

BUILDING THE SOCIALIST STATE

After ‘Victorious February’, the Czechoslovak and Slovak Communist parties found themselves in a position not just to accelerate the National Front’s national and socialist revolution, but to lead the country onwards to a fully fledged ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’. Just twelve years later (fifteen years after liberation), Czechoslovakia declared itself the first country after the Soviet Union to have ‘achieved’ socialism, and so to merit a new constitution (1960) and a new name: *Československá socialistická republika*, the ‘Czechoslovak Socialist Republic’. The millions of Czechoslovak citizens who had cheered for Stalin, Beneš and Gottwald in 1945, voted for the Communists in 1946, or supported the Communist campaign to dominate the other parties of the National Front in 1947, did not immediately have reason to feel much tension between their instinctive patriotism as Czechs or Slovaks and the international implications of their chosen system of beliefs, practices and alliances. Nor, in the first flush of victory over the ‘reactionary forces’ in February 1948, were most ‘progressives’ aware that they, too, might one day fall victim to political persecution. This state of political innocence could not be expected to last forever.

The 1950s in Czechoslovakia is remembered as the quintessentially ‘Stalinist’ decade of political show trials, bombastic propaganda and economic restructuring during which Czechoslovakia was turned into a fully command economy and a hardline authoritarian one-party police state. These were the years in which virtually all of the Communist Party’s domestic enemies – and a good number of its friends – were eliminated in the course of grand political purges and witch-hunts; in which farms were forcibly collectivized and regions clumsily industrialized; in which Socialist Realism pushed out alternative forms of artistic expression; in which even the Leninist principle of collective leadership was sacrificed to the Stalinist notion of ‘democratic centralism’ and the cult of a single great leader – in Czechoslovakia’s case, Klement Gottwald (or simply ‘K.G.’ as he was known on countless *KSČ* banners and placards, busts, portraits and on the covers of coffee-table books). But although the methods used to enforce change in Czechoslovakia

gave it – as they gave other Communist states across Central and Eastern Europe – a strong family resemblance to the Soviet Union, it is misleading to think of them as having been imposed from abroad.

It was Czech and Slovak Communists, not Russians or Soviets, who turned post-February Czechoslovakia into the Stalinist hell that it rapidly became, even if they frequently invoked the Soviet example and often sought Soviet advice on how best to do so. No one forced Czech and Slovak Communists to hold up for emulation the Soviet example in everything, from how to thresh wheat and write poetry to how to force peasants to collectivize or interrogate political prisoners. The initiative usually came from the Czechoslovak side: partly because the Soviet Union seemed to represent the future; partly because its support seemed vital to national security; and partly because it was a useful way of proving one's political credentials, winning the argument or getting ahead in one's career. Appeals in political meetings to the superiority of 'Soviet methods' – particularly by those who had no actual familiarity with the Soviet Union – helped to make one look like a sound comrade. They also papered over an underlying sense of unease that many Czech and Slovak Communists were only just beginning to feel: the tension between their ethnolinguistic nationalism and socialist internationalism.

The Czechoslovak Communist Party had come to power on the back of Czech and, to a lesser extent, Slovak nationalism. In order to stay there, and retain at least an outward appearance of legitimacy, it needed to co-opt, neutralize or eliminate all actual or potential vehicles for the expression of Czech or Slovak national feeling that might conceivably rival its own claims to be the single legitimate voice of the Czechoslovak 'nation'. To do so, it drew more naturally upon Czechoslovak/Habsburg precedent than on Soviet example; but after a certain point the distinction began to blur, authoritarian police states all having a certain sameness about them. In the immediate aftermath of February 1948, the party's first priority was to secure and extend its hold on power. Since general elections were looming at the end of May 1948, the *KSC* – drawing on the technique that had been introduced by the Tiso regime in Slovakia – made provision for those who were not already excluded from voting to be presented at polling booths with two slips of paper: one giving the single slate of candidates drawn up by the National Front government (which the electorate was expected patriotically to endorse); and the second a blank sheet of paper (through which dissent, although futile, could formally be expressed).¹ It then sought to reinforce its credentials as the authentic voice of the Czech and Slovak nations by following the first wave of postwar nationalization with a second wave, rushing bills through parliament to nationalize radio stations, the construction industry, private flats, and all businesses that employed more than fifty people.² Rather than follow the Soviet example of criminalizing small-time peasants, an important source of

party support, it set the limit for private land ownership at the reassuring figure of 50 hectares (124 acres), the same cut-off point that the Czech Agrarian movement of the late nineteenth century had judged to correspond to the yeoman class that embodied ‘the core of Czech rural values’.³

On 9 May 1948, the third anniversary of the official liberation of Prague, the National Assembly passed the new constitution that the Communists had promised in 1946. Rather than reproduce Stalin’s 1936 constitution (which still applied in the Soviet Union), Czechoslovakia’s own constitution of 1920 was updated and amended to include the political, social and constitutional changes that had occurred since May 1945, and to make explicit that it was now officially ‘the will’ of the Czech and Slovak peoples to ‘build up’ the ‘liberated state’ into a ‘people’s democracy’ to guarantee a ‘peaceful path to socialism’ and defend the ‘national and democratic revolution’ against ‘reaction’, whether domestic or foreign, ‘just as we defended it in February 1948’.⁴

The Ninth of May Constitution defined Czechoslovakia, like other newly Communist states in the region, as a ‘People’s Democratic Republic’ in which all power resided in ‘the people’; but also, in line with the promises that had been given at Košice, as a ‘unitary state of two equal Slavonic nations, the Czechs and the Slovaks’.⁵ As in all previous Czechoslovak/Czecho-Slovak republics, the president, who was elected by the National Assembly for a seven-year term, remained head of state, and the government, defined as the highest legal and governing authority, was declared answerable to the National Assembly.⁶ As had been promised in the ‘Slovak Magna Carta’ of 1945, the Slovak National Council (*Slovenská národná rada/Slovenská národní rada*) and Board of Commissioners (*Zbor povereníkov/sbor pověřenců*) were defined as the ‘bearers of power’ in Slovakia and ‘equality between Czechs and Slovaks’ was guaranteed ‘in the spirit of a people’s democracy’.⁷ Finally, again in keeping with what had been agreed during the war and confirmed at Košice, the ‘bearers of state power’ at the local, district and regional levels were declared to be the National Committees (the same organizations that Karol Sidor had once suggested using to spread support for the Hlinka Slovak People’s Party, but which were now used to empower the KSČ).⁸ Just as the prewar Tiso regime had made it possible to express Slovak patriotism only through the extreme right-wing Slovak National Unity, the new postwar regime now ensured that it could be expressed only through the extreme left-wing Communist-dominated National Front. To underline the point, post-February Czechoslovakia’s first big political show trial – of the general secretaries and deputies of the Slovak Democratic Party – was held in Bratislava, ending with the conviction, on 15 May 1948, of all the accused.

General elections went ahead, as scheduled, on 30 May 1948, amid a strong campaign run by the Communist Party to persuade voters not to use the privacy of the polling booth to return a blank form, but rather to vote

'openly' for the Communist-dominated list of approved National Front candidates. There was even a special election jingle, set to the tune of a well-known nursery rhyme, suggesting that only a traitor would choose to vote against the National Front.⁹ Having chosen to go behind the screen to use the blank ballot, Eva Blochová remembered her terror when, upon leaving the polling station, she was asked to place her unused ballot in a bin. 'Now they would know how I voted!' she suddenly realized.¹⁰ When the election results were announced, giving an astonishingly high 87.12 per cent of Czech and 84.91 per cent of Slovak votes to the single list of Communist-dominated National Front candidates (meaning that only 9 per cent of voters in the Czech lands and 14 per cent in Slovakia had used the blank return), it was clear to everyone that the campaign of intimidation – combined with appeals to patriotism and national unity – had worked.¹¹

On 7 June 1948, for the second time in his career, an outmanoeuvred, depressed and ill Edvard Beneš resigned as president, leaving it to the prime minister and chairman of the *KSČ*, Klement Gottwald, to step temporarily into his place. It was thus Gottwald, rather than Beneš, who signed the new constitution into law on 9 June 1948; but this was a mere technicality. Five days later, Gottwald was unanimously elected president of Czechoslovakia, retaining his place as party chairman. Antonín Zápotocký (the chairman of the Central Council of Trade Unions who had been Gottwald's right-hand man during the February Events) took over as the country's second 'worker' (i.e. Communist) prime minister, while the impeccably Stalinist Rudolf Slánský remained in his post as secretary-general of the *KSČ*. The inauguration of the first Czechoslovak Communist president was held, as usual, in St Vitus Cathedral at Hradčany and celebrated with a *Te Deum* presided over by the bishop of Prague, Josef Beran. Although the Gottwalds, obviously unused to Church ceremony, looked ill at ease and had to be discreetly steered by the bishop and officiating priests, the very fact that they appeared in church seemed to signal that distinctively Czechoslovak traditions would be preserved and to indicate that non-Communists might not have too much to fear from the new dictatorship.

Once the requisite measures had been taken to ensure that the Communist Party's domination of the National Assembly, cabinet and presidency could not be challenged through either the constitution or the ballot box, the *KSČ* concentrated on removing its own most obvious sources of weakness: the inclusion of too many card-carrying members to ensure strict obedience to the leadership's directives; and the existence of a separate, Slovak branch which held the potential to challenge Prague's authority to speak on behalf of both nations in the state. From 15 July, the *KSČ* launched a policy of selective recruitment for new members, who were no longer to be welcomed automatically, but rather screened first for appropriate political views and class

origins. Special short courses were set up by the party to fast-track workers without university education into influential positions in the law courts, the secret police, the army, industrial management and every other sphere in which the middle classes had formerly been dominant. Everyone could feel the sudden emphasis on the ‘importance of cadre’: in other words, the purging of those said to be insufficiently politically committed or socially suspect and their replacement with irreproachably ‘loyal’ and zealous Communists, preferably of working-class background.¹²

The next matter to be tidied up was the role of the Slovak Communist Party. The formal expulsion of Yugoslavia (28 June 1948) from the recently formed Information Bureau of the Communist parties (Cominform), the obvious successor to the Comintern, gave the *KSC* leadership in Prague the perfect excuse to blame its ruthless internal reordering on what was vaguely termed the ‘international situation’. When the *KSC* Presidium of the Central Committee met at the end of June to discuss the Soviet–Yugoslav split, it did not point the finger at President Gottwald, although his slogan, as the leader of the Communist Party throughout the Third Republic, had echoed Tito’s in promising that Czechoslovakia would follow its own ‘road to socialism’. Instead, as Slovak Communist Eugen Steiner remembered incredulously, it ‘almost expressly stated’ that the analogy to the Yugoslav problem was rather to be found in Slovakia’s tendency to want to go its own way.¹³ On 26–27 July 1948, the *KSC* Presidium announced that ‘the working class and the toiling masses of Czechoslovakia’ required ‘one political leadership in the form of a united Communist Party’.¹⁴ The *KSS* was explicitly asked to make it clear that it was ‘subordinate’ to the *KSC* and that the role of its Central Committee was merely to ‘carry out’ the policy directives given to it by the *KSC*. At the next plenum, held on 27 September 1948, the *KSS* duly defined itself as ‘a territorial organization’ of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia ‘in Slovakia’. Its subordinate position was then formally cemented at the Ninth Party Congress, held in 1949.¹⁵

Having neutralized the *KSS*, the *KSC* turned its attention to its remaining rivals: institutions that could conceivably claim to speak for ‘the nation’ in its stead. These, if at all possible, were to be persuaded to join in the ‘unity’ shown by the ‘National Front’: in other words, to obey the *KSC*. Organizations that agreed to do so would be feted and included as part of the ‘nation’ and the ‘working class’; those that refused to cooperate would be neutralized or destroyed. The *KSC* increasingly relied upon the Ministry of the Interior to remain ‘vigilant’ to ‘secure’ the ‘gains’ of February 1948 by staying alert to the risks presented by any gathering, anniversary or memorial that might conceivably seek to ‘reverse’ its ‘achievements’ by upstaging its own claims to speak for ‘the working people’ and ‘the nation’. *Sokol*, the patriotic gymnastic organization that had done so much to spread Czech nationalism in the nineteenth

century, that had been actively supported and promoted as part of Czechoslovak identity by T.G. Masaryk, and that had once again proved its nationalist credentials during the war, was just such an organization; and the first postwar *Sokol* jamboree (*slet*), scheduled for 5–6 July 1948, offered just such an opportunity. To make matters even worse, the current head of the state-wide *Sokol* organization, Antonín Hřebík, who had been interned by the Nazis in Theresienstadt, Auschwitz and the Gestapo prison at Benešov, was a member of the Czech National Socialist Party, the only political party to which President Beneš had ever belonged and the one with the longest Czech nationalist and socialist pedigree. But although Hřebík is now remembered as having been a brave opponent of the Communist regime, his files in the Ministry of the Interior tell another story.

When Hřebík was first called in for questioning in March 1948, he was no stranger to the secret police. The *StB* already had a thick file of reports that had been sent in regularly since 1946 by his secretary, František Beneš, that covered everything from his circle of acquaintance and the state of his marriage to his private vanities and other foibles of character.¹⁶ Despite the viciousness of these reports, which were obviously intended to damage him as much as possible in the eyes of the Communist authorities, Hřebík's secret-police interrogators found that he had in fact behaved 'absolutely loyally' during the February Events, having immediately ordered all branches of *Sokol* to form Action Committees to 'come to the defence of the National Front'. As far as the *StB* officers could judge, Hřebík appeared sincerely to believe that Sokolists and Communists held certain core values in common – such as 'masculinity, openness and loyalty to their ideals'.¹⁷ Since it became obvious during his interrogation that Hřebík, far from being a dangerous opponent, was prepared to help the regime there was no need to downplay or cancel the first postwar *Sokol* jamboree; instead, a special commemorative postage stamp was issued to celebrate this symbol of Czech liberty and unity after what were euphemistically described as the years of 'unfreedom'.¹⁸

By mid-June 1948, the *StB* had gathered information – including members' names, addresses, employment and political profiles – on every *Sokol* group throughout the whole of the country. They also knew, from a careless conversation in a public tram, that some Sokolists were opposed to the Communist takeover and determined 'to show Prague' what 'it means to be a *Sokol*'.¹⁹ Although plans had already been drawn up for *SNB* and *StB* officers to be stationed at every point along the route of the *Sokol* march, the Ministry of the Interior issued further directives that anyone who 'took advantage' of the *slet* to call out 'provocative' or 'anti-state' slogans – such as 'Long live Beneš' or 'Long live Beneš and Masaryk's republic' – should immediately be placed under arrest and taken away.²⁰ Although the *slet* went off quietly in Prague, the *StB* was nevertheless able to report that it had arrested 230 'anti-state

agitators' and heard a total of fifty-five provocative chants, including 'Let the world hear! Beneš must come back' and 'Every *Sokol* knows that truth alone will prevail'.²¹ This gave the government the excuse to request that *Sokol*, like every other sporting organization, be merged into a single, unified Czechoslovak Sports Union, a move that Hřebík apparently supported.

The reorganization bore political fruit at the 1952 Olympic Games (the first in which the Soviet Union consented to participate, walking away with twenty-two gold medals), when Czech long-distance runner Emil Zátopek won three gold medals for the People's Republic of Czechoslovakia. This enabled the Party once again to blend Czech patriotism with propaganda about the superiority of socialist man, and gave it an excuse to launch a special government crusade to 'raise the political and athletic level of all sportsmen and gymnasts in Czechoslovakia'.²² Even the fact that Zátopek's wife, Dana (herself an outstanding sportswoman who had taken part in the 1952 Olympics), was the niece of the 'traitor' General Jan Ingr was not allowed to stand in the way of the couple being used to promote the image of sport as simultaneously Czech nationalist and internationally socialist.²³ The all-*Sokol slet* of 1948 was the last to be held under the Communists. But *Sokol* itself – thanks largely to the 'sensible' views expressed by Hřebík – was not banned as 'bourgeois' or 'reactionary'. Instead, it was officially remembered as a 'patriotic' organization that had 'voluntarily' dissolved itself into the unified Sports Union, helping to underline the notion that Czech nationalism and Czech socialism were one, and that both were best represented by the National Front as led by the Czechoslovak Communist Party. The regime therefore felt perfectly able to bring out an official commemorative album of the 1948 *slet*, with warm introductory texts by Edvard Beneš, Klement Gottwald and the late Jan Masaryk;²⁴ and to retain an honourable place in the Communist history books for Miroslav Tyrš, one of *Sokol's* two founders, who even had a sports medal named after him. In case anyone had missed the point, a special postage stamp, first issued in 1953, was circulated to proclaim the message (in Czech): '*Sokol* belongs to the working people.'²⁵ Only after a decent interval of seven years was an obvious socialist substitute, the mass gymnastic extravaganza known as *Spartakiáda*, introduced to take the corporatist place that the *Sokol slet* had held in the First Czechoslovak Republic.

The next challenge for the regime came with the death, on 3 September 1948, of Edvard Beneš. Although Beneš, a socialist and Czech nationalist who was determined above all to rid the postwar state of its German population and to place it under Soviet protection, had proved pliable to Communist wishes since as early as 1943, in death his much longer and more intimate association with T.G. Masaryk, the founding father of the state, and with the steering of foreign and state policy during the First Czechoslovak Republic was uppermost in everyone's mind, making him an obvious figurehead around

which anti-Communist dissent could rally. A seventeen-year-old living in Humpolec in Bohemia, upon hearing the news on the radio, confided to his diary his fear that Czechoslovak liberty had died with its founder, and that Communist ‘terror’ would now prevail.²⁶ As shop and flat windows filled with flags, portraits, photographs and busts of the former president, there was a widespread sense that an era was ending.

Beneš’s body was shown the same respect as Jan Masaryk’s had been, and was laid in state at the mausoleum at Vítkov where, by evening, the queues of people wanting to pay their last respects had grown so long that it took one group of mourners four hours to advance just 400 m (437 yards). As midnight approached, when visits to the casket were supposed to end, *SNB* vehicles that turned up to disperse the crowd were met with angry chants such as ‘You ought to be ashamed to be paid for this!’ and ‘We want to see President Beneš’, as well as the singing of the National Anthem and other patriotic songs such as ‘*Hej Slované*’, ‘St Wenceslas’ and the Czech folk song said to be T.G. Masaryk’s favourite: ‘*Ach, synku, synku!*’ (‘Ah, my little son’). The mood turned more defiant when about two thousand people gathered in the city’s central boulevard, Wenceslas Square, where the appearance of *SNB* officers led to the singing (to the tune of ‘Hey ho, hey ho, it’s off to work we go’) of the jeering ‘*Hey hou, trpaslíci jdou!*’ (‘Hey ho, here come the dwarves!’). The *SNB* dispersed the protestors with water cannon and tear gas. By the time that Beneš’s state funeral ceremony was scheduled to begin, at 10 a.m. on the morning of 8 September 1948, People’s Militia had been stationed throughout Prague city centre in such numbers that it seemed to the schoolboy Jan Zábřana that the Communists must have been expecting a full-blown counter-revolution.²⁷ To the consternation of the Ministry of the Interior, which took the trouble to solicit information from all twenty-four regions into which the Bohemian Crown Lands were now divided, *StB* officers reported sightings of posters and leaflets in cities as far afield as Opava, Tábor, Uherské Hradiště, Ostrava and Český Těšín that, among other crimes, accused the Communists of having murdered both Jan Masaryk and Edvard Beneš.²⁸

With the death of the two prime symbols of continuity between the First (now officially ‘bourgeois’) Czechoslovak Republic and the postwar ‘People’s Democratic Republic’, there was no longer any reason for the Communist Party to restrain itself from publicly discrediting the National Socialist Party, the party whose very existence challenged the *KSČP*’s claims to be the only genuine mouthpiece for values that were at once socialist and Czech nationalist. Josef Lesák, a National Socialist who had set up a youth organization to rival the Communist-dominated Union of Youth (*Svaz české mládeže* or *SCM*) and helped to organize the only notable anti-Communist demonstration to take place during the February crisis – a student march held on 25 February

1948 – was arrested while trying to flee the country, on 4 June 1948.²⁹ In private, his captors offered him his freedom in exchange for going on state radio to say that Petr Zenkl – who had by then sought political asylum in the USA – had, in league with other National Socialist politicians, plotted to overthrow the Communist regime. Because he refused, Lesák was to spend the next twenty years in a series of prison and labour camps.³⁰

Even without Lesák's help, enough 'evidence' was gathered to prepare for the first great Czech political trial to follow that of the Slovak Democratic Party in May 1948. This was the show trial of a group of twelve politicians (mostly National Socialist, but also including one former Communist and some Social Democrats) who were supposed to have been led into treacherous, anti-state activities by Milada Horáková, their National Socialist 'ringleader', whose real crime had been to resign from parliament after the February Events. The trial, which opened on 31 May 1950, was covered in a blaze of publicity and featured sensational 'confessions', matched by public 'demands' by workers and peasants that the guilty be given the 'most severe sentences possible'. The trial ended on 8 June 1950, with all the defendants found guilty of anti-state activity in a judgement that ran to fifty typed pages.³¹ The most sensational of the four death sentences was that of Milada Horáková herself. She was hanged at Pankrác prison, where she had already served time under the Nazis, on 27 June 1950. The Horáková case led to 35 copycat trials in the regions, in which a further 639 inconvenient politicians were condemned, 10 to death and a further 48 to life imprisonment.³²

The Catholic Church, another obvious rival institution to the Communist Party, offered a particularly delicate problem for the regime, since – as Masaryk and Beneš had also found – the government could not afford to be seen to be oppressing religious believers too crudely in what was, after all, an overwhelmingly Catholic country: even most Communist officials were baptized Catholics, and hundreds of thousands of card-carrying Communists blithely continued to attend Mass, to have their children baptized and to get married in church.³³ Since the Communist Party was not primarily concerned with private belief or discreet religious practice but rather with political control, Gottwald was at first optimistic that the Church would see sense, consent to cut its links with the Vatican and quietly submit to state control.

The early signs looked promising. By presiding over the first Communist president's inauguration after Victorious February, Archbishop Beran appeared to have given the new regime the Church's blessing. The ecclesiastical hierarchy further accepted the imposition of a so-called 'Roman Catholic Committee' to regulate Church affairs and showed every indication of being willing to endorse government resolutions when required to do so. Slovak bishops met at Nitra in August to publish a Pastoral Letter that helpfully emphasized the scriptural text 'Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's'.³⁴ The

Ministry of the Interior identified about 180 ‘progressive priests’ ready to take their instructions from the National Front government rather than their bishops, and to spout Marxist jargon as and when required, in order to help with the covert propaganda aim of drawing a sharp distinction in the public mind between the Vatican-appointed hierarchy and the ‘patriotic masses’ of the laity. So long as the Church authorities did not ‘abuse’ their positions, Gottwald assured the conference of bishops held in Prague on 14–15 December 1948, they would continue to be allowed to handle their own affairs.³⁵

Communist–Catholic relations first soured, and then broke down altogether, over three main areas of conflict. The first was the promotion by the regime of ‘nationalist’ and ‘politically engaged’ (i.e. Marxist and pro-regime) priests to positions of political importance, and particularly the elevation of the especially aggressive Marxist Catholic priest Fr Josef Plojhar (who had already been made leader of the Czechoslovak People’s Party) to the cabinet as minister for health.³⁶ The second area of conflict concerned whether or not a *Te Deum* ought to have been sung at Gottwald’s inauguration as president, a number of Communists, as well as Catholics, having been repelled by the politico-religious combination. But the last, and most bitter, dispute began with the discovery, on 22 March 1949, that a Conference of Bishops was being bugged by the secret police. This was the final straw that led Archbishop Beran to send Gottwald an angry memo in which he declared that, in the circumstances, the Church could not declare its loyalty to the government.³⁷ Not content with rebuking the government in private, Beran then went public, declaring that the government’s so-called Roman Catholic Committee was causing divisions among Catholics and instructing the clergy to ignore it.

The *KSČ* immediately struck back. When, the following week, Beran was supposed to deliver his next sermon at St Vitus Cathedral on Hradčany, hecklers from the People’s Militia prevented him from speaking. Upon returning home, he was placed under house arrest, where he was to remain a prisoner for several years. On 26 June, Beran managed to smuggle out a Pastoral Letter that accused the government of persecuting the Church. The government responded by banning Pastoral Letters, together with any assembly of Catholic clergy that had not been given advance approval. On 3 July 1949, the government announced that Slovak peasants were resisting government legislation; this gave it the excuse, on 7 July 1949, to ban all religious communities except those already under explicit state control. When the Vatican stepped in, on 13 July, to excommunicate all members of the Communist Party, together with their sympathizers, it was open warfare.³⁸ Over the course of 1949, against the background of an anticlerical campaign that stressed the wartime atrocities of the Tiso regime, described the pope as ‘Hitler’s ally’ and linked expressions of Slovak and Polish devotion to an

international anti-socialist conspiracy,³⁹ the *KSČ* proceeded to ban religious publications, censor Catholic newspapers, outlaw any religious activity that took place out of doors and take control of all seminaries, monasteries and convents. These moves were then crowned by a new law, passed by the National Assembly on 14 October 1949, which declared all Church matters to be under the control of a special minister for Church affairs appointed by the president.⁴⁰ Although most obeyed the new law, some clergy and laity refused, continuing to practise their faith in a rival 'secret' or underground Church to the officially approved one.

An ambitious government campaign was then launched to discredit the Catholic Church with the general public by demonstrating its supposed links, through the Church hierarchy, with 'treasonous imperialism dressed up in Vatican propaganda'.⁴¹ Perhaps the most astonishing *StB* contribution to the state's anticlerical crusade was the elaborate hoax, later made famous by its thinly disguised counterpart in Josef Škvorecký's novel *The Miracle Game*,⁴² in which the *StB* faked a 'miracle' in rural Bohemia in order sensationally to 'unmask' the fraud and blame it on the Church. At the nine o'clock Mass held on 11 December 1949 at the parish church of Čihošť, the crucifix on the altar was seen to move at the precise moment when Fr Josef Toufar, the parish priest, uttered the words 'Our Saviour is here with us in this tabernacle'. As news of the strange occurrence spread, prompting pilgrims, journalists, *StB* agents and the papal nuncio to investigate, Fr Toufar was taken in for a month of particularly sadistic *StB* interrogations which successfully persuaded him to 'confess' to homosexual offences with boys under the age of consent and to having fraudulently staged the 'miracle' of the moving crucifix as 'an anti-Communist symbol, a symbol of the struggle against Marxism-Leninism'.⁴³

The final stage of the secret-police farce was to force Toufar to take part in a 'reconstruction' of his crimes which was to be filmed so that it could be shown as 'evidence' in a forthcoming show trial whose purpose would be to link the Czechoslovak ecclesiastical hierarchy with treasonous attempts to overturn the Communist regime. Since Toufar inconveniently died, as a result of *StB* torture, at the end of February, the filming, which went ahead in March 1950, had to take place without his help.⁴⁴ The result was a crude piece of propaganda which showed the Čihošť crucifix spin with comic speed to the western point of the compass and in which the wires installed by the *StB* to move the crucifix were (as intended, since they were supposed to have been installed by Fr Toufar) clearly visible. A running commentary explained how the little village of Čihošť was just one small link in a chain that joined a vast network of Vatican agents to a den of capitalist conspirators based in Wall Street.⁴⁵ In a gaffe that might have been prevented had Toufar not died in police custody, the altar was covered in Easter flowers – despite the fact that the filming was purported to have taken place during Advent.

However much suppressed mirth the government's absurd propaganda film may have caused many Catholic viewers, the *StB*'s 'exposure' of the 'miracle' of Čihošť served its political purpose. At the end of February 1950, Gottwald was able to inform the Central Committee of the *KSČ* that the Catholic clergy, in league with the Vatican, had organized an elaborate fraud to 'destroy the state'. This gave the government the necessary pretext to expel the papal nuncio, who left Czechoslovakia on 18 March 1950, and to begin rounding up members of the Church hierarchy and of religious orders.⁴⁶ In a complicated joint *SNB/StB* operation codenamed Operation K, 1,746 men and women from a variety of Czech religious orders in Ústí nad Labem, Liberec, Hradec Králové, Prague, České Budějovice, Plzeň, Karlovy Vary, Pardubice, Brno, Jihlava, Gottwaldov (formerly known as Zlín), Olomouc and Ostrava were seized from their monasteries or convents. They were arrested and placed in *StB* prisons, forced-labour camps or the special 'Concentration Cloister' set up at Želiv, where monastery buildings were turned into a mass prison camp. Ján Chryzostom Korec, then a young Jesuit living in Trnava in Slovakia, remembered how, on the night of 13 April 1950, men from the *SNB*, *StB* and militia, brandishing machine guns, stormed his monastery, loaded everyone onto buses and deported them to a deserted twelfth-century monastery in the remote town of Jasov. Since the police refused to say where they had gone, it was at first assumed by their families – tellingly enough – that they were being taken to the gas chambers.⁴⁷ Further follow-up police strikes in the summer and autumn of 1950 completed the operation, in which a total of some 6,000 monks and nuns were arrested and incarcerated.⁴⁸

The final blow in the state's campaign to neutralize the Church as a possible centre of opposition to Communist rule came with a series of anti-clerical trials, the most sensational being the 'Trial of Vatican Agents in Czechoslovakia' which was held in Prague, amid a blaze of publicity, between 27 November and 2 December 1950. The trial, in which Bishop Stanislav Zela and a further eight defendants were sentenced to large fines and long terms in prison, featured demagogic harangues by collaborator priests, most notably Fr Josef Plojhar, whose rantings as a witness in the open courtroom were indistinguishable – both in style and in content – from those of secular Marxist prosecutors. The largest of the copycat trials that immediately followed in Slovakia – the show trial held in Bratislava between 10 and 15 January 1951 which included Archbishop Ján Vojtaššák and bishops Michal Buzalka and Pavol Gojdič – did not receive as much media attention, but resulted in harsher sentences, with fines of up to 500,000 crowns and life sentences for all members of the Slovak ecclesiastical hierarchy.⁴⁹ Even hardened Communist Party members who were not directly involved could not help noticing that there was something a little odd about the trials, privately finding it strange – though they did not raise their voices in public – that

priests, nuns and bishops should ‘promptly confess to every crime with which they were charged’ and ‘speak like lecturers on Marxism, formulating their testimony in the purest Party jargon’.⁵⁰

At the KSČ Ninth Party Congress, which was held on 25–29 May 1949, chairman Klement Gottwald and secretary-general Rudolf Slánský summed up the party’s principal tasks: to assume ‘the cultural and spiritual leadership of the entire nation’, overcome the ‘survivals of bourgeois ideology’ and restructure ‘society according to socialist principles’. An ambitious Five-Year Economic Plan, to follow the National Front’s Two-Year Plan, approved by the National Assembly in October 1948 and launched at the start of 1949, was to reorient trade from West to East, while simultaneously focusing on the industrialization of many rural areas.⁵¹ In order to create a suitably ‘socialist’ culture, it was decided to adopt the arguments contained in A.A. Zhdanov’s influential Soviet text of 1934, ‘How to Be an Engineer of Human Souls’, as official state policy on the role of art and culture in socialist society. This led to a new wave of highly fêted sculpture, painting, drama, opera, poetry and fiction, all in approved Socialist Realist style, whose purpose was avowedly political and explicitly intended to educate the public in Marxist-Leninist interpretations of the past as well as glimpses of the bright future that was supposed to lie ahead with the final realization of the utopia of ‘Communism’. Even budding writers with the talent of a Milan Kundera got their start by composing paeans of praise to Gottwald or Stalin. Favourite subjects included heroic images of workers (especially coalminers, the ‘aristocracy’ of the working class); industrial landscapes (especially those featuring dams or electrical plants); portraits of Young Pioneers, People’s Militia and other officially approved Socialist heroes; and idealized portraits of Communist martyrs, above all of Julius Fučík, the handsome young Czech journalist who had died at the hands of the Gestapo.⁵² As for official portraits of Communist statesmen, above all Comrades Gottwald and Stalin, artists outdid themselves in their attempts adequately to elicit the politically correct responses of love, gratitude, trust and awe towards those who had freed them from bondage and were now leading them to the Promised Land. When Heda Margolius, the wife of an important Communist official, was careless enough to laugh at a new portrait of Stalin, complete with a violet tractor set against fluffy pink clouds, for its ‘unbelievable *kitsch*’, she was reported by a fellow worker. Only because the editor of the publishing house where she worked happened – despite twenty years in the Party – to be a ‘rather sensible woman’ was the matter not taken further.⁵³

Ten-minute state-sponsored newsreels, which preceded every film shown in public cinemas from 1945 right up to 1989, kept up a steady barrage of ‘good news’: how the latest Soviet agricultural methods and industrial techniques were revolutionizing the economy; how new electrical plants were

bringing light even to the most backward regions of Slovakia; how the ‘revanchist’ plots of the West Germans, portrayed as warmongering Nazis, had yet again been uncovered and disarmed; how the peace-loving citizens of the People’s Democratic Republic of Germany were enthusiastically ‘building socialism’; how everything – from sporting triumphs and folklore festivals to art exhibitions and classical concerts (to say nothing of overtly political occasions such as the annual May Day, Victorious February and Great October Revolution celebrations) – demonstrated the superiority of the socialist system to that of the capitalist West.⁵⁴ While something like a million and a half books were taken off library shelves to be placed on a special index of prohibited books (whose titles can today be seen in the Klementinum Catalogue of Formerly Prohibited Literature), newly printed accounts of the past hammered home the lesson that, after centuries of human struggle to achieve socialism – as evidenced by the Hussite and French revolutions, together with every other historical movement that could conceivably be presented as radical, reformist or progressive – the first real breakthrough had been achieved by the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. It was this uniquely successful experiment which, having triumphantly defeated Nazism along the way, had begun to spread its benefits to the rest of the world: to Eastern Europe, to North Korea, to China and to all the other countries that, one by one, were choosing to join the international family of socialist nations.

In the spring of 1950, when East–West tensions were reaching new heights with the Berlin blockade and the start of the Korean War, a huge anti-American campaign was launched. Posters and political cartoons featured Wall Street capitalists and US generals helping the West German ‘Nazis’ and imposing their will on the United Nations, while simultaneously torturing their own Black minority and ruthlessly exploiting labour at home.⁵⁵ Posters, newspaper articles, radio broadcasts and official weekly newsreels, together with the issuing of gasmasks and holding of frequent air-raid drills, helped to keep fear of the Western imperialists at fever pitch and to minimize complaints about continued rationing. One of the unexpected side effects created by anti-Western and anti-imperialist campaigns was the trouble caused to *SNB* and *StB* officers in the border regions, where they found themselves repeatedly having to deal with attempts by citizens living along the frontiers with Austria, Poland or Hungary to flee inland out of fear that they would find themselves on the frontline when the imminently expected Third World War broke out. As early as September 1948, the problem was already so acute that the Ministry of the Interior realized that it would have to review the whole question of the security of the country’s borders which, because of the increased number of fugitives from the regime, were simultaneously having to be reinforced with watchtowers, barbed wire, minefields and all the familiar paraphernalia associated with the building of the Iron Curtain.⁵⁶

Encouraging Czechoslovak citizens to view the West with fear and hostility had obvious advantages in making citizens feel dependent for their safety on the state. It also made it possible to blame any economic misfortune – from a bad harvest to a village fire – not on mere accident or the short-sightedness of the Five-Year Plan, but rather on the evil cunning of imperialist agents who, if you believed the government propaganda, were lurking behind every bush. It was in this climate that a government campaign to blame ruined potato crops on the *mandelinka* or Colorado beetle (presumably a self-conscious revival of a similar scare of 1939) was launched in 1950, stimulating fears of pestilence at just about the same time that US planes were dropping anti-Communist leaflets in the border regions of the country.⁵⁷ The atmosphere of war hysteria, justifying the need for constant vigilance, was further maintained by the launching of a series of popular and well-made feature films, of which Josef Mach's *Akce B* (Operation B), a *Boy's Own*-style adventure story in which the *SNB* and Czechoslovak army triumphantly defeat a reactionary group of bandits (composed of an unsavoury blend of Vatican agents, international spies and *Banderovci* traitors) hiding out in the wilds of Slovakia is probably the best-known example.⁵⁸ Positive propaganda about the benefits of socialism and friendship with the Soviet Union was left to the enthusiastic messages on display in Communist Party glass-encased wooden notice boards which were to be found in every neighbourhood and village; to the constant emphasis on the peace-loving nature of the Slav and socialist worlds as opposed to West Germany and the warmongering West; and also to light comedy films such as *Bylo to v máji* (It Was in May), whose moral appeared to be that trusting 'politically engaged' (i.e. Communist) workers to lead society 'forwards' was the best guarantee of the nation's future security, happiness and fulfilment.⁵⁹

Large industrial firms could be nationalized at the stroke of a pen, but the hoped-for collectivization of agriculture lagged far behind, small landowners, farmers and better-off peasants proving reluctant to join cooperative farms. Pressure therefore began to be applied systematically. At first, the government relied mostly on poster and newsreel campaigns to advertise the alleged benefits of cooperative farms, which were portrayed as infinitely more efficient and up-to-date than their 'capitalist' counterparts, while simultaneously presenting private ownership as greedy, selfish and inefficient. Since months of this approach passed without much discernible effect, and from 1 January 1949 there was the Five-Year Plan to think of, added muscle was lent to the cause. Tractors and farm machinery began to be requisitioned by the government on the slightest pretext and handed over to rival agricultural cooperatives in the same village; private farms were given quotas that were increasingly impossible to fulfil; the children of stubborn peasants were refused permission to attend *gymnázia* (prestigious high schools) or to go to

university. Finally, farmers and peasants who continued to be uncooperative were branded in local newspapers as 'kulaks', a Russian term denoting 'tight-fisted' independent farmers, famously considered by Stalin the 'class enemy' of poorer peasants. They were then made the object of angry factory-floor discussions, charged with criminal acts of subversion, hauled before local courts and sentenced to terms in prison, after which their property could be confiscated by the state and handed over to a 'collective' (i.e. state) farm. Raimund Musil, whose father ran a medium-sized farm in Dědina that was already struggling to keep up with the quotas of milk, meat and poultry demanded by the government, finally gave the authorities an excuse to confiscate the family property altogether when he was found to be hiding some objectionable leaflets for his local branch of *Sokol*. The *StB* came after midnight, waking everyone up, and took him away for questioning. He was next seen in a courtroom in Brno as one of a large number of 'treasonous kulaks' to be tried against the usual background of local factory workers' petitions and resolutions that he be given 'the severest punishment' for his 'crimes' against the state. In the end, Musil's father was not sentenced to death, but to a large fine, the confiscation of his family's property, the removal of his rights as a citizen and sixteen years in prison. The conditions at Bory prison, on the outskirts of Plzeň, were so bad that he returned home after serving less than two years of his sentence: in a coffin. The whole family was forcibly moved out of the village around Christmas 1952.⁶⁰

In the especially sensitive matter of the Czechoslovak army, although the officer class had been thoroughly purged by 1949 there were still the troops to consider. Since the army was largely made up of draftees called up for National Service, Communist Party, National Front and Union of Youth (*ČSM*) organizations were enlisted to write political assessments of each recruit for scrutiny by the relevant local branch of the *StB*. With the beginning of the Korean War in 1950 and the consequent increase in Cold War tensions, the importance of a politically reliable army came to seem paramount. Ludvík Svoboda, a wartime hero, was relieved of his duties as minister of defence in March 1950 and put in charge of sport instead; at the end of 1951 he was again removed from his post, this time to spend a few months in prison before being sent to work on a collective farm. The new minister of defence was Alexej Čepička, Gottwald's son-in-law and an ardent prewar Communist who had survived Nazi concentration camps to be appointed minister of domestic trade in 1947 and minister of justice in 1948. Under Čepička, whose brief was to reform the army in line with the wartime Soviet-Czechoslovak agreements signed by Beneš, it was decided in September 1950 to create a special new category, 'Category E', for army recruits deemed 'politically unreliable', who were automatically to be placed in special units called *pomocné technické prapory* (auxiliary technical battalions).

These were the infamous *pétépáci* (PTPs) or ‘Black Barons’, recruits who were not allowed to take part in weapons training or to mix with other soldiers, but who were instead isolated in special camps and used for hard labour.⁶¹ From 1 October 1950, each of the ninety thousand recruits called up for National Service had to fill out a detailed questionnaire whose answers were checked according to a revised list of eleven criteria for identifying the ‘politically unreliable’. All those who had previously been tried for anti-state offences (whether under the 1923 or the 1948 laws for the Defence of the Republic) were automatically to be placed in Category E. So were factory owners, employers with more than ten employees, anyone who earned more than 10,000 crowns per month from property or other investments, peasants who owned more than 30 hectares (74 acres) of arable land, people who in the past had been removed from public positions by Action Committees, and students who had been expelled either from school or from university.⁶² Although the number of Category E soldiers was at first too low to enable the army to fulfil its coal-mining and road-building obligation to the Five-Year Plan, by the end of 1950 army officers were taking their ‘political duties’ seriously enough so that, out of an intake of 83,000 fresh recruits to the army, 5,102 were assigned to the PTP and a further 1,900 marked down for further investigation; by making up numbers with priests, monks and seminarians, who were placed in a special road construction unit, the PTP finally consisted of 9,990 men, of whom the vast majority, some 8,000, were Category E prisoners, exactly the number estimated to be necessary by the army to carry out its required projects.⁶³

PTP units were scattered around the country, mostly in Bohemia and the border regions. In theory, the men were supposed to have some free time, tolerable living conditions, and to attend ‘re-education’ courses in Marxism-Leninism so that they could be rehabilitated and eventually reintegrated into society. In practice, it was common for *pétépáci* to be worked well over the regulation daily eight hours, following night duty with a day shift; to be housed in makeshift tents or primitive barracks without hot water or even glass in the windows; or to find that their ‘leisure’ time consisted solely of being made to perform callisthenics or sing socialist songs.⁶⁴ Formal re-education classes turned out to be a joke, consisting of parroting answers in unison for the benefit of teachers who, according to legend, were in some cases themselves so poorly educated that one mysteriously persisted in calling Lenin ‘the fifth of January’, apparently under the delusion that that was what the initials ‘V.I.’ stood for in Vladimir Ilyich Lenin’s name.⁶⁵

From September 1949, even those Communist Party members who had zealously denounced and reported others began to feel at risk. This time, the initial pressure came not from the *KSC* leadership so much as from ‘fraternal’ Communist parties in the neighbouring People’s Democratic Republics, which

were following the first major postwar trial in a Central European state of a Communist Party official: the trial in Budapest of László Rajk, the Hungarian foreign minister, for being a ‘Titoist agent’. Although there was an initial reluctance on the part of the KSĈ to seek the ‘enemy within’, the publicity given to the Rajk trial, together with ‘evidence’ read out in court that pointed the finger at Czechoslovakia, meant that it became increasingly difficult for the KSĈ to ignore. Most of the evidence concerning Czechoslovak Communists, many of whom were explicitly named in the trial proceedings, came from the testimony of Noel Field, a US national who, although cast in the role of CIA agent, had in fact worked for the NKVD (the People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs, the USSR’s public and secret police organization). Other members of his family also had links either with Czechoslovak or German Communists, Soviet intelligence or both.⁶⁶ In the spring and summer of 1949, as secret preparations for the Rajk trial were being made, the Fields, one by one, disappeared. Noel Field was last seen leaving the Palace Hotel in Prague with two men in May, though the bill for his vacant hotel room continued mysteriously to be paid; his brother, Hermann Field, disappeared on a flight from Warsaw to Prague in August; Herta Field, who had gone out to Prague to look for her missing husband and brother-in-law, herself disappeared from the Palace Hotel a few days later. Even Erika Glaser, a girl the Fields had helped to escape from postwar Germany and whom they referred to as their ‘adopted daughter’, vanished without trace after boarding the subway between West and East Berlin a year later, in August 1950.⁶⁷

From the autumn of 1949, when their testimonies began to be heard in the Budapest courtroom, part of the Field family mystery started to be solved. The Fields, it turned out, had been arrested in Prague on the recommendation of the Hungarian secret service, which was in turn being helped by Soviet advisors. Also on trial in Budapest was Gejza Pavlík, a prominent Slovak Communist who had worked with Noel Field in Switzerland and afterwards become head of the Czechoslovak Travel Bureau, *Čedok*, and whom the Hungarian authorities were claiming as the link between Field and a Hungarian Trotskyist group.⁶⁸ Among those named in depositions by Noel Field, Gejza Pavlík and others, all of whom were held in Hungarian secret-police cells, were some sixty prominent Czechoslovak Communists, including Otto Šling, the regional party secretary in Brno; Vladimír Clementis, minister of foreign affairs and a leading Slovak Communist; Vilém Nový, the editor of the Communist Party daily *Rudé právo*; Václav Nosek, minister of the interior since 1945; Richard Slánský, a diplomat and the brother of KSĈ secretary-general Rudolf Slánský; and Evžen Löbl, deputy minister for foreign trade.⁶⁹

As Evžen Löbl (Eugene Loeb) later recalled, one day in September 1949 he was summoned before the KSĈ Central Committee. He was told that he

was to be questioned, and that his future would depend upon his cooperation in telling the ‘unadulterated truth without reservations’. As an obedient Communist, he scrupulously completed his résumé in a spirit of self-criticism which ‘made no secret’ of his mistakes and, if anything, presented his own actions and motives ‘in too bad, rather than too good a light’. That same evening, Löbl was transferred to an improvised cell in the Central Committee building to complete his task. The next day, his interrogators took note of the fact that he ‘was not of working class family’ and that he had spent time in the West and had dealings with Western journalists, politicians and economists. To his surprise, he was then informed that the party was releasing him so that he could continue in his duties at the Foreign Office, but that he was not to leave Prague or to inform anyone about what had happened, on pain of expulsion from the party and immediate arrest.⁷⁰

Löbl claims to have kept his mouth firmly shut, but a couple of months later a plainclothes *SzB* officer entered his flat and delivered a summons from Minister of the Interior Nosek. Instead of being taken to Nosek (who was by then himself under suspicion), he was driven in the direction of Prague’s Ruzyně airport and led to a large building where a uniformed *SzB* officer arrested him. He was put in prison clothes and left entirely alone for four days. On the fifth day, he was interrogated by *SzB* officers Vladimír Kohoutek and Bohumil Doubek. Since Löbl initially failed either to admit to any wrongdoing or to implicate others, he was subjected to ‘hard treatment’. This meant being interrogated on average fourteen times a day; dragged out of sleep thirty or forty times a night; kept in continual hunger; and not allowed to sit down, even when eating or using the toilet. Often he was forced to spend the whole day standing with his face to the wall. The physical effects of not being able to sit down included such painful swelling to his feet ‘that washing became torture and every step hurt’. To these physical sufferings was added the psychological distress of being kept in a constant state of tension, shouted at, threatened, insulted and kept within earshot of the interrogation room, where the cries and weeping of other prisoners, together with the bellowing of interrogators, could be plainly heard. Several times he was woken and led, blindfolded, to a basement room where he was made to listen to telephone discussions of what turned out to be bogus plans for his execution on the grounds that feeding him had become too great an expense, or that his interrogators’ time was being wasted. Careful measures, he noticed, had been taken to prevent the possibility of suicide: the ‘handkerchiefs’ issued were of only 13 sq cm (2 sq inches) and glass windows were situated well beyond the reach of prisoners.⁷¹

After several months of this treatment, Löbl willingly ‘confessed to every conceivable crime’ without so much as toying with the idea of later retracting his statements in an open courtroom. From the point when he made his full

'confession' (to crimes that he had not committed), he was permitted to read and to accept parcels from his wife, and found that Kohoutek, his principal tormentor, suddenly became 'friendly and chatty' with him. Thanks to what was officially termed Löbl's 'responsible' attitude towards 'helping' his interrogators, the original list of suspects, as initially identified by Noel Field in similar circumstances in Hungary, was considerably enlarged.⁷²

Accounts left by Party members who survived the ordeals of arrest, imprisonment and trial in 1950s Czechoslovakia (or by the widows of those who did not) have a depressing predictability and sameness about them. Suspects first became aware that they were being followed; then that their homes were bugged and their telephones tapped; then that they were in some indefinable way being held at arm's length and watched by their colleagues and superiors with suspicion. Next they were demoted or unexpectedly moved from influential positions. Only then did the *StB* come to take them away. Victims typically responded to being arrested with incredulity and indignation, demanding to be allowed to speak to President Gottwald, Secretary-General Slánský or to other powerful people in the party. When this response got them nowhere, they clung to the belief that there had been some terrible mistake which the party, in its wisdom, would eventually clear up. Left alone in solitary confinement for hours, days or even weeks, they discovered the prison rules and conventions by being shouted at. They were not to use their names, but only their prison numbers; the dazzling light in their cells would never be turned off; they could not place their hands under their blanket, however cold the weather; nothing could be kept in their cell except a tiny scrap of material, a dozen centimetres or a few inches square, officially called a 'handkerchief'; even combs and toothbrushes had to be specially requested and returned immediately after use. Prisoners were watched, day and night, by a series of *StB* prison staff through the peephole that was to be found at eye level in each cell door.

For most prisoners, the first interrogation, to which they were always brought blindfolded and disoriented, gave a ray of false hope. After solitary confinement, it was a relief simply to speak with another human being and to be in the comparatively normal environment of a prison office, with desk, chairs, carpet, typewriter and reassuringly familiar portraits of Stalin and Gottwald. Most looked forward to the opportunity to explain their innocence, while the first questions asked – name, occupation, place of birth – were soothing in their very banality. Only once prisoners found – with a nasty shock – that the questions would be repeated, and the interrogations continue, until the answers finally conformed to those the interrogators wished to hear, did they begin to realize the complete hopelessness of their position.⁷³

The immediate impulse for the *KSČ* to hold what turned out to be the most extensive and elaborate Communist show trial outside the Soviet Union

came from the first secretary of the Hungarian Workers' Party, who warned Gottwald at the beginning of September 1949 that when the forthcoming Rajk trial opened, it would include dozens of Czechoslovak names. Gottwald, who had already helped to ensure that the Field brothers were extradited to Hungary, again responded helpfully, by ensuring that some seventeen suspects, including Löbl, were immediately arrested and that veterans from the Spanish Civil War, Yugoslav Partisans, Communists who had spent the war in London and other 'anti-Party elements' were placed under surveillance. President Gottwald and *KSC* secretary-general Slánský, eager to curry favour with Moscow and anxious not to put a foot wrong, further requested that the Soviet Union send 'advisors' to coach them on how to proceed.⁷⁴

Although all seventeen initial Communist Party suspects either committed suicide or were brought to trial, the main political purpose for which the secret-police apparatus was being expanded – to uncover evidence of a conspiracy in the highest echelons of the party – had not yet been achieved. This failure on the part of the *KSC* leadership seemed all the more suspect given Czechoslovakia's history. Not only had Czechoslovakia been created in the image of its 'bourgeois' and 'imperialist' allies, France, Britain and the United States; but a good proportion of the Communist Party leadership had spent the war in Britain, where they had worked closely with the Beneš government. After the war, the *KSC* had preached the 'Titoist' notion of a distinct 'Czechoslovak road to socialism'; had voted to accept Marshall Aid before being rebuked for so doing by Moscow; and had been one of the first states to follow the Soviet Union in recognizing Israel, which by 1949 had disappointed Soviet hopes by allying itself instead with the United States. To Stalinists everywhere, it was simply inconceivable that Czechoslovakia could be immune from Titoist intrigue and Western infiltration when even countries that had been thoroughly purged during occupation by the Red Army were proving compromised.

Among the first in the Czechoslovak Communist Party to see the need for radical action was the secretary-general of the *KSC*, Rudolf Slánský. Slánský had little to fear from his own past since – unlike his closest comrade, Klement Gottwald, who had repeatedly promised that Czechoslovakia would follow its 'own road' to socialism – he had long been renowned for his disciplined Stalinism and unquestioned loyalty to the Soviet Union. After a Comintern meeting in November 1949 characterized by an atmosphere of near-hysterical hate and fear and at which a second condemnation of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia was passed, it was becoming clear that any Communist parties that did not join in the wholehearted condemnation of even the slightest deviation from current Stalinist orthodoxy would themselves be suspect. At a speech to *KSC* activists held in Prague on 7 December 1949, Slánský insisted that enemy agents must also have infiltrated their own ranks and called on the

party faithful to show the utmost vigilance to ‘unmask’ the ‘enemies in our own ranks, for they are the most dangerous enemies’.⁷⁵ Impatient with the Ministry of the Interior’s apparent slowness in coming up with evidence of a conspiracy large and important enough to satisfy the rest of the socialist bloc, from mid-1949, Slánský began routinely to go over Nosek’s head, giving instructions to *StB* agents directly from party headquarters. Not to be outmanoeuvred, in 1950 Gottwald insisted on taking direct responsibility for national security.

Just as wartime anti-Semitic and postwar anti-German legislation, parcelled out to rival, and sometimes overlapping, regional, district and national authorities in the late 1930s and early 1940s, had tended constantly to escalate in volume and intensity, so the confusion of party and state competencies in the late 1940s and early 1950s began to spiral out of control. The group that had taken charge of Löbl, for example, was made up of a mixture of *StB* officers from the Ministry of the Interior and officials from Party Central Office, renamed Sector IIa and organized into special sections to deal with ‘Trotskyites’, members of International Brigades and ‘bourgeois nationalists’ (i.e. Slovak Communists). In Slovakia itself, an equivalent department was established by the Ministry of the Interior, but supervised by *KSS* secretary-general Štefan Baštovanský and party chairman Viliam Široký, whose first task was to collect information on leading Slovak Communists. In May 1950, the *StB* broke away from the Ministry of the Interior to form its own, independent Ministry of National Security. Meanwhile, staff at the Party Control Commission, equally eager to find ‘the Czechoslovak Rajk’, began to make use of confidential reports at their disposal to find further suspects, whom they then took it upon themselves to interrogate or place under surveillance. Before long, the Commission had set up its own plants in the *StB* to see whether the National Security office itself might not be covering up for enemies within the party. Even regional and district party committees began to set up their own committees of investigation, reminiscent of the immediate postwar people’s tribunals and known in the districts as the ‘threes’, because they were made up of the district party security secretary and district *SNB* and *StB* chiefs, and in the regions, where they were joined by the regional public prosecutor and another official, as the ‘fives’.⁷⁶

In 1950, therefore, the same year that army reforms, together with the Milada Horáková, ‘Vatican Agent’ and thousands of less high-profile political show trials were spreading terror throughout Czechoslovak society, an equally fervent hunt was simultaneously being carried out within the Ministry of the Interior, the Department of National Security and the various police forces, as well as in all of the *KSC* and *KSS* national, district and regional committees to find and expose the ‘enemy within’ the Communist Party. As each new prisoner was interrogated, more names were added to the list of

suspects; as each interrogation group competed with the others to ‘unmask’ the plot (whose existence no one appears any longer to have doubted), suspicion fell not only on those who had already been arrested or placed under surveillance, but also on those working in rival departments, leading to a spiral of denunciations, arrests and confessions. But no matter how many Communists had already been forced to ‘confess’, the very logic of the search meant that the witch-hunt within the Communist Party could not be brought to a close until the ‘Czechoslovak Rajk’ had been found, condemned and executed. Only then could the socialist world be satisfied that Czechoslovakia had been ‘purged’ in the same way as the other People’s Democracies.

The first likely candidate to provide a convenient scapegoat, and whose name had helpfully been suggested by Hungarian security, was the prominent Slovak Communist Vladimír Clementis. Since Clementis had disapproved publicly of the Soviet-German Pact of 1939, he could be presented as anti-Soviet; since he was Slovak, he could be accused of ‘bourgeois nationalism’; because he was minister of foreign affairs, he could be seen to resemble Rajk and be suspected of both ‘Titoism’ and ‘cosmopolitanism’. Unlike Gustáv Husák, who was more vulnerable to the charge of ‘Slovak bourgeois nationalism’ but who actually refused, while in the custody of the secret police, to ‘help the Party’ by confessing, Clementis proved pliable. As a Slovak who could be used to link Western imperialist plots simultaneously with Edvard Beneš, ‘Hlinka fascists’ and ‘our Jewish bourgeois nationalist circles’, he was invaluable.⁷⁷ Foreign Minister Clementis was arrested on 27 January 1951 in a special operation, codenamed ‘Operation Stones’, in which an entire replica of the border with West Germany was set up within a few kilometres of the actual border, complete with barbed wire, huts and *StB* agents impersonating border guards, so that – in a touch that was said to have appealed to Gottwald’s sense of humour – the foreign minister could appear to have been caught in the act of attempting to defect to the West.⁷⁸

Another possible scapegoat was Otto Šling, chief secretary of the Regional Committee of the *KSC* in Brno, who had already been arrested on 6 October 1950, sparked by the sudden discovery by the security services of a letter purported to have been sent to Šling by Emanuel Voska, the head of a Czechoslovak spy ring based in the United States. The next month, the case was discussed by the Regional Party Committee in Brno, under the watchful eye of delegates from Prague, who agreed to expel Šling from the party and to enforce a radical change in the district party leadership. Within hours of the resolution, the *StB* had made its first arrests and launched an extensive hunt throughout Moravia for the rest of ‘the Šling leadership’. By January 1951, some six hundred personal dossiers had been examined and twenty or more arrests made, mostly of Communists in the Brno region. By February, the number of arrests had risen to about fifty, and included a Slovak group,

party officials from other regions who (like Šling) were of Jewish background and even top security men like deputy minister of national defence Bedřich Reicin and deputy minister of national security Karel Šváb. A special prison had to be set up at Koloděj House near Prague to deal with the sudden intake of prisoners. Interrogations at Koloděj, which were more sadistic and less controlled than those that had become routine at Ruzyně and Pankrác, also brought about the required results: Václav Kopecký was able to report to the *KSČ* Central Committee the following month that Šling, probably in league with Clementis, had conspired to depose *KSČ* secretary-general Slánský and assassinate President Gottwald; other prisoners further suggested that he had wanted to oust Antonín Novotný from his position as party secretary in Prague. The sensational ‘revelations’ became so widely publicized that a new term entered the language: ‘Šlingism’, meaning a combination of espionage, sabotage and treachery.⁷⁹

As the security services worked overtime to extract the requisite ‘detailed confessions’ to manufacture a case against a band of conspirators centred around Šling, *StB* interrogators claimed to be struck by how often the name of *KSČ* secretary-general Rudolf Slánský – another Stalinist of Jewish background – came up during questioning. They began to toy with an idea so bold that, if realized, could give the secretary-general a taste of his own medicine and simultaneously prevent Czechoslovakia from ever again being accused of being ‘soft’ on its own party leadership. Since even the most brutal interrogation methods of scores of prisoners – from former *StB* officers to the highest party officials – had yet to produce concrete evidence of an actual conspiracy, the *StB* – and, through it, the party leadership – came to the conclusion that the real evil genius must be someone even higher up in the party hierarchy.⁸⁰ Slánský, although he had recently been awarded the highest honour in the land – the Order of Klement Gottwald for the Building of Socialism – was therefore, on 6 September 1951, removed from his post as secretary-general of the *KSČ*. Three days later, the security services informed President Gottwald that they had intercepted a letter – again presumed to have been sent by the Voska group – that warned someone referred to only as ‘the Great Crossing Sweeper’ that he was in imminent danger of arrest, but could be helped to defect. By 23 November 1951, Gottwald was apparently persuaded that the letter must have been intended for Slánský (it now appears that it was a provocation by the CIA).⁸¹ The Slánskýs were arrested the same night on their way home from a dinner party thrown by the Zápotockýs, who obediently phoned the *StB* at the moment their distinguished guests left the party. Slánský, who endured the usual ‘hard treatment’ at Ruzyně for nearly two months, proved a hard nut to crack. But at the end of January 1952, after he had unsuccessfully tried to commit suicide by hanging himself with the alarm cord attached to his window, he confessed to the

existence of a conspiratorial 'centre' and, thereafter, to anything else that was required of him.⁸²

The next stage of the proceedings was for all the testimonies that had been so painstakingly extracted from hundreds of 'witnesses' and 'culprits' over the course of two years to be readjusted and realigned to fit the new political requirements: that it was no longer Clementis or Šling, but rather Slánský, who had been 'unmasked' as the 'real' Rajk. Whereas the Slovak Clementis and regional leader Šling had been vulnerable to accusations of 'bourgeois nationalism' of a 'Titoist' kind, Slánský – although a Bohemian Czech – was of Jewish background. This opened the way for accusations of 'Zionism' and 'cosmopolitanism' to be added to the usual crimes of sabotage, espionage, Titoism and Trotskyism. Judaism could also provide the thread to link a large number of the 'conspirators' together, win favour in Moscow, advertise the 'correct' attitude to be adopted towards the state of Israel, and, relying on the strength of popular anti-Semitism, ensure that the members of the 'conspiratorial centre' would elicit no pity. Finally, focusing on the Jewish backgrounds of those who were now to be cast as the eleven leading members of a 'conspiratorial centre' led by Rudolf Slánský helped to deflect attention from the impeccably Czech and Aryan, but politically compromised, Gottwald, who took care to ensure that the further accusation – that Slánský had propagated 'a Czechoslovak road to socialism' – was deleted from the final text of the indictment.⁸³ As Hannah Schling has found, in Gottwald's speech to the Central Committee conference of September 1951, which was afterwards sent to all party members in pamphlet form, he referred to the conspirators as largely made up of those who 'did not grow from the roots of our country and our Party, of whom the majority belonged to a different type, which at the January conference of the Central Committee of the Party I called cosmopolitans'.⁸⁴ Like many other Communists, Rudolf and Heda Margolius initially felt only relief when they heard of Slánský's arrest, assuming that the purge which Slánský had helped to launch would now be brought to an end. Instead, the arrests escalated, focusing on Jews. One of those to be arrested in this next purge of high Communist officials was the deputy minister of foreign trade: Margolius himself.⁸⁵ Although unable to protect the *KSČ* from having to go through the same terrible ordeal as the other People's Democracies, Gottwald probably tried to spare his own kith and kin by offering, wherever possible, Jewish or Slovak (rather than Gentile and Czech-speaking) Communists in their stead.

On 20 November 1952, the 'Trial of the Leadership of the Anti-State Conspiratorial Centre headed by Rudolf Slánský' opened as a grand piece of political theatre at the State Court in Prague. Fourteen leading Communists (Slánský, Löbl, Šling, Clementis, Margolius, London, Reicin, Šváb, Hajdů, Fischl, Geminder, Frejka, Frank and Simon), eleven of whom were explicitly

described as being ‘of Jewish origin’, were accused of being ‘Trotskyite-Titoist, Zionist and bourgeois nationalist traitors’ and ‘enemies of the Czechoslovak people’, who – in the pay of ‘the US imperialists’ and under ‘the direction of Western espionage agencies’ – had conspired to create ‘an anti-state conspiratorial centre’ to ‘undermine the people’s democratic regime, frustrate the building of socialism, damage the national economy, carry out espionage activity’ and ‘weaken the unity of the Czechoslovak people and the Republic’s defensive capacity’ in order to ‘tear the country away from its close alliance and friendship with the Soviet Union, liquidate the Czechoslovak people’s democratic regime, restore capitalism and return the Republic to the imperialist camp and destroy its national sovereignty and independence’.⁸⁶ Only Clementis, as token Slovak, confessed to taking part in a ‘subversive group of Slovak bourgeois nationalists’ that had tried ‘to separate the development of Slovakia from the development of the state as a whole, thus strengthening reaction and hindering the progress of socialism and the development of the people’s democratic order’.⁸⁷

The courtroom was packed with ministers, factory delegates and plain-clothes *StB* officers; the families of the accused – some of whom might not have shown proper satisfaction at the ‘unmasking’ of the traitors⁸⁸ – had to find out the verdicts from radio and newspaper reports. Not only the defendants and witnesses, who had learned their testimony word for word, but even the lawyers and the public prosecutor, Josef Urválek, had their lines written for them by the *StB*, who drafted and redrafted the script until it met with the full approval of the party leadership. The trial, which lasted a week, was held in a blaze of publicity, backed by a strongly anti-Semitic campaign which featured Slánský as a Judas, a rat or an anti-Semitic caricature.⁸⁹ The campaign inspired thousands of vindictive letters and angry resolutions from factory workers, groups of schoolchildren Pioneers (a sort of Communist equivalent of Boy and Girl Scouts) and agricultural cooperatives, in addition to the inevitable regional and district party resolutions. Gottwald was widely praised for his manliness, discipline and honour in not sparing even his closest associate and friend, while the nation was treated to the daily sensation of new ‘revelations’ in the press, together with live broadcasts of the entire proceedings, blared out over the loudspeaker systems on factory floors and in public places around the country. Inevitably, all fourteen defendants were found guilty of multiple charges of high treason, espionage, sabotage and military treason. Three – Evžen Löbl, Artur London and Vavro Hajdů – were sentenced to life imprisonment; the remaining eleven were sentenced to death on 27 November and executed at Pankrác prison on 3 December 1952. The entire transcript of the trial was then edited by the Ministry of Justice and published by Orbis, the state publisher, as a fat brown paperback which could be bought by anyone for 45 crowns.⁹⁰

The Slánský and related show trials of the early 1950s were not of a fundamentally different kind from the tens of thousands of other, far more obscure Czechoslovak political trials – of National Socialists, Slovak Democrats, priests, nuns, monks, scout leaders, members of *Sokol*, army recruits, ‘kulaks’ and countless other ‘class enemies’, to say nothing of hundreds of thousands of alleged ‘traitors’, wartime ‘collaborators’, ‘saboteurs’ and ‘black marketeers’ – that preceded or accompanied this most sensational of trials. But there were two important differences. Unlike the other trials, which were a purely Czechoslovak affair, the quest for ‘the Czechoslovak Rajk’ was prompted by ‘fraternal’ pressure from other socialist countries, particularly Hungary, and included some direct Soviet involvement. Pressure and advice were not, however, the same thing as compulsion; and while contemporary Hungarian and East German political trials bore an uncanny resemblance to the Czechoslovak ones, the Polish Communist Party appears to have managed successfully to ignore the hints and requests from Moscow to conform.

In later years, the Slánský trial and related purges and denunciations were taken by Czechoslovak Communists themselves as a matter for ‘self-criticism’ and explained away as a symptom of the ‘personality cult’ that a mistaken reliance upon Stalin was supposed to have provoked. Upon closer inspection, this turns out not to have been so much a ‘self-criticism’ as an avoidance of the main point and a passing of the buck to other Communists – whether rivals within the party or safely distant foreign comrades – who were held individually responsible for the torture, forced confessions and fabrications of evidence that had characterized the trials. At no point were the many thousands of other show trials publicly explained or regretted. For the first time since February 1948, substantial numbers of Communist Party members were included among the aggrieved and discontented with the regime at home. By blaming the obvious miscarriages of justice on the Soviet authorities, they were able to leave their underlying faith in the righteousness of Czechoslovak socialism intact.

On 5 March 1953, Stalin died. In Prague, Wenceslas Square filled to capacity with mourners dressed in black for a special commemorative ceremony, with a podium set up outside the National Museum and an enormous banner showing Stalin’s face. Since Gottwald was in Moscow to attend Stalin’s funeral, the main speeches were given by Zápotocký (in Czech) followed by Široký (in Slovak). According to the ‘revolutionary’ style in vogue at the time, the speeches were declaimed rather than spoken, and were virtually indistinguishable from one another. The first half of each Communist leader’s speech expressed gratitude to the ‘Great Stalin’ as the ‘Defender of Peace’, ‘Champion of Working People Everywhere’ and Czechoslovakia’s ‘Teacher, Liberator and Friend’; the second half, less traditionally for a funeral oration, furiously lambasted ‘capitalists’, ‘criminals’, ‘Fascists’, ‘traitors’ and other

vaguely defined enemies. Široký, a short and slightly absurd figure, became so hysterical during the latter part of his speech that his voice cracked; but no one laughed. The speeches concluded, in a manner highly reminiscent of Nazi rallies, with the crowd asked to take a public oath to ‘defend socialism’. The ceremony was then rounded off with a gun salute and the singing of ‘The Internationale’.⁹¹

Within a fortnight, the entire performance had to be repeated, this time to mark the death of President Gottwald, who died on 14 March 1953, officially of a cold caught while attending Stalin’s funeral, but presumably in fact because of his rampant alcoholism. Gottwald’s body, like Stalin’s, was embalmed and placed on public view in a glass coffin. Wrapped in the Czechoslovak flag and flanked by soldiers, the corpse of ‘K.G.’, the first ‘Worker-President’, was solemnly carried on a gun barrel from the Castle, past Letná plain, across the River Vltava to Republic Square, up to the National Museum at the top of Wenceslas Square, and then to its final resting place in a special tomb, reminiscent of Lenin’s tomb in Moscow, at Vítkov. Despite frantic *KSC* directives to keep numbers down, a crowd of 200,000 filled Wenceslas Square to capacity to hear his funeral oration. This time, they were treated to an even fiercer speech by Zápotocký, which climaxed with a public oath in which everyone present swore to continue to ‘build socialism’ and never to turn their backs on ‘the Soviet Union’, ‘Lenin’, ‘Stalin’ and ‘progress’. On May Day 1953, which was marked by the launch of Czechoslovak television’s first regular broadcast, the same message of ‘no change’ was again strongly signalled. The leadership had little choice but to continue on the same path. Not only was it in the middle of preparations for yet more political trials, to thoroughly purge the *KSS*, but the Czechoslovak economy – which had faithfully followed the Stalinist model of promoting grand symbols of heavy industry at the expense of consumer needs – was approaching collapse. A drastic devaluation of the Czechoslovak crown by a factor of ten, which was later remembered as the ‘Great Swindle’, was already scheduled for 1 June 1953.⁹² As things turned out, the monetary reform was to lead to demonstrations and even riots so widespread and severe that they could only be put down by making the fullest, most brutal use of police powers, giving those who took part in the demonstrations another reason to resent and hate the regime under which they lived.

In Moscow, where Nikita Khrushchev took over as first secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, there were immediately signs that some sort of power struggle was taking place in the Kremlin. Luckily for Antonín Zápotocký, who as prime minister had betrayed Slánský to the *StB*, too many people were implicated in the recent party purges for his own neck to be at risk, and he was unanimously elected Czechoslovakia’s second ‘Worker-President’ by the National Assembly on 21 May 1953. Antonín Novotný, who had been

specially commended for his help in ‘unmasking’ Slánský and other ‘traitors’, took over as general secretary of the KSC, while Viliam Široký, the rising Slovak Communist star who was hard at work rooting out ‘Slovak bourgeois nationalism’ in the KSS, was made deputy prime minister. Zápotocký made his first presidential appearance on the same balcony at the Castle where Hitler had received crowds of Sudeten Germans in March 1939. This time, a Czech crowd chanted ‘Long live Comrade President!’⁹³

No sooner had Stalin died than *Pravda*, the Soviet equivalent of the KSC’s *Rudé právo*, suddenly stopped printing stories about a supposed plot hatched by Jewish doctors to take Comrade Stalin’s life. Within six months, Beria, the chief of the Soviet secret police, had himself been accused, put on trial, sentenced and executed. As Zdeněk Mlynář, a promising young Czech Stalinist who had been sent to study at the Higher Political School in Moscow, later recalled, throughout 1954 and 1955 criticism of Stalinist terror was voiced more and more openly, while even party-controlled newspapers began to criticize aspects of Soviet bureaucracy and to write about the need for ‘collective leadership’ in the party, campaigns against ‘cosmopolitanism’ gradually died out and the atmosphere of suspicion relaxed. As a young Slovak Communist named Alexander Dubček who was brought up in the Soviet Union later recalled, the most extraordinary symbol of the changing times came at the end of 1955, when Khrushchev flew to Belgrade and addressed Tito – who until recently had been called an ‘agent of imperialism’, ‘executioner’ and ‘imperialist lackey’, and caricatured as a vulture-faced figure in Nazi uniform with a blood-soaked axe in his hand – as ‘Dear Comrade’.⁹⁴

Oblivious to the signs of change that those living in Moscow were beginning to notice, on May Day 1955 (ten years after the idea had first been mooted, six years after the foundation stone had been laid and two years after Stalin and Gottwald’s deaths), a colossal statue of Comrade Stalin leading a vanguard of peasants and workers was solemnly unveiled on Letná plain, on the very spot that T.G. Masaryk had once selected as the national *Sokol* exercise ground.⁹⁵ The monument, the subject of ‘voluntary’ drives and ‘enthusiastic’ national campaigns, measured a full 30 m (32.8 yards) in height and weighed 14,000 metric tonnes (13,779 tons).⁹⁶ In the same year, a specifically Czechoslovak symbol of national and socialist unity was also launched: enormous sporting pageants, reminiscent of the *Sokol slets* of years gone by, in which masses of amateur gymnasts demonstrated their ability to move in perfect synchronization: the *Spartakiáda*. The *Spartakiáda*, which was designed – like economic plans – to recur every five years, and which continued right up to the year 1990, drew on the patriotic associations of gymnastics that *Sokol* had spread, but also sent out the subliminal message that each individual had a place in the great socialist collective, in which the whole was greater than the sum of its parts.⁹⁷

Khrushchev's 'secret speech' on Stalin's crimes as delivered to the Twentieth Communist Party Congress at the beginning of 1956 dropped a bombshell to hardline Communists the world over, not least in Czechoslovakia. Mlynář, stunned, was particularly struck by the 'concrete details' of the 'torture and forced confessions in political trials', which, as he could see only too well, had 'direct implications for Czechoslovakia.' Dubček, who did not feel 'ready' to hear 'much of what they were saying', later recalled being 'shocked when they stated bluntly that Stalin had been a murderer'. The revelations were simply 'too sudden' and 'too momentous' to grasp.⁹⁸ In the People's Republic of Czechoslovakia, where everything possible had been done to elevate Gottwald to the status of a second Stalin, the currency reform of 1953 had led to widespread economic misery, and the political show trials had rivalled those of the Soviet Union in their scope, cynicism and brutality, the about-turn in Soviet policy came as a particularly nasty shock to the *KSČ* leadership. Since those members of the Communist Party who had survived the purges justified their part in creating terror on the grounds of faithfully following Soviet orders, they now found themselves in a dilemma. To admit their own guilt in creating and perpetuating what were suddenly being called Stalinist 'deformities' might end up costing them their necks; yet to continue to defend the status quo would make them vulnerable to the charge of 'deviating from the Soviet model', the very crime for which they had persecuted their former colleagues. Unsurprisingly, the party leadership tried to walk a tightrope between these two equally unpalatable alternatives, making a few noises of token approval of Comrade Khrushchev's new departure while at the same time doing everything possible to prevent any real reform from taking place within the *KSČ* or the *KSS*.⁹⁹ The first cautious criticisms of the Stalinist model were therefore raised, not by the top leadership, but in the lower ranks of the party and in university departments of Marxism-Leninism, and were then aired at the Second Writers' Congress held on 22–29 April 1956.

It was at a meeting of students from Charles University held on 26 April in the School of Chemistry in the Albertov district of Prague that pressure on the party leadership grew more trenchant in tone. Students suggested an end 'to mere copying of the USSR' on the grounds that 'mechanically adopting the Soviet experience' had 'done great harm to our educational system and, in particular, to our economic system'.¹⁰⁰ Since, as some claimed, 'further harm' had been done 'by playing the Soviet national anthem at the end of every broadcast day [*sic*] and the displaying of Soviet flags at all occasions', they also requested that 'the Soviet national anthem and Soviet flag be present only on occasions which directly involve the Soviet Union, e.g. the November 7 and May 9 celebrations'. The meeting turned into a heated debate, lasting five hours, which ended in the adoption of a formal resolution asking for 'a public review of the Slánský and other political trials' together with 'a guarantee of

rightful political punishment for persons who tolerated illegal procedures during interrogations and for those who directly carried out these procedures'. It also requested an 'amnesty for convicted persons similar to the amnesty recently declared in the Polish People's Republic', and stated that it did 'not consider correct the view of Mr. Novotný' that 'The Central Committee . . . decides and must decide the most important questions of the Party and state' since this ignored 'the principle that workers must be governed according to their own convictions' and 'distorts the real content and leading role of the Party'.¹⁰¹ *Mladá fronta*, the official newspaper of the Communist-controlled Czechoslovak Union of Youth, which might have ignored or condemned the students, instead suggested that, like 'all honest people today', the students cared 'only about eliminating the insufficiencies and mistakes in our life as soon as possible'.¹⁰² After a deputation of students in Prague solemnly called on the minister of education on 4 May with a resolution demanding change, copy-cat student resolutions began to appear all over the country: first at Comenius University in Bratislava and, by 15 May, at universities and colleges all over the country, including at Brno, Ostrava, Plzeň, Košice, Banská Bystrica and Nitra.¹⁰³ The student protest movement peaked on 20 May, when it made use of the traditional student carnival known as *Majáles*, reinstated for the first time since 1948, to demand reform.

Luckily for the *KSČ* leadership, any desire for reform by high Communist officials was for the time being dampened by the sight of the fraternal Communist Party in Poland having to be rescued by the Soviet Union in October 1956, and above all of the fraternal Communist Party in Hungary, where civil war had broken out and secret policemen (ÁVH) were lynched before the Soviet army came in to 'normalize' the situation and restore its preferred Communist leadership to power. This was just as well, since the Barák Commission, when it completed its investigations into the Czechoslovak political trials, found that too many men in the current Presidium – not least First Secretary Novotný – were so hopelessly implicated that it had little option but to conclude that the trials had been conducted in strict accordance with the law and to uphold all the guilty verdicts. In such a politically dangerous situation, Novotný, on Zápotocký's death on 13 November 1957, simply took over the presidency of the republic in addition to retaining his position as first secretary of the *KSČ*, blocking the way to any would-be rivals for power.

By 1960, the Communist regime in Czechoslovakia was proud of what it had achieved. In less than fifteen years, the nationalization of industry and collectivization of agriculture had been realized; the Church effectively silenced; the army purged; rival political parties rendered powerless; and the economy re-oriented from wartime dependence on Germany to postwar dependence on the Soviet Union and the rest of the Eastern bloc. A vast network of prisons and forced-labour camps had been built or adapted to contain opposition and



The Czechoslovak Socialist Republic, 1960–68

to silence dissent. Many of the inspiring and revolutionary aims for which the older generation of Communists had been prepared to serve prison sentences in the First Czechoslovak Republic, or to risk their lives under Fascism, had been achieved, at however high a price. As Communists saw things, there were no longer private capitalists or the old divisions based on social class; officially at least, there was no unemployment and no homelessness. Free medical care, old-age pensions and education were available to everyone. The average standard of living, though by no means 'affluent', was 'decent' and believed to be rising. Even the housing crisis, clearly 'the most sensitive spot' in the matter of living standards, seemed to be 'soluble in time by stepping up housing construction, which the Stalinist emphasis on developing heavy industry had eclipsed'.¹⁰⁴ The *KSC* and *KSS* had, in short, 'achieved' the primary aims of 'socialism' and so felt able to declare the People's Republic of Czechoslovakia a fully fledged Socialist Republic.

On 9 April 1960, the regime took the precaution of readjusting the regional boundaries of the state in such a way as to prevent any resurgence of Slovak 'bourgeois' nationalism and ensure a firm centralization of the state. This came in the shape of a new law that divided the country into ten regions: seven in the Bohemian Crown Lands and three in Slovakia (the western, central and eastern Slovak regions). On 5–7 July, a state-wide congress of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia announced that socialism had been victorious in Czechoslovakia, and discussed a draft of a new constitution to acknowledge the fact. Article 1 of the constitution adopted on 11 July 1960 declared the 'unitary state of two fraternal nations possessing equal rights, the Czechs and the Slovaks', to be a 'socialist state founded on the firm alliance of the workers, peasants and intelligentsia, with the working class at its head', and to be 'part of the world socialist system'.¹⁰⁵ Although the Slovak National Council was preserved, it was specifically restricted to working 'under the direction of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia' to ensure 'a uniform execution of state power and administration' together with 'the general development of the economy and culture in Slovakia'.¹⁰⁶ The body that was supposed to administer state policies in Slovakia, the Board of Commissioners, was abolished, as were several Slovak branches of central institutions.

Article 4 of the constitution made explicit that 'the guiding force in society and in the state is the vanguard of the working class, the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia', which was defined as 'a voluntary militant alliance of the most active and most politically conscious citizens from the ranks of the workers, peasants and intelligentsia'.¹⁰⁷ The 'entire national economy' was to be 'directed by the state plan for the development of the national economy', a plan that was 'usually to be worked out for a period of five years' and, together with the annual state budget, promulgated by law.¹⁰⁸ The place of ideology was assured in Article 16, which stated that the 'entire cultural policy

of Czechoslovakia, the development of all forms of education, schooling and instruction' were to be 'directed in the spirit of the scientific world outlook, Marxism-Leninism, and closely linked to the work of the people'. The state and the 'people's organisations' were further instructed 'systematically [to] endeavour to free the minds of the people from the surviving influences of a society based on exploitation'.¹⁰⁹ As part of the constitution's stated aim of securing 'the full development of socialist society' and creating 'the conditions for the gradual transition to communism', particular attention was to be paid to 'eliminating the substantial differences between physical and mental labour and between town and country'.¹¹⁰ In the latter aim, the 'fraternal co-operation between the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and other countries of the world socialist system' was singled out for attention, and promises were made to 'systematically develop and strengthen this co-operation, which is based on mutual assistance and the international socialist division of labour'.¹¹¹

With the power of the Communist Party secure at home, and protected internationally by the support of the Warsaw Pact and *de facto* Western acceptance of the Soviet sphere of influence, the Czechoslovak government and KSCĚ could afford to relax a little. Since a combination of fear, the desire to do right by one's family and the less lovely human characteristics of greed, envy and ambition appeared to be enough to keep most people in check most of the time, outright terror was no longer necessary. The subtext of the 1960 constitution was clear: although the most embarrassingly kitsch aspects of the personality cult would no longer be insisted upon, and although mass political show trials were no longer considered necessary to teach the population at large the value of at least outward conformity, the party would continue to monitor and control all aspects of citizens' lives, its ideology would remain firmly Stalinist, and its partnership with the Soviet Union would continue, in the words of a favourite motto of the day, forever.