



BOOK REVIEW

Nigrin, Tomáš. *The Rise and Decline of Communist Czechoslovakia's Railway Sector*

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This book analyzes the development of Czechoslovak socialist railways, representing an original and deep study of the railways functioning in the socialist economy. The author does not limit himself to the analysis of national realities but tries to put them into a broader context by comparing them with the development of railway systems in other communist countries. Using a variety of original resources and an interdisciplinary approach to the topic, the author hypothesizes that the dominance of rail transport was dictated by inflexible, long-term planning that limited the ability of railways to adapt toward higher efficiency. An alternative hypothesis could be formulated based on the observation that the central plans were determined by the economic possibilities of the command economy. If we accept this view, then the development of the rail system in Czechoslovakia was determined by the limits of the command economy, and central planning only reflected these limits.

The author's work is evidence-based, and I appreciate the inclusion of many economic statistics that allow intertemporal and sometimes international comparison, giving the analysis a sound quantitative basis. I also appreciate that the analysis includes an economic framework, which is not always the rule in historical works. The growth of road transport is a key factor in the development of rail transport in the period under review. While the author addresses this issue in several places, it may have been worthwhile to include a more comprehensive (sub)chapter documenting the changing importance and perception of passenger and freight road transport in the socialist economy.

Nigrin begins by historicizing the development of the railway system. I have two comments on the conclusions presented here. First, I question whether it was indeed an advantage that the railway system in Czechoslovakia, unlike some other countries, avoided significant damage during the war. Many countries with destroyed railway infrastructure proceeded to significantly modernize it, which improved its parameters and fundamentally affected its competitiveness in the future. Second, when analysing the different historical periods, it would be useful to emphasize that the railways operated in very different economic systems (market economy, war economy, socialist economy), which significantly determined their opportunities and achievements.

The author provides a very interesting (and readable) analysis of the functioning of the federal Ministry of Transport. He also offers a very realistic description of the motives, actions, and consequences of the actions of the various actors in railway policy, showing that in many cases, socialist transportation policy makers cannot be generalized into mindless implementers of plans or forged partisans, but that the economic games in the socialist economy were far more varied and many of the actors had, even from today's perspective, a very honest and rational approach to transportation needs. However, Nigrin's analysis shows that even these well-intentioned efforts were doomed to failure in a socialist economic system because of the priority given to planned or ideological factors.

The author explains the stagnation of socialist railways in the 1980s by the gradual neglect of rail transport by the plan and the authorities of the time. In contrast to this interpretation, however, an alternative economic interpretation can also be offered, which argues that in the 1970s (and perhaps as early as the late 1960s), rail transport in the socialist economy hit the limits of its potential

development, due not only to investment constraints but also to the very limits of the centrally planned economy.

I appreciate that the author's analysis has been contextualized internationally. Rather surprisingly, this reveals that the mutual relations between the countries of the socialist camp were not nearly as idyllic as one might have expected. Nigrin gives a very lively account of the quarrel over the level of railway tariffs that Czechoslovakia and Poland had with each other, as well as the reasons that led to this quarrel. Other international comparative passages present interesting and factual probes into the workings of the socialist camps, their economies, and their railway systems.

To me, the overall thrust of the book suggests an alternative hypothesis to the author's regarding the dominant role of the plan on the development of the railway industry, namely, the influence of economic factors. In my view, it can be argued that the railroad industry, after a period of dramatic growth in the first five years, entered a period of stagnation not only due to neglect by the plan but also because the centrally planned economy had already hit the limits of its extensive development and it was simply no longer possible to grow at the same rates as in the 1950s. The plundering of mineral resources and the emphasis on quantitative parameters had hit the limits of economic performance within the Czechoslovak economy. It is true that there were a number of bottlenecks within the infrastructure that blocked further development. It is also true that the needs of the railway sector were not high on the investment priorities of central planning. Yet it is possible to speculate that even with more support from central planning, the stagnation of the railways in the 1980s could not have been reversed.

The main contribution of the work is a thorough and in-depth analysis of the historical, economic, and political contexts of the development of socialist railways in Czechoslovakia. It presents a unique probe into the workings of this sector and enables an understanding of the historical development of the railway in the context of the political and economic development of socialist Czechoslovakia.