

*A Trial in Prague*. A documentary. Directed by Zuzana Justman, Pick Productions, 1999 83 min.

The Soviet dictator J. V. Stalin had an unusual way of keeping his country on its toes. He accused his closest collaborators of the most heinous crimes (the accusations were pure fiction) and had them sentenced to death in elaborately staged show trials. Prior to the trials, the victims were subjected to torture to make them agree to learn by heart the texts of their „confessions“, written for them by the secret police interrogators. Stalin also had millions of his fellow-citizens arbitrarily arrested and sent to labour camps where many of them died.

When the countries of Central and Eastern Europe were swallowed up by Stalin's empire after the Second World War and communist regimes were installed in them, the same methods of „political mobilisation“ were used in these satellite countries by Soviet advisers, who practically run these countries on Stalin's behalf. Czechoslovakia suffered perhaps the most serious oppression. Tens of thousands of people ended in labour camps and about 200 people were executed before Stalin died in 1953.

*A Trial in Prague* deals with the most notorious Stalinist show trial which took place in Czechoslovakia in the early 1950s. Fourteen top communist party officials, including the General Secretary of the Communist Party Rudolf Slánský, were falsely accused of treason and espionage for the West and most of them were executed. The trial had clear anti-semitic overtones. Eleven of the accused were Jews.

Zuzana Justmanová's film concentrates on personal testimonies of the surviving closest relatives of some of the victims of this show trial. Mostly, these are the wives of the condemned men. Marian Šling-Fagan, originally from Britain, and Lise London, originally from France, were the wives of Czech communist officials Otto Šling (who was executed) and Arthur London (who was sentenced to a long prison term), Heda Margolius Kovály was the Czech wife of Rudolf Margolius, an idealistic communist trade minister who was also executed. Jan Kavan, Czech Social Democratic Foreign Secretary in 1998-2002, talks about the fate of his father Pavel Kavan, also a communist official, who was sentenced to a long term of imprisonment.

The film is a powerful juxtaposition of harrowing personal testimonies and horrifying period newsreel footage. The director manages to evoke the ruthless and paranoid atmosphere of the Stalinist 1950s in Czechoslovakia well.

The whole issue of the cruel and unjust oppression in Czechoslovakia in the 1950s has been discussed at length and there is a relatively large amount of literature, dealing with the subject. The debate of the Stalinist excesses of the 1950s was one of the main themes of the reformist Prague Spring which took place in 1968 in Czechoslovakia. During the Prague Spring, censorship was abolished and this is when the harrowing details of the showtrials were widely discussed in the Czechoslovak media for the first time, often by the victims and their families. The debate about the injustices of the 1950s became a part of general soul-searching about what communism meant for the Czechs and Slovaks and how what many people originally regarded as a bright ideal had turned into a nightmare. The discussions were abruptly stopped by the Soviet-led Warsaw Pact invasion in August 1968, and so the Czechs had to labour under the yoke of totalitarian communism for two more decades. But many Czech and Slovak intellectuals left Czechoslovakia after the invasion and so a number of

testimonies about the show trials were published also in the West. Amongst the most remarkable is perhaps the memoir by Heda Margolius Kovály *The Victors and the Vanquished*, with a commentary by political scientist Erazim Kohák (New York, Horizon Press, 1973); Costa-Gavras's film *Confession* (USA, 1970) is based on the testimony by Arthur London, also published in book form; the life story of Rudolf Slánský's wife Roberta Slánská was brought out in German (*Bericht über meinen Mann*, Vienna, Europa Verlag, 1969), the wife of Pavel Kavan Rosemary published her memoir *Love and Freedom*, with a foreword by Arthur Miller (second edition London, Grafton, 1989).

What is new about Zuzana Justmanová's film is the urgency of the testimony of her personal witnesses and the vivid immediacy of their experience of oppression. The interviewed ladies had not had prior experience with totalitarian oppression and the action, taken by the authorities against their husbands and against them seemed to be totally illogical, absurd, even. „The communists always tried to recruit the most idealistic, the most courageous and the most enthusiastic people for their Party,“ reminisces Heda Kovályová in the film. Why then, did the communist authorities choose to liquidate these most energetic and the most independent-minded individuals? It turns out that in spite of appearances to the contrary, Stalin demanded blind obedience, to the point of death. And, amazingly, many communists were ready to oblige. In spite of everything, some of the accused refused to believe that their „Mother“, the Communist Party, could ever be at fault.

The discussion of the Stalinist show trials, when it resumed after the fall of communism in 1989, was much more complex than the one in 1968. In the 1990s, critics asked more loudly than in 1968, why should attention concentrate almost exclusively on the *communist* victims of the Stalinist showtrials when there were many non-communists who also were unjustly prosecuted and their cases did not evoke so much media concern.

Justmanová's film deals with this. Jan Kavan points out that many of the individuals condemned and executed in the Slánský show trial were in fact ruthless power wielders who prior to their arrest did not hesitate to sign orders to execute their non-communist opponents (the only true idealist among them being the hapless trade minister Margolius).

*A Trial in Prague* is a powerful introduction to a violent era in European history. It analyses a traumatic historical event in terms of personal experiences, hence the film is accessible and engrossing. If you want to learn about Stalinism in its most aggressive form, watch this film.

Jan Čulík  
University of Glasgow