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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
OFFICE OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES

13 December 1951

STAFF MEMORANDUM NO. 173

SUBJECT: The Liquidation of Rudolf Slansky and the Lavrentiev Purge.

Summary. The arrest on 26 November of Rudolf Slansky, former Secretary General of the Czechoslovak Communist Party, apparently has inaugurated a ruthless purge of the party and government hierarchies under the inspection, and probably the direction, of the new Soviet Ambassador, Anatoly Lavrentiev. The nature and method of the purge suggest that the Kremlin regards Czechoslovak economic inefficiency and political lethargy as intolerable and that it is holding the Czech Party responsible for failing, by proper "political education," to correct the situation. The Lavrentiev purge is almost certain to continue, to the point where virtually the entire hierarchy may be replaced.

1. Slansky's loyalty to Moscow hitherto had been unquestioned. A life-long Communist, he spent the years between 1938 and 1944 in Moscow, returning to Czechoslovakia to become Secretary General of the Communist Party. His decline began last February when two leading Party officials were arrested on charges of deviationism and espionage. While Slansky was reproached for not having purged these "enemies of the state" earlier, he retained his position, though somewhat precariously. Although he was stripped of political power in September, he was not summarily dismissed but "promoted" to Vice Premier. Only three weeks before his arrest, Premier Zapotocky carefully explained to the press that Slansky's "transfer" was organizational and "non-political." Two weeks before Slansky's arrest, his collected speeches appeared in a two-volume edition and were warmly received by the press. The Party organ RUDE PRAVO, whose editor is a high functionary of the Party, praised the work as a great contribution to ideological education.

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2. All this suggests that the decision to arrest Slansky was made quite suddenly and by the Kremlin. His arrest was reported immediately after the arrival in Prague of Lavrentiev, the previous ambassador having been recalled so hurriedly that he left without farewell ceremonies. Lavrentiev is one of the Kremlin's most ruthless and competent foreign affairs officials. He was envoy to Bulgaria and Rumania between 1939 and 1941, Ambassador to Belgrade from 1946 to 1949, and thereafter a Deputy Foreign Minister.

3. Besides Slansky, his brother Richard, an official in the Foreign Ministry, and Slansky's closest Sudeten friends, Geminder, Koehler, and Frank, were ousted. All are reported to be under arrest. At the same time, thousands of lesser officials and functionaries are being ousted and/or arrested. The surviving Party executives have already scheduled purges of the remaining leadership, as well as of the rank and file.

4. The official reasons given for the liquidation of Slansky and his clique -- "espionage", "anti-state activities", "Titoism", and "attempts to escape with Western help" -- are, of course, a cover. There is no evidence that Slansky, the prototype of the "international" Communist, had Titoist ambitions. Nor is the old feud between him and Gottwald likely to have caused his elimination. Slansky's fall should certainly not be construed as a victory of the "nationalist" Czechs under Gottwald over the "internationalist" led by the Slansky faction. It is also implausible that [redacted] It is also implausible that [redacted] Czechs led to his downfall, or that his being a Jew was more than a contributory factor for his ouster.

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5. The prime motive for the purge probably is an increasing Soviet concern over the Czechoslovak economy. The steady decline of the living standards has resulted in widespread unrest among the workers. The Kremlin probably fears lest this dissatisfaction hinder the increase of industrial production which it seeks. Premier Zapotocky's angry speeches on 31 October and 8 November admitted the government's failure to provide adequate food and housing, but blamed the workers in general and the miners specifically for not meeting the current Plan's goals. From the Soviet point of view, however, the Party is responsible for "political education," which should strengthen the workers' ideological position and thereby cause them to work harder and to produce more. As Party chief,

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Slansky had failed in this function. In addition, he had tried to perpetuate his position by accumulating personal power; he had infiltrated into various government agencies, especially the Defense Ministry.

6. The purge is an integral part of the Communist system, which shows no gratitude for services rendered in the past. Based doctrinally on Marxian dialectics, the purge is designed as a continuous rejuvenation process to be applied whenever necessary. The fact that Slansky and his followers were loyal servants of the Kremlin mattered little when they failed to perform their duties satisfactorily, or when the Kremlin believed new men had to be elevated to handle a new line. Slansky committed the crime of holding a high position in the Party without fulfilling his "norm"; he did not use his power to lead his people to Communist enlightenment, i.e., to better Soviet exploitation. Thus he and his Moscow-minded crowd became new victims of the purge, which throughout the history of applied Marxism has eliminated or liquidated Communists in the USSR and elsewhere.

7. Czechoslovakia is the last of the Eastern European Satellite countries to experience such a violent shakeup. The present purge is probably far from over. It presumably aims at the installation of an almost entirely new set of leaders and officials. Even the positions of Gottwald and Zapotocky may well be regarded as insecure, and their replacements may be drawn from younger Communist "technicians" who execute but do not make policy. The ultimate objective of the purge -- as in the other Satellites -- is complete consolidation of the orbit under Soviet rule.

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