

The Comparative Examination of the Road to the Differing Current Perceptions of László Rajk and Rudolf Slánský

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The names of László Rajk and Rudolf Slánský are undoubtedly intertwined with the historical legacy of Hungary's and Czechoslovakia's Stalinist political trials, which aimed to unveil the "enemies within the party." Rajk, as the Minister of Interior, and Slánský, as the general secretary of the KSC, played a robust role in establishing the socialist system in their countries. Their careers, trials, and fate only slightly differ from each other. However, Rajk's reburial in 1956 and his son's active involvement in the opposition movement during the 1980s made his public perception quite complex. These factors generated a sort of sympathetic victimhood around him, disregarding his career within the communist party. This stays in sharp opposition to the perception of Slánský, whose character was never looked at sympathetically. In my study, I examine the road to this complex image of the two politicians based on secondary literature, archival and journalistic sources. Using a comparative historical and cross-national approach to explore the similarities and differences between Rajk's and Slánský's life, political career, demise, and the aftermath of their trials, the study not only depicts the distinctions and resemblances between the two men, but also reveals how their current perceptions took shape throughout the years.

Keywords: communism, political trials, history of memory, comparative history, cross national history

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It is not the role of a historian to make a final decision in such a challenging matter as how society should remember its past. However, the historian is obliged to draw attention to these complex issues, as they affect the development of current views. Thus, this study examines the similarities

and differences between Rudolf Slánský's and László Rajk's lives, political careers, fates, and the aftermath of their trials, and with that, the road to their intricate current image. Using comparative analysis, the aim is to give a clear summary of the reasons why their present perceptions differ so much, given that their lives shared many similarities.

To achieve this goal, the best methodology is the comparative approach. The human mind thinks in comparative patterns in everyday life, therefore, every historical work contains comparisons. However, comparative history is a specific method as opposed to the often unconscious and abstract analogies we use daily. According to the Hungarian historian, Béla Tomka, historical comparison is the explicit and systematic juxtaposition of two or more entities from different contexts. With this, one can gain clearer information about the compared entities, can set up and/or test hypotheses, or can bring a completely new aspect to already existing research.¹ Despite this somewhat clear definition, comparative history – while certainly not a new approach in historical literature – lacks clear and uniformly accepted criteria along which historians can execute their comparative research.² Therefore, according to Tomka, different aims require different comparisons. But generally, such inquiry can be successful comparative research if the historian works with effectively comparable entities, keeps the number of these entities on a manageable level for the scientific analysis, and pays attention to the entities' geographical and timeframe context.³

Considering that the subjects of this research, Slánský and Rajk, were from different countries (Czechoslovakia and Hungary, respectively), the approach of the inquiry is not only comparative, but transnational as well. Transnational and comparative history often go “hand-in-hand,” since the former regularly uses cross-national comparisons.⁴ With this fruitful combination of comparative and transnational history,

¹ BÉLA TOMKA, *Az összehasonlító módszer a történetírásban – eredmények és kihasználatlan lehetőségek*, in: *Korszakok és korszakhatárok. Jelenkortörténeti tanulmányok*, (ed.) Béla Tomka, Budapest 2023, pp. 24–33.

² MARTA PETRUSEWICZ, *The Modernization of the European Periphery; Ireland, Poland, and the Two Sicilies, 1820–1870: Parallel and Connected, Distinct and Comparable*, in: *Comparison and History: Europe in Cross-National Perspective*, (eds.) Deborah Cohen, Maura O'Connor, New York 2004, p. 146.

³ B. TOMKA, *Az összehasonlító módszer a történetírásban*, pp. 34–36.

⁴ AKIRA IRIYE, *Global and Transnational History. The Past, Present and Future*, New York 2013, p. 72.

it is possible to get a new, cross-national perspective on certain historical questions, while also gaining a deeper understanding of the researched subjects on a national level.⁵

In this study, the compared entities are two similarly high-ranking communist party members from the same time period (mid-1940s to 1950s) and geographical area. This allows the focus of the research to stay close to its subjects to get a deeper understanding of them. The comparison of the two late communist politicians is almost evident. The fact that both held key positions in neighbouring countries' communist parties after 1945 and met the same fate, but are remembered in vastly different ways, gives a perfect opportunity for a juxtaposed, transnational examination. To do so, however, it is necessary to draw out the explicit aspects along which the comparison will take place. First, it is important to concisely summarise their lives and careers, since later it is inevitable to refer to the details of the differences and similarities between the two politicians. The second aspect, examining and comparing the political circumstances of their show-trials' revisions and the role of the dissident movements, is also significant in analysing how their perception formed before the "annus mirabilis" in 1989. And, since it is hard to measure scientifically their present-day perception – perception being a truly objective interpretation of information – in this study, the third aspect of the comparison is the current historiography of the two communist politicians. Considering that secondary literature is not only informative for historians, but also able to form the overall view and polemics on a certain topic in society, this factor could be seen as an adequate base for the comparison to inspect the existing memory of the two men.

The Almost Same Road to the Exact Same Fate

It is not the goal to give a detailed biography of Rajk or Slánský; however, the summary of their lives and careers is inevitable to give historical context on their current perception. Short biographies of each follow.

⁵ MÁRKUS KELLER, *A megértés lehetősége – az összehasonlítás hasznáról*, Aetas 20/2005, no. 4, p. 111.

László Rajk

László Rajk was born in 1909 in Székelyudvarhely, Transylvania. His father, József Reich, owned a bootmaker workshop, which meant not just financial stability for his family, but some wealth as well. He changed their surname from Reich to Rájk to strengthen the family's Hungarian national identity in the turbulent last years of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. From his eleven children, László was the ninth. László, however, was not the only one to have a political career, as his older brother, Endre, became a member of the Hungarian fascist Arrow Cross Party (Nyilaskeresztes Párt) and was the government commissioner for stock management in the Arrow Cross Government in 1944.

The family, after the Treaty of Trianon, became a Hungarian minority in Romania. Due to this new circumstance, most siblings moved to Hungary to pursue their studies. László studied to be a French–Hungarian teacher at the Péter Pázmány University from 1927, during which he also had the chance to study in France at the University of Franche-Comté in Besançon. He returned to Hungary in 1930 and became more and more involved with leftist and communist ideas, and the illegal organisations associated with the ideologies. He became a member of the Party of Communists in Hungary (Kommunisták Magyarországi Pártja, KMP)⁶ in 1931.

Due to his leftist orientation, the 1930s were tumultuous years for him: he was imprisoned, expelled from the country, studied construction, was sent to Czechoslovakia by the party, and, most notably, fought in the Spanish Civil War from 1937 to 1939. Rajk spent several months in French internment camps before illegally returning to Hungary during the Second World War in 1941. In 1944, he was arrested once again, but after a short time in prison, he was released and took over leading the illegal communist movement. When he was arrested once again, in 1944, it was his brother, Endre who saved him from a death sentence – which he repaid later, when, in 1946, he saved Endre from a similar sentence.⁷

⁶ The party was founded in 1918 and was dissolved in 1943. In 1944, it was reestablished as the Hungarian Communist Party (Magyar Kommunista Párt, MKP), which fused with the Hungarian Social Democratic Party (Magyarországi Szociáldemokrata Párt, MSZDP), creating the Hungarian Working People's Party (Magyar Dolgozók Pártja, MDP) in 1948.

⁷ DUNCAN SHIELDS, *A Rajk-fráterek*, Budapest 2007, pp. 18–120.

After the war, his career at the now legal communist party quickly went upwards. He became a popular communist politician in post-war Hungary. In 1945, the official paper of the communist party, *Szabad Nép*, recognised and celebrated his leadership of the illegal movement during the war, and his actions in the Spanish Civil War.⁸ He quickly became an important member of the party as well. After he was appointed Minister of Interior in 1946, one of his main goals was to strengthen the state security service⁹ led by Gábor Péter.¹⁰ This caused a tremendous amount of tension between the two men, and soon the MDP's General Secretary, Mátyás Rákosi,¹¹ lost trust in Rajk. As it turned out, Rajk's leading style was much more problematic for the party's "muscovite" leadership than they had previously anticipated.¹² Thus, Stalin's expectations for a grandiose political trial targeting the "enemy within the party" was more than convenient for Rákosi to get rid of Rajk. Rajk's political isolation started in the summer of 1948, when he was removed from the position of Minister of Interior and was appointed Minister of Foreign Policies. This new

⁸ Unknown author, *Rajk László hazaérkezett*, *Szabad Nép* 3/1945, no. 41, p. 3; Unknown author, *Budapest ünnepli a spanyol szabadságharc hőseit*, *Szabad Nép* 3/1945, no. 98, p. 1.

⁹ The name and structure of the Hungarian political police changed quite often throughout the 1940s and 1950s. From 1945 to 1946, it existed as the Political Police Department (Politikai Rendészeti Osztály, PRO); from 1946 to 1948, as the State Protection Department (Államvédelmi Osztály, ÁVO); from 1948 to 1950, as the State Protection Authority of the Ministry of the Interior (Belügyminisztérium Államvédelmi Hatósága, BM ÁVH); and finally, from 1950 to 1953, as the independent State Protection Authority (Államvédelmi Hatóság, ÁVH). After 1953, the organisation was reassigned to the Ministry of Interior. For more on the history of the service in Hungarian, see ROLF MÜLLER, *Politikai rendőrség a Rákosi-korszakban*, Budapest 2012.

¹⁰ Péter led the Hungarian state security services from 1945 until his arrest in 1953. For more on his life in Hungarian, see ROLF MÜLLER, *Az erőszak neve: Péter Gábor. Az ÁVH vezetőjének élete*, Budapest 2017.

¹¹ Rákosi was the general, then first secretary of the MKP and MDP between 1945 and 1956. Between 1952 and 1953, he was also Prime Minister. In 1956, he was removed from his positions and expelled from the Political Committee. He left Hungary and moved to the Soviet Union. For more on his life in Hungarian, see ÁRPÁD PÜNKÖSTI, *Rákosi a hatalomért, 1945–1948*, Budapest 1992; ÁRPÁD PÜNKÖSTI, *Rákosi a csúcson, 1948–1953*, Budapest 1996; ÁRPÁD PÜNKÖSTI, *Rákosi bukása, száműzetése és halála, 1953–1971*, Budapest 2001.

¹² Á. PÜNKÖSTI, *Rákosi a csúcson*, pp. 143–155; TIBOR ZINNER, "A nagy politikai affér", a *Rajk–Brankov-ügy*, Volume I. Budapest 2013, pp. 49–61, 83–85; R. MÜLLER, *Az erőszak neve: Péter Gábor*, pp. 127–137.

post set him apart from the BM ÁVH, which already started preparing to construct his fall. He was arrested on May 30, 1949.¹³

The trial of Rajk, held between September 16 and 24, 1949, fulfilled Stalin's expectations regarding the fabricated concept of "unveiling the enemies within the party." The court sentenced him, András Szalai,¹⁴ and Tibor Szőnyi¹⁵ to death; Pál Justus¹⁶ and Lazar Brankov¹⁷ to life imprisonment; and Milán Ognyenovics¹⁸ to nine years in prison. The jury gave the case of György Pálffy¹⁹ and Béla Korondi²⁰ over to the military court where they (together with Dezső Németh²¹ and Ottó Horváth²²) were also sentenced to death.²³

¹³ T. ZINNER, "A nagy politikai affér", *a Rajk–Brankov-ügy*, Volume I. pp. 86–87, 263–312.

¹⁴ Szalai (b. Ervin Lendler) was the deputy head of the party's Cadre Department from 1947 until his arrest on May 16, 1949.

¹⁵ Szőnyi was a neurologist; from 1947 until his arrest on May 16, 1949, he was the head of the party's Cadre Department.

¹⁶ Justus was a writer, poet, and translator; he led the social democratic party's Department of Agitation and Propaganda between 1945 and 1948, and was the vice president of the Hungarian Radio from 1948 until his arrest on June 18, 1949.

¹⁷ Brankov was the first secretary of the Yugoslav legation in Hungary between 1947 and 1948. After Yugoslavia was expelled from the Cominform, he emigrated to Hungary where he was the leading person of Yugoslav emigrants. He was arrested on June 21, 1949.

¹⁸ Ognyenovics was the national, then general secretary of the Democratic Union of Hungarian South Slavs (Magyarországi Délszlávok Demokratikus Szövetsége) from 1948 until his arrest on July 5, 1949.

¹⁹ Pálffy (b. Oesterreicher) was a military officer; he led the Military Political Department of the Ministry of Defence (Honvédelmi Minisztérium Katonapolitikai Osztálya, Katpol) between 1945 and 1948. From 1948 until his arrest on July 5, 1949, he served as the Deputy Minister of Defence.

²⁰ Korondi (b. György Dergán) was active in the Katpol between 1945 and 1946. He became the employee of the Ministry of Interior after 1946, where he filled different positions until his arrest on June 6, 1949.

²¹ Németh was a military officer; he was the military attaché of the Hungarian Embassy in Moscow from 1948 until his arrest on August 5, 1949.

²² Horváth (b. Hönigsberg) was a military officer and police lieutenant-colonel. He was arrested on July 5, 1949.

²³ For an exceptionally detailed work on the Rajk trial in Hungarian, see TIBOR ZINNER, "A nagy politikai affér", *a Rajk–Brankov-ügy*, Volume I and II. Budapest 2013 and 2014. In Czech, see KAREL KAPLAN, *Mám, co jsem si zasloužil. Zpráva o zavraždění Rudolfa Slánského a spol.*, [I Got What I Deserved. Report on the Murder of Rudolf Slánský et al.], Praha 2022, pp. 46–63.

Rudolf Slánský

Rudolf Slánský was eight years older than Rajk. He was born in the village of Nezvěstice, Czechoslovakia in 1901. His father, Šimon Slánský, owned a small village store. The Slánský family was much smaller than the Rajks: Rudolf had only three brothers, two of whom, Josef and Richard, later also became active in the communist movement.

For a short period, it seemed that Slánský would follow in his merchant father's footsteps, since, after finishing gymnasium, he went to study at the Academy of Commerce in Plzeň (Pilsen). His interests, however, soon took a different direction as he started to become increasingly familiarised with socialist and communist literature thanks to his older brother, Josef, in the early years of the 1920s. After he left Plzeň for Prague, this interest led him to join the social democratic party in 1920, where he took part in the founding of Czechoslovakia's Communist Party (Komunistická strana Československa, KSČ) in 1921. Slánský played an active role in the early years of the organisation: he was one of the passionate young communists who founded the Union of Communist Youth in Czechoslovakia (Svaz komunistické mládeže Československa)²⁴ also in 1921, and was a member of the Faction of Communist Students. In 1924, he was already a member of the KSČ's Regional Committee in Prague, while he worked as the editor of the party's official paper, *Rudé právo*, and at the editorial office of the *Dělnický deník*.

In contrast to Rajk, Slánský did not participate in the Spanish Civil War, but stayed in Czechoslovakia and steadily built up his career within the party apparatus during the 1920s and 1930s. Being a close friend of the KSČ's soon-to-be general secretary, Klement Gottwald, was in his favour. During the late 1920s, he filled different positions at the regional KSČ organisations in Ostrava and Kladno, then, in 1929, for a short period, he became the secretary of the KSČ's Regional Committee in Prague.

²⁴ Although many archival documents refer to this organisation as the "Komsomol," it was not the same as the All-Union Leninist Young Communists (Всесоюзный ленинский коммунистический союз молодежи), founded in 1918. The "Czechoslovak Komsomol" was established as the KSČ's independent organisation. In 1922, its name changed to the Communist Youth Union of Czechoslovakia (Komunistický svaz mládeže Československa). In this form it was dissolved in 1936. The youth organisations of the KSČ later existed as the Pioneer (Pionýr), the Czechoslovak Union of the Youth (Československý svaz mládeže), and, from 1970, as the Socialist Union of the Youth (Socialistický svaz mládeže).

It was, however, not a linear road leading to the higher echelons of the party, as, for example, the late 1930s were filled with disappointment for Slánský since many fellow party members voiced criticism towards him.

The 1938 Munich Agreement was a caesura in the history of Czechoslovakia – and in the life of Slánský as well. After the agreement, like many of his comrades, he chose to go to Moscow in exile. During these years, he worked at the editorial office of the Moscow radio, where he edited the Czech – later the Central European – programme, while his political position steadily strengthened as he became an important part of the exile party leadership. Time spent in the Soviet Union, however, was hard on his family and not only due to the ongoing war. His daughter was abducted in plain sight in Moscow, what was understandably shocking for the Slánskýs.²⁵ In 1944, he and the other high-ranking communists returned home from Moscow in a partisan group, in which Slánský was responsible for the political aspects of the movement. Being in such group meant that he also actively participated in the so-called Slovak National Uprising before returning to Moscow again.

Slánský was appointed general secretary in April 1945, a position he filled until 1951. This post was crucial not only for his steeply ascending political career, but for the whole country as well, especially after the coup d'état of the KSČ in 1948. Serving as general secretary, Slánský became the second ranking member after his close friend, the now president, Klement Gottwald. Their long-standing friendship, however, did not prevent Gottwald from complying with the orders from Moscow regarding the “unveiling the enemies within the party.” Following a long search after the “Czechoslovak Rajk,”²⁶ the position of general secretary was abolished and Slánský was appointed Deputy Prime Minister in September 1951. Just a few weeks later, on November 24, 1951, he was arrested.²⁷

²⁵ Even though there were extensive investigations to find the child, the culprit was never found. On this event, in Czech, see Slánský's wife's memoir: JOSEFA SLÁNSKÁ, *Zpráva o mém muži [Report on My Husband]*, Praha 2018, pp. 133–147.

²⁶ Neither the case of Vladimír Clementis, nor the case of Otto Šling, was sufficient to establish a wide-scale show trial such as in the case of Rajk. For more on the events leading to the Slánský trial, in Czech, see K. KAPLAN, *Mám, co jsem si zasloužil*, pp. 91–324.

²⁷ KAREL KAPLAN, PAVEL KOSATÍK, *Gottwaldovi muži [Gottwald's Men]*, Praha 2004, pp. 79–88, 98–110, 118–120; KAREL KAPLAN, *Kronika komunistického Československa. Klement Gottwald a Rudolf Slánský [Chronicle of the Communist Czechoslovakia. Klement Gottwald and Rudolf Slánský]*, Praha 2009, pp. 207–225,

His and his co-accused's trial was held between November 20 and 27, 1952. The court sentenced Slánský, Bedřich Geminder,²⁸ Ludvík Frejka,²⁹ Josef Frank,³⁰ Vladimír Clementis,³¹ Bedřich Reicin,³² Karel Šváb,³³ Rudolf Margolius,³⁴ Otto Fischl,³⁵ Otto Šling,³⁶ and André Simone³⁷ to death, and Artur London,³⁸ Evžen (Eugen) Löbl,³⁹ and Vavro Hajdů⁴⁰ to life imprisonment. Therefore, even though Czechoslovakia was late in “finding their own Rajk,” the state security service, the Státní

251–265; JAN CHADIMA, *Rudolf Slánský*, Praha 2022, pp. 23–31, 51–53, 59–83, 91–97, 115–122, 147–155, 181–187, 193–207, 223, 315–334.

²⁸ Geminder led the International Department of the KSČ's Central Committee's (CC) Secretary between 1946 and 1951; he worked for a short period at the Czechoslovak Radio until his arrest on November 24, 1951.

²⁹ Frejka was the secretary of the KSČ CC's National Economy Committee between 1945 and 1948; he led the Department of National Economy at the Office of the President of the Republic from 1948 until his arrest on January 31, 1952.

³⁰ Frank was a member of the KSČ CC from 1946 until his arrest on May 23, 1952.

³¹ Clementis was the Minister of Foreign Affairs between 1948 and 1950. He was arrested on January 21, 1951. For more on his life, in English, see JOSETTE BAER, *“Spirits that I've cited...?” Vladimír Clementis (1902–1952): The Political Biography of a Czechoslovak Communist*, Stuttgart 2017.

³² Reicin was the Deputy Minister of National Defence from 1948 until his arrest on February 8, 1951.

³³ Šváb was a member of the KSČ CC's “bezpečnostní pětka” (security five) between 1948 and 1950, in which he became the most influential person regarding the state security organisations. He was the Deputy Minister of National Security from 1950 until his arrest on February 16, 1951.

³⁴ Margolius was the Deputy Minister of Foreign Trade from 1949 until his arrest on January 10, 1951.

³⁵ Fischl was the ambassador of Czechoslovakia in East Berlin between 1949 and 1951. Until his arrest on June 21, 1951, he worked as a lawyer.

³⁶ Šling worked as the Regional Party Secretary of Brno from 1945 until his arrest on October 6, 1950.

³⁷ Simone was the leading journalist of the party press. He was arrested on June 9, 1952.

³⁸ London was the deputy head of KSČ CC's Cadre Department between 1948 and 1949; he was the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs from 1949 until his arrest on January 29, 1951. For more on his life, in English, see ARTUR LONDON, *The Confession*, New York 1970; in Czech, see ARTUR LONDON, *Doznání. V soukromí pražského procesu [Confessions. In the Machinery of the Prague Trials]*, Praha 1990.

³⁹ Löbl was the Deputy Minister of Foreign Trade from 1945 until his arrest on November 24, 1949.

⁴⁰ Hajdů was the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs from 1949 until his arrest on April 2, 1951.

bezpečnost (StB), and the KSČ compensated for this with the high number of death sentences and the many prolonged follow-up trials.⁴¹

Biographical Differences and Similarities

Even this summary of the two politicians' lives reveals major differences that play an important role in understanding the context of the road leading to their current perceptions. The two most notable ones lie in their activities during the Second World War, and their relationships with the leaders of their parties. In the first case, Rajk stayed in Hungary and not only participated in the illegal movement, but led it as well, which made him a so-called "domestic communist." In contrast, Slánský left the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia behind to go into exile in Moscow, and while he returned to fight as a partisan in the 1944 Slovak National Uprising, a year later, he arrived in Czechoslovakia as a "muscovite." Although the conflict between the "domestic" and "muscovite" groups was much more prevalent within the MDP,⁴² this leads to the second major difference, as it might have played a role in how Rajk's and Slánský's relations developed with the party leaders after 1945.

Although Slánský was already in a close friendship with Gottwald in the 1920s,⁴³ the shared experiences of the years in exile strengthened the bond between them and their families. As an expression of their friendship, Josefa and Rudolf Slánský named their daughter, Marta, after Gottwald's wife, Marta Gottwaldová, in 1949. Furthermore, when Gottwald's daughter married Alexej Čepička⁴⁴ in 1951, Slánský was her best man.⁴⁵ These examples prove that the companionship between the

⁴¹ PÉTER BENCSIK, *Csehszlovákia története dokumentumokban*, Budapest 2016, p. 279.

⁴² Á. PÜNKÖSTI, *Rákosi a hatalomért*, pp. 96–97; T. ZINNER, "A nagy politikai affér", *a Rajk–Brankov-ügy*, Volume I. pp. 54–55. For more about this, in English, see CSABA KÁLI, *Hungary's Communist Party Elite in the "Long" Fifties (1948–1962)*, *Pamięć i Sprawiedliwość* 32/2018, no. 2, pp. 236–258.

⁴³ K. KAPLAN, *Kronika komunistického Československa*, p. 208.

⁴⁴ Čepička was the Minister of Internal Trade between 1947 and 1948; he was the Minister of Justice from 1948 until 1950, while he also filled the position of Chairman of the State Council for Church Affairs between 1949 and 1950. He was the Minister of National Defence between 1950 and 1956 and, at the same time, was also the Deputy Prime Minister from 1953 until 1956.

⁴⁵ J. CHADIMA, *Rudolf Slánský*, p. 298, 325.

two families ran deep and was far from superficial comradeship. Slánský also had other close friendships within the party, such as his deputy, Ladislav Kopřiva,⁴⁶ and the Prime Minister, Antonín Zápotocký.⁴⁷ However, the campaign of “unveiling the enemy within the party,” in which Slánský himself actively participated in the beginning, made it possible to override private relationships in favour of the party’s expectations and policies. Thus, these relations – after pressuring Gottwald from Moscow to comply – were utilised for the arrest of Josefa and Rudolf in 1952, as it was planned to happen after a dinner party at the Zápotockýs.⁴⁸

The same cannot be said about Rajk. Of course, he also had friends and close connections within the movement and later in the MDP. He, however, had far from a cordial relationship with the general secretary of the party, the “muscovite” Rákosi. Even though Rajk was the Minister of Interior, and with that he oversaw state security as the most important pillar of the party’s fight for full authority, he did not get into Rákosi’s innermost circle, the so-called “quartet.” It is not surprising why: all four men in the inner circle – Rákosi, Ernő Gerő,⁴⁹ Mihály Farkas,⁵⁰ and József Révai⁵¹ – were “muscovites.” Although, besides Rajk, there were

⁴⁶ Kopřiva led the Ministry of National Security (Ministerstvo národní bezpečnosti, MNB) between 1950 and 1952. K. KAPLAN, *Kronika komunistického Československa*, p. 282.

⁴⁷ Zápotocký was the Prime Minister from 1948 until 1953. Between 1953 and 1957, he was the President of Czechoslovakia.

⁴⁸ IGOR LUKES, *Rudolf Slansky: His Trial and Trials*, Washington D.C. 2008, pp. 47–49. For more on the arrest and the false reason behind it, in Czech, see K. KAPLAN, *Kronika komunistického Československa*, pp. 252–292; K. KAPLAN, *Mám, co jsem si zasloužil*, pp. 191–200; J. CHADIMA, *Rudolf Slánský*, pp. 329–334. And, for a different view on the false reason of the arrest, in English, see IGOR LUKES, *The Rudolf Slánský Affair: New Evidence*, *Slavic Review* 58/1999, no. 1, pp. 160–187.

⁴⁹ Gerő was the Minister of Transport between 1945 and 1949 and was also the Minister of Finance in 1948–1949. From 1949 until 1952, he was the Chairman of the Council of Economics. He was Deputy Prime Minister in 1952–1954, while he was also the Minister of Interior between 1953 and 1954. From 1954, he was the Chairman of the MDP CC’s Economic Policy Committee. During the summer and autumn of 1956, he was the first secretary of the MDP but later fled to the Soviet Union. Gerő returned only in 1960 but was excluded from the party shortly after that.

⁵⁰ Farkas (b. Herman Lówy) was Deputy General Secretary between 1945 and 1951; he was the Minister of Defence between 1948 and 1953. In 1957, he was sentenced to 6 years in prison but was released in 1960.

⁵¹ Révai was the Minister of Education in 1949–1953; he was Deputy General Secretary from 1950–1951.

other “domestic” communists at the higher levels of the party apparatus, the final decisions were made by the “quartet.” When the political manoeuvres of the party wished for it, Rákosi himself praised Rajk as well, but these were only shallow gestures and were the schemes of the propaganda machine.⁵² Rákosi’s aversion to Rajk was enhanced by Farkas’ and Péter’s opinions as well.⁵³ Both men were highly frustrated with Rajk as the Minister of Interior, as Péter feared that Rajk might minimise the authority of the state security service and, in this way, his power. He often complained about Rajk to Farkas, who was responsible for controlling the Ministry of Interior’s work along the party line. On many instances, Péter’s complaints reached Rákosi through Farkas, which enhanced the general secretary’s already existing antipathy towards Rajk. Farkas was also dissatisfied with Rajk and arguments between the two were quite common. What made this already belligerent atmosphere between the four men worse was that Farkas and Rákosi tended to incite even more friction between Rajk and Péter. In the long term, all of these interrelating conflicts contributed to the growing alienation of Rákosi, Farkas, and Péter from Rajk and their decreasing trust in him.⁵⁴ From this, it is clear why Rákosi had taken the opportunity to get rid of Rajk under the auspices of a “grand” show-trial.

While these presented instances are stark differences between the two politicians, their career shared many similar features as well. The most significant one is that both men eagerly and actively participated in building up the oppressive communist regime. This activity was intensified by their high position in the apparatus and public administration.⁵⁵ Other major similarities arise from the last years of their life due to the

⁵² Á. PÜNKÖSTI, *Rákosi a hatalomért*, p. 99, 230.

⁵³ Although Péter also spent the Second World War in the illegal communist movement in Hungary, as the head of the state security he was much closer to Rákosi. On this, in Hungarian, see the above cited work of Müller.

⁵⁴ T. ZINNER, “*A nagy politikai affér*”, *a Rajk–Brankov-ügy*, Volume I, pp. 50–64.

⁵⁵ In Slánský’s case, in Czech, see K. KAPLAN, P. KOSATÍK, *Gottwaldovi muži*, pp. 84–96; K. KAPLAN, *Kronika komunistického Československa*, pp. 225–242; J. CHADIMA, *Rudolf Slánský*, pp. 219–293. In Rajk’s case, only general historical works are available regarding his role in the new regime. The reason for this is covered later in this study. For example, in Hungarian, see GYÖRGY GYARMATI, *A Rákosi-korszak. Rendszerültő fordulatok évtizede Magyarországon, 1945–1956*, Budapest 2013, pp. 65–77, 97–111, 123–136.

consistent nature of the Stalinist show trials.⁵⁶ Both of their roles were clear: their trials under the auspices of the campaign against the “enemies within the party” served as an example that even the most loyal politicians can not only be removed but executed as well under the regime. With this, Stalin’s goal was to make it clear for all parties in the Eastern Bloc, that, after the exclusion of Yugoslavia from the Cominform in 1948, and the ensuing “Titoism,” he would not tolerate any deviation from his policies.⁵⁷ As a result of this newly launched direction in many countries in the Eastern Bloc, the starting point in the search for the “enemies” was Noel Haviland Field,⁵⁸ an American communist diplomat. This was especially true in the case of Hungary and Czechoslovakia, since the BM ÁVH and StB worked closely together on the Field case to build up a background for the constructed trials.⁵⁹ After it was clear that Moscow chose Rajk and Slánský as the main characters for the show trials, political isolation was an inevitable step towards their ultimate demise. Both lost their high-ranking positions, which indicated that they had fallen out of Stalin’s grace. To cover this, the MDP and KSČ let them stay in the apparatus for some time, though the artificially generated campaign against the “enemy within the party” soon closed in on them, and there was no self-criticism that could save the two men from their subsequent arrests, interrogations, public trials, and executions.

A major difference lies, however, in the falsified charges brought against them. While in the Rajk trial, “Titoism” was the main charge, by 1952, the Soviet Union’s foreign policy changed, thus, in the trial of

⁵⁶ The stages of the said trials are best described by Jiří Pelikán. In English, see JIŘÍ PELIKÁN (ed.), *The Czechoslovak Political Trials 1950–1954: The Suppressed Report of the Dubcek Government’s Commission of Inquiry*, Stanford, California 1971, pp. 24–27.

⁵⁷ J. PELIKÁN, *The Czechoslovak Political Trials*, p. 45.

⁵⁸ In the 1930s, Field worked at the U.S. Department of State; during the Second World War, he had a job at the Unitarian Service Committee. After sentencing him in a follow-up trial of the Rajk case, he stayed in prison in Hungary, and, even after his rehabilitation, he lived in Budapest with his wife until his death in 1970. For more on his life, in Czech, see K. KAPLAN, *Mám, co jsem si si zasloužil*, pp. 46–54. In English, see TONY SHARP, *Stalin’s American Spy: Noel Field, Allen Dulles and the East European Show-Trials*, London 2014. In Hungarian, see Kémek, korok, életek. Erica Glaser Wallach és Noel H. Field története, (eds.) GYÖRGY MAJTÉNYI, ZSUZSANNA MIKÓ, CSABA SZABÓ, Budapest 2017.

⁵⁹ VANDA BESSENYEI, *Csehszlovák–magyar állambiztonsági kapcsolatok 1948 és 1951 között*, Aetas 36/2021, no. 4, pp. 53–55; For more on Field and his role in the trials in Czech see KAPLAN, *Mám, co jsem si zasloužil*, pp. 46–54.

Slánský, “Zionism” became the more important accusation and “Titoism” was only briefly mentioned in addition. Due to this shift, while Rajk’s Transylvanian Saxon roots were irrelevant to the proceedings, Slánský’s and his co-accused’s Jewish origins fuelled the trial’s antisemitic tone.⁶⁰

Despite this exception, their fates were the same. In terms of the campaigns prior to and during the trials, the death sentences were evident – just like the long-term effects on their families. Both the Slánskýs, Rajks, and their extended families suffered very similar consequences due to the two executed men’s “traitorous politics.” The wives, Júlia Rajk and Josefa Slánská, lost their previous privileges and were shunned not only from the party but from their formerly known lifestyles as well. They had to leave behind their residences and work in entirely new jobs to provide for their children. Júlia was sentenced to five years in prison but was released in 1954 and rehabilitated in 1955. Júlia and Josefa undeniably lost their previous lifestyles, which, later, became a huge factor in forming their children’s future and perspectives.⁶¹

Rehabilitation and Re-evaluation

Geographical borders hardly played any role in forming the above-mentioned similarities and differences between the two communist politicians. The almost identical experiences of the communist movements,⁶² the communist parties’ post-war struggle to gain power, and the Soviet–Yugoslav split were much more determinant elements shaping the parallels and contrasts between Rajk and Slánský. This, however, changed remarkably after Stalin’s death on March 5, 1953, when slowly – and still under the auspices of the communist ideology – the revisions of the political trials and rehabilitation processes began. From this point onward,

⁶⁰ PÉTER HEVŐ, *A Slánský-per anticionista jellege és annak következményei*, in: *Hindu istenek, sziámi tigrisek. Balogh András 70 éves*, (ed.) István Majoros, Budapest 2014, pp. 230–236, 240; J. CHADIMA, *Rudolf Slánský*, pp. 305–306; K. KAPLAN, *Mám, co jsem si zasloužil*, pp. 257–258, 311.

⁶¹ D. SHIELS, *A Rajk fivéreke*, pp. 141–149; ANDREA PETŐ, *Árnyékban. Rajk Júlia élete*, Budapest 2020, pp. 107, 136, 142–145; J. SLÁNSKÁ, *Zpráva o mém muži*, pp. 161–215.

⁶² Almost identical as, for example, while the KMP were illegal between the two world wars, the KSČ operated legally.

important events occurred in the two countries that greatly influenced the differing perceptions of the two men today.

The Hungarian revisions took place in two stages. The first occurred between 1953 and 1956, under the name of the “new course” of Imre Nagy,⁶³ but was overshadowed by the personal and political conflicts between Nagy and Rákosi, of whom the latter – as “Stalin’s best disciple” – refused to follow the directives that the Communist Party of the Soviet Union’s⁶⁴ new first secretary, Nikita Khrushchev, designated for the Soviet Union and its allies. And although, during these three short years, the MDP was able to face the Stalinist terror itself, the search for the responsible persons was dictated by the same communist ideology that made possible said terror. Thus, there could not be a complete and true revision of the past. Many “results” of the process were quite questionable, as in the case of Péter, who was sentenced to life imprisonment on December 24, 1953.⁶⁵ Even though he was charged as a responsible person, which was quite correct considering that he was arrested in January as the main accused of the planned Hungarian “Zionist” show trial, the change of charge was only the result of Stalin’s death.⁶⁶

The 20th Congress of the CPSU was a tipping point in February 1956.⁶⁷ Both Khrushchev’s public and secret speeches signalled that the destalinisation that had been envisaged in 1953 was now ready to be realised. Thus, during the spring and summer of 1956, it became increasingly evident that Rákosi had to leave, since he did not have a place in the new Khrushchev era, and the MDP’s inner circles were also very well aware of this. The fact that Rákosi was still present in Hungarian political

⁶³ Nagy was the Minister of Agriculture in 1944–1945; he was the Minister of Interior between 1945 and 1946. From 1950 until 1952, he filled the position of the Minister of Agriculture and Food once again. He was Prime Minister twice: first between 1953 and 1955, and second during the revolution in 1956. Due to his involvement in the revolution, he was sentenced to death and executed in 1958. Nagy was fully rehabilitated only in 1989.

⁶⁴ Коммунистическая партия Советского Союза. For the sake of simplicity, in the study, I use the English abbreviation (CPSU) when referring to the party.

⁶⁵ In his retrial, in 1957, he was sentenced to 14 years, but he was released from prison on medical reasons in 1959.

⁶⁶ VANDA BESSENYEI, *Felelősök keresése: a CSKP KB határozattervezete a politikai perek kiértékelésére*, ArchivNET 23/2023, no. 5, <https://www.archivnet.hu/felelosok-keresese-a-cskp-kb-hatarozattervezete-a-politikai-perek-kiertekelesere> (accessed on 01 March 2025).

⁶⁷ The Congress was held between February 14 and 25, 1956.

life created enormous tension within society and the MDP had to act quickly to avoid escalation. On July 18, 1956, he was finally withdrawn from his position of first secretary and was expelled from the Political Committee. Referring to his “poor health,” he moved to the Soviet Union for treatments, but this meant that he was practically expelled from the country and could never return. The following decision, however, was quite counterproductive, since Rákosi was replaced with Gerő, who did not differ from him and his Stalinist political programme.⁶⁸ To try to alleviate the increasing crisis, both within the MDP and in society, the party decided to speed up the revision processes. During this procedure, solely communist and social democratic victims were rehabilitated, and since most of the responsible politicians still occupied their positions in the party, many of them were not named. Therefore, the discussion about the regulation to avoid such illegal trials in the future was also counterproductive.⁶⁹ The final and most grandiose cadenza of the revisions was the reburial of Rajk, Szőnyi, Szalai, and Pálffy on October 6. Although, this gesture was clearly planned with society in mind, to convey that the MDP was ready to break with its Stalinist past, it was far from enough to handle the already increased tensions. And thus, the tens of thousands who paid their respects in front of the four biers also silently protested against not only the Rákosi regime’s terror, but the state socialist regime itself.

In consequence, the MDP’s visible break with the negative connotations of the past was achieved by reevaluating Rajk. He was not only rehabilitated, but his personhood became a memento of the Stalinist terror in Hungary between 1948 and 1953. In this way, the MDP publicly broke ties not only with its own past,⁷⁰ but also with Rajk’s position as the party’s Minister of Interior. His new role was to be the symbol of the previous oppression of the regime.

⁶⁸ GY. GYARMATI, *A Rákosi-korszak*, pp. 377–385.

⁶⁹ PÉTER BENCSIK, *Feledésre ítélt reformok? Az MDP KV 1956. júliusi ülése és a „tisztá lap” politikájának néhány történelmi problémája*, in: *Reform vagy forradalom? A szocializmus útkeresése az ötvenes évek közepén Kelet-Közép-Európában*, (ed.) Péter Bencsik, Budapest 2023, pp. 28–31.

⁷⁰ On the reburial, the news, and the movie made during the process, in Hungarian, see A. PETŐ, *Árnyékban*, pp. 183–188.

After the reprisals following the revolution in October 1956, and in the spirit of the accepted decisions at the 22nd Congress of the CPSU,⁷¹ the second stage of the rehabilitations started. The revision of the committee led by Béla Biszku⁷² ended with lopsided results: although, between the given ideological frameworks, most victims were fully rehabilitated, many politicians and most state security personnel still avoided responsibility for their roles in the political trials. Still, the Magyar Szocialista Munkáspárt (MSZMP) could close an unpleasant chapter in its history,⁷³ while keeping authority and proclaiming that the true and full confrontation with the past finally happened.⁷⁴ Nonetheless, the new perception of Rajk was strongly sustained by this process. It was especially true, since the Biszku committee's final report, discussed between August 14 and 16, 1962, focused more on Rákosi's offences than on the victims. Based on the cult of personality created around Rákosi, the responsibility was almost exclusively attributed to him, Gerő, and Farkas, while Rajk was once again recognised as the communist movement's "very best fighter."⁷⁵ This tone was reflected by the MSZMP's final decision regarding the revisions as well.⁷⁶

It cannot be disputed that Rajk was a victim of the Stalinist political terror. He was subjected to dehumanising political isolation, arrest, and inhumane interrogation methods, and tried and executed on false

⁷¹ The congress was held between October 17 and 31, 1961. The accepted decisions proposed a new wave of destalinisation not only in the Soviet Union, but in the Eastern Bloc as well. By adopting the Congress's decisions, the satellite states had to start their halted or nascent revision processes.

⁷² Biszku was the Minister of Interior between 1957 and 1961.

⁷³ Unpleasant it was indeed, as, let us not forget, even the first secretary of the MSZMP, János Kádár, took part in the interrogation of Rajk in 1949. In Hungarian, see T. ZINNER, "A nagy politikai affér", *a Rajk–Brankov-ügy*, Volume I. pp. 323–368; GÁBOR KISZELY, *AVH. Egy terrrorszervezet története*, Budapest 2000, pp. 199–206.

⁷⁴ See V. BESSENYEI, *Felelősök keresése*, <https://www.archivnet.hu/felelosok-keresese-a-cskp-kb-hatarozattervezete-a-politikai-perek-kiertekelesere> (accessed on 08 March 2025).

⁷⁵ Magyar Nemzeti Levéltár Országos Levéltára (MNL OL), f. M-KS 288, vol. M-KS 288-4, archival unit 50–55, Jelentés és javaslat a Központi Bizottságnak a személyi kultusz idején elkövetett törvénysértésekről, A Központi Bizottság 1962. augusztus 14-i határozata a személyi kultusz évaiben elkövetett törvénysértések lezárásáról.

⁷⁶ *A Magyar Szocialista Munkáspárt Központi Bizottságának határozata a személyi kultusz éveiben a munkásmozgalmi emberek ellen indított törvénysértő perek lezárásáról*, Népszabadság 20/1962, no. 194, pp. XI–XII.

charges. But with his reburial the MDP created, and after the revolution, the MSZMP maintained a narrative around him that only consisted of this victimhood, and Rajk's role as the influential Minister of Interior was practically non-existent. The only perception by the MSZMP was this victimhood – in sharp contrast with the perception of Rákosi. As historian Paul E. Zinner observes, Rajk turned into a martyr.⁷⁷ The new role of his memory is best illustrated by the fact that, in 1974, at the Karl Marx University of Economics,⁷⁸ the Rajk László College for Advanced Studies was founded. Without the MDP's and MSZMP's deliberate efforts to change Rajk's perception, this could not have happened. According to the college, Rajk's name was taboo since it referred to the regime's past and present contradictions. Rajk was indeed uncomfortable for the Kádár regime. Still, by stating that the college was named after Rajk as a form of resistance to the Kádár regime,⁷⁹ it is clear that the perception of Rajk was successfully detached from his political career by the MDP and MSZMP.

This re-evaluation of Rajk is in strong contrast with how the perception of Slánský formed after 1953. While in Hungary, the revisions started almost right after the death of Stalin and in accordance with the new directives from Moscow, in Czechoslovakia, 1953 and even 1954 were still the years of the follow-up trials. Later, there were not two, but three attempts to revise the political trials and three committees were entrusted with the task between 1955 and 1968. The first attempt was led by Rudolf Barák,⁸⁰ the second by Drahomír Kolder⁸¹ (which in parallel worked with the so-called Barnabita committee), and the third by Jan Piller.⁸² All of these commissions had to face the same obstacle as the Biszku committee: they had to bring the revisions to success while many responsible cadres were still occupying high positions in the party. Their options were just as limited as it was for Nagy or the Biszku committee in Hungary. Furthermore, the Barák committee's work is still questioned today, as it was more of a closing act to the political trials than a real

⁷⁷ Á. PÜNKÖSTI, *Rákosi a csúcsán*, p. 242.

⁷⁸ Today known as the Corvinus University of Budapest.

⁷⁹ RAJK.EU, <http://rajk.eu/rolunk/> (accessed on 08 March 2025).

⁸⁰ Barák was the Minister of Interior between 1953 and 1961. He was Deputy Prime Minister twice: first in 1953, then between 1959 and 1960. He was arrested in 1962 and sentenced to 15 years in prison. He was released in 1968.

⁸¹ Kolder filled different party functions from 1946 until his death in 1972.

⁸² Piller was Deputy Prime Minister between 1962 and 1965.

step towards revision.⁸³ In parallel to how Rákosi hindered the revisions, Gottwald's successor, Antonín Novotný, also did not make a genuine process possible. Although he was not a hard-line Stalinist as Rákosi, he still showed hardly any initiative to change dogmatic policies – which ultimately led to his replacement in 1968.⁸⁴ And, again, as it happened in Hungary in 1956, the revisions were washed away by the storms of history: the Piller committee could not finish its work as the so-called Prague Spring was ended brutally by the Warsaw Pact invasion, after which their report could not be submitted.⁸⁵

Up until the early 1960s, the Czechoslovak revisions gradually rehabilitated almost all communist victims of the political trials. Slánský was fully rehabilitated in 1963, after the Political Committee (Politbyro) discussed the report submitted by Kolder on November 21, 1962.⁸⁶ Slánský's rehabilitation, however, was not accompanied with any symbolic gesture as in the case of Rajk. The report and the final decision about the rehabilitation was the only act representing the KSČ's will to face its past. Slánský and his co-accused were not reburied, and they were not utilised for political purposes. The report of the Kolder committee admitted that they were tried and executed on false charges, but maintained that they made mistakes in their positions, especially Slánský, who exploited the cult of personality around himself.⁸⁷ Furthermore, the report used the terminology from the campaign against them, as it, for example, stated that Slánský was "opportunistic" and a "careerist" who showed "bourgeois attitudes."⁸⁸ With such statements, the KSČ admitted the

⁸³ J. CHADIMA, *Rudolf Slánský*, pp. 385–394.

⁸⁴ K. KAPLAN, P. KOŠATÍK, *Gottwaldovi muži*, pp. 269–270, 299–307.

⁸⁵ J. PELIKÁN, *The Czechoslovak Political Trials*, pp. 9–12. Their report was later published in English in the United States by Jiří Pelikán himself (see the above-cited book).

⁸⁶ National Archives (NA), f. 1261/0/11, vol. 370–371, archival unit 465, item 26, *Závěrečná zpráva Kolderovy komise, 21. 11. 1962*. [*Final Report of the Kolder Committee, 21. 11. 1962*.] The document is also available online at <https://www.praguecoldwar.cz/kolderuvod.htm> (accessed on 18 April 2025).

⁸⁷ As the report rightfully noted, Gottwald was also responsible for "violating the principles of collective leadership." For more on the cult of personality around him, in Czech, see RUDOLF KROLL, *Klement Gottwald a jeho doba [Gottwald and His Era]*, Praha 2019, pp. 270–275.

⁸⁸ NA f. Central Committee of the KSČ (1945–1989) – Committee for Revisions of the Political Trails and Rehabilitation – so-called Kolder Committee (KOM II), vol. 23, archival unit 496, *Zápis z 10. schůze komise ÚV KSČ k přešetření nejdůležitějších politických procesů ze dne 19. 11. 1962*. [*Record on the KSČ CC's 10th Meeting*

constructed nature of the trial, but did not make Slánský into a sympathetic victim or a memento of the past.

What made Rajk's perception even stronger was his son's, László Jr's political activity in the 1970s and especially during the 1980s. He was born in the year of his father's execution. As part of the arrests among the family members, he was taken into an orphanage where he lived under the name "István Kovács" until 1952, when he could return to his family. In 1954, he reunited with his mother when she was released from prison.⁸⁹ Later, mother and son lived through the last days of the revolution together in 1956. After the Soviet invasion began on November 4, they joined Imre Nagy and other significant members of the government and revolution at the Embassy of Yugoslavia. In this way, unfortunately, together with the others, they were also abducted and transported to Romania. They could return to Hungary only after the constructed trial of Nagy and his co-accused ended in 1958.⁹⁰ For a decade, László Jr lived an average, apolitical life, although, he read Josefa Slánská's memoir, therefore, he was aware that other families with the same burden existed within the Eastern Bloc.⁹¹ He studied architecture and stayed out of the ongoing political discussions.

His attitude changed at the end of the 1960s and early 1970s as he became gradually more interested and involved with the political discourse and its slowly developing opposition. In 1977, he joined the Hungarian version of the Charter 77 movement and actively supported the Czechoslovak opposition activists, including Václav Havel, during their trial in 1979.⁹² In the 1980s, László Jr's role in the opposition grew even further: he became a vital figure of Hungarian *samizdat* publishing. The "Rajk boutique" became a well-known term among the opposition members at the time, since it referred to László Jr's own flat, where he reproduced and distributed the most notable *samizdats* and copies of other

on 19. 11. 1962. for Revising the Most Important Political Processes], Návrh usnesení ÚV KSČ k zhodnocení politických procesů, 19. 11. 1962. [The KSČ CC's Draft Resolution for Evaluating the Political Trials, 19. 11. 1962.]

⁸⁹ D. SHIELS, *A Rajk-fivérek*, pp. 148–151.

⁹⁰ A. PETŐ, *Árnyékban*, pp. 196–204, 210–217.

⁹¹ D. SHIELS, *A Rajk-fivérek*, p. 11.

⁹² For more on this, in English, see RAINER M. JÁNOS, *The Effect of Charter 77 on the Hungarian Political Opposition Movement*, in: *Charta 77. Od obhajoby lidských práv k demokratické revoluci. 1977–1989. Sborník z konference k 30. výročí Charty 77. Praha, 21.-23. března 2007*, (eds.) Markéta Devátá, Jiří Suk, Oldřich Tůma, Praha 2008, pp. 293–298.

illegal publications. Due to this, he had many conflicts with the authorities in the form of police searches and arrests as well. In 1988, he was one of the founding members of the Network of Free Initiatives (Szabad Kezdeményezések Hálózata), then the political party called Alliance of Free Democrats (Szabad Demokraták Szövetsége, SZDSZ). After 1989, László Jr continued his political career for years within the SZDSZ. He left the political scene in 2009, when, together with others, he quit the party due to growing corruption.⁹³ It is unquestionable that László Jr did substantial work as an opposition activist in the last years of the Kádár regime. His efforts to take action against and dismantle the state socialist administration righteously put his name in a favourable light. Nevertheless, it had somewhat positive consequences regarding his father's perception as well, by strengthening his positive remembrance.

In contrast, Slánský's children scarcely participated in politics. Josefa and Rudolf Jr both signed the Charter 77, and, during the Velvet Revolution, Rudolf Jr became a member of the Civic Forum (Občanské fórum). But after the fall of the regime, he stayed away from politics, although he filled the position of the Czechoslovak Ambassador to the Soviet Union until 1993 and had a diplomatic career after that at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. His sister, Marta never participated in politics.⁹⁴

Though the sons' participation in the opposition movements differ, considering the differences between the Czechoslovak and Hungarian dissident activism, it is even more remarkable. It would exceed the scope of this study to give a detailed comparison of the two countries' opposition movements, however, it is inevitable to look at the key differences to understand this contrast between László Jr and Rudolf Jr.

In the case of the Hungarian movement, the revolution in 1956 and its severe aftermath had a devastating effect on the population's political participation. The Kádár regime successfully depoliticised society, on the one hand, by the harsh reprisals following the revolution. On the other hand, after 1963, it created a certain consensus within society in which citizens refrained from major political activities, and in exchange, the party provided a somewhat stable existence and even opportunities

⁹³ D. SHIELS, *A Rajk-fivőrek*, pp. 198–204, 207, 218. See also his official webpage for his biography at RAJK.INFO, <http://rajk.info/hu/> (accessed on 08 March 2025).

⁹⁴ J. CHADIMA, *Rudolf Slánský*, pp. 395–396.

for slight growth in personal prosperity.⁹⁵ Even though the number of intellectuals who rejected the ideology and ruling of the party gradually increased already from 1968,⁹⁶ due to this apolitical atmosphere, the organised opposition movement came into existence quite late. Furthermore, it was strongly divided ideologically and generationally. In the first case, two distinct groups formed. The so-called “populist movement” was represented mostly by writers, many of whom had right-wing views, and their activity largely revolved around cultural and national issues.⁹⁷ The “democratic opposition,” on the contrary, consisted of economists and sociologists and voiced more political criticisms. The division between the two groups was increased by the generational gap: those who participated in the revolution had a hard time finding the common denominator with younger intellectuals.⁹⁸ This fragmented state of the opposition and the already existing apolitical society made it difficult to create a homogeneous, organised opposition movement that could mobilise the majority of the population. The actual organisation of the previously only informally connected opposition movement began only in the late 1980s.⁹⁹

The movement of dissidents was quite different in Czechoslovakia, where the “normalisation”¹⁰⁰ following the Prague Spring did not have an effect that would depoliticise society to such an extent as it happened in Hungary. Furthermore, the first secretary of the KSČ and president, Gustav Husák, did not offer a consensus for Czechoslovak citizens as Kádár did, even if on the surface his policies seemed similar.¹⁰¹ The roots

⁹⁵ MIKLÓS MITROVITS, *Politikai ellenzék és kulturális ellenállás Lengyelországban és Magyarországon a késő szocializmusban (összehasonlítás, kapcsolatok, transzferek)*, Múltunk 66/2021, no. 3, pp. 127–128.

⁹⁶ ERVIN CSIZMADIA, *Ellenzékiség a “puha” diktatúrában*, Kritika 20/1991, no. 4, p. 9.

⁹⁷ For more on this movement, in Hungarian, see ÁRPÁD SZÉCSI, *Rendszerváltó mozgalom. A Magyar Demokrata Fórum előzményei és korai története*, Budapest 2023.

⁹⁸ M. MITROVITS, *Politikai ellenzék és kulturális ellenállás Lengyelországban és Magyarországon a késő szocializmusban*, pp. 134–136.

⁹⁹ M. MITROVITS, *Politikai ellenzék és kulturális ellenállás Lengyelországban és Magyarországon a késő szocializmusban*, pp. 141–142. For more on the process of organisation, in Hungarian, see *A többpártrendszer kialakulása Magyarországon, 1985–1991*, (ed.) MIHÁLY BIHARI, Budapest 1992.

¹⁰⁰ For more on the policies of the so-called normalisation, in Czech, see PAVEL KOLÁŘ, MICHAL PULLMANN, *Co byla normalizace? Studie o pozdním socialismu [What was Normalisation? A Study of Late Socialism]*, Praha 2016.

¹⁰¹ See, for example, the study of Balík, Holzer, and Kopeček, who suggest that “normalisation” created a similar consensus: STANISLAV BALÍK, JAN HOLZER,

of the Czechoslovak opposition movement can be found in the tragic end of the Prague Spring itself: despite the Warsaw Pact invasion and the soon to be implemented “normalisation,” many who were involved in the reform processes strived to protect its core ideas. During the late 1960s and early 1970s, the “socialist opposition” voiced political criticism, while civic dissidents created an underground platform for publishing *samizdats* and engaging in philosophical debates regarding the state and nation.¹⁰² The Czechoslovak opposition movement peaked in the creation of the Charter 77 in 1977.¹⁰³ Even though, there were many instances of disagreement and clashing views within the Charter 77, it was able to connect the different signatories. Thus, the opposition movement in Czechoslovakia not only became organised sooner but was much less fragmented than the movement in Hungary. Although its actions were not tolerated by the regime and many of its leaders were tried and imprisoned in 1980,¹⁰⁴ they could not end what had already begun. Though the signatories of the Charter 77 were only a minority within society, and from a certain point of view “normalisation” had an eerily similar effect on society as the consensus the Kádár regime offered, from the second half of the 1970s but mainly during the late 1980s, the attitude towards the regime gradually became less apolitical among Czech and Slovak citizens, who were already dissatisfied with the “normalisation.” In the second half of the 1980s, newly founded opposition organisations¹⁰⁵ held demonstrations and published texts criticising state socialism, while in

LUBOMÍR KOPEČEK, *Czechoslovakia in 1989 – A case of successful transition*, Totalitarianism and Democracy 5/2008, no. 1, p. 22–24.

¹⁰² TAMÁS BERKES, *A cseh hatvannyolc saját kontextusa*, 2000 20/2008, no. 7–8, <https://ketezer.hu/2008/07/a-cseh-hatvannyolc-sajat-kontextusa/> (accessed on 01 November 2025); MARTINA MIKLOVÁ, *Transformations of Opposition and Dissent in Prague and Brno in the Era of “the Normalization Regime”: Resistance to the Communist Regime between 1969 and 1989*, Středoevropské politické studie 9/2007, no. 4, pp. 338–341.

¹⁰³ Although, many question if Charter 77 can be considered a successful dissident organisation. See, in English, for example, S. BALÍK, J. HOLZER, L. KOPEČEK, *Czechoslovakia in 1989 – A case of successful transition*, p. 25.

¹⁰⁴ MILAN HANYŠ, *Beyond “The Power of the Powerless”: the Political Thought and Polemics of the Czechoslovak Opposition, 1977–1980*, East Central Europe 50/2023, no. 2–3, pp. 279–299; M. MIKLOVÁ, *Transformations of Opposition and Dissent...*, p. 343.

¹⁰⁵ Such as the Committee for the Defense of the Unjustly Prosecuted (Výbor na obranu nespravedlivě stíhaných, VONS) or the Movement for Civil Liberties (Hnutí za občanskou svobodu).

Slovakia the Catholic Church filled a similarly anti-regime role. Due to this, society's political awareness and detestation of the regime gradually strengthened and in the late 1980s, almost on the eve of the change of regime, citizens started to express this disdain by supporting the activities of the previously isolated opposition groups. Many participated in commemorative events, marches, and demonstrations, and signed petitions, despite the authorities' violent responses to these activities.¹⁰⁶ Another important factor was the ideological shift within the Charter 77 and soon in the other dissident movements as well. From the second half of the 1980s, ex- or reform communists were no longer welcomed among the previously diverse circles of dissidents, since the opposition, albeit maintaining its focus on social and human rights issues, gradually became more involved in anti-regime debates. The anti-communist sentiment grew to be dominant (and increasingly complex) during the Velvet Revolution and in the following political discourse shaping historical memory.¹⁰⁷ This prominent standpoint, both in the opposition movement and in the post-1989 politics, made it impossible but also unnecessary to change the perception of Slánský.

We can see, on the one hand, that in the much more divided Hungarian movement, which was further weakened by the overall apolitical attitude of the society, László Jr played an important and active role. In contrast, Rudolf Jr was less active in the much sooner organised Czechoslovak movement, which was also well-known in the Western

¹⁰⁶ M. MIKLOVÁ, *Transformations of Opposition and Dissent...*, pp. 341–342; KAREL HRUBÝ, *How Much Totalitarianism Remained in the "Normalisation" Era?*, Czech Journal of Contemporary History 5/2017, no. 1, pp. 130–135; TOMÁŠ VILÍMEK, "We Want No More, We Can No More." *The Changing Social Atmosphere in Czechoslovakia in the Late 1980s*, in: 'Annus Mirabilis' 1989 and Slovakia: From a Totalitarian Regime to Democracy. Proceedings from the International Scholar Conference in Bratislava, 12–13 November 2019, (ed.) Beáta Katrebová Blehová, Bratislava 2021, pp. 458–466. For more on the opposition during the "normalisation," in Czech, see MILAN OTÁHAL, *Opozice, moc, společnost 1969/1989. Příspěvek k dějinám "normalizace"* [Opposition, Power, Society 1969/1989. Contribution to the History of 'Normalisation'], Praha 1994.

¹⁰⁷ S. BALÍK, J. HOLZER, L. KOPEČEK, *Czechoslovakia in 1989 – A case of successful transition*, p. 28; JIŘÍ SUK, *Anatomy of the End of Charter 77 (1990–1992). Between Politics, Morality, Business and Coming to Terms with the Past*, Soudobé dějiny 31/2024, no. 3. pp. 675–681, 684–686; MICHAL KOPEČEK, *Citizen and Patriot in the Post-Totalitarian Era: Czech Dissidence in Search of the Nation and its Democratic Future*, <https://www.iwm.at/transit-online/citizen-and-patriot-in-the-post-totalitarian-era-czech-dissidence-in> (accessed on 22 October 2025).

political spheres ever since its creation.¹⁰⁸ On the other hand, due to the inner ideological shifts within the Czechoslovak opposition movement, a strong anti-communist tone became prevalent among dissidents. Although both movements voiced strong anti-regime criticisms, these differing factors largely influenced how the memories of the two former communist politicians evolved. Firstly, the constructed positive perception of Rajk was accepted by the apolitical society, as it avoided questioning complex political issues, such as the memory of the former Minister of Interior. Thus, the name “Rajk” continued to be associated with victimhood, continuing into the 1980s, and with the efforts of László Jr in the opposition movement. The late organisation and the fragmented state of the opposition might have also contributed to why the former minister’s perception did not change as, in the late 1980s, their focus was on much more acute and current political issues. In contrast, since the overall perception of Slánský was not reevaluated in Czechoslovakia, and, during the second half of the 1980s, dissidents grew to be strongly anti-communist, society did not have the aspiration to change the memory of the former general secretary. His victimhood was clear, as was his massive contribution to the state socialist regime’s most oppressive years, which was rightfully condemned by the anti-communist tone of the opposition. One can say that citizens did not have the need to alter this already existing image. Rudolf Jr’s more reserved participation in the dissident movement, compared to László Jr, also did not change it.

The Historiography of Rajk and Slánský¹⁰⁹

Although historical remembrance is influenced by many other factors, such as current politics, historical literature is still an important agent in

¹⁰⁸ JAMES F. PONTUSO, *The Dissent Reception: How Charter 77 Won the West*, in: *Charta 77. Od obhajoby lidských práv k demokratické revoluci. 1977–1989. Sborník z konference k 30. výročí Charty 77. Praha, 21.–23. března 2007*, (eds.) Markéta Devátá, Jiří Suk, Oldřich Tůma, Praha 2008, p. 57, pp. 63–64.

¹⁰⁹ In this section, I am not taking into consideration the general historical works dealing with the two countries history in the 20th century. Many such works do not have the chance to elaborate either on the policies or on the biographies of the two communist politicians due to their works’ scope. Therefore, I only examine works focusing exclusively on Rajk and Slánský.

how society perceives its past. Therefore, the historiography of the two men is quite telling about their remembrance today.

The only similarity between the two politicians' historiography is that their trials were published almost immediately after the proceedings ended, as part of the publicity and propaganda of the show trials. Then, after the change of regime, they were published again, now as an important source and memento of the years of terror and oppression. This time, however, studies giving historical context preceded the text of the trials.¹¹⁰ In all of these editions, however, the focus is on the trials and not the main accused.

After 1989, previously classified documents of the state socialism became available for archival research, which made it possible for objective works to be published on the Rajk trial. The many monographs and compilations of sources that are available can be divided into two groups. The majority of works cover the show trial and its immediate background. While these pieces are an integral part of the historiography of 20th-century Hungary and analyse the topic in immense detail, they still hardly examine Rajk outside of the trial's framework. For example, in his two-volume work, *A nagy politikai affér*, Tibor Zinner gives an excellent, detailed analysis of the trial. This monograph is essential for understanding not only the process but its background and transnational aspect as well.¹¹¹ In *Kirakatperek*, György Hódos offers an insight into other similar political trials and their relations to the Rajk trial, while revealing his own recollection of the proceeding as one of its victims.¹¹² Béla Szász does the same in his memoir, since he was also charged in a follow-up trial in 1949.¹¹³ István Ötvös worked on the Pálffy case in *Koncepcióváltások*, covering the trial's lesser-known side.¹¹⁴ *A Rajk-per éve: közelitések 1949-hez* is an excellent collection of studies that gives

¹¹⁰ *Rajk László és társai a népbíróság előtt*, Budapest 1949; *Proces v vedením protistátního špikeleneckého centra v čele s Rudolfem Slánským* [Trial of the Leadership of the Anti-State Conspiracy Centre Headed by Rudolf Slánský], Praha 1953; TIBOR ZINNER (introductory study), *Rajk László és társai a népbíróság előtt. 40 év távlatából... Az ún. "Kék Könyv" hasonmás kiadása*, Budapest 1989; BEDŘICH UTITZ (ed.), *Neuzavřená kapitola: Politické procesy padesátých let*, Praha 1990.

¹¹¹ TIBOR ZINNER, "A nagy politikai affér", *a Rajk-Brankov-ügy*. Volume I and II. Budapest 2013 and 2014.

¹¹² GYÖRGY HÓDOS, *Kirakatperek. Sztálinista tisztogatások Kelet-Európában. 1948–1954*, Budapest 1990.

¹¹³ BÉLA SZÁSZ, *Minden kényszer nélkül*, Budapest 2013.

¹¹⁴ ISTVÁN ÖTVÖS, *Koncepcióváltások – A Rajk-per katonai vonala*, Budapest 2012.

essential context (political and economic) on the trial.¹¹⁵ Gábor Paizs's collection of *Szabad Nép's* articles regarding Rajk gives a powerful image of his rise and fall.¹¹⁶ Finally, István Soltész collected and published the most important sources, parts of memoirs, and interviews regarding the trial.¹¹⁷ Thus, it is clear that there are many excellent works on the topic, yet none of them deals with Rajk outside of the trial – i.e. outside of his victimhood. This does not mean that Hungarian historians follow the narrative of the MDP and MSZMP regarding Rajk. Rather, their objective historical works examine him only as the main accused of the trial, which conveys a one-sided approach towards society. Duncan Shiels's *A Rajk-fivérek* slightly addresses this deficiency, but his work focuses more on the extended family than solely on Rajk. Furthermore, Shiels also misses the most important part in order to be a fully objective biography, since his work does not deal with Rajk as a high-ranking politician between 1945 and 1948.¹¹⁸ Similarly, Andrea Pető's monograph about Júlia Rajk gives a personal insight into the relationship between Júlia and László; it further mentions several instances from Rajk's position as the Minister of Interior, but the focus remains on Júlia. Thus, while Pető's work provides substantial additions to the existing historiography of Rajk, as a biography of his wife it does not concentrate on him.¹¹⁹

Other publications, while including context on Rajk as a politician at the height of his success, almost exclusively accentuate his conflicts with Rákosi and/or Péter. The focus is not precisely on Rajk or his policies as a minister, but on how he became increasingly problematic for the general secretary and the commander of the BM ÁVH. This can be observed in Rákosi's and Péter's biographies, where Rajk is only mentioned in connection to their personal conflicts to give context to their leading roles in the trial.¹²⁰

A brief summary from 1974 can be considered Rajk's first and, to date, only biography. It was published as a part of a series showcasing famous Hungarian communists.¹²¹ The tiny book,¹²² however, is far

¹¹⁵ TIBOR TAKÁCS (ed.), *A Rajk-per éve: közelítések 1949-hez*, Budapest 2021.

¹¹⁶ GÁBOR PAIZS (ed.), *Rajk-per*, Budapest 1989.

¹¹⁷ ISTVÁN SOLTÉSZ (ed.), *Rajk-dossieré*, Budapest 1989.

¹¹⁸ See the above-cited work of Shiels.

¹¹⁹ See the above-cited work of Pető.

¹²⁰ In the case of Rákosi and Péter, see the above-cited works of Pünkösti and Müller.

¹²¹ ÉVA H. BALÁZS (ed.), *Életek és korok, I–VII. kötet*, Budapest 1974.

¹²² As all volumes in the series, the book is only 7 × 10 cm.

from an objective historical work. In it, one can read about Rajk merely from the perspective of the MSZMP, namely as the passionate young communist in the years of illegality and the Spanish Civil War, then the “outstanding statesperson.” Although the authors mention some of his decrees as the Minister of Interior, they do so only in a positive light, strictly in line with the then current ideology. According to the booklet, for example, Rajk dissolved religious groups and associations only to eliminate those organisations that were covering for “fascists.” The trial is not discussed in the publication; the authors only mention that Rajk did his best as a “dutiful communist” in the midst of the escalating hysteria of vigilance, and against Rákosi, Péter, and Farkas.¹²³

The difference between Rajk’s and Slánský’s historiography could not be more significant. After the Velvet Revolution, the archives opened up to historical inquiry in Czechoslovakia, then in Czechia and Slovakia as well. The previously confidential documents became available, and soon Slánský’s life, career, and death were also examined or at least partially mentioned in monographs, compilations of studies, and memoirs. Since his trial was the second biggest show trial in the Eastern Bloc in the 1950s, at first the focus was on the trial proceedings. But interest in the subject did not fade with time; new summaries as well as new editions of previously written works are still published today.¹²⁴ After the second half of the 2000s, however, it seems that a stronger demand appeared to understand who “Czechoslovakia’s second man” was as a person, outside of the framework of his trial. Karel Kaplan could be considered one of the most notable experts on the Slánský trial. Kaplan

¹²³ ERZSÉBET STRASSENREITER, PÉTER SIPOS, *Rajk László*, in: *Életek és korok*, I–VII kötet, (ed.) Éva H. Balázs, Budapest 1974, pp. 11–193.

¹²⁴ Besides the above-cited works of Kaplan and Utitz, in English, see KAREL KAPLAN, *Report on the Murder of the General Secretary*, London 1990. In Czech, see ARTUR LONDON, *Doznání. V soukolí pražského procesu* [Confessions. In the Machinery of the Prague Trials.], Praha 1990; RUDOLF STRÉBINGER, *Vražda generálního tajemníka: poslední Stalinův exemplární proces. Soud s Rudolfem Slánským* [The Murder of the General Secretary: The Last Stalinist Exemplary Trial. The Trial of Rudolf Slánský], Brno 1991; KAREL KAPLAN, *Zpráva o zavraždění generálního tajemníka* [Report on the Murder of the General Secretary], Praha 1992; ARTUR LONDON, *K pramenům Doznání. Motáky z ruzyňské věznice* [To the Sources of Confessions. Letters from the Ruzyň Prison], Brno 1997; JIŘÍ PERNES (ed.), *Politické procesy v Československu po roce 1945 a „Případ Slánský“* [Political Trials in Czechoslovakia after 1945 and the ‘Slánský-case’], Praha 2005; MARIE ŠVERMOVÁ, *Vzpomínky* [Memories], Praha 2008; JAROMÍR SLUŠNÝ, *Procesy* [Trials], Praha 2021, pp. 310–337.

not only worked extensively on historical research on the proceedings, but also dealt with the topic of Slánský as an individual on several occasions. In his works, he examined the general secretary's life and career, including what role Slánský played in the state socialist regime's creation.¹²⁵ Kaplan's outstanding work is complemented by Jan Chadima's Slánský biography, which is an exceptionally detailed composition on the former general secretary.¹²⁶ Slánská's memoir also enriches the existing historiography; her "report" gives an intimate insight into their relationship and family life and offers a new perspective.¹²⁷ Regarding the general secretary, however, not only scientific approaches exist. In 2014, a comic book was published on the Slánský trial. Containing intriguing visual metaphors, the authors dealt with this chapter of the past using a new medium, bringing it closer to a fusion of pop culture and history.¹²⁸

It is evident that Slánský's historiography is not as one-sided as Rajk's. Through these works, both historians and the public can get to know him as a politician, a victim of his own regime, and as a family man. His historiography's multilateral approach and diverse genres are much more advantageous for developing an objective, fair-minded perception of Slánský within society. His real victimhood does not overshadow his work as the general secretary, and conversely, his actions as a general secretary do not conceal the fact that he was a victim of a Stalinist show trial. While Kaplan's works focus more on the trial and the road leading up to it, together with Chadima's biography, a full, detailed image of Slánský's life, his role in the state socialist regime, and his demise can be found in Czech historical literature.

Conclusions

According to this comparative analysis, the different perceptions of László Rajk and Rudolf Slánský do not stem from the two politicians' careers within the communist movements and parties. Rather, it was

¹²⁵ K. KAPLAN, P. KOSATÍK, *Gottwaldovi muži*, pp. 78–121; K. KAPLAN, *Kronika komunistického Československa*, pp. 216–249.

¹²⁶ See the above-cited work of J. Chadima.

¹²⁷ See the above-cited work of J. Slánská.

¹²⁸ PAVEL KOSATÍK, VOJTĚCH MAŠEK, *Češi: 1952: Jak Gottwald zavraždil Slánského* [Czechs: 1952: How did Gottwald murder Slánský], Praha 2014.

determined by (1) the distinct ways in which the Hungarian and Czechoslovak communist parties dealt with revisions after Stalin's death, and (2) the differences between the two countries' opposition movements. In the first case, while in Czechoslovakia the committees gradually rehabilitated Slánský (and his co-accused) from the constructed charges, they did not detach his perception from his work as the general secretary. In contrast, Rajk was not only rehabilitated but his memory was separated from his position as the Minister of Interior. In the second case, the alternate routes of how the dissident movements came to life and what inner conditions, conflicts, and changes shaped them, also contributed to the image today of the two communist politicians.

Due to the transnational experience of being part of the communist movement and the higher echelons of the party, there are many similarities in the lives of Rajk and Slánský. Both encountered Marxist-Leninist ideology and became involved in the legal and illegal movements at a young age, where they quickly made important connections and started to build up their political careers. After 1945, they became some of the most important men in the communist party apparatus, and they put an enormous effort into creating the regime in their respective countries and, thus, were widely celebrated by their comrades. Then, however, both became eligible to play the leading role in their respective country's show trials. The differences between their lives, though fewer, are more important. Rajk fought in the Spanish Civil War, while Slánský did not. Rajk spent the Second World War in Hungary leading the illegal movement, while Slánský returned to Czechoslovakia as "muscovite." Rajk experienced increasing tension between him and Rákosi, for which he never got into the innermost circle of Hungarian communist leadership, while Slánský had a close relationship with Gottwald both in the political and personal spheres of their lives.

However, the differing perception of the former politicians could hardly be understood based only on their lives. A more important factor is the internal affairs of Hungary and Czechoslovakia after 1953. Although the question was the same (how to face the political trials after Stalin's death?) and the answer was "ready-made" by Moscow, the implementation of a plan still diverged according to the inner political circumstances. With the reburial of Rajk and the lopsided revisions, Rákosi became the main culprit for the terror of the previous years. In Czechoslovakia, the KSČ did not make such a gesture, and the revisions were carried out without changing the perception of Slánský. As a result, remembrance

of Slánský was not detached from his political career, in contrast to the remembrance of Rajk. Furthermore, while both their sons did their fair share of work in the opposition movements, László Jr's actions in the illegal *samizdat* publishing further strengthened the somewhat sympathetic perception of his father – previously only generated by the party itself. In contrast, due to the strong anti-communist attitude of the Czechoslovak opposition in the late 1980s, it did not even occur to them to perceive the former general secretary differently.

The divide in the perception of Rajk and Slánský can be clearly observed in their current historiography. While there are plenty of works based on excellent research on Slánský's life, including his personal and political career, Hungarian historical literature lacks a similar complete biography of Rajk. The Hungarian historiography of Rajk is limited to his trial and/or his conflicts with Rákosi, and there are no monographs or biographies that give a detailed analysis of his actions as the Minister of Interior. The general historical works discussing Stalinisation in Hungary only mention indirectly how the Minister of Interior was involved in the process. With this historiography of Rajk, the perception of him still revolves around his victimhood. Even though historians are aware of his role in the state socialist regime, by not conveying this knowledge to the public with an objective historical work, the sympathetic and subjective perception of him that was created by the MDP, and developed further on its own throughout the decades, will linger.

While the Hungarian historiography still lacks a full biography of Rajk, a slow shift regarding the perception of him can be observed in recent few years. This is confirmed, for example, by the fact that the Rajk László College for Advanced Studies dropped “László” from its name in 2018, while still honouring and preserving the college's history. With this action, the institution expressed the fact that Rajk was simultaneously a culprit and a victim of the regime.¹²⁹ The shift in the perception of Rajk is also evident by popular science articles published in the last few years, in which the focus is not solely on the Rajk trial but also on his political role.¹³⁰

¹²⁹ See their website, RAJK.EU, <https://rajk.eu/rolunk/> (accessed on 15 March 2025)

¹³⁰ In Hungarian, see, for example, ÁKOS LAKHÁZI, *Tettes és áldozat – 65 éve temették újra Rajk Lászlót*, <https://www.xxszazadintezet.hu/tettes-es-aldozat-65-eve-temettek-ujra-rajk-laszlot/> (accessed on 15 March 2025). There are many online historical portals summarising his biography, including his role as a Minister. See, for example, the pages of the 1956 Institute - Oral History Archive or the Institute

By comparing Rajk and Slánský and the current state of remembrance of their legacies, it is clear how two countries, despite such similar historical experiences of state socialism, can arrive at different perceptions of their former communist politicians.

for the Research of Communism: <http://www.rev.hu/sulinet45/szerviz/kislex/biograf/rajk.htm>; <https://www.kommunizmuskutato.hu/eletrajzok/rajk-laszlo> (both accessed on 15 March 2025).