EUROPEAN HISTORY IN PERSPECTIVE

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'A highly readable, thoughtful book that moves beyond Cold War stereotypes and takes a refreshingly nuanced approach to the communist past. Communist Czechoslovakia is a welcome addition to the rapidly growing revisionist literature on Eastern and Central European political history.' – **Mary Heimann**, *University of Strathclyde, UK*

In this clearly written and accessible volume, Kevin McDermott analyses the political and social history of communist Czechoslovakia from the end of World War II to the collapse of the regime in 1989.

Drawing on Czech and Slovak archival sources and the most recent historiography, he challenges the still dominant 'totalitarian' paradigm, and argues that the forty-year communist experience in Czechoslovakia cannot simply be dismissed as a Soviet-imposed aberration. Rather, he contends that popular attitudes to the socialist aims and visions of the Czechoslovak Communist Party modulated from broadly supportive in the late 1940s, to 'critical loyalty' in the 1950s and 1960s, to 'disengaged collusion' by the 1970s and 1980s. Finally, McDermott maintains that the demise of the system in 1989 was neither inevitable, nor the product of a 'heroic' band of 'dissidents', nor simply a manifestation of a mass desire for capitalist democracy.

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ISBN 978-0-230-21715-7

9 780230 217157 90101

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macmillan education

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COMMUNIST CZECHOSLOVAKIA, 1945–89

A POLITICAL AND SOCIAL HISTORY

Chapter 3: Stalinism Reigns, 1948–53

In the months and years immediately after the February takeover, the Czechoslovak communists embarked on their prime goal of 'constructing socialism'. The burning political task was to consolidate and extend the party's monopoly of power and the mandatory model was a Soviet-style de facto one-party dictatorship: in short, Stalinism. A pivotal component of this intense drive was the coercion of 'class enemies'. To this end, state-led repression was unleashed by late 1948 and lasted until well after Stalin's death in March 1953. Many tens of thousands of Czechs and Slovaks were persecuted and imprisoned in labour camps and top-ranking communists and non-communists were arrested and executed after infamous sham show trials. The emerging Cold War, ingrained fears of a resurgent US-sponsored German revanchism, and even belief in the 'inevitability' of a Third World War imparted a clear, albeit grossly distorted, ideological imperative to Stalinist terror: the 'construction of socialism' had to be as rapid as possible and this required the removal of all 'aliens' and 'anti-socialist elements', who by definition were suspected of allying with the 'imperialist war-mongering' West. In this menacing atmosphere, political pluralism and the rule of law were effectively renounced as 'bourgeois' institutions and power was concentrated in the hands of the few men (never women) who composed the Communist Party's Presidium, or Politburo. Private enterprise and ownership of the means of production were virtually eliminated; the nationalisation of heavy industry, begun after 1945, was expanded; the economy was placed on a war-footing; and agriculture was subject to recurrent collectivisation campaigns. Finally, a leadership cult was created around Gottwald to bind the 'nation' together, and intellectual and artistic life was constrained by the theory and practice of 'socialist realism'.

Emphasis on the terroristic and undemocratic essence of the state, however, should not obscure the fact that Czechoslovak Stalinism was a contradictory political, economic and socio-cultural phenomenon which elicited divergent and hybrid responses not only from different social strata, but also often *within* individuals. On the one hand, the swift steps towards a one-party state, the growth of a seemingly omnipotent secret police, the rise of bloated bureaucracies, the Soviet-inspired 'militarisation' of the economy, the repression visited on many 'ordinary' citizens and the draconian labour discipline undoubtedly contributed to embedded alienation and resentment. Similarly, the sustained efforts to collectivise agriculture embittered the majority of farmers, especially the more prosperous. Indeed, poor socio-economic conditions continued to be at the heart of popular discontent with the system, and this malaise signified for many workers, and one suspects some lower-level party and trade union functionaries, that government policies were failing and in need of reform.

On the other hand, important components of communist strategy, such as large-scale nationalisation of industry, security of employment, a highly egalitarian wage structure, extended social benefits and 'democratised' educational and cultural opportunities facilitated a fragile bond between worker and regime based on the strident 'class perspective' that pervaded Stalinist rhetoric. This 'bridge' linking state and society was reinforced by the manipulation of ritualised public discourse and terminology. Upward social mobility for hitherto disadvantaged groups was a particularly noteworthy aspect of 'Stalinisation' with hundreds of thousands of 'traditional' workers moving into non-manual administrative jobs to be replaced by even more 'new' workers from largely non-proletarian backgrounds. It seems reasonable to conclude that these beneficiaries of the system formed a solid, if not permanent, social base of support for the regime.

That said, most scholars agree that after 1948 the Stalinist command model of socialism was imposed on a Czech and Slovak society whose political culture was perceived to be essentially democratic, pluralist and humanist. But how far did Stalinism represent a sharp rupture with dominant past practices? By what means did the new communist government consolidate its monopoly rule? What were the origins and processes of Stalinist terror in Czechoslovakia, and how did the population respond to state repression? Why did most citizens conform to 'imported' political values and policies? What role did cultural politics play in the 'struggle for socialism'? What

did it mean to live and work under Stalinism? What was the extent of 'resistance' and how far was it politicised? How can we best conceptualise state–society relations in Stalinist Czechoslovakia and begin to analyse the nature and meaning of popular opinion? These are among the key questions to be explored in this chapter.

Elite Purges and Mass Repression

Between 1948 and 1954, Czechoslovak society was subjected to multiple forms of repression by the newly installed communist regime. No stratum of society escaped the depredations. Ever since, experts have attempted to explain the origins, processes and outcomes of these deeply troubling events. A recurrent question haunts historical scholarship and indeed the Czech and Slovak collective consciousness: why did political violence on this scale take place in a country with the democratic credentials of Czechoslovakia? Does the comforting answer lie in external pressures exerted most obviously by Stalin and the Soviet political and secret police hierarchies? Or was there a disconcerting internal determinant at play, sometimes referred to as 'indigenous Stalinism'? Or were the broader geopolitical conflicts and constraints of the emerging Cold War more relevant? Other no less intractable issues abound. Who were the prime targets? By what mechanisms were the repressions actually carried out, and who organised them? What was the political impact and longer-term significance of the Stalinist terror? Most intriguingly perhaps, what was the popular reaction to the purges, particularly of leading communists such as Rudolf Slánský, who was condemned to death in November 1952 on trumped-up charges?

Origins: Exogenous and Indigenous Factors

The generic term 'Stalinist terror' is often used to describe the process of state-led violence in communist regimes. Specifically, it refers to the murderous elite purges and mass repressions that engulfed Soviet officialdom and society in the late 1930s and beyond, and is intimately associated with the aims and policies of the Soviet dictator, Josef Stalin. Many of the methods and mechanisms perfected in Stalinist Russia in the 1930s – a pervasive secret police service, sham show trials, forced labour camps, deportations of peoples, state propaganda campaigns – were transposed to the infant communist

regimes in Eastern Europe after the Second World War, culminating in the persecutions of the late 1940s and early 1950s.[1] Fundamentally, 'Stalinist terror' denotes the conscious attempt by communist leaderships to crush civil society and its autonomous institutions. The overall aim, even if not always fully achieved, was to entrench the parties' monopoly of power by eliminating alternative independent sources of authority and allegiance, notably opposition groupings, class networks, military cliques and the organised churches.

The origins of these violent campaigns lie in a complex combination of externally generated longer and shorter-term pressures and deep-seated indigenous social and ethnic conflict exacerbated by war, foreign occupation and post-war fears and retributions. I will examine the former first. A key question here is: how can we begin to understand the collective psychology of communist leaders who implemented, rationalised and justified what we term 'terror' and 'mass repression', but which they called 'class justice' and the elimination of 'enemies'? First, the process of the 'Stalinisation' of communist parties, initiated by the Comintern from the mid-to-late 1920s, signalled an unswerving commitment to, and ultimate dependence on, Moscow in terms of party strategy, selection of leadership cadres and financial backing. Second, emergent Stalinism exacerbated the communists' almost hermetic way of life and their self-identification as 'outsiders'. The Stalinist project demanded that comrades 'work on themselves' to internalise the values of total party loyalty and Bolshevik self-sacrifice and 'vigilance', and to expunge deviant 'bourgeois individualistic' thoughts and actions. Crucially, this 'hermeneutics of the soul' inculcated a mental landscape of criticism, self-criticism and conspiracy in which 'enemies', both within and without, were deemed ubiquitous. Stalin's terror of the late 1930s immeasurably strengthened such attitudes.[2] To the extent that this mindset was appropriated by East European communists, particularly those who had lived in exile in the Soviet Union such as Gottwald and Slánský, its persistence helps to explain the events of the late 1940s and early 1950s. Finally, it may well be obvious, but it is worth stressing nonetheless, that communists were not liberals – they were Marxist revolutionaries who were intent on rapidly reforging the world and this necessarily entailed recourse to coercion.

These long-standing external factors were compounded by shorter-term exogenous catalysts. Here, it is tempting to see a monolithic hand at play: Stalin and the Soviet political and secret police bosses carefully orchestrating the purges in order to 'Sovietise' the country, remove all 'Titoist', 'bourgeois nationalist' and 'Zionist' conspiracies

and challenges to the infant 'socialist camp', and thus secure the international and ideological position of the USSR in the dangerous uncharted waters of the Cold War. Tito's defiant attitude towards Soviet strictures was particularly alarming, threatening as it did the Kremlin's dominance of the embryonic communist systems throughout the region. These goals were given added urgency in Czechoslovakia's case by its exposed geopolitical location at the frontline of East–West frictions and intrigues. To be sure, such analyses are well-founded and, at one level, highly persuasive. Stalin's actions were undoubtedly informed by the darkening international conjuncture and the belief that war between socialism and capitalism was inevitable. It should also be recognised that Western and émigré spies really did exist and attempted to recruit agents in Czechoslovakia, compounding communist fears and insecurities. Therefore, society needed to be 'protected', mobilised and prepared for the decisive battles ahead and the political trials of 'renegade' communists and 'anti-state' oppositionists were an indispensable method of inculcating uniformity and passivity among potentially unruly Soviet bloc allies.

Moreover, Stalin's pet theory that the class struggle would heighten and 'bourgeois' resistance intensify as socialism approached provided the ideological underpinnings of terror by exposing the machinations of the 'class enemy' as the root of all problems. Hence, 'class justice' had to be applied, meaning that farmers, businessmen and artisans opposed to communist economic policies were perennial regime targets. For instance, kulaks (an imported Russian word signifying better-off peasants) were systematically harried, just like they were in the Soviet Union, as a means of redistributing their wealth and property for the benefit of state-directed industrialisation programmes. And there were other perceived economic benefits to be derived from the use of terror, not least in the form of forced labour extracted in the numerous camps established in all of the new socialist dictatorships. Another factor was the attempt to identify scapegoats for economic and political failures, or to mobilise supporters of communist regimes against 'spies' and 'class enemies'. Stalin's suspicion of communists who had spent the 1930s and early 1940s in exile in the West, who had fought in the Spanish Civil War, or who had been in Nazi concentration camps, also contributed to the search for 'enemies'. Finally, with or without Soviet involvement, there were inevitably local power struggles and personal score-settling going on among party, state, economic and cultural elites.

It is also often affirmed that Stalin's increasingly anti-Semitic tendencies in the last years of his life, associated with crass

'anti-cosmopolitanism' and the notorious 'Doctors' Plot', impacted on Czechoslovak and wider bloc developments. Indeed, such sentiments were given full reign in the late 1940s and early 1950s when the KSČ unleashed a vicious 'anti-Zionist' campaign dutifully following Stalin's shift to a pro-Arab and anti-Israeli foreign policy. This drive effectively degenerated into an anti-Semitic onslaught most grossly manifested in the Slánský trial in which 11 of the 14 defendants were officially designated 'of Jewish origin'. There is little doubt, then, that the Soviet dictator bears ultimate responsibility for the repressive campaigns in Czechoslovakia and elsewhere, though his exact role is almost impossible to verify, subject as he was to vacillation, obfuscation and tactical change.

The bottom line, however, was Stalin's *Realpolitik* and never-ending quest for Soviet state security. As ever, domestic developments in the countries of Eastern Europe in these years can never be divorced from wider international relations. As the Cold War intensified from 1947 and the Stalin–Tito split in 1948 opened up fractures in the Soviet bloc, the imperative for near monolithic homogeneity became ever more urgent in the Kremlin – unity meant strength. This, in turn, demanded an assault on omnipresent 'class enemies', 'spies', 'saboteurs' and 'traitors' within and outside communist ranks. These 'enemies' were identified primarily on 'traditional' Soviet lines: kulaks, priests, private entrepreneurs, anti-communist 'terrorists', 'Mensheviks' (Social Democrats), *ancien régime* military, police, judicial and state officials. But these actions were not simply vindictive and arbitrary campaigns aimed at bolstering the cohesion of state and society in dangerous times. For the Stalinists were motivated by an *idée fixe*: prophylactic strikes against multifarious 'anti-social elements' would 'purify' society and lay the class foundations for the overriding task of 'constructing socialism', as they understood it. In this sense, a distorted Marxist ideological utopianism underlay mass repression and it is clear that many communists, particularly at a leadership level, regarded political violence as the sharp end of class war and as an indispensable weapon in the struggle for the 'radiant future' purged of 'alien dross'.

However, regardless of the explanatory potency of this exogenous interpretation, it is in my opinion inadequate. Even if we accept that the purges were initiated and coordinated in Moscow, they often fell on fertile soils, were adapted for domestic purposes and were not always amenable to strict party control 'from above'. In the specific case of Czechoslovakia, we have seen the immense relevance of the Munich 'betrayal', Nazi occupation, wartime horrors and particularly

the widespread post-war retributions and cleansing of the Sudeten Germans, all of which made plausible the notion of the 'enemy within' and engendered pressures 'from below' for restrictive practices. Internal tensions and conflicts could be, and were, used to 'solve' power struggles, organisational rivalries and personal jealousies among the Czechoslovak political and cultural elites, target class and in some instances ethnic 'enemies', identify scapegoats for the gross economic and material hardships, serve as a reservoir of forced labour for developmental and military goals, and act as propaganda and educative tools for the masses. Coercive policies emerged initially as a response to the sense of crisis that afflicted the regime as early as the autumn of 1948, the origin of which was the failure to satisfy unrealistic economic targets and aspirations. Ultimately, however, mass repression had a direct political goal based on an ideological imperative steeped in Stalinist brutality: to bolster the legitimacy of the infant communist state by declaring a 'class war' on the 'bourgeois', 'impure' and 'socially harmful elements' who stood in the way of the communist project.

In sum, repression was closely related to the intense drive of the new rulers to 'construct socialism'. The unpalatable truth is that many Czech and Slovak communists, from all ranks of the party, condoned this violent campaign; some actively participated in it. Prime responsibility for the carnage most assuredly resides with the leading cohort, but it is hard to avoid the conclusion that many lower-level functionaries and ordinary members, and not a few non-communist citizens, were complicit by their 'silence', illiberal attitudes and tacit consent. Indeed, the social acceptance of political and ethnic violence after 1945 helped to lay the foundations for Stalinism. In the controversial words of the Czech writer, Dušan Hamšík: 'we are all collectively responsible for the political trials – the nation as a whole, as a continuum'.[3]

Processes and Mechanisms

The immediate political goal for the KSČ after the 'victorious February' was to consolidate its power. To this end, within a few months approximately 28,000 employees were removed from state and public administration, including in the army, secret services and judiciary. Leading non-communist officials, especially National Socialists and Slovak Democrats, were summarily dismissed, their parties infiltrated and effectively decimated, by communist-dominated

'Action Committees' which were given the power to purge mass organisations regardless of normal legal procedure. Economic and cultural institutions were also targeted. Dozens of university professors were dismissed, as were many students, who tended to be most vocal in their opposition to the infant regime. Many National Committees, the organs of local and municipal government, were purged of non-communists or disbanded. As early as March, April and May 1948, 'espionage' trials were held of high-ranking National Socialists and Slovak Democrats. Less violently, the Social Democrats were politically emasculated by a merger with the KSČ in June 1948, by which time Czechoslovakia had become in essence, if not formally, a one-party state.[4] In the following months and years, persecution affected all sections of society: communists, non-communists and anti-communists, Czechs and Slovaks, men and women, young and old, urban and rural. Numerically, it is still impossible to arrive at precise overall figures as the term 'repression' covers a wide variety of meanings and measures: non-judicial murder, judicial execution, detention in labour camps or prison, enforced military service, expulsion from the party, loss of employment and status, and a host of other social and material restrictions including evictions from dwellings, exclusions from schools and universities, arbitrary reduction or cessation of pension payments and confiscation of personal property. Neither is it always evident whether a victim was targeted specifically for 'political' or 'anti-state crimes'.

Post-1989 archival findings indicate, however, that approximately 90,000 citizens were prosecuted for 'political crimes' in the years 1948–54, including at least 19,100 Slovaks. In addition, over 22,000 people (about 7,000 of whom were Slovaks) were incarcerated in 107 labour camps, almost 10,000 suspect soldiers and conscripts were condemned to back-breaking work in special construction battalions, and as many as 1,157 people perished in detention.[5] The most awe-inspiring labour camp was the Jáchymov mine complex in north-western Bohemia, which produced highly valuable uranium for the USSR and became a living hell for thousands of inmates. It is also widely agreed that in the period October 1948 to December 1952, 233 death penalties were pronounced, of which 178 were carried out. This figure included Milada Horáková, a National Socialist parliamentary deputy and the first, and only, woman to be executed in Czechoslovakia on political grounds. More death penalties were approved in 1953 and 1954, a total of 181 being passed between 1953 and 1967. Tens of others were shot while trying to escape from prison or attempting to flee the borders. Among the communist elite,

278 high-ranking party functionaries were convicted, although communist victims represented a tiny fraction of the total sentenced (some have estimated a mere 0.1 per cent). In addition, party purges and expulsions reduced the size of the KSČ by several hundred thousand in the years 1949–54.[6]

What were the mechanisms by which this terror was perpetrated? During the Prague Spring of 1968, the reformist party leadership under Alexander Dubček ordered an official enquiry into the Stalinist repression of the late 1940s and early 1950s. The archival based findings, known as the Piller Report after the chair of the commission, were not published at the time, but the damning account concluded that the purges were conducted by three main bodies: the political institutions, the state security service (*Státní ezpečnost* – StB) and the judiciary. In the first category, determining roles were played by named individuals: most consistently Party Chairman and President of the Republic Gottwald and Prime Minister Antonín Zápotocký, but also 'at times' other top figures, such as Antonín Novotný, Viliam Široký and Karol Bacílek. Gottwald 'usually' took the decision to arrest leading officials, he was informed of the course of interrogations and he 'intervened in the preparation of the big trials'. He and his closest colleagues also approved the indictment and length of sentence in all the major political trials. To this extent, 'he bears full and major responsibility for the trials'. The significance of these political actors and institutions lay in their ability to issue specific directives and articulate ideological justifications for the repression, while at the same time extending their domination over the judiciary and, more ambivalently, the secret police. Underlying these personal responsibilities, according to the report, was the 'deformed political system', notably the monopoly of power of the Communist Party and the way its 'leading role' in political and social affairs was exercised. Hypertrophied centralisation and bureaucratisation meant that power became concentrated in ever fewer hands and any independent control over that power by parliament and the judiciary was eliminated. In turn, fiercely applied party discipline ensured 'unquestioning obedience' among subordinates, many of whom genuinely acted in good faith.[7]

The state security service, or more accurately those departments of the service devoted to preparing and staging the trials, played a pivotal role in the whole terror process, becoming in typically Stalinist fashion a virtual law unto itself. The falsification of written evidence, verbal and physical abuse of prisoners and the extortion of 'confessions', all of which were sanctioned by the political leadership, were routinely employed by StB agents, such as Bohumil Doubek and Karel Košťál. From a broader perspective, it has been claimed that the secret police heavily influenced the political conception of the main trials and that leading communist functionaries themselves were at times fearful of the StB. Indeed, Kaplan has argued that the security service:

> acted as the driving force of the entire mechanism for the manufacture of political trials…most importantly, its actions determined the decisions of political institutions, [and] it pursued its own objectives or those of its Soviet colleagues in selecting future victims and preparing trials.[8]

The reference to 'Soviet colleagues' is noteworthy. Having been invited to Czechoslovakia by Gottwald in autumn 1949, many Soviet agents worked in the central and regional security administrations right through to the mid-1950s. As representatives of Moscow, they wielded enormous power and prestige: 'their advice and instructions had the weight of orders' and most Czech and Slovak officials, up to and including the Minister of National Security, accepted their prescriptions as correct.[9] Furthermore, Soviet advisers introduced harsher forms of interrogation, recommended the composition of groups to be tried, intervened in the formulation of the indictments and, it appears, injected distinct anti-Semitic overtones in the preparation of the Slánský trial.[10] In a real sense, they were Stalin's eyes and ears in Prague.

The third component of state coercion was the judiciary. Although the Piller Report absolved the judicial profession as a whole from implication in the terror and suggested that it played a relatively minor part, the principal function of the relevant judicial organs was not inconsiderable: to legalise the trials and publicise the proceedings in line with party directives. As such, many judges, prosecutors and defence lawyers were unable or unwilling to uphold the independence of the courts and oversaw 'a system of administering justice behind closed doors', in effect condoning gross violations of the law bordering on arbitrary misrule. Top officials in the Ministry of Justice, the Supreme Court and the Prosecutor's General Office enthusiastically endorsed this politicisation of the judiciary and initiated key repressive legislation, including the ignominious Act on the Protection of the People's Democratic Republic No. 231/48. In sum, the Piller Report concluded that 'an instrument of power had come into being, accountable to no one, beyond all control and outside

the law; it had placed itself above society and usurped a power to which it had no right. Its very existence was unconstitutional'.[11] And it was this supreme 'instrument of power', founded on a firm alliance of monopolistic communist political hegemony and untrammelled secret police authority, which unleashed the mass repressions.

These campaigns took two main interrelated forms: socio-economic and political. Crucial components of the former were the special 'operations' (*akce*) organised by the party leadership and supported by the Ministries of the Interior, Defence and National Security. 'Operation B', lasting from May 1952 to July 1953, targeted 'anti-state elements' who were to be evicted from the major cities. Several thousand families were affected.[12] 'Operation K' was aimed at resettling so-called '*kulaks*', a total of 8,246 people being hit between November 1951 and summer 1953.[13] 'Operation P' was directed at the Roman and Greek Catholic churches under the terms of which virtually all bishops and thousands of priests, monks and nuns, especially in Slovakia, were demoted, interned in assembly camps or placed under house arrest. People deemed of 'bourgeois' and 'petit-bourgeois origin', both urban and rural, were systematically harassed. For instance, plans were enacted in April 1950 to liquidate private craft businesses, and by 1958 such firms had been cut from 247,404 to just 6,552. In the countryside, Soviet-style collectivisation of agriculture and accompanying 'elimination of the kulaks' were initiated in April 1949 and reportedly hit over one million farmers, drastically reducing the amount of farm-holdings above 20 hectares.[14] Even industrial labourers, the social backbone of the system, were far from immune from persecution. Kaplan has maintained that initially workers comprised approximately 30 to 40 per cent of prisoners in the labour camps.[15]

Political repression was endemic between 1948 and 1954. The first mini-wave of trials occurred in September and October 1948 and involved primarily young people accused of writing and distributing anti-state propaganda and leaflets. It is estimated that up to 1,800 were sentenced.[16] Thereafter, other categories of society were earmarked for attack, affecting in some cases KSČ members: army officers and former participants in the anti-fascist resistance; officials of non-communist parties, notably National Socialists and Social Democrats; so-called 'Trotskyites'; 'external enemies' connected in some way with Western agencies and organisations; and economic officials, managers and white-collar workers. Some of these mockeries of justice – the great 'show trials' of non-communist politicians, Catholic bishops and communist luminaries – had national, even

international, significance, and were carefully staged performances designed to expose 'the enemy', intimidate the population and act as educative and propaganda tools. Other trials were secret in nature, generally having local and regional connotations. The victims were invariably non-communist citizens often charged under the Act on the Protection of the People's Democratic Republic. It has been calculated that between 40,000 to 45,000 people were sentenced in accordance with this law and the Penal Act of 1950. It should be noted that at a regional and district level, local Communist Party officials composed 'security groups' which appear to have had a degree of autonomy from the 'centre' in deciding repressive policy.

Popular Responses

The most infamous case of Stalinist terror in Czechoslovakia concerned Rudolf Slánský, the second-in-command of the communist system. A brief study, based largely on archival sources, of his show trial illustrates not only the stifling degree of centralised control exerted by the communist authorities, but also the multifarious responses and level of criticality exhibited by 'ordinary' citizens to the purges that rocked Czechoslovak political life.[17] From the end of World War II to September 1951, Slánský was general secretary of the KSČ and without doubt one of the most powerful figures in the country. Reasons for his arrest, on Stalin's orders, in November 1951 are still obscure. According to the Soviet dictator, he had 'committed a number of errors in promoting and posting leading personnel' which had allowed 'conspirators and enemies' to go on the rampage in the party.[18] Beyond this, Stalin's broader geopolitical concerns, Slánský's Jewish background and relative unpopularity in the KSČ, and inner-party elite rivalries all served to make the ex-general secretary a perfect scapegoat for the socio-economic travails afflicting the communist regime.

Physically and mentally tortured for many months by Czech and Soviet secret police interrogators, Slánský eventually confessed to having acted as the head of a fictitious 'anti-state conspiratorial centre' composed of 14 prominent party and state leaders, 11 of whom were 'of Jewish origin'. The men were charged inter alia with high treason, espionage, sabotage, and economic and military subversion with the ultimate aim of tearing Czechoslovakia from the Soviet camp, undermining socialism and restoring capitalism. Amid tumultuous public fanfare, the falsely condemned were brought to trial on 20 November

1952 having diligently memorised predetermined scripts. After a week's ordeal, Slánský and ten others were sentenced to death and three received life imprisonments. All 11 were hanged in the early hours of 3 December, and their ashes unceremoniously scattered on an icy road near Prague.[19]

At one level, the Slánský trial and its reception exemplify all too clearly the centralised organisational grip and ideological manipulation of the top party leadership. After Slánský's arrest, Gottwald and a handful of his closest aides were informed in minute detail about the progress of the interrogations, and in the weeks before the trial they decided the date of the proceedings, the composition of the court and the sentences to be administered. The mass media covered the proceedings on a daily basis, newspapers were reportedly sold out immediately, and the public followed the trial on state radio, and, subversively, on foreign stations such as Radio Free Europe, with intense interest. Contrary to all legal norms, the guilt of the accused was assumed. Between 20 November and 2 December 1952, 8,520 resolutions and telegrams flooded the Central Committee and the state court. The wording and structure of these communications were formulaic and stock phrases – though not always entirely identical – recurred, suggesting orchestration from above.[20] In them, many thousands of factory workers, collective farmers, clerical and institute employees, teachers and even schoolchildren from all over the republic expressed their outrage and righteous indignation at the 'crimes' of the 'Slánský gang'. Some were accompanied by long lists of hand-written signatures. While a minority of the resolutions explicitly demanded the death penalty, the vast majority called for 'the strictest punishment' of the 'traitors', 'villains' and 'imperialist agents'. The 'masses', then, seemingly endorsed the party's version of the affair and positively welcomed the harsh sentences.

However, a closer reading of the archival sources reveals a more variegated picture. Local party functionaries and secret police agents despatched daily reports to their superiors indicating that many citizens, including party members, adopted non-conformist and sceptical attitudes to the trial. For example, some, generally older, workers refused to accept that Slánský, a long-serving 'co-fighter' with Gottwald, was capable of betrayal. He was rather 'a lightning rod who is blamed for all mistakes and scarcities while the guilty lot stay clean'. A few brave souls doubted the charges brought against him and one party official expressed surprise at Slánský's demise, regarding him as a 'model Bolshevik worker'. The conduct of the trial itself came in for scathing criticism among the more independent minded. For them, it was 'a show (*divadlo*) rehearsed in advance', 'a well-staged comedy', 'a filmed circus' and 'farce'. One citizen complained: 'you can't listen to such crap (*kraviny*)'. It was commonly suggested that 'drugs', 'pills', 'injections', 'narcotics' and 'chemicals', even beatings, were responsible for the abject performances of the accused.[21]

Anti-Semitic outbursts were depressingly legion, ranging from unreflective knee-jerk stereotyping to quasi-Hitlerian vituperation. Several representative comments will suffice: 'we worked' while these 'Jewish pigs fleeced us of our money'; 'Jews always shirk honest labour and do well for themselves'; 'what else can you expect from Slánský, a Jew who's never known manual work and has always been affluent'. Among the more violent diatribes are the following: 'All Jews should be shot'; 'Hitler shot lots of them, but still not enough'; 'I'd like to get my hands on this Slánský and tear him limb from limb'; 'they should hang him immediately'; this 'stinking Jew' should be 'cut into strips'; these 'scoundrels' should be 'cut to pieces'.[22] These vicious sentiments confused and worried some party officials and even Gottwald felt constrained to offer publicly a distinction between ideologically sound 'anti-Zionism' and crass racist 'anti-Semitism'.[23]

Less common, but one suspects more disturbing to the party elite, were those voices which implicitly and explicitly criticised leading figures in the KSČ for their gullibility and lack of vigilance in the Slánský case. Even party members were not afraid to express their distrust of specific ministers and Central Committee dignitaries, up to and including Gottwald and Zápotocký, who were on occasion openly blamed for ignoring warning signals from below. How come these people are so divorced from rank-and-file complaints? Why are party 'comrades' isolated from the workers and never move among them? Surely, 'this is not a communist attitude'? Why aren't leaders subject to rigorous 'cadre review' like everyone else? Shouldn't Gottwald carry out 'self-criticism'? Shouldn't there be a 'screening' of all responsible figures in party, state and economic life in order to guarantee that they have the appropriate 'class origins' to defend workers' interests? Proletarians understood that the 'higher-ups' must have decent houses and other amenities if they are to represent the republic, but 'luxury and gross differences' should not be permitted.[24] Secret police agents reported that factory workers were apparently 'signing resolutions demanding the resignation of the entire government and the establishment of a new government composed of people whose past life is unambiguous and well known to the public'. Likewise, regional party officials in Brno noted ominously that workers were calling on 'members of the CC [Central Committee]

KSČ to give up their functions'. A perspicacious Prague security agent stated the obvious: 'among some workers, even party members, faith in the government and the CC KSČ is shaken'.[25] It appears, then, that the Slánský trial was used by discontented and frustrated citizens to vent their anger against the communist regime per se, not just against the few designated 'enemies'.

What do these diverse popular responses tell us about the impact of terror in Czechoslovakia? As far as the KSČ is concerned, it seems that internal party discipline generally held firm, but the leadership could never blithely rely on strict Leninist dictate among the rank and file. Ordinary members, and not a few lower-level functionaries, aired views that were disquieting to the centre and were critical by name of top party and state bosses. The accountability and trustworthiness of the executive were cast into doubt, the reality of 'inner-party democracy' was impugned and the gap between 'us' and 'them' clearly identified. In the process, it is possible that the administrative competence and loyalty of some party-state cadres were undermined. These unintended consequences of the leadership's policy of repression hint at the muted limits of 'Stalinisation' at the base of the Czechoslovak party, even if we accept that the KSČ elites were growing increasingly accustomed to obeying Moscow's orders.

At a societal level, given the scale and range of the repression there can be little doubt that most citizens lived in fear and were scarcely able to voice their opinions openly. Nevertheless, attitudes towards the Slánský trial, as we have seen, ranged from strident, sober and selective support to passive compliance and resigned accommodation, to apathy, doubt, guarded dissent and overt opposition. In the absence of hard statistics and regardless of the ostensible loud consensus behind the party line, it is impossible to assess the relative weights of these positions. However, the numerous signs of nonconformism suggest that public backing for the trial was exaggerated and that the communist authorities were never able to manipulate completely popular opinion and eliminate negative comment. We are palpably not dealing with a fully fledged 'totalitarian' system capable of moulding public discourse at will. A minority was not afraid to speak critically, even if many others, enthusiastically or passively, played by the rules of the game. Not everyone, it appears, was intimidated by the terror.

In summary, elite purges and mass repressions in Stalinist Czechoslovakia were multifaceted processes with distinct, but closely interrelated, exogenous and indigenous origins and multiple politico-ideological and socio-economic aims. Precisely because of this complex web of causes and effects, they cannot be interpreted as merely a product of 'evil' megalomaniac men bent on creating a 'totalitarian' order. Neither were they simply imposed by Moscow on a resistant party and society. Neither is there a single overarching explanation for their emergence. Stalinist terror in Czechoslovakia is best located in a framework which emphasises both longer and shorter-term factors: the pre-war 'Stalinisation' of the KSČ and the creation of a mentality of ubiquitous 'enemies'; the traumatic experiences of the Munich 'betrayal', Nazi occupation, the Holocaust and, notably, post-war ethnic and class retributions, all of which went some way towards tearing the fabric and cohesiveness of Czechoslovak society; and the sense of internal crisis and external pressure generated by the failings of the infant communist regime in an intense international atmosphere of breakdown between two hostile camps. In addition to these 'objective' circumstances, the goals, ambitions, perceptions and misperceptions of concrete actors should never be ignored – individual agency is crucial. Stalin, Gottwald and other Czech and Soviet political and security bosses operated in an almost Byzantine network of personal rivalries and clandestine conflicts, and the elite purges are explained, in part at least, by these ultimately impenetrable intrigues and cabals. In short, structural and contingent factors combined to produce a toxic form of lawlessness, which bred mistrust and suspicion, engendered widespread feelings of fear and legal insecurity in the population, and undermined public faith in the constitution and politics in general. The wounds were deep and are still apparent to this day, an ugly and unwanted reminder of a dark past which implicated and tainted too many people.

'Constructing Socialism': Politics, Culture and Labour

State-sponsored coercion, exclusionary policies and the inculcation of fear were not the only methods adopted by the communist authorities after February 1948. 'Socialism' in its Stalinist guise also had to be created in more inclusive productive ways. A solid base of social support needed to be forged. It is true that the Soviet model was de rigueur and that Muscovite shibboleths and blueprints could never be ignored, especially after the Stalin–Tito split in mid-1948. But the limitations of this 'Stalinisation' process should be noted. First, 'Stalinism' and 'totalitarianism' were not the conscious and self-proclaimed aims of the Czechoslovak communist leaders. These are pejorative terms given, no doubt often for good reason, to communist policies and