

Workers' Liberty 3/36: The Slansky Trial

The Slansky Trial: introduction

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2012 marks the 60th anniversary of the so-called Trial of the Anti-State Conspiratorial Centre led by Rudolf Slansky.

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The Slansky Trial was one of a series of Eastern European post-war Stalinist show-trials in which leading Communist Party members confessed — after prolonged physical and psychological torture — to being longstanding agents of American imperialism.

But the trial also broke new ground. It was the first show-trial in which state-sponsored anti-semitism played a central role. As the New York Times, reporting under the headline “Tragi-Comedy in Prague”, put it:

“There is something new in this latest trial. The charge (is) that Slansky and the majority of his fellow-defendants, who are of Jewish origin, were members of a vast Jewish conspiracy... Here we have the infamous Protocols of the Elders of Zion, but in the Stalinist version. So the Prague trial is not merely a comedy; rather it may well mark the beginning of a major tragedy as the Kremlin swings further and further towards anti-semitism masked as anti-Zionism.”

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The Slansky Trial: the rehearsals

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At the centre of the supposed conspiracy was Rudolf Slansky, a lifelong member of the Czechoslovak Communist Party (CPC). He had joined the party at its inception in 1921 and been elected to its Central Committee in 1929.

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Elected to the Czechoslovak National Assembly in 1935, Slansky fled to the Soviet Union after the German annexation of the Sudetenland in 1938. He returned to Czechoslovakia in 1944, taking part in

the Slovak National Rising, and was elected CPC General Secretary the following year.

Following the CPC putsch of 1948, in which the non-CPC parties were driven out of what had previously been a coalition government, Slansky was the most powerful person in the country, second only in name to President Klement Gottwald.

The official celebrations which marked Slansky's 50th birthday, in July of 1951, appeared to underline his grip on power. He was awarded the Order of Socialism (the highest state decoration). An avalanche of the obligatory laudatory articles appeared in the press and his collected works were published.

But it would not be long before Slansky was playing the lead role in a Czech version of the show-trials which swept through Eastern Europe in the years following 1948.

In response to the onset of the Cold War and the rift with Tito's Yugoslavia in June of that year, Stalin had clamped down on the satellite states' Communist Parties. The subsequent Moscow-inspired and orchestrated purges and show trials sent out a warning to the leaders of the “fraternal” Communist Parties that any dissent was punishable by death.

In 1949, the Albanian Interior Minister Koci Xoxe and Traycho Kostov, Bulgaria's President of the Council of Ministers, were executed, both accused of espionage on behalf of the US and UK. However, it was the trial and execution in October of the same year of Hungarian Interior Minister Laszlo Rajk for being “a Titoite spy” and an imperialist agent which triggered what would become the Slansky Trial.

In mid-1949 the Hungarian Communist Party General Secretary, Matyas Rakosi, provided Gottwald with a list of around sixty Czech officials who had been named by Rajk's co-conspirators as supposed collaborators. Arrests of whom began in November.

Initially, the interrogations pointed in the direction of a show-trial of Slovak “bourgeois nationalists”, but later became focused on anti-Zionism.

In late 1950 and early 1951 the arrest and interrogation of another 60 officials was approved by Gottwald and Slansky. Around the same time a new — and much more imaginative — script for an eventual show-trial was drafted. In this version Otto Sling (CPC Brno Regional Secretary) and Marie Svermova (CPC Central Committee Secretary) were the leaders of an underground Trotskyist organisation, recruited from CPC veterans of the Spanish Civil War and CPC members who had spent the war in exile in London.

With the support of Slovak “bourgeois nationalists”, they had been preparing a coup aimed at removing Gottwald, Slansky and Zapotocky (the Czechoslovak Prime Minister) from their positions of power.

In February 1951 a meeting of the Central Committee approved a report on the plot, which had by then been confirmed by the forced confessions from those arrested at the turn of the year. According to the report, Sling had become an agent of the Anglo-American intelligence service in the 1930s. In 1948 he had been instructed to “develop nefarious activities (in Czechoslovakia) similar to Rajk’s in Hungary and Kostov’s in Bulgaria.”

Sling’s plan was to convene a special conference of the CPC at which his supporters would oust Slansky. The report continued:

“They already had a candidate in the wings (Svermova) to take over the position of the General Secretary. This candidate had to know Sling as a cynic, a thug, a criminal, and a murderer of his own mother.... The party will therefore also treat M. Svermova without remorse as a criminal enemy.”

But even as this report was being adopted by the CPC Central Committee, a third script was being drafted. In this version Slansky was not the victim but the plot’s prime mover, and the ideological driving force was Zionism.

In March, the state security services in Moscow, which received reports of the interrogations of the alleged plotters in Czechoslovakia, identified Slansky as being responsible for placing “unreliable persons and enemies” in high-ranking positions in the CPC and Czechoslovak government, and as the possible leader of a conspiracy. Czech interrogators were encouraged by their Russian advisers — who had begun to arrive in Czechoslovakia from late 1949 onwards — to accumulate more material incriminating Slansky.

The absurdity of the new role attributed to Slansky was particularly obvious to those who had only recently confessed to involvement in the Sling-Svermova conspiracy. Svermova herself later recalled:

“The same interrogators who used to call [Slansky] a Bolshevik whom I and my faction wanted to eliminate now forced me to confess that I had always aided him in his criminal activity against the party and the state.”

But the absurdity of the script did not prevent the interrogators’ victims from making the required “confessions”. By the early summer the interrogators had amassed a substantial collection of similar confessions, all incriminating Slansky. Despite such confessions, Stalin held back from ordering Slansky’s arrest.

He did, however, find that Slansky had been at fault in his selection of people to fill government and CPC posts. In July Stalin told Gottwald that Slansky should be stripped of his post of General Secretary. Meeting in September, the Central Committee carried

out Stalin’s instructions. As compensation, Slansky was appointed Deputy Prime Minister.

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The same meeting also marked the introduction of “anti-Zionism” (in reality: anti-semitism) into the preparations for the eventual show-trial.

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While Gottwald made no more than a passing reference to the high number of arrested CPC members who “did not grow from the roots of our country and our party,” the party’s ideologue, Vaclav Kopecky spoke at length about the dangers of “cosmopolitanism” and Zionism:

“Cosmopolitans should in principle not be posted in leadership positions. This truly is an issue of cosmopolitanism, not a racial question. There are people of Jewish origin who are firmly rooted in our nation. What we are concerned with here is those people who are strangers to us, who are not true internationalists... The people of this background mostly come from very wealthy strata. In many instances they also had a very religious upbringing, which only fortified their Zionist tendencies.

“Today we know that the attitudes of many people of Jewish origin to the working class have changed... The Jews are drawn to Anglo-American imperialism, which is supporting Israel and using Zionism as a disintegrative agent within the parties of the popular democratic regimes and within socialism.”

Under Stalin’s instructions, on 23 November, Slansky was arrested. The following day a meeting of the Central Committee approved a report on the arrest which named him as the head of a Zionist group, consisting of CPC veterans of the Spanish Civil War, Slovak nationalists, and CPC exiles who had spent the war in London. The goal of the group was to usurp power in Czechoslovakia.

In the meeting, Kapecky continued to lecture on the threats which cosmopolitanism and Zionism posed:

“Zionism has become a very serious danger in recent years. It has become an important instrument of American and British imperialism. The international Zionist organisation is linked with the Jewish State of Israel. Advocates of Zionism figure that in the people’s democracies Zionism can be transformed into a species of Titoism.”

Another wave of arrests soon followed. Those arrested were chosen for their suitability for a role in the Slansky-led “Zionist conspiracy”, overwhelmingly of Jewish origin.

The anti-semitic element of the trial became increasingly pronounced as the script for the trial was finalised in the 12 months between Slansky's arrest and the staging of the trial itself, part of the wider pattern of anti-semitism promoted by Stalin in the Soviet Union and its satellite states between 1945 and his death in 1953.

In late 1947 and early 1948 the Soviet regime unleashed a policy of suppressing Yiddish culture and Jewish identity, beginning with the murder of Shlomo Michoels, the Jewish actor who had been the chair of the wartime Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee (JAFC), by the secret police.

This was followed by the dissolution of the JAFC, on the grounds that it had become "a centre of anti-Soviet propaganda", and by the execution of another two dozen leading Jewish Soviet writers and poets in 1952, amidst accusations of a plot to transform the Crimea into a Jewish region which would be home to a US military base.

In early 1953 the burgeoning anti-semitic campaign — in which "rootless cosmopolitan" was the thinly disguised codeword for "Jew" — reached its climax in the so-called "Doctors' Plot": a number of Jewish doctors were accused of having abused their positions of trust to murder members of the Soviet elite and to plot the murder of Stalin.

The same anti-semitism, rebranded as "anti-Zionism", was also evident in the Stalinist satellite states. In March 1949, for example, the Hungarian Zionist Union was dissolved by the Hungarian government. Later the same year the government reduced and then stopped completely the issuing of emigration passports for Jews wanting to move to Israel.

The Rajk Trial had also contained an anti-semitic undercurrent. According to the Hungarian press, "Trotskyism, fascism, Zionism and anti-semitism" were the "family circle" which nourished Rajk and his "co-conspirators". The judge in the trial emphasised the Jewish names of four of the defendants.

The anti-semitism of the Slansky Trial was therefore not a uniquely Czechoslovak phenomenon. It was part of a broader pattern of anti-semitism, of varying degrees of intensity, pursued by the Stalinist states in the post-war years.

The trial's anti-semitism also served a domestic, and more traditional, purpose: it allowed Jews to be scapegoated for the economic difficulties which the Czechoslovak population was experiencing at the time.

By the late 1940s Stalin's policy of "reorganising" the Czechoslovak economy (and the economies of the other satellite states) to meet the needs of the Soviet Union had plunged the country into an economic crisis. Agricultural output declined as collectivisation proceeded and labour was transferred from agriculture to industry. At the same time, the production of consumer goods slumped as the government gave priority to heavy industry to supply the exports the Soviet Union demanded.

By the close of 1952 — just one year before the end of the first Five Year Plan — repeated pay cuts had been imposed, even basic foodstuffs such as milk were in short supply, the chemicals industry was on the point of collapse, and energy production fell well short of demand.

That the blame for this economic crisis lay with Slansky and his 13 co-conspirators — 10 of whom, along with Slansky himself, were Jewish — and with the Czechoslovak Jews who had emigrated to Israel in the post-war years was to be a major theme of the trial.

According to the trial's prosecutor in his opening address:

"After the founding of Israel the plotters, above all Slansky and Fischl, by protecting and supporting capitalist elements and on the pretext of Jewish emigration to Israel, organized the illegal flight of a large number of capitalist and hostile elements from Czechoslovakia and the neighbouring popular-democratic countries, and allowed them to take wealth amounting to thousands of millions out of Czechoslovakia.

"Gold, silver, jewellery and the most varied tools and machinery were exported against the law and in secret. According to incomplete statistics, 10,000 export licences were issued, by means of which Czechoslovak national property worth nearly 6,000 million Czech crowns was illegally exported."

In addition to this very public statement of anti-semitism, the arrested Jews also experienced religious abuse at the hands of their captors.

In 1955 Doubek, one of the pre-trial interrogators, recalled how anti-semitism had been encouraged by the Soviet advisors who had arrived in Czechoslovakia from 1949 onwards:

"They pointed out (to the Czech interrogators) the growing influence of Jewry in the international arena. They pointed out Rockefeller, Rothschild and Du Pont and put this in connection with what Slansky and the Jews were doing here, saying there's a danger that the Jews will end up as masters of everything.

"They also pointed out the role of the state of Israel and tried to prove... the Jews are the main representatives of international imperialism. Comrade Boris (one of the advisors) even said that Jews are not interested in political offices in capitalist countries lest their intentions of mastering the world become apparent."

When Eugene Loebel, the first of the trial's defendants to be arrested, was brought face-to-face with one of the Soviet advisors, the latter told him:

"You are not a communist [or] a Czechoslovakian. You are a dirty Jew, that's what you are. Israel is your only real fatherland and you have sold out socialism to your bosses, the Zionist imperialist leaders of world Jewry. Let me tell you, the time is fast approaching when we'll have to exterminate all of your kind."

In his book about the trial Artur London, one of the three defendants not sentenced to death, described similar experiences with some of the Czech interrogators:

“One of them seized me by the throat and shouted with hatred: ‘We’ll get rid of you and your filthy race. You’re all the same! Not everything Hitler did was right, but he destroyed the Jews, and he was right about that. Too many of you escaped the gas chamber. We’ll finish what he started. We’ll bury you and your filthy race 10 yards deep.’

“Soon after my arrest, I thought [anti-semitism] was limited to a few individuals. ...But I now realised that even if this mentality only appeared sporadically during the interrogations, it was nevertheless a systematic line.”

Slansky himself drew an analogy between the Czechoslovak state’s “anti-Zionism” and Nazi anti-semitism. He told his cellmate that the fight against Zionism which his interrogators spoke of was no different from Nazi anti-semitism.

Such anti-semitism was not confined to the Soviet advisors and Czech interrogators, nor to party ideologues such as Kapecky. Andrej Keppert, who replaced Karel Svab as a state security chief after the latter had himself been arrested in preparation for the trial, had never hidden his particularly rabid anti-semitism.

He used to tell his colleagues that when he saw someone with a big nose he either opened a file on them or opened the prison gate. One of Keppert’s first acts after replacing Svab was to set up a special unit to track down Zionists.

Publicity about the forthcoming show-trial also encouraged popular displays of anti-semitism, such as graffiti reading “Out With the Capitalists and the Jews”, and people identified houses owned by Jews. CPC branches demanded that “citizens of Jewish origin” should be banned from party membership, and that the party should “transfer Jews from office jobs to manual labour” so they could “prove their attitude to the regime”, following complaints about the number of Jews in high-ranking positions. Some CPC branches went even further and demanded that all Jews be removed from public office.

In the 12 months between Slansky’s arrest and the opening of the trial Slansky and his co-accused were “coached” in the roles they were required to play. It was not enough for them to have signed self-incriminating confessions. They were also required to learn their lines to perfection, as too were the trial’s judge and prosecutor.

London later recalled: “The questions which the prosecutor and the judge asked (during the trial) were exactly where they had been inserted in the script of my speech. Word for word, they repeated what I knew from my text... Not one word was different!... No questions from my lawyer! That was not provided for in the script!”

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The Slansky Trial: the performance

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On 20 November 1952 the Slansky Trial finally opened in Prague.

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Court documentation published in preparation for the trial emphasised the fact that this was not a trial of “ordinary” Czechoslovak nationals: the names of 11 of the 14 defendants were followed by the words “of Jewish origin.” Where the name was deemed not to sound sufficiently Jewish, the original name of the accused was also included: Slansky alias Salzmann, Frejka alias Freund, and Andre Simone alias Otto Katz.

Slansky and his 13 accomplices were accused of “high treason, espionage, sabotage and military treason.” More specifically, as the prosecutor explained in his opening address:

“As Trotskyite-Titoite, Zionist, bourgeois-nationalist traitors and enemies of the Czechoslovak people, of the popular-democratic social order, and of socialism, they formed an anti-state conspiratorial centre in the service of American imperialism and controlled by hostile western intelligence services. They undermined the popular-democratic social order, disrupted socialist construction, harmed the people’s economy, carried out espionage activities, and weakened the unity of the Czechoslovak people and the defence capabilities of the country.

“They did so in order to tear the country away from its solid alliance and ties of friendship with the Soviet Union, to liquidate the popular-democratic social order in Czechoslovakia, to restore capitalism, to again drag the country into the camp of imperialism, and to destroy its autonomy and independence.”

Slansky confessed that he had become a police spy in 1924/25, had joined a “Trotskyite faction” by 1928, and by 1930 had been recruited by the US intelligence services. During the war, Slansky continued, he had worked for both the American and British secret services. In the latter half of the 1940s he had then made contact with Yugoslav Titoites through Tito’s advisor Moshe Pijade and British Labour MP Konni Zilliacus.

Slansky’s links with Pijade were proof of his Titoism:

“I made it quite clear to Pijade that I regarded the measures of the Tito clique as correct and assured him that my stand was identical with that of Tito and his accomplices and that I was pursuing a similar line in Czechoslovakia.”

His links with Zilliacus were an even more serious matter, given the role allocated to Zilliacus in the “conspiracy” at the centre of the trial. According to the trial indictment:

"The hideous plans of the imperialist arsonists placed a special emphasis on the liquidation of the democratic system in Czechoslovakia and entrusted this important task to their trusted pimp, the master of deceit and provocation, Konni Zilliacus, one of the most successful agents of the British Intelligence Service."

Slansky further "confessed" that he had personally selected his 13 co-defendants for the positions which they had held at the time of their arrests and which they had used in order to "execute sabotage and espionage."

In response to the judge's instruction to "elaborate on your activity in infiltrating Zionists into important posts," Slansky replied:

"I collaborated with the Zionists, whose diversionary tactics were part of their campaign to liquidate the popular-democratic regime in Czechoslovakia. ...Those Zionists for their part brought other Zionists into various sectors of our political and economic life ...The Zionists active in Czechoslovakia were part of an international conspiracy led by American Zionists.

"The whole world-wide Zionist movement was, in fact, led and ruled by the imperialists — in particular the US imperialists through the American Zionists. For American Zionists, who, as in other countries, are the financially most powerful and politically most influential Zionists, form part of the ruling imperialist circles of America."

In order to stifle criticism of his promotion of Zionists and his patronage of Zionist organisations, Slansky explained, he had falsely accused his critics of anti-semitism, creating an atmosphere of fear to prevent opposition to Zionism.

But even now the fantasies of Slansky's scriptwriter had not yet exhausted themselves. Asked by the prosecutor if he had used other organisations apart from Zionist ones in his "subversive activities", Slansky responded:

"Yes. Freemasons. In its activities the Anti-State Conspiratorial Centre made use of Freemasons and their lodges as well as Zionist organisations ...I wish to stress that the hostile character of Freemason lodges was emphasised by the fact that Dr Eduard Benes (the former Czechoslovak President), the imperialist agent, was also a member."

Slansky had a simple explanation for his behaviour: "My past... made me an enemy of the cause of progress and socialism. I was born into a middle-class Jewish family."

Andre Simone, until recently the foreign editor of the CPC's newspaper Rude Pravo, confessed to having been a Zionist, a Trotskyist, a foreign intelligence agent in his own right, and also a conduit for the information which his co-accused supposedly passed on to the foreign secret services.

In France, he confessed, he had been "in close contact with the Jewish nationalist and French Colonial Minister Georges Mandel until 1939." Thereafter he had "links with the Jewish nationalist

and member of the US Supreme Court, Frankfurter" and also with "the agent of the American secret service, the Jewish nationalist Schönbrunn."

In addition, Simone continued, "I was at the service of the French, British and American espionage services."

Simone's scripted explanation for his treachery was:

"My personal characteristics, which resulted in my being an enemy of the working class and everything progressive. As the son of a manufacturer, and educated in the spirit of bourgeois ideology I have always been alien to the working class. I considered a worker an inferior being and moved in circles close to my heart, among traitors to the working people: Trotskyites, Social Democrats, and Jewish bourgeois nationalists."

(To ensure the nature of Simone's "personal characteristics" was properly understood, his confession was preceded by the following questioning by the judge: "Your name is Andre Simone. Was that always your name?" "My correct name is Otto Katz.")

Geminder, former chief of the CPC's International Division, confessed to being "a Trotskyite and a Jewish bourgeois nationalist." He had been the go-between for Slansky and Zilliacus, as well as being Slansky's intermediary for contact with Israeli and Yugoslav diplomats. According to Geminder: "The United States imperialists sought by means of the Zionist agency... to destroy the political and economic foundations of the country."

Asked by the prosecutor about his attitude towards the workers of Czechoslovakia, Geminder replied:

"I was indifferent to the interests of the Czech people, and I have never felt any affinities with them. Their national interests have always remained alien to me. At the end of my studies I frequented petty-bourgeois, cosmopolitan and Zionist circles, where I met people of German nationality."

Otto Fischl, one-time Deputy Finance Minister, confessed that he had been a Gestapo agent and had assisted Nazi exploitation of the Czech economy during the war. In the post-war years, he explained, he had been an agent of the Israeli secret services and had played a central role in recruiting Zionists to Slansky's conspiratorial centre.

He further confessed that as Czechoslovak Deputy Finance Minister he had agreed trade deals with Israel which were disadvantageous to Czechoslovakia, and had also played the main role in allowing Jewish emigrants to drain 6,000,000,000 crowns from the Czechoslovak economy.

Fischl had been nicknamed "the Jewish Himmler" in Israel because of the difficulties which he placed in the way of Jews taking their possessions with them when emigrating from Czechoslovakia. But in the trial he confessed that this was just a cover to conceal his true purposes:

"My strict attitude... was intended to conceal the fact that I was helping the bourgeoisie by approving the

export of their wealth. ...The main purpose of my speeches at that time (attacking Jewish emigration) was to conceal my hostile activity. ...I identified with the interests of the Jewish bourgeoisie and supported them."

Bedrich Reicin, previously a Deputy Defence Minister, confessed to being recruited as a Gestapo agent and betraying leading members of the underground CPC to the Nazis.

As a reward for his treachery the Nazis had allowed him to escape to Moscow, where he joined Slansky's group and secretly collaborated with western military attaches in post-war Czechoslovakia.

Ludvik Frejka, ex-chief of the Economic Department of the President's Cabinet, confessed to having been an American secret services agent. He said he had abused his government position in order to sabotage Czechoslovak industrial development and economic relations between Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union, and artificially boosted trade with the West in order to assist imperialism in frustrating the first Czechoslovak Five Year Plan. Frejka accepted responsibility for the prevalent shortages in the country:

"The fact that there are still shortages today and that there are still food ration cards in Czechoslovakia — for that I alone bear the responsibility, I alone bear the blame for this."

Eugene Loebel and Rudolf Margolius, two former Deputy Trade Ministers, confessed to having been recruited as agents of the American secret service during the war — Loebel confessing he had also worked for the English, Austrian and Israeli secret services — and to having collaborated with Israeli politicians in attempts to undermine economic relations between Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union:

"By means of foreign trade we endeavoured to bind the economy of the Republic to the West in such a way that this country would be completely dependent on the capitalist states and a toy in the hands of Western imperialists."

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The Slansky Trial and Israel

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They claimed to have also sabotaged the Czechoslovak economy by making trade agreements with Israel under which the latter paid 17% less than it should have done for goods which it imported from Czechoslovakia.

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Otto Sling, one-time CPC Brno Regional Secretary, "confessed" to having been part of a British espionage organisation and to having prevented accurate information about anti-Czechoslovak conspiracies from reaching Gottwald.

Sling also outlined the role of the "conspiratorial centre" in the event of war:

"Our anti-state conspiratorial centre was a fifth column in Czechoslovakia, constituting the internal offensive of American imperialism against Czechoslovakia."

Vavro Hajdu and Artur London, both of whom had previously held the post of Deputy Foreign Minister, confessed to having undermined relations between Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union, and to having abused their posts in order to appoint "Trotskyites, Zionists and other bourgeois nationalists" to domestic and international diplomatic posts.

London confessed that he was "a Trotskyite and a United States intelligence agent." Hajdu confessed that he was a Zionist who had been recruited to work for British intelligence while living in England in 1941.

The confessions of the three non-Jewish defendants — Vladmir Clementis (former Foreign Minister), Josef Frank (former CPC Deputy General Secretary) and Karel Svab (former Deputy Minister of National Security) — corroborated those of their co-accused.

Clementis confessed to being a "Slovak bourgeois nationalist" who had joined the Slansky conspiratorial centre in 1948, having been an agent of the French intelligence services, organising an espionage ring in Hungary, and supplying Czech state secrets to the French, British and American ambassadors in Prague. He also confessed to co-operating with the American ambassador (Laurence Steinhardt) to facilitate the emigration of wealthy Czechoslovak families such as the Schwarzenberg and Lobovitz families.

Frank confessed that he had tortured to death Soviet and French prisoners of war in Nazi concentration camps. After the war he had undermined Czechoslovak foreign trade by selling goods cheaper to capitalist states than to the "people's democracies", and by overfilling orders to the former and under-supplying orders to the latter.

Svab confessed that he too had tortured prisoners of war in Nazi concentration camps. After the war he had recruited "Zionists and other hostile elements" into the Czech security services, and had also sabotaged the investigation of a spy ring in Czechoslovakia after the Rajk Trial in Hungary.

Witnesses — many of whom received long prison sentences in later show-trials — confirmed these confessions.

Two of the witnesses were Israeli nationals: Mordecai Oren, a leader of the Israeli (pro-Soviet) Mapam party and a member of the Knesset, and Shimon Orenstein, an assistant trade attaché in the Israeli Legation in Prague until 1950.

Described by the prosecutor as "the notorious Zionist deceiver", Oren confessed that he had been one of Slansky's go-betweens with English Labour MPs, American capitalists, the Israeli Foreign Ministry and Marshall Tito:

"In the interests of Zionism and of British intelligence I had meetings with the Tito fascist clique. In conversation... I learned of Rudolf Slansky's collaboration with this clique.

"I was requested to transmit to Slansky all documents concerning the attitude of Titoists regarding the decisions of the Cominform and the workers' parties."

Orenstein confessed to having been present at a secret meeting held in Washington in 1947 where future Israeli leaders promised:

"Zionist organisations would be available for espionage and other subversive activity in the people's democracies in exchange for United States support for the Zionists' aims in Palestine."

Leading American-Jewish politicians and financiers, Orenstein explained, were part of a huge international Zionist conspiracy, corroborating the allegations about Israeli subversive activities contained in the trial's indictment:

"The former Israeli ambassador to Czechoslovakia as well as embassy officials established an espionage network with Geminder and Fischl. Israeli diplomats in the service of American intelligence committed, together with the plotters, acts of sabotage and wrecking which caused heavy damage to Czechoslovakia."

What distinguished the Slansky Trial from its predecessors was its anti-semitism. But it would be remiss not to mention another of the trial's innovations.

During the Soviet show-trials of the 1930s it was not unknown for the children of the trials' victims to have to raise their hands when schoolteachers demanded of their classes that they support a motion in favour of the death penalty for the "people's enemies".

The scriptwriters of the Slansky Trial went one better. On the fifth day of the trial the judge read out a letter from the teenage son of Ludvik Frejka:

"Dear Court! I demand the ultimate penalty for my father — the death penalty. I have realised that this creature, who cannot even be described as a human being, because he lacks even a trace of emotion and human dignity, has been my greatest and bitterest enemy.

"I pledge that I will always work as a loyal communist. I will strengthen my hatred of all our enemies, who want to destroy our life which is becoming ever richer and happier, and above all I will never allow my hatred of my father to die away, so that I can work all the better for the communist future of our people."

Frejka's son did not live up to his pledge to be a loyal communist. After Czechoslovak radio had announced his father's execution, he hanged himself.

A second letter read out by the judge was from London's wife, Lisa Londonova:

"My husband was a traitor to his party and a traitor to our fatherland. That is a terrible blow for me and my children — never before has a traitor lived in our

family. My children have promised me to behave as loyal communists throughout their lives.

"But as a communist and as a mother I am happy, for the sake of the Czechoslovak people and world peace, that the band of traitors has been exposed and rendered incapable of inflicting further harm. I can do no more than join all honourable people in demanding the ultimate penalty for the traitors."

The Slansky Trial lasted just eight days.

In his concluding speech the prosecutor stressed the important role which the trial had played in revealing the supposedly true nature of Zionism:

"The defendants include 11 alumni of Zionist organizations who entered the service of American imperialism... The trial shows all Communist and workers' parties the danger of Zionism as an agency of American imperialism.

"The Zionist movement is not a system of ideas [nor] even a fallacious ideology. The Zionist movement consists of the Zionist organizations in America, plus the ruling clique of the state of Israel, plus the Zionist capitalists all over the world, linked by the intimate ties of their factories, companies, and business deals with American imperialists.

"It is self-evident that Slansky put only Zionists into high positions, that he received the diplomatic representatives of Israel, that he protected their criminal activities. That was because Slansky himself was, by his very nature, a Zionist."

The prosecutor and the accused alike demanded that the judge impose the death penalty on all defendants.

"I am guilty of the most heinous crimes that a man can commit," said Slansky. "For me there cannot be any extenuating or mitigating circumstances, nor any mercy. I rightly deserve only contempt. I deserve no other end to my life than that proposed by the prosecutor."

Simone agreed: "I was a writer. There is a fine saying according to which the writer is an engineer of the human soul. But what kind of an engineer have I been — I who poisoned souls? An engineer of the soul such as myself belongs on the gallows."

In a letter to Gottwald written after the verdicts had been announced, Svab wrote: "I consider the verdict fully justified and I shall pass away with the knowledge that this solution is the only correct one."

Geminder wrote, also in a letter to Gottwald following the announcement of the verdicts:

"I am walking to the gallows with a heavy heart but relatively calm. The air is becoming purer and one obstacle along the victorious road to socialism is being removed. The party is always right, which my case corroborates once again."

Eleven of the defendants were condemned to death and executed on 3 December. The other three (Loebl, Hajdu and London) were sentenced to life imprisonment.

The trial had been an unprecedented exercise in state-sponsored and orchestrated anti-semitism. The conspiracy involved was similar to those "uncovered" in other show-trials. But in this case, beneath a thin veneer of the new Stalinist political orthodoxy of "anti-Zionism", the "conspiracy" incorporated traditional anti-semitic stereotypes.

Tags:
