

*Kaplan, Karel: Report on the Murder of the General Secretary. Translated by Karel Kovanda.*

I. B. Tauris & Co. Ltd., London 1990, 323 S.

The story of the Soviet bloc's largest postwar show trial of communist officials is not new. Indeed, the Czech-born historian Karel Kaplan has dealt with this theme in other books, including *Political Trials in Czechoslovakia, 1948–1954*. In *Report*, however, Kaplan presents a wealth of new detail as he systematically traces the political developments in post – 1948 Czechoslovakia leading to the trial for high treason of Communist Party General Secretary Rudolf Slánský and fourteen others which ended with the execution of eleven of the defendants, including Slánský.

In 1949, following both the trial of Hungarian Politburo member and one-time government minister László Rajk and the Second Yugoslav Resolution of the Comintern, the search began in Czechoslovakia for enemies within the Party apparatus, a search headed by Slánský himself. During the course of this search, the focus changed – encouraged by Moscow – as it became an ideological and political struggle against Zionism (“cosmopolitanism”), which, according to Kaplan, was simply anti-Semitism. And, Slánský was no longer the hunter, but one of the hunted.

Why Slánský? In early 1951, Slánský was the number-two in Czechoslovakia after President Klement Gottwald, who was known to be in ill health. “A feared, capable man, a competent organizer, and a political bureaucrat” (p. 117), Slánský had enemies in high places. They included Presidium member Václav Kopecký, who had close ties to Soviet security circles, and Prime Minister Antonín Zápotocký, who wanted the number-two position for himself.

Kaplan details the handling of the trials, revealing that the organizers knew from the outset that the charges were false; he also highlights Soviet influence on the trial, which

was part of Moscow's continuing intervention in Czechoslovakia between 1945 and 1956. He discusses the physical and psychological pressure used to achieve the interrogators' goals: confession of alleged crimes and lack of protest against the proposed verdict. In conclusion, the author attempts to address questions concerning the motivation of the trial and the acceptance by various of the actors involved of their assigned roles.

In this moving account, Kaplan has drawn from Czechoslovak archival sources to which he had access in the late 1960s due to his position as secretary of the Piller Commission, created by the Central Committee to investigate the Slánský trial. Party authorities prevented Kaplan from publishing his first manuscript on the topic following the installation of Gustáv Husák as leader of the KSČ in April 1969, and then banned him from working as an historian. Kaplan thus emigrated to the West where, having managed to spirit out relevant notes and documents, he wrote this volume in the late 1970s. This is a useful book for students of both contemporary Czechoslovakia and postwar communism in Eastern Europe.