

The Rajk Case: A Reappraisal

THE SOVIET-YUGOSLAV controversy, which came into the open in March 1948 and developed into a full-fledged schism with the issuance of the Cominform's Bucharest Resolution three months later, was to produce a *cause célèbre* that will long be remembered. It was the trial of Laszlo Rajk and "his accomplices," most of them Hungarian Communists, on charges of plotting against Communist-ruled Hungary on Yugoslav orders, with the active support of the British and American intelligence services. The Rajk trial produced ostensibly "irrefutable proofs" that the Yugoslav Communist leaders were American agents and "war criminals," and that Rajk himself was a police spy, traitor, *déserteur* and international adventurer. He was hanged on October 15, 1949.

Although the broader purpose and meaning of the Rajk trial were clear from the outset,¹ many aspects of the case remained secret until recently. The official rehabilitation of Rajk and some of his fellow accused, carried out in 1956, gave a measure of moral satisfaction to the families of those unjustly condemned and to the survivors of the major purge that followed Rajk's arrest, but it did not clarify a number of key points. Why was Rajk made the main victim of the trial? Who decided his fate? How did the secret police obtain the confessions indispensable to the success of the trial? None of these questions was answered in 1956.

The charges brought against Rajk and the other accused (who included General György Pálffy and Tibor Szónyi, head of the personnel department of the Hungarian Communist Party) were at once monstrous and ridiculous, though their very monstrosity silenced many who would have liked to ridicule them openly. Some of them had a familiar ring, obviously taking their cue from the Moscow trials of 1936-38; others were apparently invented on the spot to suit the political expediency of the moment. Thus, stock anti-Trotskyist accusations, such as spying on behalf of a foreign power, plotting against the lives of party leaders (in this case, Rákosi, Gerö, Farkas), and conspiring to restore capitalism, were interwoven with and com-

¹ As F. Fejto observes in his *Histoire des démocraties populaires* (Paris, Seuil, 1952, p. 254), "One could say that the Rajk trial was nothing but an *ersatz* trial of Belgrade which could not take place."

plemented by fanciful charges of Yugoslav Communist collaboration with the CIC and the *Deuxième Bureau* in organizing Trotskyist groups in Hungary in order to split the Hungarian Communist Party. The three alleged evil spirits behind the "plotters" and "spies" were Allen Dulles of the U. S. intelligence, Yugoslav Minister of Interior Aleksander Rankovich, and former Hungarian police official Sombor-Schweinitzer. The first two names had a political-demonological, the third a practical significance. Sombor-Schweinitzer was necessary as a link between past and present: most of the accused were said to have been his informers in the past, hence they could be blackmailed and recruited into the American and Yugoslav secret services.

Whereas the accused Communists in the Moscow "show trials" had been charged with *degenerating* into agents of foreign powers, the script of the Rajk trial produced even more appalling "revelations" purporting to prove that Rajk and his accomplices *had never been* Communists. They were said to have been diversionists and opportunists all their lives—consequently, natural allies of Tito's devilish "plot against Europe".³ Rajk, a veteran of the International Brigade in the Spanish Civil War and Hungary's ruthless Communist Minister of Interior between 1946 and 1948, himself testified that he had been a police agent and informer since 1932. Tibor Szónyi, whom the Swiss police had known during the war as a dangerous Stalinist⁴ (he had taken refuge from the Nazis in Switzerland), confessed that he was an American agent. György Pálffy-Oesterreicher, a hero of the Hungarian anti-Nazi Resistance during the war, told the court that his political ideal was Mussolini's fascism. None of the three was in any way guilty of the crimes to which he confessed. Ironically, the only Hungarian defendant to come out of the main trial with his life, the Social Democrat Pál Justus, was the sole accused with a genuine Trotskyist past.

² Before World War II Sombor-Schweinitzer had headed the political department of the Hungarian police. He was deported by the Germans in 1944 for alleged anti-German activities.

³ Derek Kartun, editor of the London *Daily Worker*, published a book on the Rajk case under the title *Tito's Plot Against Europe* (London, 1949).

⁴ See F. Fejto, *La tragédie hongroise*, Paris, 1956, p. 75.

ANOTHER FEATURE WHICH made the Rajk trial look like a refurbished, second-rate version of the Moscow trials was the very unanimity and uniformity of the confessions. All eight accused fully admitted their guilt and endured the prosecutor's scorn with exemplary meekness, literally holding out the other cheek. Their confessions and statements before the court were all framed in a uniform, cut-and-dried style suggestive of a prosecutor, often repeating, word for word, ritual Cominform phrases and formulas. The confessions of the accused were thinly-veiled self-denunciations, and their last appeals open denunciations of Tito, Kardelj and Rankovich. The prosecution called in witnesses in large numbers, but not one appeared on the side of the defense. Amongst them were former functionaries of the Horthy regime, Communists who had fought together with Rajk in Spain or knew Szónyi from Switzerland, and a man named István Stolte, a colleague and comrade of Rajk many years before. Stolte's appearance in the dock surprised some people who thought he was living in Germany. They were right, but Stolte had been tricked into visiting Vienna, had been kidnapped there by the MVD and spirited to Hungary.⁵

Just last year the many still unanswered questions about the Rajk trial were reopened again by the announcement of a decision by the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party (MSZMP) to rehabilitate "all victims of the autocracy connected with the cult of personality."⁶ This was evidence of Kadar's wish to dissociate himself and his government from the crimes of the Rakosi regime and to close a shameful chapter in the history of the Hungarian party. For the gross violation of justice inherent in the Rajk Trial and in all the subsequent sub-trials held *in camera* (Kádár himself was sentenced in one of these trials) the 1962 MSZMP declaration blamed "the cult of personality" in general, and Rákosi, Gerő, Farkas and the leaders of the Hungarian Security Police (AVH) in particular. The members of the so-called Rákosi clique, it said, concocted fictitious charges against their fellow Communists solely in order to strengthen their personal power. "On the basis of the documents at its disposal," added the declaration, "the Central Committee came to the conclusion that the schemes behind the trials that took place in the period of the cult of personality . . . were made up by Rakosi himself." The document also condemned the judicial organs which complied with Rakosi's orders and cooperated in staging the trials.

This somewhat belated pronouncement by the MSZMP has two conspicuous shortcomings: it devotes only one discreet sentence to the anti-Titoist aspect of the trial, and this without actually naming Yugoslavia; and it preserves complete silence on the role played by Soviet security or-

⁵ See Ferenc A. Vali, *Rift and Revolt in Hungary*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1961, p. 61.

6. "A Magyar Szocialista Munkaspárt Központi Bizottságának határozata a személyi kultusz éveiben a munkaszervezeti emberek ellen indított törvénytörő perek lezárásáról," *Társadalmi Szemle* (Budapest), August-September 1962, p. 47.

gans in the conception and preparation of the Rajk trial. Yet it is clear that, without Stalin's maniacal determination to destroy Tito's heresy and without the closest possible cooperation between the AVH and the MVD, the Rajk trial could not have taken place even if Rákosi had willed it. Rákosi and Gábor Péter of the AVH could hardly have preconceived Stalin's intentions; they merely helped realize those intentions by finding a scapegoat through whom Tito's perfidy could be demonstrated. As for Rajk, he was no Titoist, nor even an oppositionist; he was simply the most suitable person for Rakosi and the Soviet secret police to cast in the stellar role of Titoist agent.

THIS IS ONE of the conclusions that can be drawn from the excellent, 347-page study of the Rajk case by Vincent Savarius (Béla Szász), recently published in Hungarian by the Imre Nagy Institute in Brussels.⁷ Savarius had been active in the illegal Communist movement in Hungary as early as 1931, and his friendship with Rajk went back to that same period, when both were students at Budapest University. This and the fact that Savarius lived abroad during the war were more than enough to make him "suspect"—that is, potentially useful for the scriptwriters of the Rajk case. He was arrested in May 1949, kept in prison for more than five years, finally rehabilitated, and since 1957 has been living in London. His book is a highly readable and remarkably objective record of his personal experiences, interspersed with interesting comments and observations about the fabrication of the Rajk case and the techniques of the Hungarian secret police.

Savarius maintains that before his frame-up Rajk had not been involved in any factional struggle against Rakosi, and he adduces evidence to show that Rajk, in fact, supported the anti-Yugoslav decision of the Cominform. If there was any tension between Rákosi and Rajk, it would have resulted from *tactical* rather than ideological differences. The Moscow-approved policy of the Hungarian party after World War II was the formation of a coalition with friendly non-Communist parties, stressing all the time the democratic and patriotic character of the Hungarian Communists. Class warfare was, for the time being, relegated to the background. But if Rakosi was a tactician, Rajk certainly was not: he was a fighter, almost a fanatic. He played a major role in the gradual elimination of the coalition and the suppression of the non-Communist parties in the immediate postwar period. If anything, Rajk was too zealous and too popular amongst militant Communists for Rakosi's liking. The anti-Semitism attributed to Rajk by some⁸ could not have been a decisive factor in his selection by Rákosi to be the chief villain of the piece, for out of the six Hungarians accused in the Rajk trial, three were of Jewish origin, and both Szónyi and Szalai

⁷ Vincent Savarius, *Minden kénszer nélkül*. Brussels, 1963.

⁸ Ferenc Nagy, *The Struggle Behind the Iron Curtain*, New York, 1948, p. 190.

were said to have Zionist connections. Rather, it appears to have been, above all, the fanatic, unconditional nature of Rajk's devotion to the Party—hence, his presumable willingness to sacrifice himself for it—that decided the architects of the trial to make him the main victim in preference to Imre Nagy or any other possible candidate. Other favorable factors, from the scriptwriters' viewpoint, were the "vulnerability" of his past⁹ and the fact that he had been to many foreign countries, including France, Spain and Yugoslavia, and had met many foreign Communists. In many ways, he was the ideal scapegoat.

What we have, therefore is not so much a powerful, malevolent Rákosi scheming to destroy Rajk out of political enmity as a servile and resourceful Rákosi giving bright ideas to General Bielkin of the MVD, the stage director of this ambitious Soviet-Hungarian coproduction. Savarius believes that even Bielkin had to consult Moscow, the final decisions resting with Stalin.¹⁰ Once Rajk had agreed under pressure to play his assigned part, the trial took place, and therewith both Stalin and Rákosi achieved their respective aims. On Stalin's side, the depth of Tito's "treason" stood revealed; on Rákosi's, a blow was dealt to the Western-oriented Hungarian Communists, and Communist Party members throughout Eastern Europe were intimidated into complete obedience.¹¹

The Hungarian secret police handled the prisoners involved in the Rajk trial and its subsidiary cases with special brutality, torturing them in the most horrible ways, psychologically as well as physically. The investigators used both threats and false promises: some of the principal accused were offered "deals" (similar to that offered Radek before his Moscow trial) none of which was actually honored; others broke down under the pressure of dramatic appeals to their party loyalty. All these methods are known to have been employed in the preparatory stages of the Moscow trials. The AVH looked upon the prisoners, to quote Savarius, simply as "pre-fabricated elements of a building under construction."¹² The construction work had three stages: in the first, confessions were extorted in the hundreds, in the second, these confessions were fitted together and any gaps or contradictions filled in or eliminated; and finally the assembled "building" was painted and decorated—the trail could begin.

⁹ Ferenc Vali explains the reasons for this "vulnerability" in his book (*op. cit.*, p. 34): "In World War II, when Rajk was arrested as a Communist conspirator by the pro-Nazi Hungarian movement, his life was saved by two powerful Arrow-Cross brothers. After the war he repaid this debt by removing the names of his brothers (then in Germany) from the list of war criminals."

¹⁰ Savarius, *op. cit.*, p. 230.

¹¹ According to authoritative accounts, Rajk at first refused but finally was persuaded to yield by Janos Kadar, then Minister of Interior. See Savarius, *op. cit.*, p. 213, and G. Paloczi-Horvath, *The Undefeated*. London, 1959, pp. 259-62.

¹² Savarius, *op. cit.*, p. 117.

SAVARIUS-SZASZ had the courage and stubbornness not to admit to accusations which might have landed him in the prisoners' dock at the main trial—and also the good fortune of not being really necessary to the prosecution of the trial. He was separately tried *in camera* together with other superfluous "prefabricated elements." Only his name was mentioned in the Rajk trial: the prosecutor referred to him once as a British, and once as an American spy.

The irrational, often demonological, features of the Rajk case and the atrocious methods employed by the AVH in its preparation undermined the faith of even the staunchest Communist believers who were touched by it. Many who experienced AVH brutality lost faith in the party entirely, and even those victims who have since remained loyal Communists underwent a serious moral crisis. This crisis is vividly described by Gyula Oszkó, himself a police officer at the time of his arrest, who only recently published his reminiscences in Budapest.¹³ Oszkó does not hide the total helplessness and despair that gripped him in jail and the bitterness he felt upon learning the outcome of the Rajk trial. He was convinced of Rajk's innocence (having known him from Spain) and could not accept the cynical claim that the frame-up would serve "the interest of the Party". The only thing that kept up his spirits during the five years he spent in jail was the hope that time would ultimately vindicate the truth that "a just cause cannot be served by unjust means."¹⁴ We believe that the same truth impelled Vincent Savarius to write his book.

The international consequences of the Rajk case—Tito's continued defiance of Stalin and Yugoslavia's embarkation on its "own road to socialism"—are well known. Yet, the consequences of Rajk's execution within Hungary were equally important, for it was his ghost that roused Hungarian Communist writers to rebel against Rákosi, finally leading to the dictator's downfall. October 6, 1956, when the honorary reburial of Rajk and his comrades took place, was an advance rehearsal for the events of October 23: amongst the silent mourners at the graveside stood those who were to lead the huge student demonstration seventeen days later, raising the curtain on the Hungarian uprising.

In 1949, Laszlo Rajk had died ignominiously on the gallows because of Stalin's desire to crush Tito. But in October 1956 it was Stalin's colossus that toppled under the blows of history.

¹³ *Kortárs* (Budapest), February 1963.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 255.

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EDITOR'S NOTE: Readers are welcome to comment on matters discussed in this journal. Letters should be addressed to the Editors, Problems of Communism, US Information Agency, 1776 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW, Washington 25, D.C. (Please note: Subscription orders or inquiries should be addressed according to instructions on the front inside cover.)

ON STALIN

TO THE EDITORS: The March-April issue of *Problems of Communism*, containing an article by Francis Randall on the early biographies of Stalin, fell into my hands shortly before my departure for the Soviet Union (the first trip in over 38 years), and in view of Dr. Randall's gracious yet reluctant comments on my *Stalin*, I would appreciate space for a few observations. Since Dr. Randall has undertaken to do a new biography of Stalin, to a study of whose career I have devoted nearly 35 years, allow me to enlighten him on some of the facts to which he adverts.

1. In discussing at length Essad Bey's book on Stalin, Dr. Randall refers to him as a "deliberately mysterious German Near Eastern writer using the Turkish name and title of Essad Bey." Essad Bey's real name is Nusselbaum, a Russian-Jewish refugee in the Caucasus whose true identity was well-known to his publishers. I was reliably informed that Essad Bey did not even know Georgian, and was certainly not a German. The real mystery to me is why Dr. Randall should have gone to such lengths to dissect Essad Bey's "biography" which no serious student of the Russian Revolution ever regarded as anything but a fictional melange on the order of Raguza's French biography which introduced Stalin as a Jew and of the notorious French fabrication under the name of Svanidze, *My Uncle Joe*.

2. Louis Fischer did not break "decisively with communism during the Great Purges", but considerably later, after the conclusion of the "Stalin-Hitler" (Molotov-Ribbentrop) Pact. Mr. Fischer is an American writer, a native of Philadelphia, although he may also be "of Russian origin," which is quite different from "a writer of Russian origin."

3. If I may be allowed a few words of comment about my *Stalin*, of special interest to students of his life, it contained the first and only complete bibliography on Stalin available by 1931, at a time when Stalin was the most enigmatic figure on the world stage. That is why my book (because of the source material) was welcomed by H. G.

Wells in a note to me as "a godsend," why persons ranging from Albert Einstein to Col. House hailed it as a revelation of an area hitherto hidden from western eyes. Let Dr. Randall look up Dorothy Thompson's report on her visit to the Soviet Union and he will discover that she did not even learn Stalin's first name when she was in Moscow. If memory does not betray me, she called him Peter Stalin.

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MR. RANDALL REPLIES: I am glad that Mr. Levine has penetrated the mystery of "Essad Bey," who *was* credited by his publisher with being a Georgian-speaking German officer in the Ottoman army; his book was worth discussing for its influence on Hitler. I stand corrected on the birthplace of Louis Fischer. However, I must cite the testimony of Mr. Fischer, a man whose word I do not doubt, in his autobiography, *Men and Politics*. There he movingly describes his "divorce" from Stalin's Russia during his stay in Moscow in 1937 as his friends were being purged. Fischer, long a defender of Communist Russia, never justified the purges, and prolonged silence from such a source spoke volumes. His silence jeopardized his chances of getting his Russian wife and Russian-born children out of the Soviet Union, as Soviet officials gave him to understand. Nevertheless, Mr. Fischer had the courage to dissent openly from Stalin's policies at the beginning of 1939, while the purges were still going on, before his family was safe, and many months before the Stalin-Hitler Pact. Mr. Levine's *Stalin* was indeed a book the world needed very badly. It was, as I said in my article, "the best of the early lives of Stalin."

ON RODOS

TO THE EDITORS: Mr. Conquest's suggestion concerning the identity of the mysterious Soviet secret police interrogator Rodos (see his letter in the March-April, 1963 issue)