

## The Purge of Heads of State and Heads of Government in Post-World War II Europe

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My inspiration: postwar retribution, purges, catharsis; the possibility of trying statesmen and politicians for wars of aggression, war crimes, genocide. All these issues are as controversial today as they were after the war.

Inspiration for this specific lecture: realization that there was an enormous difference between how Europe treated its statesmen before WWII and immediately after WWII.

First point: no matter how terrible the wars they had fought and lost; how heinous the crimes they had committed, to the best of my knowledge no European head of state or head of government, except one, was tried and executed between the beheading of Louis XVI in 1793 and World War II. The single exception was the Hungarian Prime Minister Count Lajos Batthyány whom an Austrian firing squad executed in 1849. Napoleon I and Napoleon III were never tried, only exiled, although they had been responsible for terrible destruction and the utter defeat of France.

In 1918, the victorious Allied Powers made vague attempts to have the Kaiser arrested and tried for war crimes but were relieved when the Dutch refused to surrender him to a yet to be constituted international court of justice. As for the German people, despite the fact that they suffered terribly as a result of the lost war, they would rather have re-started hostilities than allow their wartime leaders to be tried by either an international or a national court. Nor was Emperor-King Charles of Austria-Hungary called to justice for having sacrificed the lives of thousands and for losing an empire.

Instead of a trial, a devastating number of rulers and prime ministers were assassinated by anarchists or killed by secret governmental order during the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century: a president of France; a king and a prime minister of Portugal; a prime minister of Spain; a king of Italy, an empress and a crown prince of Austria-Hungary; a prime minister and a chancellor of Austria; a former chancellor of Germany; a president and a king of Greece, two kings of Serbia; a king of Yugoslavia; a prime minister of Bulgaria; two prime ministers of Romania; a former prime minister of Hungary, a prime minister of Poland, and three tsars of Russia fell to the bullets of conspirators or to the bombs and daggers of assassins. Undoubtedly, it was a very dangerous occupation to lead a state in Europe during those years but, at least, these statesmen were spared the public humiliation of a trial and the horrors of the gallows.

Everything changed with the coming of World War II and even more so with the defeat of Nazi Germany. The idea that a statesman ought to be tried for the defeat of his country caught on first in Vichy France where, at the so-called Riom trial, opened in 1942, three former prime ministers, among them Léon Blum, several ministers and a commanding general were made to stand trial, charged with having “betrayed their duties” toward France. Remarkably, the accused were allowed to defend themselves eloquently and to use the services of outstanding lawyers. The proceedings were suspended in the following year, but two prime ministers were later transported to Buchenwald and French fascists assassinated another high-ranking defendant.

This was only a beginning: during the war, both radical Nazi collaborators and left-wing anti-Nazi resisters developed the notion that those responsible for the sufferings of the nation ought to be made to account for their deeds as part of a great national catharsis. This *épuration*, as the French resisters called it, would rid the nation of the residues of the old regime and allow for the creation of a new society led by an elite that had grown out of wartime developments. In one version, the new leadership would emerge from the right-radical camp, in the other version, from the left-wing resistance movements, quite especially from among the Communists.

Only the more moderate among the collaborators and among the resisters hoped for a return to a status quo ante, although even such conservative monarchists as the commanders of Milak, the Norwegian military resistance organization, and the Cetnik commander General Draza Mihailović of Serbia envisaged a rather different country from that before the German invasion. Milak, for instance, foresaw an administratively more centralized Norway, and the Cetniks projected the end of Yugoslavia and the rise of an independent Greater Serbia. Or, to take another example, what tied the pro-Nazi Prime Minister General Milan Nedić of Serbia to the anti-Nazi Hungarian ex-Prime Minister Count István Bethlen was that they were equally terrified of Bolshevism and the Soviet Union. One trusted German victory until it was too late, and the other hoped against hope that the Anglo-American troops would arrive in his country before the Soviet Red Army troops. Not surprisingly, the collaborator Nedić ended in a prison of the Titoist regime while the resister Bethlen died in a Moscow jail.

Let us remind ourselves that, in the first four years of the war, almost the entire continent of Europe was allied to Germany, the so-called neutrals included. Even the countries defeated by Germany were generally allowed a government or an administration that was friendly to the Nazi regime. With the exception of Poland in which underground resistance arose immediately, the majority of Europeans supported the German-friendly governments, at least until after the battle of Stalingrad. Therefore, such leaders who were tried after the war for collaboration, could look back to years when they had been celebrated by a population that was now asking for their blood.. The popular French greeting addressed to Marshal Philippe Pétain at public assemblies: “Maréchal nous voila”, Marshal we are for

you, was repeated in various forms in other countries, all the way from Belgium, where the collaborationist King Leopold III was hailed as the savior of his nation, to Greece where the successive prime ministers Georgios Tsolakoglu and Ioannis Rallis were perceived by many as defenders of national interests and bulwarks against the native Communist threat.

Devotion to the leader was particularly keen in those countries that were genuine allies of Germany and therefore enjoyed considerable liberty of action in domestic affairs and even in military policy. This was the case of Italy, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, and Finland. Moreover, the population nearly idolized the leaders of such countries that owed their existence to Nazi Germany, namely Slovakia and Croatia; Ante Pavelić and Msgr. Jozef Tiso were seen as liberators of their nation. In the first years of the war, the idea of trying and even executing these men was only a faint hope on the part of such an embittered exile as Czechoslovakia's Edvard Benes.

After Stalingrad everything changed: former collaborators gradually transformed themselves into resisters or, as was more often the case, they began to play two simultaneous roles. Hungary's Regent Miklós Horthy was proud of his soldiers fighting shoulder to shoulder with the German *Kamaraden* but after Stalingrad, and especially following the surrender of Italy to the Allies in September 1943, he sought contact with the Western Allies in the hope of a negotiated surrender. Even such a staunch admirer of the Führer as Marshal Ion Antonescu rightly claimed before his judges in the people's court of post-war Romania that he had sought contact with the Allies behind the back of Hitler.

Because practically all heads of states and government ministers in Hitler's Europe had enjoyed some popularity in the first few years of the war, and because they felt that, during the war, they had acted as shields of their country against German exactions, they bitterly resented their arrest and trial after the war. Only such off-beat creatures as Norway's Vidkun Quisling and Hungary's Arrow Cross leader Ferenc Szálasi claimed, when in court, that fighting alongside the Nazis had been a good thing for which their nation should be grateful. For them, the court was simply a representative of their temporarily triumphant mortal enemies. Most other defendants expected the court to appreciate the services they had rendered in defense of the nation.

Agitation for the punishment of collaborators, traitors, and war criminals arose fairly early during the war, spearheaded by the exile European governments in London. It was at their prompting that the Great Allies decided to try the major German war criminals as well as to order the new governments in the defeated countries to try their guilty leaders. Trials of collaborators in underground courts actually began under the German occupation, especially in Poland, Italy, and France. Following liberation, the task of judging the war criminals generally fell to so-called people's courts; these revolutionary institutions were meant to substitute for, or at least to complement, the undermanned, often Nazified, and ossified regular courts. The proceedings at these courts were under the

supervision of the now ruling anti-fascist parties which tried to combine the need to purify society with that of respecting at least a minimum of legitimacy. Except in the Soviet Union, these were no show trials.

Those investigated and tried numbered in the hundreds of thousands with every country in Hitler's Europe arresting and trying proportionally similar number of suspects. The defendants were mostly adult males, the proportion of those being sentenced in court or punished administratively, including expulsion from the country, amounted to perhaps five percent of those in this group. Only in West Germany and Finland were far fewer people investigated and tried, whereas in such countries as Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, and the Soviet Union, the proportions were probably larger but statistics and studies on this subject are hard to come by.

The most dramatic of all were the trials of heads of states and prime ministers. In Italy, Mussolini had been tried and hanged by a kangaroo court made up of anti-fascist partisans but in most other places some kind of decorum was respected. The number of highest-ranking defendants is staggering: Hungary, for instance, executed one head of state and four prime ministers; in Bulgaria, virtually the entire old political elite were wiped out either through court action or arbitrary killings. Slovakia executed their heads of state; Norway, France, Romania, and Bulgaria executed their prime ministers. The head of state of France and two successive prime ministers of Greece Serbia perished in prison. President Emil Hácha of the Czech Protectorate was lucky enough to die in a prison hospital a few weeks after the end of the war.

True, not all the wartime leaders considered guilty shared the same fate. Ante Pavelić, the head of the Croatian fascist state, escaped punishment by fleeing abroad with the help of the Vatican; Hungary's Regent Miklós Horthy was protected from extradition to Yugoslavia by his American captors in Germany, and the assistance of Stalin, who apparently appreciated the old admiral's effort to surrender to him in October 1944. Occupied Belgium and the Netherlands had in lieu of constituted governments only heads of administration during the war, and the Danes whose king and government had stayed put during the German occupation, successfully cultivated the legend of the king and his government having been heroic resisters. In reality, Danish economic assistance to Germany had been invaluable. In Finland, under Soviet pressure, President Risto Ryti was sentenced to ten years in prison but was pardoned in 1949, and when he died, a few years later, he was buried with full honors. All in all then, escaping the death penalty for a wartime head of state or prime minister was a question of luck or of having been able to maintain a great degree of political autonomy and thus also a parliamentary regime during the war; this was the case especially of Denmark and Finland.

It is well known that Hitler preferred well-established, conservative statesmen in the non-German countries to fascists and other radicals who might not be disciplined enough to mobilize their nation for the German war effort. The

fascists were only the last resort, hence the appearance in the post-war courts of such non-Nazi conservatives as Marshal Pétain of France, Prime Ministers László Bárdossy and Döme Sztójay of Hungary, Marshal Antonescu of Romania, General Nedić of Serbia, and Prime Ministers Tsolakoglou and Rallis of Greece. With the exception of Bárdossy and Rallis, these were military men. All defended themselves with dignity, although Pétain, who had volunteered to return to France from Switzerland, refused to recognize the court and kept silent. The Hungarian László Bárdossy, who was accused, among other things, of having illegally started the war against the Soviet Union in 1941, dazzled the audience with quotations in Latin and English; he also proved both polite and contemptuous of his opponents. His popularity soared during the proceedings even though he adamantly refused the prosecutor's suggestion that he shoulder the blame for Hungary's fatal alliance with Nazi Germany. It was believed that Bárdossy's confession might shift the burden of guilt from the Hungarian people, especially in view of the coming peace treaty with Hungary. Perhaps in appreciation of his dignified behavior and his popularity, Bárdossy was only shot at the end of his trial whereas nearly all other main defendants were hanged.

Every member of the late-war Arrow Cross government in Hungary was held to be guilty until proven innocent; meanwhile, members of the Horthy regime were often acquitted; many were not even tried but rather, acted as witnesses for the prosecution. Yet it was under Horthy that Hungary entered the disastrous war against the Allies, and it was under him that nearly half a million Jews were deported to Auschwitz. Let us note here that in Romania, too, conservatives and the regular administration were far more guilty of murder than the wild and violent Iron Guard. It was Marsal Antonescu who had ordered the massacre of at least 300,000 thousand Romanian and Ukrainian Jews whereas the fascist Iron Guard was responsible for pogroms which claimed the lives of "only" a few thousand victims.

The National Socialist former Prime Minister Béla Imrédy tried in court to embellish his sorry wartime record but the Arrow-Cross National Leader Ferenc Szálasi behaved in court as though he were one of the great world leaders asked to present to the public his political views and his plans for a future. This fanatic, whom many judged to be demented, actually behaved with even more dignity than Bárdossy did. Assaulted by invectives not only by the prosecutor but also by the presiding judge and the audience made up mainly of Jewish survivors, Szálasi insisted that he was still the head of the nation whom he would guide to world-historical greatness in partnership with Germany and Japan.

The sentences of the major defendants were decided everywhere by the political party leaders and not really by the courts. The question must be asked whether the trials achieved their purpose which was, first, to punish the guilty, second, to warn all statesmen that they may be held personally accountable for actions undertaken by their government, and third, to make way in the centers of power for members of the anti-fascist parties? The judgment is still out on all this, but one must admit that, despite their enormous shortcomings and biases, the courts

succeeded in punishing most of those who had been responsible for the ruin of their country. Never mind such delicate problems as, for instance, whether heads of state can be punished at all, and whether it was right to punish people on the basis of ex-post-facto laws.

Nearly everywhere the new leaders hoped that the trials, especially of the highest-ranking traitors, would educate the public. In this respect, it is difficult to talk of success; immediately after the trials, which were held roughly between 1944 and 1946, the more radical former resisters judged the process of purification totally inadequate (*épuration manqué; epurazione mancata*) while the more moderate and conservative anti-Nazis considered the judgments too drastic. Wartime collaborators considered all trials illegal. Some defendants, such as Bárdossy, and Prime Minister Pierre Laval in France, earned a certain popularity with their courageous behavior and the cravenness of some of their accusers.

There is no evidence of the trial materials having penetrated public consciousness in a way planned by the anti-fascist parties. Little if any of the proceedings were ever taught in schools. On the other hand, the great fear of the post-war governments, namely that new right-wing politics would arise from the legacy of the “martyrs,” did not materialize either. Despite the efforts of French, Slovak, Romanian, Croatian, and Hungarian right-wingers, to create a cult of their wartime radical leaders, only a minority honors Pétain, Tiso, Antonescu, Pavelić and Szálasi in their country.

The final question is how to explain the execution, imprisonment and a myriad of other forms of punishment meted out in their countries to a nearly unbelievable number of fellow-citizens and, especially, to pre-war and wartime leaders. After all, World War I had not been less bloody, and yet it was followed by virtually no charges and no punishment. The only explanation I can suggest is that the extent of European collaboration with Nazi Germany had been so extensive and so spontaneous, that it was felt to be necessary to sacrifice a great number of fellow-citizens and especially the country’s leaders in order to clear the conscience of the others. There was also the perceived need to project the entirely false image of one’s country having been that of heroic resistance fighters and of only a small number of dastardly traitors.

Unfortunately, the post-World War II purges might well have been a unique phenomenon with no effect on later generations; witness the failure of “lustration” in post-Communist Central- and Eastern Europe. Still, the great attempt at a catharsis had been a good try.

## **Appendix I**

### **European heads of state and prime ministers murdered between 1793 and 1939**

President Marie-Francois Sadi-Carnot of France (1894); King Carlos I (1908) and Prime Minister General Sidonio Paes (1918) of Portugal; Prime Minister José Canalejas of Spain (1912), King Umberto of Italy (1900); Empress Elisabeth (1898) and Crown Prince Francis Ferdinand (1914) of Austria-Hungary; Prime Minister Karl Stürgkh of the Austrian Empire (1916); Chancellor Engelbert Dollfuss of the Austrian Republic (1932); former Chancellor General Kurt von Schleicher of Germany (1934); President Giovanni Kapodistria (1831) and King George (1913) of Greece ; Prime Ministers Armand Calinescu (1939) and Nikolae Iorga (1940) of Romania ; Kings Michael (1868) and Alexander (1903) of Serbia; King Alexander II of Yugoslavia (1934); Prime Minister Alexander Stamboliski of Bulgaria (1923); Prime Minister Count István Tisza of Hungary (1918); Prime Minister Gabriel Narutowicz of Poland (1922), Prime Minister Peter Stolypin of Russia (1911), and the tsars Paul I (1801), Alexander II (1881) and Nicholas II (1918) fell to the bullets of conspirators or to the bombs and daggers of assassins.

### **European heads of state and prime ministers tried and executed between 1793 and 1939**

King Louis XVI of France (1793), Prime Minister Lajos Batthyány of Hungary (1849), Prime Minister Aleksei Rykov of the Soviet Union (1939)

## **Appendix II**

### **European heads of state and prime ministers tried and executed during, at the end, or soon after the end of World War II**

Note that some of these statesmen died in prison.

Eliaš of the Czech Protectorate was executed by the Germans and Bethlen of Hungary was an anti-Nazi seized by the Soviets. All others were tried and sentenced for treason and collaboration with Nazi Germany.

(PM stands for prime minister)

Bulgaria: PM Bogdan Filov as well as 24 ministers and 68 parliamentary deputies

Czechoslovakia/Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia: President Emil Hácha (died in prison); PM General Alois Eliaš (tried and shot by the Germans in 1942)

France: Chef d'Etat (head of state) Marshal Philippe Pétain (died in prison); PM Pierre Laval

Greece: PM General Georgios Tsolakoglou and PM Ioannis Rallis {both died in prison)

Hungary: Nemzetvezető (national leader) Ferenc Szálasi; PM István Bethlen (died in prison in Moscow in 1946?), PM Béla Imrédy, PM László Bárdossy, PM General Döme Sztójay, PM Jenő Szöllösy,.

Italy: PM (Il Duce) Benito Mussolini (shot by Italian partisans after a mock trial in May 1945)

Norway: PM Vidkun Quisling

Romania: Conducator (leader) PM Marshal Ion Antonescu

Serbia: PM General Milan Nedić

Slovakia: President Monsignor Józef Tiso, PM Vojtech Tuka