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## Court trial of Catholic bishops

Political show trials were an integral part of the system created and controlled by the Communist Party. Conditions for major show trials were created by Act No. 231 of 1948, which introduced the death sentence and long penal sentences for treason, espionage, military treason and sabotage. This allowed the persecution of whole groups of residents. Trials were prepared according to the proven Soviet model: they would demonstrate vigilance against enemies and also affect inhabitants by discouraging all real and potential opponents from opposing the regime. The trials, which were often public, were theatrical in nature. The accused were prepared for the appearance with a lengthy investigation carried out by state security. Torture elicited guilty pleas in most cases, even among the innocent – their signing of interrogation protocols were considered proof of guilt. Then they recited learned statements. Prosecutors and judges delivered sentences only after agreement with Communist Party headquarters, or the latter subsequently decided about changing a judgment or issuing a pardon. Both individuals and groups were identified as enemies and put on trial. Trials had one specific feature in Slovakia – they evidenced the futility of resistance to Slovakia’s position in the centralistic state. In reality, the trials highlighted the problem with Slovakia’s self-governing position. The trial of Catholic bishops Ján Vojtaššák, Michal Buzalka and Povol Gojdič was the largest public political show trial, which was held from 10 to 15 January 1951 in Bratislava. Buzalka and Gojdič were given life sentences. Vojtaššák was sentenced to twenty-four years imprisonment. Only a concern for the international response prevented the death sentence for Gojdič and Buzalka, which had been proposed by the state prosecutor. A propaganda book and brochures were issued for the trial in Slovak, English, French and Polish. The campaign was also spread via radio and the press. The following was written in a propaganda brochure related to the bishops’ trial: ‘The accused persons calculated that their high church titles allowed them to breach the valid laws of the Republic and to commit the most serious crimes with impunity. They believed that these crimes would remain hidden behind the thick walls of bishops’ residences. It is clear that no state can see this activity and not respond. The people’s authorities found secret archives in the bishops’ residences, which helped to reveal the crimes of the accused down to the smallest details. Bishop Gojdič changed his residence to a factory intended for the production of falsified documents for Bandera’s gangsters, who robbed and looted worshippers in Eastern Slovakia. Illegal correspondence with Sidor and documents on links to underground groups were found at the residence of Bishop Vojtaššák. Documents on espionage activities in favour of the Vatican and initiators of war were discovered at Bishop Buzalka’s residence. Files and records of an espionage nature, which were delivered by all three accused persons through Prague internunciature to the Vatican, were discovered. This strong evidence was

..... completed by witness testimonies that convicted the treasonous bishops. Only under the compelling weight of such evidence did the accused plead guilty of their crimes.’ The objective of this trial was to compromise the Catholic Church and to reveal its link to fascism and capitalism. This trial aimed to justify strong attacks against the Catholic Church in Slovakia. A similar trial was held in Hungary of Archbishop and Cardinal Józef Mindszenty and Czech Bishop Stanislav Zelo.



**T**he trial of a group of anti-communist activists – Albert Púčik, Anton Tunega and Eduard Tesár – in 1949 ended more tragically. All were accused of espionage in favour of America. They were sentenced to death and executed in 1951. Legendary partisan commander Viliam Žingor together with partisans Samuel Bibzo and Ladislav Nosák were also executed – they had refused to subordinate to the Communist Party and tried to form a group to overthrow the Communist system. The revolution soon turned against those who had initiated and benefited from it. This began with the major trial of Hungarian Minister of the Interior László Rajko in the Autumn of 1949, who was declared ‘an agent of western imperialism.’ A similarly highly-placed functionary was also sought for the leadership of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia – the post finally being falling to Rudolf Slánsky, the General Secretary of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia. Another thirteen people who held high office in security, army, economic and foreign policy were sentenced along with Slánsky. The trial had anti-Jewish undertones, since most of the sentenced were of Jewish origin, which reflected the hostile relations between the Soviet Union and Israeli. Of those sentenced, eleven were executed. Of Slovaks, former minister of foreign affairs, Vladimír Clementis, was executed after the trial with Slánsky. The 1954 trial of ‘Slovak bourgeoisie nationalists’ – a group of communists who championed Slovak interests – ended without death sentences due to the death of the dictator Stalin. The main accused person in the group, Gustáv Husák, was sentenced to life imprisonment. The other accused, Daniel Okáli, Ivan Horváth and Laco Novomeský were sentenced to lengthy prison terms. Even though from the mid-1950s public trials were gradually refrained from, both security forces and the courts carried out acts of repression – the persecution of those considered enemies of the regime – until the fall of communism in 1989. In Slovakia, 71,168 persons were sentenced to a total of 82,615 years of imprisonment during 1948-1989 – sixty-one were executed for political reasons.



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**References:**