At the time of the Communist regime’s collapse in 1989, the Czechoslovak railroad system was inefficient, antiquated, and plagued with delays. Its employees were dissatisfied, and its trains were dirty and unpleasant. Despite this state of decline, the Czechoslovak State Railways (Československé státní dráhy, ČSD) had an illustrious history. A dense railroad network enabled the Czech lands’ rapid industrialization under Habsburg rule, and during the interwar period, the Czechoslovak government invested heavily in connections to Slovakia as part of its effort to integrate the two halves of the new state. While Allied bombs and retreating German troops damaged both Czechoslovak railways and locomotives, Czechoslovakia’s railroad system emerged from the Second World War in far better shape than those of neighboring countries. Railroads played a central role in the economic plans of postwar governments, both before and after the Communist coup of 1948, and received the majority of state transportation funds. The railroad sector retained its dominance in Czechoslovakia throughout the 1950s and 1960s, even as road transport increased in Western Europe. Over the following decades, however, the Communist regime allowed the ČSD to stagnate. Paradoxically, while failing to invest in the railroads’ modernization, Czechoslovak planners continued to insist on their preeminent importance—not only to the country’s economy, but also to its military security and political stability. Why would planners allow the stagnation of what they themselves considered an essential part of the national economy?

Precisely because planners heaped such great tasks on the railroad system, Tomáš Nigrin argues in *The Rise and Decline of Communist Czechoslovakia’s Railway Sector*, they were unable to reform or improve it. Furthermore, the plan defining the sector’s economic tasks accounted only for quantitative measures of success, failing to address its continual decline in quality. This book, published in 2020 in Czech as *Od nepostradatelnosti ke stagnaci? Železniční odvětví v Československu v 70. a 80. letech 20. století* and translated into English by Robert Kiene, examines this vicious circle of over-
dependence and underinvestment. It focuses on the final two decades of Communist rule—the period of “normalization” following the thwarted reforms of the 1960s. Nigrin’s analysis makes extensive use of documents found in the Czech National Archive, particularly reports produced for the Ministry of Transportation and the Communist Party leadership, but also draws on six interviews conducted with individuals active in the railroad sector during Nigrin’s period of study.

Nigrin begins with a history of Czechoslovakia’s railroads prior to 1970, as well as a brief discussion of other forms of transportation—most importantly, buses, automobiles, and motorcycles. The following chapter provides a thorough account of the institutions that structured the railroad sector, from the international to the local level. Czechoslovakia’s political and economic system suggested a strictly hierarchical structure of power, with decisions made by Communist Party leaders and central planners and carried out by lower-level officials and managers. In practice, the situation was far more complicated, as Nigrin demonstrates in the next chapter. Short-term political imperatives rather than long-term economic plans—or, unsurprisingly, market forces—determined the railroads’ place in the Czechoslovak economy. The Ministry of Transportation prioritized low prices for both freight and passenger transportation to preserve social stability, even as the cost of energy increased. For similar reasons, they were unwilling to eliminate little-used rail lines and face the opposition of local governments and the general public. The final chapter addresses the conditions of Czechoslovakia’s railroads, which deteriorated during the regime’s final decades. Planners found it difficult to implement new technologies, improve services, or even maintain existing infrastructure. As Nigrin notes, however, international cooperation did improve the efficiency of Czechoslovakia’s railroads: the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance promoted the containerization of cargo, and West Germany loaned the ČSD much-needed freight cars.

This book serves as a detailed case study of the railroads’ place in a planned economy and presents a clear example of the inefficiencies of central planning, making it a useful resource for those interested in the economic history of Communist states. However, a fuller discussion of transportation in normalization-era Czechoslovakia would have allowed readers to place the ČSD in its broader context of political, social, and technological transformation. Nigrin notes in the conclusion that citizens increasingly preferred road over railroad transportation, leaving railroads “unable to compete” (p. 202). But what official policies shaped the rise of the automobile, and what led the regime to invest in roads over railroads? Furthermore, as this quote suggests, this work often applies the logic of the market to an economic system that operated according to different principles. While the ČSD consistently failed to meet its own standards of service and reliability in the 1970s and 1980s, it also could pull off highly complex logistical tasks when politically necessary, as Nigrin demonstrates with his discussion of the railroads’ elaborate preparations for transporting participants and spectators to the Spartakiad gymnastics exhibitions. Nevertheless, _The Rise and Decline of Communist Czechoslovakia’s Railway Sector_ provides insight into an important aspect of the Czechoslovak economy during the late socialist period.