'The October Russian Revolution and the 1944-8 takeovers in Central and Eastern Europe demonstrate that war is the decisive factor in the success of communist takeovers' Discuss.

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In October 1917, the Bolshevik Party staged the first communist revolution in history. With this, the new Russian leadership removed Russia from the Great War and began to put into action its ideological ideas for world revolution. Then, in 1919 the Third Communist International (Comintern) was established with the role of exporting the revolution and creating, a 'World Federative Republic of Soviets' which was seen as crucial for the survival of the Russian soviet state.[1] Despite this, and the economic problems of the interwar years, the only other country to witness a communist revolution before the Second World War was Outer Mongolia (and briefly, Hungary). Then, a second wave of revolutions (more accurately described as takeovers) took place and saw communism take hold of the majority of Eastern Europe. This suggests that there is a strong link between the conditions brought about by war and communist takeovers. The two World Wars brought about many different situations which were beneficial to the communists. Of most significance was the revolutionary atmosphere fostered by war, the destruction of existing regimes, the significance of soviet victory and the impact of Axis defeat. However, the role of war is only fully understood in conjunction with the strength and tactics of the Russian communists in both of these periods. Furthermore, there were factors other than those induced by war which facilitated these revolutions and takeovers.

A key Leninist concept is the idea that imperialist war, as a result of conflicting imperialist monopolies, signifies the highest stage of capitalist development. With the increased exploitation of the proletariat, revolution is then inevitable.[2] The growing number of strikes in Russia and the decisive events of February 1917 led the Bolsheviks to believe that analysis to be correct. This idea was built upon with the advent of fascism, which was seen as the last attempt by capitalism to hold onto power.[3] The revolutionary nature of the war was a key point at the first session of the Communist Information Bureau (Cominform) of 1947, at which it was stated that, 'We have met an epoch of great changes which have come about as a result of the last war'.[4] The great strains brought about by war caused a general radicalisation in the populations of Eastern European states and led to broad expectations for change. The legacy of right wing radicalism in the largely peasant based societies of Eastern Europe meant that they were generally susceptible to the rhetoric of the communists. Specifically in Czechoslovakia and Hungary where there were genuinely democratic coalition governments, Ivan T. Berand argues that 'the communists could most easily sail the rough waves of radical plebeian revolutionary spirit and expectations'.[5] Those persecuted under Nazism and previous regimes, such as national minorities and Jews, alongside young radical workers found the utopianism of communism appealing. Such sentiments would have been reinforced by the massive economic impact of war. For example, Poland, Yugoslavia and Hungary lost half of their railroads and 75% of their bridges, hugely affecting production and therefore standards of living.[6] Mass popularity was most evident in Czechoslovakia, where the

Communist Party (KSČ) saw genuinely encouraging results at the elections of May 1946 gaining 38% of the vote.[7]

A second significant factor brought about by war is its destructive impact upon existing regimes. In Russia, the strains of the war led to the abdication of Tsar Nicholas II in February 1917. Monumental loses such as that at Tannenberg and the inability of Russian industry and agriculture to deal with the demands of war led to a punishing three years for the Russian populace. Fixed grain prices, inflation and a concentration on industrial production led to the increase in strikes and a decisive turn of events surrounding the annual International Women's Day demonstrations in February 1917. The subsequent Provisional Government inherited these tsarist problems and faired little better than its predecessor. The failed June Offensive and further inflation caused the young interim administration to fall, leaving the Bolsheviks, as Adam B. Ulam argues, just to pick power up.[8]

War was to have a similar impact three decades later. For I. T. Berand, 'the old regimes were burned under the ruins of war and fascism'.[9] Throughout this entire region, nations and their ruling structures were destroyed whilst their lands were torn apart. Nations occupied by the Nazis had their governing systems shattered, and what was left when they retreated was easily swept away and manipulated by the communists. This is clearly illustrated in the case of Yugoslavia, which was occupied and partitioned. Furthermore, with the government in exile claims to power were possible. As well as destroying political structures, the war eliminated the old elites and traditional holders of power. In Poland for example, one third of the intelligentsia perished and there was a huge demographic shift as over a million inhabitants of Warsaw were killed.[10] Those who cooperated with the fascists were discredited, and many key democratic figures were either killed or in exile.

The most significant factors related to war with reference specifically to the takeovers of 1944-8 are connected the ideas of victory, most importantly the *soviet* victory. The eventual surrender of Germany and the allied victory in Europe in May 1945 put the Soviet Union in a particularly strong position. The international implications of this were of great significance and are essential to understanding the communist takeovers of 1944-8. Insecurity had always been a primary motive of Soviet foreign policy, and after the devastation of the Second World War, protection from any further attacks was of primary importance. With the death of Roosevelt and the explosion of the first atomic bomb for example, fears of a future war sparked the beginning of the Cold War. It was quickly realised that it was the size of the Soviet Union that aided victory and therefore that further expansion of soviet influence could only bring about greater strength. Seen in this light, the creation of friendly communist states behind an Iron Curtain is less part of the ideological plan to export the revolution, and more a move of traditional imperialist defence. The famous 'Percentages Agreement' of October 1944 determined the post-war fate of Romania, Bulgaria and to a certain extent Yugoslavia and Hungary. Similarly, the post war Conferences signalled greater soviet influence in Eastern Europe.

Most illustrative of the Soviet desire for security is the direct intervention in Poland. Historically, Poland had been troublesome for the Soviet Union as a gateway from the West into Russia.[11] Occupied since 1939, Stalin was desperate to put in place a pro-soviet government. In the civil war that broke out the Polish Communist Party (PPR) owed much of its strength to the Red Army (which itself had a Polish Division). It is indicative of the dominance of soviet security as a priority that Poland was one of the first countries in Eastern Europe to see a significant communist influence with the formation of the Lublin Committee in 1944.

Generally cited as the deciding factor in the creation of the communist bloc in Eastern Europe is the force of the Red Army. Lucian Boira for example comments that, communists came to power, 'precisely where the Red Army advanced' with no regard for individual cultures or national traditions.[12] The role of the Red Army was certainly

great, but to make such a comment greatly overshadows other factors. Doing so ignores the fact for example, that Austria, Finland, Bornholm and Northern Iran were occupied by the Red Army yet did not experience communist takeovers. Similarly, Crampton highlights the fact that there was no significant Red Army presence in Albania, Yugoslavia, Bulgaria or Czechoslovakia yet communists came to power there.[13] The influence of occupation is understood most fully when looking at the domestic activities of the various communist parties, as Red Army troops mainly acted as reinforcement to local communist actions. A striking example of the direct influence of the Red Army is however seen in the events of February 1945 in Romania. In response to Prime Minister Nicolae Radescu ordering troops to open fire on communist demonstrators, the Red Army occupied the Romanian Army's Headquarters and the King was forced to appoint a National Democratic Front government.

Still related to the idea of victory, the pattern of communist takeovers in Yugoslavia and Albania however were different to those elsewhere. The Second World War brought about circumstances in which communists were able to fight for power in national civil wars. Just as the Bolsheviks had done thirty years previously, Tito's partisans and Hoxha's communists physically fought to establish communism. In Yugoslavia, with support from the British, the partisans (fighting against the Serbian loyalists and the fascist Ustaša) established the Anti-Fascist Council for National Liberation (AVNOJ) which would go on to become the United Provisional Government in March 1945. The chaos of invasion meant that efforts against the fascist occupiers were seen as part of a heroic national struggle and thus legitimated communist claims to power.

The role of soviet victory is best understood when coupled with the implications of defeat for the axis nations. It is in Bulgaria, Romania and Hungary where we can see the full extent of soviet interference. As a condition of the armistices, Allied Control Commissions were set up to administer axis governments. In Central and Eastern Europe, western representatives had minimal roles in these bodies. In Romania for example, British and American members of the commission were not given soviet authority to travel to Romania. Soviet influence upon internal affairs in these three countries was essentially allowed to go unchecked. The power of the members of these commissions is exemplified by that of General S.S. Biriuzov who was placed to oversee events in Bulgaria. Describing himself as a 'soviet viceroy' he was able to remove Dr G. M Dimitrov of the Agrarian Party from leadership and even forbade the Bulgarian government from communicating with non-soviet representatives. When western representatives objected he simply suspended all Commission sessions for seven months. The importance of these commissions is seen when examining the tactics which enabled communist supremacy in Eastern Europe. As well as giving the Soviet Union direct influence in local affairs, defeat more generally discredited the old regimes and made a radical change seem necessary. Liberation from Nazism by the Red Army reflected well upon the regional communist parties.

Linked to the soviet victory are the tactics used by the national communist parties themselves. The confidence given by the fact that they knew that the Soviet Union, now a superpower, was behind them meant that the communists came to dominance throughout Eastern Europe. Thomas T. Hammond in his analysis of communist takeovers argues that the twin tactics of camouflage and gradualism are essential to understanding their success. For Hammond, these tactics were used in order to avoid a civil war as the Bolsheviks had experienced, and set in motion 'revolutions that did not look like revolutions'.[14]

Camouflage was a key tactic employed by the Bolsheviks in 1917 as well as throughout Eastern Europe 1944-8. For example, by disassociating themselves from the violet outbursts in July, and calling for 'All power to the Soviets', the Bolsheviks were able to give their revolution a façade of legality. Just as the Bolsheviks did in 1917, communist parties promised peasants land in order to gain support. Many avoided using typically communist terms, most

notably creating 'People's Democracies' rather than 'Dictatorships of the Proletariat'. Walter Ulbricht of the German Communist Party commented at the time that, 'its got to look democratic, but we must have everything in our control'.[15] Key ministries, such as Defence and Interior, were held by communists who in Romania, Hungary and Bulgaria were placed there under the influence of the Allied Control Commissions. Throughout the region, elections were held in order to legitimate communist power, but in an atmosphere of soviet dominance official figures rarely reflected actual opinion. In Eastern Europe, Hugh Seton-Watson's model of Genuine Coalition, Bogus Coalition, Monolithic Regime, illustrates this tactic of camouflage and also gradualism as method through which the communists came to power in Eastern Europe.[16] The gradual penetration of governments by communists in key positions allowed for communism to take power without any real evidence of mass support. Whereas in 1917 the Bolsheviks staged the first communist revolution for the sake of the Russian proletariat, the takeovers of 1944-8 were engineered largely for the benefit of the Soviet Union. Therefore, any discussion on the influence of individuals within the communist parties are somewhat overshadowed, as for a second time superior tactics were engineered by Russian communists.

A further factor which enabled communist success both in 1917 and the period 1944-8 was the weakness of the opposition. Through subversive means, the communists were able to outmanoeuvre and discredit their political rivals. In 1917, Lenin taunted the Mensheviks with the slogan 'All Power to the Soviets'[17] and discredited the Socialist Revolutionaries for being part of the 'bourgeois' provisional government. In the second wave of takeovers, more extreme tactics were used to undermine and eliminate opposition, as embodied in Mátyás Rákosi's idea of 'salami tactics'. For example, in June 1947 members of the Bulgarian Agrarian Party were arrested, and later their leader Nikola Petkov was executed for apparently taking part in an armed plot against the government. Similarly, Béla Kovács, leader of the Hungarian Smallholders was arrested in February 1947 on suspicion of spying for western intelligence. On the whole, liberal opposition both in 1917 and in the period 1944-8 were restrained by their sense of legality and democracy and were therefore easily outmanoeuvred by the subversive communists. In Czechoslovakia for example the democrats walked out of the government on 13 February 1948 in protest of the ever-increasing possibility of a communist dictatorship. Instead of causing the government to collapse this only served to strengthen the position of the KSČ.

Despite the favourable conditions brought about by war, the fact that there is a war does not make revolution a certainty. Although embroiled in the Second World War and even occupied by the Red Army, Finland and Austria for example did not fall to communism. Therefore the pattern is not as simple as it superficially seems. After the First World War, in what is known as the 'First Period' of the Comintern, no other country (other than Outer Mongolia) successfully completed a communist revolution of any longevity. Even Germany, as Marx's model country for communist revolution only progressed as far as removing the Kaiser from power and establishing a Republic. Reflecting on the events of October 1923 Trotsky commented that it was an unquestionably revolutionary situation.[18] This suggests that there must be a further complementary factor involved in turning a potentially revolutionary situation into actual revolution. In contrast to the period 1944-8, the Soviet Union was extremely weak in the years that followed the Bolshevik revolution. The First Period of the international communist movement is generally categorised as a time when the Soviet Union was dependant on the exporting of the revolution in order to secure its own. In contrast, in the period 1944-8, the Soviet Union emerged from the war as a world super power and used its newly acquired strength to ensure its future security behind a buffer zone of East European states.

The factors discussed show that the establishment of communism both in 1917 and 1944-8 was greatly facilitated by the consequences of war. Using the example of Germany in 1923 however and the fact that communism only spread

to areas that were of strategic advantage to the Soviet Union, it is possible to make some further observations. Crampton's comments about the difficulty of explaining the success of the tiny communist parties of Romania and Hungary, when the larger parties in France and Italy failed are definitely enlightening.[19] However, it would appear that rather than the direct action of the Red Army, it is instead the sheer dominance of the Soviet Union in the region that was the decisive factor. Just as in 1917 when the Bolsheviks were stronger than the Provisional Government, post-war communist parties with the support of the Soviet Union were stronger than their opposition. Rather than war being the decisive factor it appears that war was more of a facilitating factor – a 'motor of history' as Trotsky famously stated – with the ambition and tactics of the Russian communists being the more decisive factor in both periods under discussion.

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[3] For example the Executive Committee of the Communist International stated with regard to the growth of Nazism in Germany in 1930 that, 'The crisis increases the misery of the masses and enhances to an unheard-of extent all forms of exploitation of the working class on the basis of capitalist rationalisation. The intensification of the class

struggle resulting therefrom [sic], leads to a further growth of the revolutionary upsurge and to an extension of the front of proletarian struggle', 'On the Session of the Presidium of the E.C.C.I and the Tasks of the C.P of Germany (continued)', Inprecor, vol. 10, no. 19, (17 April 1930) p. 362

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[6] *ibid* p. 6

[7] Igor Lukes, 'The Czech Road to Communism', in, N. Naimark, L. Gibianskii (eds), The Establishment of Communist Regimes in Eastern Europe 1944-1949 Oxford: Westview Press, 1997 p. 257

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[9] I. T. Berand, Central and Eastern Europe p. 4

[10] G. Schopflin, Politics in Eastern Europe Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1993 p. 60

[11] Stalin commented that, 'in the course of twenty five years the Germans had twice invaded Russia via Poland…its is therefore in Russia's vital interest that Poland should be both strong and friendly', Stalin *quoted in*, I. T. Berand, Central and Eastern Europe p. 29

[12] L. Boia, Romania London: Reaktion Books Ltd, 2001 p. 111

[13] R. J. Crampton, Eastern Europe in the Twentieth Century London: Routledge, 1994 p. 213

[14] T. T. Hammond, 'The History of Communist Takeovers', in, T. T. Hammond (ed), The Anatomy of Communist Takeovers London: Yale University Press, 1975 p. 24

[15] *ibid* p. 25

[16] See H. Seton-Watson, The East European Revolutions London: Methuen & Co Ltd, 1956

[17] This phrase was used against the Mensheviks, who in theory had the same goal as the Bolsheviks but believed that there should be a longer period of constitutional rule after the fall of the tsar before socialist revolution, S. Fitzpatrick, The Russian Revolution Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994 p. 61

[18] See, for example, 'Letter on the German "Lefts"'(2 April 1927), in, L. Trotsky, The Challenge of the Left Opposition 1926-27 New York: Pathfinder Press, 1980

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Having departed from academic circles I am keen to continue to think critically. My time at CREES introduced me to politics and current affairs and I would like to build on my limited knowledge in this area. I have a particular interest in current events involving Russia.

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