

# Popular opinion of under a cruel star



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Popular Opinion of a Cruel Star Heda Margolius Kovaly was a woman who during her time in Czechoslovakia lived through many harsh periods for not only the country, but people of Jewish heritage as well. Her memoir Under a Cruel Star tells her story of hardship from 1941 to 1968. In this memoir she explains her time in Auschwitz, her escape, as well as life in Communist Czechoslovakia, concentrating more on the hardships of Czechoslovakia after World War II.

While Kovaly's memoir depicts the suffering of the Czechoslovakian people as well as the Slansky trials, which her first husband was a victim of, she never really touches upon the fact that many of the people tried, convicted, and killed were of Jewish decent. However, an article entitled "A ' Polyphony of Voices'? Czech Popular Opinion and the Slansky Affair," by Kevin McDermott depicts the suffering of the Czech people as well as the trials in a completely different manner, addressing the anti-Semitic actions of the Czechoslovakian government under the rule of Joseph Stalin and the influence that followed his death.

Both the memoir and the article explain the Slansky Trial, each with a different view. In Kovaly's memoir her husband was one of the Jewish KSC leaders which were tried during that time. It is explained in text that her husband had no connection to Richard Slansky, but it left him questioning the years of devotion he made to the communist government. While the Kovaly perspective shows an outsiders view of what was happening to Slansky McDermott's article explains why and how Slansky was brought to trial.

The article explains how Slansky was a very powerful leader in the KSC party, “ he was effectively second in command to Gottwald, responsible for the day-to-day running of the party machine and co-responsible for formulating policy and strategic direction... He was a member of the party’s top decision-making- bodies. ” Stalin sent a letter to Gottwald stating that he had “ committed a number of errors” in promoting leading personnel which has caused a threat to the party and the people and advised him to remove Slansky. This could have been caused through a change in geopolitical support In the Middle East.

This could infer that Stalin’s increasing anti-Semitic tendencies impacted Czechoslovakia. Other than the fact that both Kovaly and Slansky were Jewish another reason for their demise was their different view on the communist ideal. When Heda tries to beg her husband to leave his government position he responds by saying “ if all the decent people leave now, things will get worse. ” Leaders like Slansky and Kovaly believed in the communist party actually as one for the people, they did not take huge bribes or look out for only themselves.

They worked to do good for the party and the people. However, the Czech economy was failing, there was widespread social discontent and with that brought demonstrations and strikes. “ Workers universally cursed the fact that everything is dear and wages are low... A year ago salami cost 8 crowns and today it’s 28 crowns. ” The government needed a scapegoat and Slansky (mainly him) as well as many Jewish officials were the perfect people to blame. Vzpominky Goldstucker actually spoke about Slansky saying “...He was cleverer than all the others so they had to get rid of him. ”

When the arrest of Kovaly's husband took place and her friends and family found out, people purposefully avoided her and severed all contact with her. The government had effectively influenced people to fear going against them by staging arrests and trials such as Kovaly's husband. A lot of what Kovaly writes in her memoir shows her being ostracized by society. Her husband's arrest was one of those times. She wrote that people would spit at her and other people who were like her were stoned. At this point in her memoir she doesn't mention any anti-Semitic acts, only the ostracized effect that came with her "traitorous" husband's arrest.

When the trials began Heda was hospitalized due to her being sick of sleep deprivation, malnutrition, and stress, while she was in the hospital she heard her husband present a statement on the radio. Hearing his "flat and halting" voice leads her to believe that he is repeating a written statement which he was forced to memorize. Both Kovaly and McDermott touch on this subject of torture and forced statements. McDermott writes that the conduct of the court hearings came under criticism among citizens. Some people are saying that they have the impression that the trial is a show rehearsed in advance... because the accused reply so fluently as if they are reading their statement. "Slansky was forced to do the same thing. He originally apologized for allowing some wrong people to make it through the government ladder, but denied ever being traitorous, that was until the secret police began to interrogate him. They used a series of "physical and psychological pressures bordering on torture" which finally influence him to confess his "guilt".

While both Kovaly and McDermott addressed the torture that some of the prisoners received to influence their confession, Heda addressed a personal

experience focusing only on her husband while McDermott's article addresses several sources as well as explained deeper detail why the torture was used. With the regime change it was written that " The Death of Stalin Means Death to Communists. " The regime changed in 1956 and Kovaly writes that Nikita Khrushchev gains power and criticizes Stalin's reign. Quickly satellite nations begin releasing prisoners and declare them to be rehabilitated.

The party even admitted that confessions were forced through torture, drugs, and psychological manipulation. The article does defend these points which Kovaly is making as well as takes it one step further by explaining some of the signs citizens were apparently posting in the towns. Even though Stalin was dead his anti-Semitic influence was not. An example would be an inscription found on the ground floor of a residential block which read " DEATH TO THE JEWISH TRAITORS-TO JEWS, GOTWALD AND THE JOINT- WE WANT A NATIONAL GOVERNMENT. " Although not mentioned by Heda Kovaly, hatred towards Jewish people was still present after Stalin's death.

People were influenced to believe that it was Jewish leaders fault for the hurt economy which is why many jokes, comments, and almost fighting broke out. Although the extreme hatred towards Jewish people was un-intentionally publicly created it grew to something that the government could almost not control. While Kovaly's memoir depicts the suffering of the Czechoslovakian people as well as the Slansky trials, which her first husband was a victim of, she never really touches upon the fact that many of the people tried, convicted, and killed were of Jewish decent.

However, Kevin McDermott depicts the suffering of the Czech people as well as the trials in a completely different manner, addressing the anti-Semitic

actions of the Czechoslovakian government under the rule of Joseph Stalin and the influence that followed his death. This difference in historical focus during the same time period happens because Kovaly is writing on personal experience while McDermott is not. His research however does allow weight to be brought to the experiences which Kovaly is writing by showing detail which she is missing.

Still, Kovaly's work does lack the reference of anti-Semitic acts which were extremely present during that time and continuously present in the article.

----- [ 1 ]. McDermott, Kevin. ", " A ' Polyphony of Voices'? Czech Popular Opinion and the Slansky Affair,". " Slavic Review. 67. no. 4 (2008): 840-865. (846) [ 2 ]. McDermott 847 [ 3 ]. McDermott 847 [ 4 ]. Kovaly, Heda. Under a Cruel Star: A Life in Prague 1941-1968. Cambridge, MA: Plunkett Lake, 1986. Print. (101) [ 5 ]. McDermott, Kevin. , " A ' Polyphony of Voices'? Czech Popular Opinion and the Slansky Affair,". " Slavic Review. 67. no. 4 (2008): 840-865. [ 6 ]. McDermott 859 [ 7 ]. Kovaly 150 [ 8 ]. Kovaly, Heda. Under a Cruel Star: A Life in Prague 1941-1968. Cambridge, MA: Plunkett Lake, 1986. Print. 170 [ 9 ]. McDermott 852 [ 10 ]. McDermott 856/857 [ 11 ]. McDermott, Kevin. ", " A ' Polyphony of Voices'? Czech Popular Opinion and the Slansky Affair,". " Slavic Review. 67. no. 4 (2008): 840-865. 849 [ 12 ]. McDermott 859 [ 13 ]. McDermott 859