

The background of the cover is a light yellow-green color with several faint, stylized leaf motifs scattered across it. Each motif consists of a short stem with two leaves pointing upwards and outwards.

# SHOW TRIALS

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**Stalinist Purges in Eastern Europe,  
1948–1954**

**George H. Hodos**

 **Greenwood**  
PUBLISHING GROUP

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1948–1954

GEORGE H. HODOS

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PRAEGER

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To Marta

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# LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

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AVH	Államvédelmi Hatóság [State Security Authority of Hungary]
CC	Central Committee of the communist party
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CP	Communist Party
DDR	Deutsche Demokratische Republik [German Democratic Republic]
GDR	German Democratic Republic
K5	Kommissariat 5 [the fifth (political) branch of the East German police under Soviet military administration]
KPD	Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands [Communist Party of Germany]
KRN	Krajowa Rada Narodowa [National Council for the Homeland]
MVD	Ministerstvo Vnutrennikh Del [Ministry of Internal Affairs, responsible for the Soviet state security organs, from 1946 to 1954]
NKVD	Narodnyi Komissariat Vnutrennikh Del [People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs, responsible for the Soviet state security organs, from 1934 to 1946]
OSS	Office of Strategic Services
PPR	Polska Partia Robotnicza [Polish Workers' Party]
SED	Sozialistische Einheitspartei [Socialist Unity Party of East Germany, after the merger of the communist and the Social Democratic parties in 1946]
SSD	Staatssicherheitsdienst [State Security Service of East Germany]
UDB	Uprava Drzavne Bezbednosti [State Security Directorate of Yugoslavia]
USC	Unitarian Service Committee
VVN	Vereinigung der Verfolgten des Naziregimes [Union of Victims of Nazi Persecution in East Germany]

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# PREFACE

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“The Party is dead; it can neither move nor breathe, but its hair and nails continue to grow,” said Rubashov to Colonel Ivanov of the NKVD, Stalin’s security police, at the outset of his interrogation.

“We know more than men have ever known about mankind; that is why our revolution succeeded. And now you have buried it all again. . . . Everything is buried; the men, their wisdom and their hopes. You killed it, you destroyed it. . . .”<sup>1</sup>

Rubashov, Arthur Koestler’s literary symbol of the victims of Stalin’s purges, was a broken, disillusioned man, his revolution betrayed and converted into an instrument of personal power by Josef Stalin. Koestler modeled his tragic hero after Bukharin and placed Trotzky’s pince-nez upon his nose, but he represented the entire Bolshevik old guard, Lenin’s comrades in arms who, pushed into the opposition by Stalin, watched helplessly as their power was taken from them, their loyalty to the party mocked, and they, themselves, systematically and brutally destroyed. In his thirst for absolute power, Stalin used the right against the left, then left against right, and finally played off the center against both until, in the 1930s, he had them all slain in the Great Terror.

Ten to fifteen years later, after the war, a very different group was liquidated, the young guard of the communist leadership in Eastern Europe. These were not opponents of Stalin, but his faithful disciples. At the time they were chosen by their master to serve him as victims, they were at the height of their newly attained power. Rajk, Slánský, Gomułka, and their comrades were no Rubashovs; they were no less devoted to the policies of Moscow than their executioners.

The difference was also reflected in the methods of interrogation used to extort false confessions.

“I plead guilty to not having understood the fatal compulsion behind the policy of the government, and to have therefore held oppositional views,” conceded Rubashov midway through his interrogation.

“I plead guilty to having followed sentimental impulses, and in so doing, to having been led into contradictions with historical necessity. . . . to having placed the idea of man above the idea of mankind. . . . I admit that these points of view

are, in the present situation, objectively harmful and, therefore, counterrevolutionary in character."<sup>2</sup>

The next step, from accepting subjective guilt to confessing to abominable crimes, consciously committed, followed with implacable logic. To accomplish this, Rubashov's second interrogator, Gletkin, needed only the blinding light of a desk lamp, the false testimony of another prisoner, and the exhaustion brought on by uninterrupted interrogations.

"The roles had been exchanged; it was not Gletkin but he, Rubashov, who had tried to muddle a clear case by splitting hairs. The accusation, which until now had seemed to him so absurd, in fact, merely inserted the missing links into a perfectly logical chain."<sup>3</sup>

But Rajk, Slánský, Kostov, Patrascanu, and Gomułka did not suffer from subjective guilt feelings that could be reinterpreted into objective crimes. When Rubashov was escorted to his first interrogation, Ivanov, an old friend, smiled at him from behind his desk.

"'What a pleasant surprise,' said Rubashov, dryly. 'Sit down,' said Ivanov with a polite gesture."<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps, in 1937, a similar scenario greeted Bukharin at his arrest, his nerve having been broken during ten years of harassment and vilification. According to some witnesses, he had never been beaten or tortured. Maybe. But with the new victims, the executioner had no time to waste. It took only a few weeks of physical and psychological torture for communist leaders, at the height of power, to be transformed into helpless clumps of human flesh, robbed of their humanity and of the meaning of their lives. They were beaten with rubber truncheons and rifle butts, their nails were torn out, they were denied drinking water and forced to swallow the urine of their captors, they were subjected to water baths through which electrical currents were sent, they were confined to cages in which they could only crouch, they were threatened with the arrests of their wives and children—when these had not already been arrested—to the point where they felt hopelessly delivered to an incomprehensible fate: buried alive, robbed even of the possibility of committing suicide. The higher their position in the party, the more brutally they were tortured. Only rarely did the mechanism break down, when they were beaten to death or were driven insane by overzealous interrogators.

The philosophical conversations described by Koestler, the appeals to party loyalty, the requests to render a last service to world communism through confession, came only at the very end of the ordeal, after the process of physical and psychological destruction was complete.

Rajk and the other postwar victims of Stalin were no Bukharins. Neither were they "national communists," more loyal to their countries than to Stalin's demands, as they have often been described by Western observers. To invest them with Titoist tendencies is to completely misjudge their personalities and political

careers. Drawing a mistaken analogy with the trials of the 1930s provides their hangmen with a perverse justification; if the victims were guilty of actually opposing Stalin, then they had to be liquidated. The distorting nature of the Western characterization of these people as national communists becomes clear in the cases of Gomułka, Kádár, and Husák, each of whom was first a victim of the postwar purges and survived to become faithful servants of Soviet imperial policies.

The show trials in Eastern Europe would have occurred even without the break between Stalin and Tito, probably even with the identical victims, as the device by which the brother parties of the postwar Soviet satellite states in Eastern Europe were subordinated to the Soviet party. Show trials were an integral part of Stalinism, and their introduction into the satellite states was a logical step, albeit with variants on the tested Soviet model. These differences were not merely geographic or periodic. In the factional, ideological, and power struggles of the 1930s, the victims were selected first and the necessary scenario written afterwards. In the Eastern Europe of the 1940s, the scenario was created before the victims were selected. The Stalinist terror in the satellite countries constituted a new chapter in the history of the show trials, distinctly different in character from those that preceded them, about whose differences little has yet been written. To fill this gap in our knowledge about and understanding of the later version is the purpose of this book.

\* \* \*

The show trial is a propaganda arm of political terror. Its aim is to personalize an abstract political enemy, to place it in the dock in flesh and blood and, with the aid of a perverted system of justice, to transform abstract political-ideological differences into easily intelligible common crimes. It both incites the masses against the evil embodied by the defendants and frightens them away from supporting any potential opposition.

The concept is used here in a specifically narrow sense, restricted to the liquidation of communists by communists. It ignores the Stalinist show trials against real enemies of the system such as the leaders of the bourgeois and social democratic parties and of the Catholic church. On the other hand, it includes not only public trials before selected audiences and broadcasts on radio, but also secret trials, news of which was disseminated by clever whispering campaigns among the party membership. In their secrecy and with the silent disappearance of the accused, these were no less effective as instruments of terror than were the public trials.

The centerpiece of this book is the trial of the Hungarian communist leader László Rajk, not only because of my personal involvement in it, but also because the hanging court in Budapest provided a model for all of the subsequent bloody purges in the satellite countries. A detailed account is given of the relatively

unimportant starting point of the purges in Tirana because in the relevant literature the analysis of postwar developments in Albania, culminating in the show trial of Koci Xoxe, receives only superficial treatment. Quite the opposite situation applies to the trials in Czechoslovakia, whose long and bloody course is amply documented in the memoirs of survivors as well as in the confidential report of the commission set up by the Central Committee, a copy of which has been published in the West. Consequently, the trials in Prague are examined here primarily in terms of how they related to the other East European trials and how they differed from them.

An examination of the show trials in Poland provides many opportunities to cast light on obscure and neglected aspects, to date mostly unexplored, as the existing literature is concerned mainly with the planned—but never staged—show trial of Władisław Gomułka. The chapters dealing with the Stalinist purges in Bulgaria, Romania, and East Germany probe into territories hitherto scarcely documented. It is my hope that they offer a number of new suggestions for a much more detailed exploration of events still kept secret by a nearly total silence on the part of perpetrators and surviving victims alike.

This study would be incomplete without at least a cursory analysis of the rehabilitation of the purge victims that occurred during the period of de-Stalinization—that slow, uneven, contradictory process that saw those responsible attempt to extricate themselves from their crimes. This sudden confrontation of socialist ideology by factual reality had a decisive influence on the Polish and Hungarian uprisings and was one of the origins of the Prague Spring.

\* \* \*

I was one of the fortunate survivors of the Rajk trial and thus had an opportunity to obtain, from the point of view of the victim, insight into the mechanism and the psychology of the model trial. From the moment of my arrest to the present day, I have been haunted by a single question: How and why could this have happened? When I began my research into this question I found, to my amazement, that there exists no book that offers a comprehensive study of the trials that swept Eastern Europe from 1948 to 1954. I was limited to a mosaic composed of fragments, and to piece them together into a coherent and understandable explanation became an inner necessity.

Some insight came from my own experiences. That, in turn, was enlarged and deepened by the relatively rich primary literature provided by victims who survived the Prague show trials. The best among them was the intelligent and honest report by Artur London, titled *Confession*. Many details were divulged in the two books by Eugene Loebel, *The Revolution Rehabilitates its Children* and *My Mind on Trial*. I also learned much by reading *Report on My Husband* by Josefa Slánská and *Truth Will Prevail* by Marian Šlingová, both stirring accounts of the persecution of the victims' families. Finally, among the personal reports, there

was *Prisonnier politique à Prague* by the Israeli defendant, Mordecai Oren, which bore witness to the anti-Semitism of the purges. Especially valuable among the official documents were the report of the Czechoslovak Central Committee inquiring into the background of the Slánský trial, a work banned immediately after its publication, and an additional study, published only in Paris, *Dans les archives du Comité Central* by Karel Kaplan.

On the show trials in other countries, the primary literature is restricted to scattered articles in newspapers and periodicals and two books, *Volunteers for the Gallows* by Béla Szász, a personal account of the Rajk trial, and a deeply moving report, *Light at Midnight* by Erica Wallach, on the attempt to emulate the Hungarian trial in the German Democratic Republic. The survivors of the Kostov trial in Bulgaria and of the trials in Romania and Poland have kept their silence, the only direct but propagandistically distorted information on the latter coming from a defector, Security Colonel Josef Światło, in his broadcasts for Radio Free Europe.

The personal memoirs and reports, however, illuminate only part of the picture, and because of their restricted scope, do so in a necessarily subjective manner. The existing secondary literature is even less helpful. In contrast to the rich literature on the general phenomenon of Stalinism, there are relatively few comprehensive historical studies of Stalinist Eastern Europe. Even in the most outstanding of these, *The Balkans in our Time* by Robert Lee Wolff and *Histoire des démocraties populaires* by François Fejtő, the show trials receive cursory treatment as part of a general history rather than the thorough analysis they deserve. In the rather scarce literature about the Stalinist periods of the individual communist countries and their communist parties, the show trials are treated as mere copies of the Soviet purges. The authors content themselves with the obligatory reference to the Stalin-Tito break and explain the liquidation of thousands of East European communists by labeling them summarily but misleadingly as “national communists.” The few studies in which the purges receive more than these brief references date mainly from the 1950s, a period during which the Stalin-Tito break, the spectacular confessions, and the rehabilitation of some of the victims in the Khrushchev era were still on everyone’s mind. Missing is all of the information that has come to light during the last thirty years.

What were the global and domestic backgrounds of the postwar purges? What was the role of Stalin and his security organs? To what extent did Rákosi, Gottwald, Gheorghiu-Dej, Dimitrov, Bierut, and the other willing servants of the Soviet Union influence the trials? What role did Noel Field play—he whose ghostlike figure propelled the wave of purges from Budapest through Prague and Warsaw to East Berlin? Why were there no public show trials in Poland, Romania, and East Germany? Wherein lie the similarities and the differences among the trials and where did they interconnect? How were the victims chosen

and how were the scenarios drawn up? The answers to these and similar questions that have haunted me for three decades cannot be found within the narrow limits of the individual trials.

The present book originated in my need to discover answers. This attempt is made in the full knowledge that, for the foreseeable future, it will not be possible to examine the secret archives of the communist security services. Therefore, it falls upon the survivors of the show trials, living in the West, to fill the void as best we can. Our generation is passing on and since, up to now, no one more competent has come forward to take up the task, I feel compelled to make the attempt. Soon there will not be anyone left to tell about this chapter of history with the intimate knowledge that comes from having been a participant.

\* \* \*

In this book, I have inserted some of my personal experiences. They are intended to serve as illustrations, photographs in a travel book about a scarcely explored country. I began this long journey convinced that I and my fellow communists had found definitive answers to the world's problems. But the reality of communism destroyed for me the validity of these answers, and I am still groping to find new and satisfactory ones.

On orders of Stalin I have been thrown in prison, five years later Khrushchev gave me back my freedom, accomplices of the hangmen declared sanctimoniously that I am rehabilitated, legally as well as politically.

The thaw in the Soviet Union was soon frozen again. The strangled de-Stalinization of Khrushchev, his tanks in the streets of Budapest, Brezhnev's troops in Prague buried all the resurrected hopes for a better future.

The pessimism might have been premature. With Gorbachev, a new historical chance seems to be emerging to rid socialism of the strait-jacket of Stalinist legacy. Only then can the still open wounds of the show trials in eastern Europe be healed. Only then will their victims be truly rehabilitated.

\* \* \*

A final remark: It is customary for an author to assume responsibility for all of the mistakes contained in his book, and certainly there are many errors in this one. I hope it will not sound presumptuous to ask for the indulgence of the reader if I shift part of the blame on to the East European governments that block any access to the secret party or to the security archives, and that wrap the details of the show trials in silence.

# SHOW TRIALS

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# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

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### **HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

It is not the purpose of this book to present a history of Stalinism, or even of the political terror that it unleashed against opposition movements in Eastern Europe. The scope of this work is limited to a history of the purges and show trials against communists that took place in the Soviet satellite nations during the early postwar years and that served as one of the main instruments by means of which the Soviet Union established domination over the satellite states and their communist parties, making them subservient to Stalin and his security services.<sup>1</sup> This work also establishes the connections, similarities, and differences among the events in the different countries without any attempt at a theoretical analysis of these events.

The historical background leading to the show trials is amply documented in the political literature dealing with those times.<sup>2</sup> But there is a need for a brief outline of the three elements that triggered the trials: the Cold War, Stalin's growing paranoia, and the Soviet-Yugoslav split.

At the end of World War II, the Soviet Union controlled all of Europe east of a line drawn from Stettin on the Baltic Sea, to Trieste on the Adriatic Sea. The West, led by the United States, was unwilling to accept total Soviet domination of this vast area and, fearing a further expansion of communism in Europe, countered with a "policy of containment." Step by step, the Cold War intensified; U.S. support for the Royalists in the Greek Civil War in 1946 was followed by the Truman Doctrine in March 1947, offering political, economic, and military aid to any nation threatened by communism. In June 1947, the U.S. proposed the Marshall Plan to rebuild Western Europe and enable it to withstand communist pressures from within. In June 1948, the decision was made by the Western powers to build up a strong, anti-Soviet West Germany, and in July 1949, NATO was forged out of the Brussels Union and thus completed the creation of a worldwide circle of strategic bases around the Soviet Union.

In the sphere of intelligence, President Truman in June 1948 broadened the role of the newly established Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to include covert operations against the Soviet Union and its satellites in the fields of "propaganda and economic warfare; preventive direct action including sabotage; subversion

including assistance of underground resistance groups; and support for indigenous anti-communist elements.”<sup>3</sup>

The covert operations centered in Western Europe and provided secret subsidies to buy or influence individual politicians, political parties, labor unions, newspapers, and cultural organizations. Until the institution of total Stalinization cut the East off from the West, the same methods were used in the satellite countries: Clandestine channels were opened to finance and manipulate anticommunist factions and parties, churches, and civic groups. In Poland and in the Ukraine, intelligence agents actively supported armed guerrilla movements. In Albania, a secret British-U.S. paramilitary operation was foiled by the betrayal of the double agent, Kim Philby.<sup>4</sup> The alleged efforts to recruit communist leaders, of which so much was made in the show trials, belonged, however, to the realm of Stalinist fantasy, doubtless fueled by an organized disinformation campaign in the Western media, suggesting rifts between fictional nationalist and Soviet, liberal and orthodox wings within the satellite leadership.

The policy of containment thwarted any possible Soviet aspiration to expand further to the West. The Soviet Union found itself encircled and isolated. Stalin reacted by turning the occupied countries into satellites, using them as a military defense belt and forcing the Soviet pattern on every aspect of their political, economic, and cultural lives.

Ideology became a powerful instrument in this policy of colonization. The initial theory about the existence of different national roads to socialism was banished, and in its place was instituted a Stalinist concept of imposed conformity, the absolute primacy of Soviet interest, and the exclusive validity of the Soviet example. The external Cold War was translated for internal use into the pseudo-Marxist “theory” of the “growing intensity of class struggle” in the phase of transition from capitalism to socialism. Vigilance became a paramount concern because the theory implied that the enemy, beaten and cornered, finds covert, desperate, devious methods to conspire against the people’s democracies and to sabotage the construction of socialism. The party was no exception; the paranoid suspicions of Stalin saw the enemy infiltrate the top positions, imperialist agents disguised as communists trying to subvert from within his newly won empire. Soon the most dangerous enemy became the one who held a party card and occupied a high position. Tito’s revolt seemed to Stalin the proof of his pathological nightmare of spies and enemies everywhere; it led directly to the show trials.

\* \* \*

The purges would have taken place even without Tito; the break merely speeded up the process. The aging despot began to distrust his closest associates. He accused Molotov, Voroshilov, Beria, Mikoyan, Zhukov, even his personal secretary Poskrebyshev of being English spies,<sup>5</sup> the proofs of their guilt being held in readiness by extorting false depositions and confessions from purge victims in the prisons and concentration camps of the Gulag. He terrorized his

most servile courtiers by arresting their relatives, the wives of his head of state Kalinin, of Poskrebyshev, and of Molotov, and two sons of Mikoyan were thrown into prison as traitors; Kaganovitch's brother committed suicide in the interrogation room.<sup>6</sup> Chief ideologist Andrei Zhdanov, forced into early retirement died suddenly in Leningrad under mysterious circumstances; Stalin, who was probably responsible for his death, accused the top Jewish physicians in the Kremlin of his murder and concocted the infamous "doctors' plot" as the culmination of his anti-Semitic campaign. Thousands of Jews prominent in the political, scientific, and cultural life of the Soviet Union were liquidated and the deportation of the entire body of Soviet Jewry to Birobidjan in Central Asia was prepared.<sup>7</sup> In the "Leningrad affair," closely related to the death of Zhdanov, nearly the entire staff of that city's party organization, of the local Komsomol and Soviet executive committee, factory managers, scientific personnel, teachers, and professors were arrested; thousands were executed; among them, the leading economist and Politburo member, Vosnesenkii, the secretary to the Central Committee, Kusnetsov, and the chairman of the Council of Ministers of the Russian Soviet Republic, Rodionov.<sup>8</sup>

Even the security service, Stalin's main pillar of the terror, was not spared. Under the supervision of Stalin's chief henchman, Lavrenti Beria, it was split into three parts: the Ministry of Internal Affairs under Kruglov; the Ministry of State Security headed by Abakumov; and the special section for Stalin's personal safety, directed by General Vlasik. Soon Abakumov was arrested, Vlasik was accused of being a British spy, and even Beria fell from grace. He was banished from Stalin's presence, and in the so-called Migrelian case many of his creatures were arrested in a clear preliminary to his impending liquidation.<sup>9</sup>

For the aging dictator, everyone was suspect. He distrusted his own, steadily decimated circle of accomplices, so how much more did he distrust his foreign agents in the satellite countries? There were spies among them, he must have been certain of that. At home, the transformation of the USSR into a superpower made the staging of public show trials politically unwise, since the attention of the entire world was now riveted on what took place in Soviet internal affairs, hitherto ignored by the outside world. The shows in the Soviet Union had to be performed behind the scenes; the postwar purges in the USSR, therefore, were restricted to covert liquidations, secret mass murders, unmentioned and unmentionable. In the satellite countries, no such restraints existed. There, the road was open for the show trials.

\* \* \*

Stalin's paranoia about enemies infiltrating into the top ranks of communist parties found a convenient validation in Tito's rebellion. It had its roots in the fact that Yugoslavia was the only East European country to have achieved its liberation and its socialist revolution by dint of its own efforts and not through the triumphs of the Red Army.<sup>10</sup>