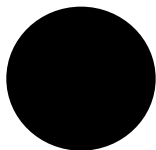


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Crime and Punishment in Prague

The Strange Case of Karel Vaš and Gen. Heliodor Píka

Milan Hauner

Last June 15, the Czech Press Agency (CTK) briefly noted that Karel Vaš [pronounced like the French word for “cow”—*la vache*], a former military prosecutor, had been sentenced to seven years in jail. The senate of the Prague City Court had found the 85-year-old man guilty of having forged evidence against Gen. Heliodor Píka, who had been selected as the prime target in the purges initiated inside the Czechoslovak officer corps in the immediate aftermath of the Communist takeover in February 1948. The sentence against Vaš, mild in itself, has been regarded as symbolic atonement for past crimes committed during Communist rule. It has been well received in the Czech Republic, though voices of sympathy were heard in favor of the aged defendant, suffering from Parkinson’s disease, who himself became a victim in the 1950s of the same deadly mechanism of justice he helped to lubricate. However, most commentaries agreed that an outrageous miscarriage of justice in the name of ideology, whether National Socialist or Communist, had to be punished, even if it had happened more than a half a century ago.

Hearing the verdict, Vaš declared himself innocent; he and his counsel immediately dismissed the sentence as fabricated. Both repeatedly said that they would appeal. Deputy Premier Pavel Rychetsky, himself a lawyer by training, told the press that the sentence set a moral and political precedent in that the same legal standards as applied to Nazi prosecutors and judges could be applied to Communist crimes. Although more

than 50 years have passed since General Píka’s execution and despite the turbulent political changes in Central Europe, this is certainly not the last word about the Vaš trial. It is, in a sense, a retrial of General Píka, an attempt to rectify historic wrongs, like the trials of octogenarian Nazi judges and prison guards, or Vichy administrators, accused of maintaining the appearance of legality in the Nazi empire.

Who was General Píka? A short answer is that his judicial murder in 1949 fulfilled a similar function in launching the purges inside the Czechoslovak officer corps as the arrest and subsequent execution of Marshal Tukhachevsky in 1937 had done for the Red Army. He was a professional officer loyal to former President Edvard Beneš and his London-based government in exile, who served between 1941 and 1945 as the head of the Czechoslovak Military Mission in Moscow. It was a most difficult job, since the officer had to serve several masters. He accomplished the task with considerable success and managed to resist constant Soviet harassment and frequent attempts at blackmail to force him to be disloyal to the Beneš government.

After the war, President Beneš promoted Píka to deputy chief of the general staff. However, in May 1948, after the Communist takeover in Prague, he was arrested without a warrant on charges of spying for British military intelligence. Interrogated for the rest of 1948, he was sentenced to death on charges of high treason in January 1949 and executed six months later. The

institution that carried out the interrogation was the Army Security Intelligence Office, known under the Czech abbreviation OBZ, run by officers trained by the NKVD (the predecessor to the KGB) during the war. The head of the OBZ was Bedřich Reicin, who harbored a grudge against Píka dating back several years when the two served together in the Soviet Union. Reicin put Karel Vaš, also trained by the NKVD in the USSR during the war, in charge of the Píka case, first as the chief investigator, and then, in a breach of legal practice, as the second prosecutor at Píka's trial. So complete was Communist control of the military and judiciary apparatus after the February coup, and so weak the authority of the ailing President Beneš, by then almost a figurehead, that not even a warrant was required to arrest one of the most senior army officers.

Whether the OBZ acted upon the advice of Soviet "counselors" has yet to be established. The prosecution protocols do not reveal direct Soviet involvement in the Píka case. Soviet counselors were brought in later for the notorious Slánský trials, in which the Communists turned against their own ilk under the pretext of cleansing the Communist Party of Zionists. (Rudolf Slánský, the first secretary of the Czechoslovak Communist Party, was arrested, tried, sentenced, and executed in 1952.) Reicin, a suspicious "cosmopolitan" Communist (because of his Jewish origins), was himself eventually sentenced to death.

Two years later, the wheel turned again and Vaš, too, was crushed, in yet another trial. Hoping that it would be a mitigating circumstance, Vaš boasted of his decisive contribution in the Píka trial and mentioned that Moscow had been highly appreciative of his prosecution. No written evidence was produced and no Soviet witnesses were called in the Vaš trial of 1953. However, the former prosecutor must have impressed his judges because he received a "mere" life sentence, which was commuted after 1956, and he was subsequently freed.

In 1968, during the Prague Spring, a brief spell of liberal reform that began in March and ended on August 21 of that year when the Soviet tanks rolled, General Píka's surviving son and his defense lawyer requested a review of his 1949 trial. A military court declared the dead general rehabilitated but left Karel Vaš unpunished.

The Corpus Delicti

It might be helpful to reproduce here the corpus delicti that sent General Píka to the gallows and for which Reicin and Vaš were directly responsible. Since it is the only document in English in the huge bundle of protocols surviving in the former Communist Party Central Committee archives, the reader can assess for himself how Communist justice operated and how the standards of the legal profession in Czechoslovakia had declined. Some years ago, I happened to inspect the protocols pertaining to the Píka case. They had been illegally photocopied inside Czechoslovakia in the aftermath of the Prague Spring and smuggled abroad. Among the protocols, mostly by fellow officers who were forced to testify against their former colleague, was one document that attracted my attention. It was written in English, but with innumerable errors and strange phrases. It was supposed to be an internal message from a British intelligence officer to a colleague about a confidential conversation he had with Píka when the general was in London in 1946.

This "document," allegedly intercepted by Czech agents operating in England, was in fact manufactured inside Czechoslovakia. Reicin's secretary, a Mrs. Uhlířová, who had seen Reicin drafting the original Czech text, testified about the forgery during the rehabilitation trial of General Píka in 1968. Reicin had realized that he must present more convincing evidence to make the charges of high treason against Píka more believable. His two previous scenarios had failed. Even before Píka's arrest it was rumored among the OBZ operators that the

Opis agenturní zprávy - v procesu Píky, kterou Reicin sám sestavil a soudu podvrhl:

Our guest from Czechoslovakia, gen. Pika, seemed to be very pleased about my invitation and mostly impressed by what he learned at this occasion. He was very faltered when I told him that his war reports on the Russians have been so initiative and thorough, that sometime they served as the only ground of information for His Majesty Government showing us clear the true situation of our ally of the time.

I think that distingishing him would mean a reward for his excellent service during the war. According to the eagerness and frankness whith which he accepted the distinguish, one may judge that he will be only too willing to further collaboration which he expressed also in our further debate.

His knowlidge in estimatting the USSR are remarkable for such modest a man and even more that he being an officer should be so well acquainted with those various matters. These were mostly: his knowledge about the lability of the interiors state of affaire, the indescribable want, the longing of the people for a higher standar of life; at the same time he observed the attempts being made to increase the strength of the Navy of Russis. His Knowledge of the Russian building.....

My admiration for the courage and disire for the independance of the Czech people were accepted by our guest with firm assurance that the good relations of the Czech Army to his Majesty Forces are deeply rooted in out hearts and that every effort of a Russian hegemony are out of the question although the Russians trying very hard to achieve it.

Answering my question concerning the good relations of the Czech Army to the Russian Army, my guest declared without hesitation that the previous illusions of the grest part of the people after the acts of violatio in 1945 and that a far as the Russian infiltration is concerned, the limits wits the Czech have been reached already. Some of the most intelligent and strongest personalities amongst the Czech politicians, will be more and more maste of the situation. Theelections have schown a remarkable decline of communost influence since the culmination in 1945. The aversion against Russian unculture was most remar kable here, he said. As to teh Russian mission in Prague our guest declared that one succeeded to limit its previous sence of onfiltration by soviet officers in a most remarkable way, and that at present it is doing only quite insignificant instruction work at the military schools.... Speaking about those of his seniors schowing dependance from the Russians he had no great sympathy with them, but avoid to speak about it.

As to my question whether the Czech Inteligence Service and NKGB were on good terms and how their collaboration workd, the guest replied that there is no such thing good relations between the two services-with the exception of a few by communists influenced persons -assuring me that it is not the Czech Inteligence Service that is taken a basis by the Russians but that of occupied Germany. Our guest is very well acquainted with personalities of the NKGB though he met nobody in Prague, bau knows them from his stay in Moscouw. Personally he knows only Mr Chichief and another insignificant man at the Consulat Mr Tichonov. He said.....

Expresing the hope that the relations between oud two nations so good during the wae shoud continue for being so I said good by to him.

Some furter remarks and information will be put forward to those departments concerned.

18 th June 1946

Razítko MNC

Originál souhlasí s kopii
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general was to be kidnapped and delivered to Soviet authorities in Austria, presumably to be liquidated. This scheme proved unworkable since the Czechs could not find a Soviet counterpart at the Austrian border to whom the “goods” could be delivered. A second scenario, based on laboriously collected testimonies to prove that Píka had worked for British Intelligence during the war, also misfired. Even the Communist propagandists found it difficult to ignore the fact that Great Britain and the Soviet Union were allies in the fight against Nazi Germany. Thus, convincing evidence of Píka’s continuing contacts with the British in the period after the end of the war had to be found. General Píka’s official trip to London in 1946 to celebrate Victory Day gave Reicin his opening. Mrs. Uhlířová

claimed to have overheard Vaš say to Reicin: “Just tell me how much you need for Píka, fifteen years or the gallows, and the indictment can be manufactured accordingly....”

Having corresponded with the late British historian, Edward Crankshaw, who served as British intelligence officer in wartime Moscow and remembered Píka, I sent him the text of the fateful document. “The document you sent me,” Crankshaw replied in March 1983, “is really the most appalling and most unimaginably inefficient bit of forgery I have ever come across. The whole European communist apparatus...is lowered in my esteem if this is the kind of thing the Czech secret police, or whoever, is allowed to produce as fabricated evidence. I don’t think I need to elaborate on that.” ●