communist parties would survive and succeed after the regime collapse in 1989. The more the parties had encouraged pluralism within and outside their organizations, they more likely they were to gain a relatively favorable historical record and to adapt successfully to democracy.

There were two aspects to the parties’ organizational strategies. First, the parties used their organizations themselves to establish and maintain authority over society: through party organizational and membership networks, the nomenklatura system, and party purges designed to punish “deviants,” the leadership ensured societal compliance. These relations of power between the party and society ranged from the Czech or East German saturation of society with party organizations and members and the assertion of direct party power over schooling and employment, to the relative absence of the party from daily life in Poland and in Hungary, where party membership and organization rates were far lower, and considerable spheres of private economic and political activity made for greater societal autonomy of the party.
Second, the parties’ internal organizational practices—elite recruitment, advancement and turnover, and internal party pluralism—were used both to assert control over the party’s make-up, and to promote cohorts with specific skills and outlooks. Here, the variation ranged from recruitment exclusively from within the party ranks and promotion based chiefly on ideological loyalty, as in the Czech party, to the more pragmatic East German emphasis on technocratic expertise, to the recruitment and cooptation of intelligentsia in Poland, in Hungary, and even in Bulgaria. Thus, the subsequent strict control over the party stifled the rise of Czech elites with practical, portable skills, who could envision and implement reform. Ironically, however, it also allowed the rise of reformist Slovak elites. The Polish and Hungarian parties, for their part, tended to recruit their elites from the outside, using political and administrative skills as criteria. They did so more consistently than the other parties—the Bulgarian communist party, for example, engaged in such cooptation only during the period of late state socialism, in the late 1970s and beyond. As we will see, these twin practices, of societal control and of personnel recruitment were often intertwined—the more a party pursued societal saturation, the more it worried about the loyalty and reliability of the cadres who made up the party organization.

In accounting for these patterns, scholars have posited that the differences in party strategies were the result of forces outside of the party. First, prewar configurations of political parties and their constituencies shaped the bargaining over regime type immediately after World War II. Thus, the communist mass parties in East Germany and in Czechoslovakia, faced with fully democratic competition and highly mobilized urban middle strata and working class during the interwar period, eventually formed highly bureaucratized and repressive communist regimes. According to this analysis, the Polish and Hungarian parties, with their unmobilized interwar working class and strong agrarian mobilization under semi-democratic interwar regimes, formed
less bureaucratized regimes after World War II. These, in turn, were more likely to coopt than to repress their potential opposition.

Second, differences in the relationship with the Soviet Union have been used to explain the parties’ organizational strategies—the more a given party was part of the USSR’s security “core,” the less it had to worry about having to ensure its political monopoly, and was freer to pursue some liberalization. Alternatively, in the security “periphery,” party rule was not as assured by the Soviet Union, especially in the early stages, and so the parties had to resort to repression and reliance on ideologically loyal comrades to enforce party control over society.

Third, differences in the political cultures of the societies involved meant different degrees of acceptance and resistance to the communist project. Thus, where a strong working class or traditionally pro-Russian feelings existed, communist parties could take full advantage and saturate society with party organizations with little resistance or need for negotiation. At the other end of the spectrum, where parties faced a population that was particularly resistant—dominated by agrarian mobilization, religious faith, or anti-Russian/Soviet sentiment, communist parties would have to find some way to compromise with these forces in order to remain in power.

These factors clearly contributed to the parties’ organizational strategies, but leave some developments unexplained. Prewar patterns had little influence in countries where the main political actors who could continue prewar patterns were obliterated, as in Poland. The security priorities do not explain changes over time: Czechoslovakia became a firm part of the Soviet security framework, yet the KSČ did little to relax its policies, even after Stalin’s death. Moreover, relative ties to the Soviet Union do not explain the variation in the repression and control among the Romanian, Albanian, and Yugoslav parties. Political culture also does not
explain these patterns fully: Poland and Slovakia were similar in their agrarianism and Catholicism, yet the party policies clearly diverged. Nor did religiosity mandate party policy: the Church was a prominent political and societal actor in Poland, but its relative weakness did not preclude similar party strategies in Hungary.

This analysis of the communist parties of Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Hungary (with briefer consideration of the East German and Bulgarian cases), seeks to fill in some of these lacunae. I first examine the parties after World War II, and the distinct ways in which the capture of their power translated into their organizational strategies. While the initial differences in these strategies were small, especially given the Stalinist brutality that followed the takeovers, they were steadily reinforced, both by deliberate replication and by regime crises. As a result, by the 1980s, the parties had very different configurations of elites, patterns of negotiation between the party and its opposition, and reform capabilities. These various configurations, in turn, implied divergent paths of transition, and distinct political possibilities for the communist parties themselves.

II. Communist Takeovers and Regime Crises

The communist captures of power after World War II led the parties to reach distinct conclusions regarding the kind of party organization that would best establish their authority, and thus, to adopt different organizational strategies. Specifically, the more the party came to power faced with powerful domestic or external opponents it was uncertain of defeating, the more it tended to view its organization as a means of establishing and retaining power. Thus, in Czechoslovakia, where the free elections of 1946 called into question communist legitimacy, the party attempted to saturate society with its organizations and membership networks, making many aspects of daily life dependent on party loyalty. Similarly, obsessed with West German
“infiltration,” the East German SED had saturated society with an extensive network of party organizations, demands for ideological loyalty, and continual control, permeating “all activities on farms, and in factories, governmental agencies, the armed forces, and so on.” Thus, even if socialism was compatible with the national traditions of East Germany or the Czech lands, the party could not rely on this compatibility to ensure its grip on power.

In contrast, the more assured the party felt of its power, chiefly as a result of its “importation” by the Soviet Union, the less it viewed the party organization as relevant to its hold on rule. Instead, such parties relied more on elite co-optation and societal engagement to retain the “legitimacy” of its governance. Thus, in Poland and in Hungary, the party organization itself and its efforts to saturate society played less of a role in maintaining party authority than the parties’ attempts to negotiate with society through political liberalization and populist economic policies. To a lesser extent, the Bulgarian communist party in the 1960s-70s also coopted the intelligentsia and implemented cycles of economic reforms. In short, not only did the postwar communist takeovers capture power for the parties, but they also first delineated how the party would go about establishing its authority: whether the party organization would be a means of control over society, or whether the organization would be perceived as less important than elite turnover and societal engagement as a way to establish popular acquiescence.

The takeovers also set into motion the personnel policies that influenced the parties’ subsequent development, including policies of recruitment, advancement, turnover, and internal pluralism. Aware of the bases for their takeover, the parties pursued different cadre policies within their organizations. The more the party relied on its organization to control society, the more demanding its standards of ideological loyalty and uniformity. These, in turn, translated
into willingness to open channels of party advancement and reward skill rather than ideological loyalty.

By enforcing ideology rather than pragmatism, the personnel policies also affected the parties’ subsequent ability to reform policy and to negotiate with the opposition—after all, “closed” or “intramural” patterns of internal recruitment and advancement have led to orthodox, cautious, and largely conservative elites, while “open” or “extramural” policies of advancement tend to foster a more innovative, less hide-bound cohort. Similarly, higher rates of leadership turnover promote innovative and flexible policymaking. They also keep the elites from entrenching themselves in any position, and create competition for prized positions.

Regime crises strengthened these differences in the parties’ internal policies, sustaining these distinctions until the collapse of the communist regimes in 1989. Where the parties discounted the party members and minimized the direct control of society by party organizations, the response to the crises was more likely to consist of removing discredited party leaders, and of engaging society through reforms and negotiation. Where the party elites saw the party organization as the guarantee of its authority and control over society, on the other hand, they were more likely to hold it responsible for the failings of the communist regime, and thus set out to “improve” its reliability after regime crises through purges and punitive actions. The responses to these crises were thus not only a reflection of party cleavages, patterns of popular mobilization, and international pressures, but of the parties’ organization and its control over society. While there were changes over time—most notably, with the end of “national communism” and the post-Stalinist “thaw,” which relaxed ideological demands and abolished the more severe party punishments, these general patterns held throughout the postwar period.

Czechoslovakia
The Czechoslovak Communist Party (Komunistická Strana Československa, KSČ), captured power as a mass political party, with extensive organizational networks and a large party membership. Using these to mobilize voters, it won over 40% in the free elections in 1946, and a leading role in the government coalition that followed. Dissatisfied with the pace of political change, the party fomented a crisis among its coalition partners in February 1948 (several non-communist ministers resigned, without naming replacements), and took over power completely in a coup d’état. Since it relied on its 20,000 organizations and close to 2.5 million party members (or over 25% of the adult population) in 1946-8 to obtain electoral support, to eliminate political competitors, and to mobilize forces during the coup, the KSČ continued to emphasize its mass party character, even as it did away with elections.

Having successfully emerged from domestic competition, the party’s leaders considered the party structures and members as the mainstay of their power. As Central Committee members argued, “the strength of our party rests in organization, whereas the strength of other parties rests on tradition.” A large, loyal membership was both an enormous political resource, and the only proof the party needed of its legitimacy. It would guarantee the party’s sustained control over society, and retain the same structures that brought the party into power in the free elections of 1946. It was also a way of “crowding out” other political forces—other political parties had also sought mass party membership, and the KSČ saw its gains as their losses. Much as the East German SED, the KSČ saw a mass party as a way to establish firm control over society.

As a result, the party subsequently counted on the “saturation” of society by party members and structures to help establish its authority as legitimate, and to maintain their control of Czechoslovakia. Czech party membership rates were twice as high as those in the neighboring countries. By 1949, the Czech party had succeeded in infusing society with party
organizations—only 3.4% of communities were without party organizations a year after the communist takeover. Similarly, only 3.3% of the communities were without a party organization in Slovakia by 1954. By 1989, a party organization existed for every 286 Czechs, and for every 400 Slovaks. As a party journal explained as late as in the mid-1970s, “an effort must be made to ensure that there is no factory, no important workplace, and no community where there is not a primary organization of the Czechoslovak Communist Party.” The only country with comparable saturation rates was East Germany. Obsessed with withstanding potential West German assault, the SED infiltrated society to the point that anywhere from 13 to 17% of the population was in the party. By the late 1980s, there were 96,000 party organizations, or one for every 175 East Germans.

As befitted the vanguard of the workers, the KSČ consistently pursued “proper” blue-collar members. As a result, the percentage of Czechoslovak party members in the intelligentsia peaked at less than a third—the KSČ was the one party to insist on its “working class” character until the very end. Even in East Germany, with a 28% intelligentsia share in the party, the white-collar workers were relatively over-represented. In the other countries, intelligentsia and white collar rates were even higher—for example, in Bulgaria, their share of party membership topped 36% by the 1970s.

At the same time, since Czech blue-collar jobs were not made as dependent on party membership, there was less incentive for blue-collar workers to join, and far fewer sanctions to keep them from leaving. For example, while white-collar workers were demoted to menial jobs if they were expelled from the party, blue-collar workers faced no such punishments. Moreover, employment in the state sector was made exclusively the provenance of the party. As a result, the Czech intelligentsia and white-collar workers were the group most keen to join the party, but
faced the highest ideological barriers in doing so.\textsuperscript{21} Similar patterns appeared in the party aparat. Perhaps not surprisingly, given the KS\`s long-held anti-intellectualism, levels of education had no influence on whether one became a Czech party aparat worker.\textsuperscript{22} Even in the late 1980s, when well-educated technocrats in Poland and in Hungary dominated the party aparat and nomenklatura, the KS\` proudly noted that nearly 90\% of its aparat came from communist, worker families.

Concerned with the purity of party ranks as a mainstay of its organizational saturation and control,\textsuperscript{23} the Czech communist leaders purged their membership regularly, and at higher rates than any other party. In the 1948-51 period, two purges cast out 750,000 members, or 32\% of the party membership.\textsuperscript{24} Purges of the state administration sent over 150,000 people from white-collar to factory jobs in the three-year period after the takeover.\textsuperscript{25} After the Prague Spring, an estimated 70,000 to 100,000 were fired from their jobs,\textsuperscript{26} and denied all but menial employment. 75\% of the expelled communist party members were sent to perform manual labor.\textsuperscript{27}

The specter of ideological disloyalty dominated the Czech justifications of the purges. The KS\` still railed against “non-Leninist thinking” as late as 1988, and insisted that it was “wholly natural and logical”\textsuperscript{28} that the party demanded ideological responsibility from each communist, insisting that “bolshevization” was a “fully relevant and timely (\textit{aktualní})” party goal.\textsuperscript{29} Thus, the most likely cause for purging in the Czech lands was ideological insubordination or “incorrect views,” especially in the post-Prague Spring purging of any non-conformist or reformist movements. The result was the elimination of any overt reformist sentiment in the party until 1989, through continual checks, controls, and demands of more criticism and self-criticism.\textsuperscript{30}
Moreover, the Czech and East German parties were perhaps the most persistent and successful in making society dependent on the party, in areas as basic as education and employment. Membership in the orthodox Communist Youth Union was a prerequisite for higher education throughout the period, and “political criteria [were] always applied” in selection for both high school and university. Moreover, 550,000 jobs were directly vetted by Czechoslovak party organs in the mid-1980s, in contrast with 270,000 in Poland (with over twice the working population of Czechoslovakia), or the even smaller number in Hungary during the same time period. Czechs and Slovaks were not allowed to travel as freely as Poles and Hungarians, and were subject to humiliating interviews, courtesy of the State Security Agency, after their return. Censorship was also far more strict, as subscriptions to many Western journals were forbidden and domestic publications were under stricter control than either in Poland or in Hungary. In much the same way, the SED determined all access to employment and schooling, and remained “interested in all facets of a party member’s life.”

The KSČ also directly supervised “its” employees, since it saw party presence in the factories both as an extension of party agitation and a way to ensure production quality. In the mid-1980s, over 560,000 interrogations were held with state employees, with 100,000 cadres told to raise their expertise and communist loyalties. Their interlocutor? The party’s Central Control and Revision Commission, which was theoretically in charge of party discipline and membership. Moreover, there were few other hopes of employment. In contrast, Polish agriculture remained uncollectivized and in private hands, and a private sector existed in Hungary and in Poland for both customer services and petty manufacturing. Those fired from their jobs could thus turn to other forms of employment—no such alternatives existed in Czechoslovakia.
In their internal organizational policies, the conservative Czech party leaders deliberately replicated a pattern of “closed” elite advancement—elites could only rise within and through the party ranks. After 1945, the purges and recruitment policies of the Czech communist party rewarded neither education nor extramural experience, but ideological loyalty. Anxious to reassert control, and suspicious of any innovations that smacked of the 1968 reform movement, the party promoted only “safe” comrades, tested by years, if not decades, of party work. Prospective members had to apply directly to the party, and could be rejected on ideological grounds. Advancement occurred mostly through progression upwards in the party, into increasingly ideologically stagnant elite layers, so that conformist and orthodox members were the primary ones to advance in the party. The overwhelming majority of Czech and Slovak leaders were longtime party activists. Although the levels of education increased with time, party leaders had no international experience, and their schooling was either at the Prague or at the Moscow party schools. The youth organization, completely under party control after 1968, provided no reformist elites. As a result, the Czech party elites in the 1980s were ideologically hidebound, and eventually unable to keep up with the transition of 1989.

Not even the East German SED, whose “effectiveness in suppressing dissent within its own ranks while penetrating and closely monitoring the rest of society probably exceeded that of other East European ruling parties,” could match the Czech stagnation. For all the lack of toleration of differences in opinion, and its demands of ideological loyalty, the SED nonetheless coopted technocrats to a greater degree than the KSČ, and recognized individual performance and skill. As a result, upward mobility no longer took place exclusively within the party.

The rates of elite turnover further demonstrate the Czech party’s conservative stance towards the role of the party organization. In its effort to prevent the resurrection of “right-wing
opportunism,” the KSČ Politburo did not turn over its mid-level cadres and did not bring in any new members (unless an incumbent died) until 1987, when Miloš Jakeš’s dogmatic wing took over from the conservative pragmatic Gustav Husák. As a result, an average only 16% of the Politburo leadership changed every year, less than half the rates in Poland. Moreover, elites who left did so as a result of retirement or death—there was minimal horizontal movement to other positions.

The party’s response to its regime crisis also reflected its concept of the party organization as the mainstay of party rule. The major reform movement, the Prague Spring of 1968, began within the party, partly because the KSČ had so penetrated society by that point that few centers of independent thought existed outside of the party, unlike the relatively free academic departments and scientific institutes in Poland and in Hungary. The movement began with the formulation of reform alternatives by three committees attached to the central party leadership in the 1960s. The suggestions for improving the economy eventually led to calls for political reform, the ascension of the reformist Alexander Dubček into the party leadership, and eventually, an unprecedented renewal of both the party and its relationship to the society.

After the Soviet-led invasion crushed the Spring, however, all these gains were reversed. Since the impetus for the Czech liberalization had come from within the party, it instilled an even greater fear of pluralism within the party leadership. The party cadres’ “treachery” had to be punished. The new leadership reasoned that without a reliable membership, it could not count on an effective and loyal public support, and so the Czechoslovak response focused on cleansing the membership ranks. The result was both a renewed ideologization of party life and a clamping down on any “dangerous” initiatives. Entire academic institutes and departments were
summarily eliminated, the press and media enervated completely, and constant “loyalty checks” made party members acutely aware of the party leadership’s desire for ideological reliability.46

In the most dramatic purge in the history of state socialism, over 28% of KS members were expelled from the party within a year following the Prague Spring.47 Moreover, expulsion meant not only loss of party membership, but of employment and schooling opportunities as well, not only for the expellees but their entire families. Subsequently, constant “loyalty checks” made the remaining party members acutely aware of the party leadership’s desire for ideological reliability.48 The purge was designed to prevent any future reformist deviations in the party, while the subsequent policies of societal oppression and policy stagnation were to demonstrate that the party was once again fully in control.

Even more importantly, since 1968 itself was a reform that began within the party, no further political or economic reforms were considered by the party, for fear of a similarly disastrous loss of control over society. In contrast, even the trauma that followed 1953 in East Germany, producing the enormous purges that it did, did not preclude some (minor) future policy alterations by the SED.49 The KS document after 1969, “The lessons of the Crisis Development” (Poučení z krizového vývoje) denounced any attempt at political or economic reform, either then or in the future. As late as 1989, the KS leader Miloš Jakeš argued that any revision or attempt to come to terms with 1968 would mean the party would fall apart.50

Nor did the party allow internal pluralism. Any reform-minded party member bold enough to attempt to disseminate his or her views would be rewarded with both an expulsion and loss of employment. Instead of capitalizing on its reform potential of 1968, the party deliberately eliminated its residues, partly because of its fear that party foment would once again destabilize the polity. In the 1980s, following both the rise of the opposition Charter ‘77 and Polish
Solidarity, the party rank and file grew increasingly dissatisfied with the stagnation, and produced several localized, informal discussion clubs. These, however, had neither the connections to the party elite nor the access to decisionmaking to become full-fledged reform alternatives. Instead, they largely foundered at the local level or were kept out of centralized, and largely unchanged, decisionmaking structures. Therefore, party reformists in 1989, though they could now openly voice their concerns and offer alternatives, had little access to the central power structures. The more reactionary elites, with little commitment to party transformation beyond the absolutely necessary, instead took over power the party.

However, in their desire to control the Czechoslovak party, the Czech leadership created the space for Slovak reform potential. Earlier, the communist party did less well in the 1946 elections in Slovakia, and never organized as thoroughly: the membership rate at the time of the 1948 takeover was 9.1% of adult Slovaks, about a third of the rates in the Czech lands. Nor were the Slovak party members or leaders seen as particularly committed to establishing communist rule. Therefore, the Slovak component was rapidly forced to join the Czech party. As a result, the Slovak party was a subservient and stagnant party backwater until 1968, and the federalization of the country. In having to cede almost all its authority to the Prague center, the Slovak communists lost prestige within Slovakia, and became an instrument of the Czech leadership.

Having centralized control after 1946, the Czech party allowed the Slovaks some administrative autonomy after the Prague Spring with the federalization of Czechoslovakia, which partly addressed the Czech domination of Slovakia under the auspices of “the Czechoslovak People’s Socialist Republic.” Since the Slovak party was not as active in the Prague Spring, and since the Slovak party was considered slightly more liberal than its Czech
counterpart, Slovak party members were not purged as heavily. While districts where 20% of members were expelled were put forth as examples, others, like the intellectual centers in Bratislava, only had a tiny percentage of expellees. Those who were expelled could also count on support from many of their old comrades. Moreover, since the intelligentsia community was so small in Slovakia, and its members knew each other very well, there was a hesitation to punish intellectuals.

Despite the ostensible federalization, the centralization of power in the Czechoslovak communist party meant that as orders flowed from Prague to the Slovak regional party heads, Bratislava (the capital of Slovakia) was largely neglected by party supervision and control commissions. As a result, Slovak reformists survived through an oversight—they spent most of the 1970s and 1980s in the Marxist Leninist Institute of the Central Committee of the KSS, the Slovak party’s main theoretical and programmatic organ, far away from both party supervision and access to party decisionmaking. While the Czech party and its institutes stagnated, pockets of Slovak reformists could thus survive. These young scholars were unable to advance into the party’s leadership prior to 1989, and thus gained far more theoretical than practical experience in policy making and implementation. Nevertheless, they were ready to assume power at a time when most older, established party officials were either too disoriented or frightened to take charge, immediately after November 1989. Similarly, pockets of East German reform thought survived in the Berlin SED Academy of Social Sciences, and their proposals helped to shape the transformation of the SED into the PDS after 1989.

As a result, while the Czech party elites were not only unable to implement political liberalization or economic reform, but incapable of transforming the party and adapting to democracy, their Slovak counterparts were capable of preserving a more diverse membership,
and gathering some measure of public support under communism, given their partial fulfillment of Slovak national aspirations. Not surprisingly, the Slovak (and to a lesser extent, the East-German) elites were more successful in adapting to democracy after 1989, and becoming accepted political players.

**Poland**

Imported from Moscow and supported by the Soviet Army, the Polish communist party was painfully aware of its lack of support after World War II. In their analyses, party leaders admitted that the Soviet presence was “crucial” to its coming to power.\(^{57}\) Party leaders therefore never allowed a free election. As one enraged Politburo member explained in February 1946: “we cannot allow ‘loose’ elections and an unfettered mobilization of fascist elements…we cannot allow a repeat of the Hungarian experiment [in free elections].”\(^{58}\) By 1947, party leader Władysław Gomułka did not even speak about a pretense of elections, but referred to the capture of power as a “social revolution” and an “overthrow of the government.”\(^{59}\) The Polish party thus came to power through electoral fraud and coalitional chicanery, faced with popular distrust and enmity.

Not surprisingly, therefore, the Polish party regarded its newly recruited members as unreliable and uncommitted.\(^{60}\) Party members were as suspect in their loyalties as they were irrelevant to the takeover.\(^{61}\) Polish party officials did not even know how many members the party had in late 1945, while their Czech counterparts had precise figures by that point.\(^{62}\) Nor did the Polish leaders point to the party membership as a source of legitimization of their power. Instead, they complained that any increase in numbers weakened the party,\(^{63}\) and argued that past mass membership drives were “inseparable” from loss of quality.\(^{64}\) As a result, the party never pursued the sort of mass, committed membership the Czech party did—by 1948, the Polish
PZPR managed to recruit only 4.3% of the population, and subsequently averaged about 5.4% of the adult population as its members.

In contrast to the Czech saturation of society with party organizations and representatives, a fourth of Polish villages had no party organization, as late as 1987.\(^65\) In 1958, over half of Polish villages were without party organizations, a portion that decreased to 29% by 1965. This translated into 21,000 out of 41,000 villages without party organizations, down to 12,000 villages without organizations in 1965. By 1989, there was a basic party organization for every 500 Poles, in contrast to one for every 286 Czechs. The number of central party aparat employees reflected these differences—by 1965, there were more central party aparat workers in the Czech lands than in Poland (despite the fact that Poland’s population was over 3.5 times the size of the Czech), and these differences persisted.\(^66\) The leadership’s attitudes towards the aparat are also revealing: by 1945, while the Czechs had full data on aparat number and organization, the Polish party did not know either the number or placement of its aparat workers.\(^67\)

Even during the otherwise ideology-bound Stalinist era, the Polish PZPR unofficially pursued intelligentsia recruitment.\(^68\) The Polish party emphasized that the party rules did not mandate any particular composition of the party.\(^69\) A Polish regional report noted in 1953 that more highly educated workers were needed in the aparat, the better to work with intellectuals.\(^70\) By 1966, party journal *Trybuna Ludu* argued that “the scientist, the engineer or the doctor, the teacher or the economist are wanted in the party.”\(^71\) Within a decade, the official Polish elite recruitment policies stopped favoring proletarian origins (as they had in the ideologically more rigorous 1940s and early 1950s), and party workers became increasingly better-educated by the 1970s.\(^72\) By 1981, Polish leader Edward Babiuch was perfectly satisfied to report that only 21%
of the party were workers. Nor did the party pursue particularly loyal communists: by the 1970s, a tacit understanding emerged between party members and their leaders, so that the vast majority of party members attended religious services, baptized their children, and even joined *en masse* the opposition trade union Solidarity in 1980-1. Unlike the Czech or East German cases, both the Polish and Hungarian parties made peace with the private “deviations” of their members. Even the Bulgarian party, for all of Zhivkov’s obsessions with loyalty, lowered ideological demands in the *Theses of 1976*.

Moreover, the Polish and Hungarian parties not only expelled far fewer members than the Czech, but attached less significance to the loss of membership. The Polish and Hungarian parties struck off 300,000 and 179,000 off the membership lists, amounting to 20% and 16% of the membership, respectively, during the same period of Stalin-mandated “cleansing of the party ranks” (1948-1953). After 1969, the *total* expulsions amounted to 77,000 in Poland and 23,000 in Hungary, compared to the 71,000 expelled from the KS in 1969 alone.

Even in the most oppressive years of state socialism, an additional 160,000 in Poland and 130,000 in Hungary left of their free will, simply by either not showing up for party meetings or not submitting their cards for exchange. Only 20.5% of the KS members who left did so of their own accord, in contrast with 35% of the Polish members and 42% of the Hungarian departures. Polish and Hungarian party members in general were far more likely to leave of their own accord—for example, following the rise of Solidarity, over 700,000 members left the Polish PZPR in protest during 1980-81, while the Hungarian party lost about 20,000 members each year to lack of interest in the late 1970s and 1980s.

Similarly, the Polish party enforced far less societal dependence on the party, allowing the agriculture to remain uncollectivized, and making education largely independent of party
membership. For example, by the late 1980s, party membership figures among the students hovered on the comic: in 1987, the party reported 879 student members among its 2 million-plus ranks. A large private sector was allowed to function in the economy, and Poles lived under far fewer strictures than their Czechoslovak neighbors. Most notably, the Roman Catholic Church was never as prosecuted as in Czechoslovakia or even in Hungary.

In its internal advancement policies, the PZPR pursued communist youth organization (Socjalistyczny Zwiêzek Studentów Polskich, SZSP, earlier known as the ZSP and the ZMP) leaders, who were effectively educated in politicking and hungry for a chance to exercise their skills. Given the persistent conflict and distrust between society and the party, the latter needed a team of capable negotiators and administrators. The party youth auxiliaries served as both a candidate pool and training ground for future elites in a setting marked less by ideology than by pragmatic problem-solving, democratic voting procedures, made political bargaining and coalition forming as the key to attaining leadership roles. The party funded the youth organizations as part of the budgets of individual academic institutions, rather than that of a centralized organization, which gave the youth league considerable autonomy. The regional structure further meant that the future elites would learn how to win successive elections, manipulate coalitions, and achieve successively higher positions, while learning legal and administrative norms. In short, the youth organization acted as a “school for democracy.”

Many of the future party leaders advanced in these parallel organizations. Throughout the 1970s, the leaders of the youth organization moved into lower leadership positions in the party, and advanced from there. By 1986, for example, 35% of the first secretaries had been youth organization leaders, and 80% of high-ranking party bureaucrats had belonged to the youth organization in Poland. Extramural advancement became so prevalent that only 6 out of the 24
party Politburo members in 1987 had advanced from within, and even these were more educated, pragmatic elites, in keeping with the standard set by the youth organization graduates.\footnote{83}

Nor did the elites stagnate in their positions. An average of 32.5\% of the Politburo leadership changed every year in Poland, twice the rates of Czechoslovak turnover. Moreover, while the removed Czech elites either retired into obscurity or simply died, the Polish elites were part of a constant shifting of personnel from one party position to another. Edward Gierek, the Polish party leader from 1968 to 1980, instituted the “cadre carousel” and constantly “parachuted” appointees from one region to another.

As a result of the PZPR’s recruitment policies, the new party leadership in 1990 consisted almost exclusively of youth organization alumni.\footnote{84} The first leader of the Polish successor party, Aleksander Kwa\textslash{}\v{n}iewski, graduated from the youth organization to become the government’s Minister of Youth in the 1980s. Similarly, Leszek Ja\textslash{}\v{k}iewicz and Jerzy Szmajdzinski, two of the Polish communist party successor’s leaders, were both elected to youth league chairmanships in secret and direct ballots in 1981 and the late 1980s, respectively.\footnote{85} Several post-communist leaders in Poland, including two Prime Ministers and the President, were also members, as were numerous ministers, ambassadors, and other leading politicians after 1989.\footnote{86}

The regime crises reflected the loose coupling between party and society, and the lack of the party’s reliance on its organization. Poles repeatedly poured out onto the streets in protest in 1956, 1968, 1970, and 1976, prompted by economic shortages, political repression, and price raises despite tight wage policies. In the most dramatic, and most sustained, opposition movement against communist rule, these grievances culminated in the founding of the independent trade union Solidarity, which claimed 10 million members, or over a third of the adult population, during 1980-1. In what was both a historical irony and evidence of the party’s
laxness, over 35% of the Polish communist party members joined Solidarity, while 45% expressed pro-Solidarity sentiment in public opinion surveys.\(^8^7\)

In response to the rise of Solidarity in 1980, hundreds of Polish party organizations formed networks autonomous of the national leadership (the “horizontal movements”) and presented programmatic proposals to the 9th Party Congress in July 1981. Delegates were largely chosen democratically by their basic organizations, and a real exchange of views took place (as opposed to the standard scripted speeches, dutifully followed by “stormy applause.”) The new Central Committee elected by the Congress consisted of a majority of new members, beholden to their constituent rank and file and not to party leaders.\(^8^8\) Only 21 out of the previous 200 Central Committee members were reelected. At the same time, over 50% of the first secretaries of the basic organizations were changed, as were 38% at the factory, town, and commune levels.\(^8^9\) Although the horizontal movements were quelled as part of the pacification of society following the imposition of martial law in December 1981, they established the generation of politicians active in democratic Polish politics today.

In response to these crises, the party reacted by exchanging party leaders (in 1956, 1970, and in 1981), as Polish party publications openly blamed leaders for the party crises,\(^9^0\) and party congresses were held to castigate those held responsible.\(^9^1\) The PZPR further attempted to mend its ways and to “consult” with society, through freer elections and referenda in the 1980s. Even if it never fully liberalized either the polity or the economy, it also continued to foster its young elites, capable of both political and economic reforms.

For its part, the Solidarity movement, though self-limiting, nevertheless exerted enormous pressure on the party-state to transform not only the economy but also the polity. Occurring as it did only a few years before the democratic transition, the Solidarity era remained alive in the
memories of both the party elites and the populace. As the conflict between the party and the society persisted, the decade culminated in the Round Table negotiations of 1989, brought about by yet another wave of strikes in the fall of 1988. Faced with more social ferment, reform currents were reactivated by the party itself: the December 1988 10th Plenum specifically encouraged local organizations to aid the party by facilitating reform currents and platforms. As a result, many of these groupings arose locally, but with considerable elite ties. Throughout 1989, over 200 reformist platforms arose, garnering over 80% of the delegates at the founding congress of the successor in January 1990. The Polish party thus had a plethora of options for both individual elite survival and success, and the adaptation of the party to democratic competition after 1989.

Nonetheless, there were two main limitations to these efforts. First, the Polish party reformists had never clearly organized themselves prior to the transition. Second, unlike its Hungarian counterpart, the Polish opposition did nothing to support party reform efforts. The Polish party members repeatedly revolted against its leadership, but found no support from the anti-communist opposition. As a result, the party elites had the capability to transform the party into a successful democratic competitor after 1989, but had to contend with a persistent cleavage between the adherents of the former opposition and of the former communist party.

Hungary

The Hungarian Communist Party (Magyar Kommunista Párt, MKP, subsequently the Magyar Szocialista Munkáspárt, MSzMP) also received little public support after World War II. It, too, was widely seen as a Soviet import, foreign to Hungarian political traditions. Like the KSČ, the Hungarian party competed in free elections, but received only 16.9% of the vote to the winning Smallholders’ Party’s 57% in the elections of 1945. The elections themselves were conducted
under considerable shadows of doubt. Like their Polish and Hungarian counterparts, the Hungarian communists became part of the ruling coalition due chiefly to the presence of the Soviet Army.\textsuperscript{96} No international supervision was allowed, and only Soviet observers ensured the fairness of the elections. Furthermore, the Soviet military commander in Hungary at the time initially threatened to increase the army presence from 600,000 to 3 million and to starve the country unless a favorable result emerged.\textsuperscript{97} Backed by Soviet intimidation, the party then resorted to an internecine war of attrition ("salami tactics") within the government coalition to increase its share of power and eliminate its coalition partners.

Since its capture of power relied chiefly on Soviet intimidation, coalitional trickery, and elite deception, the party had little use for an extensive and mobilized membership, or for its organization as a mainstay of power. There was only one party organization for every 417 Hungarians, a rate that was far lower than in the Czech lands, or in Slovakia. In contrast to the 25.3\% of Czech adults as party members, the Hungarian party membership peaked at 12.3\% of the adult population in 1948. Afterwards, the membership declined to an average of 6\% of adult Hungarians, almost as low as in Poland but lower than in Bulgaria, with 9.7\% of the population in the party.\textsuperscript{98}

In contrast to the Czech obsession with ideological purity, the Hungarian party purged far fewer members, and displayed little concern with the members’ ideological loyalty.\textsuperscript{99} The party spoke of the "dialectic impossibility" of reconciling its leading role with mass membership, and limited itself to vague declarations rather than the pursuit of a committed mass membership.\textsuperscript{100} Hungarian party officials went out of their way to emphasize that expulsion or striking off the membership lists carried no penalties,\textsuperscript{101} and the party leader himself, János Kádár, emphasized
that the party brought in large numbers of non-party experts into both the state administration and the economic sphere.

To maintain the stability of its rule, the party resorted to a cyclical liberalization of economic policies and cautious negotiation with society. To do so, the Hungarian party pursued “technical experts” rather than blue-collar workers. As one scholar summarized, “the MSzMP was indeed extremely successful in incorporating qualified technical experts, professionals, and bureaucrats into the party organization. In contrast, strong ideological control, stringent cadre policies, and persistent anti-intellectual bias underlie the relatively weak effects of education in Czechoslovakia.”

As a result, the party deliberately pursued the co-optation of the intelligentsia and administrative technocrats, especially in the 1970s and 1980s. It offered considerable incentives to join the party to these groups, whose know-how and experience made them valuable in formulating and implementing the party’s reform policies. As a result, the more educated the functionary, the higher his chances for advancement. After 1956, the MSzMP was unique in the intensity of its recruitment of the intelligentsia, as non-party members were offered grants and positions in higher administration. At the same time, to really advance in Ministry of Interior, Foreign Affairs Ministry, or other important governmental departments, one had to join the party. Party positions were paid very well, and so many non-party technocrats, who spent the first decade or so of their career in local administration, then made the horizontal move to the far more lucrative party structures. The move was made easier by the lack of stigma attached to party membership, and the minimal requirements made of party members. (For example, Hungary after 1956 saw no recorded expulsions for ideological reasons.) The result was that, despite occasional crackdowns, the party actually had an overrepresentation of intellectuals in its