

FASCIST? DEMOCRAT? SPY?

The Three Lives of Vladimír Pekelský

Niklas Platzer

This study explores the complex and contradictory life of Vladimír Pekelský (1920–1975), a figure emblematic of the turbulent political landscape of 20th-century Central Europe. Pekelský's biography unfolds in three distinct phases: his early involvement as a fascist youth member of the Vlajka movement, his subsequent role as a democratic exile politician and publisher in West Germany, and finally his coerced collaboration as a (double) agent for the Czechoslovak State Security (StB). Employing a microhistorical approach, this work delves into the interplay of personal agency, political opportunism, and structural constraints shaping his actions against the backdrop of postwar exile and Cold War espionage. Pekelský's life illustrates the ambivalence and fragility of exile politics marked by ideological shifts, internal rivalries, and the constant threat of infiltration by secret services. His marriage to Maria Theresia Pekelská – herself an StB agent – further complicates his narrative, highlighting the entwined personal and political dimensions of espionage. The study argues against simplistic moral categorizations, advocating instead for a nuanced understanding of individual responsibility within broader socio-political pressures. Pekelský's extensive archival legacy – paradoxically a product of his espionage activities – offers valuable insights into the dynamics of the Czech–Slovak exile community. Ultimately, his biography serves as a lens for examining the broader historical processes of political exile, loyalty, and betrayal during the Cold War.