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One day it has to come out

Two books dealing with the state security apparatus in communist Hungary emphasize the extent to which its members, from informants and their handlers up to high-ranking politicians, were subordinate to the Communist Party hierarchy. Clearly, a much wider circle of people than the network of agents were responsible for the disadvantages, and even vilification, suffered by thousands of people.

It has taken twenty years for the first comprehensive account of Hungary's Communist-era secret police to come out, but at last three books are starting to fill in the details.

Gábor Tabajdi's and Krisztián Ungváry's careful study¹ finally begins to unravel how the informer network operated. From a different angle, János Rainer's book² looks at this same topic by meticulously describing a specific case, that of József Antall, the man who became Hungary's prime minister in 1990, and whom the old regime had kept under close observation for decades. Though not reviewed here, we also at last have the Kenedi Committee report to refer to. This examines disclosure of secret-service files and the obstacles put in the way of opening these most sensitive of archives.

The real story is not just about an apparatus that was a few thousand strong. "What is at stake in the uncovering of the secret services is not that as many as possible learn who was in the network... The real issue is who did what on a case-by-case basis" (Tabajdi and Ungváry, p.14). There were all manner of encroachments into daily life. The intelligence apparatus sought to recruit the young into the youth organisation and adults into the network of the party-state — more often than not successfully so. And the list is a long one. If Hungarians had faced up to how they lived through the Kádár years, they might have drawn the conclusion that everyone who supported the regime could perhaps have been responsible, albeit to varying degrees, for the operation of the secret services.

The mystery surrounding the secret services will only be dispelled if we see clearly the hierarchy of responsibilities. Even under the totalitarian dictatorship of the Rákosi years, from 1949 to 1954, the Party was able to exert control over the political police and signal who was truly in control through liquidations and show trials of individuals up to the level of minister of the interior, and even seemingly untouchable demigods like the leaders of the state-security apparatus itself. However, during the Kádár era there was no longer any need for such ostentatious signals.

We learn from Tabajdi and Ungváry that the task of the Hungarian security forces after the violent crushing of the 1956 revolution was no longer to keep

society as a whole living in a climate of terror, but to keep the peace. They were no longer expected to manufacture as many internal enemies, political crimes and criminals as possible to keep the courts, prisons and Party propaganda machine busy, but, on the contrary, to ensure that there were as few internal enemies and political crimes as possible.

The Party apparatus launched this inverted strategy by sacking the old guard to start with. Resistance that arose from interior–ministry groups and sectional interests was harshly suppressed. State–security organs were, after all, supposed to work under direct Party guidance, with the Party determining the goals, the strategy, and the identity of their enemies.

Resolutions of the Party intervened in the work of the Ministry of the Interior even in given cases, down to the level of individual operational matters... Members of the Politburo also had a part in this, but so equally did all secretaries of the Central Committee. The various instructions issued by the Ministry always include the reference that all information has to be forwarded to the relevant Party and state organs. (Tabajdi and Ungváry, p. 21)

Even in matters of staffing party instructions had a priority. Every appointment, promotion or commendation required the approval of the responsible Party organ. It often happened that the interests of state security were relegated to second place, or that promises that case officers or minders made to agents working in the network could not be met because of instructions received from state and Party organs. "Those employed to avert internal reaction occupied a far less privileged position in the Party–state than did the Party's full–time functionaries". (Tabajdi and Ungváry, p. 92)

The politicians and Party functionaries who gave the orders at every level exercised firm and explicit control over the apparatchiks of the Ministry of the Interior, and that was what counted. (The district Party committees also supervised, gave instructions to and received reports from the Ministry's district organs.) Not only among those running the network of informers or the state security apparatus, but even at the highest levels of the Ministry there was no one with powers and responsibilities that bore any comparison with those in high–ranking posts, several of whom remain, even today, emblematic figures for one major political camp or other.

The hierarchy was similar at every level. Cadres of various ranks outside the secret services, if entrusted with the task of furnishing confidential information, were more often than not the most eager to furnish it. Ungváry shows strikingly, discussing the Dialógus movement, an oppositional alternative peace initiative in Pécs in the early eighties, that, "contrary to public belief, most of the denunciations under the Kádár regime did not come from agents but through casual social and official contacts." "Compared to the 19 agents who were mobilised over Dialógus, it was apparatchiks in the Party and the Young Communists' Organisation, not those in the "network" category, who were more important, and in Pécs as elsewhere played the most prominent and dirtiest roles." (Tabajdi and Ungváry, p. 417)

The sources show clearly that a much wider circle of people than the network of agents were responsible for the disadvantages, and even vilification, suffered by thousands of people. This makes it hardly surprising that researchers pushing for freedom of information on state surveillance find little

support. The response to publications that do find their way to a wider readership is jittery, with researchers generally being accused of the very thing that is least true of them, i.e. that they are only interested in unmasking and pillorying those who were recruited into the informer network. They are criticised for pursuing witch-hunts. This claim is countered in every chapter of Tabajdi and Ungváry's book. Already in the Preface they point out that priorities should lie elsewhere:

most argument about uncovering Hungary's past has, sadly, revolved around the issue of whether some individual was an agent. In the course of public debates much is heard about the matter of agents, or committees of agents and lists of agents, whereas interest in the mechanics of the regime is not particularly large. (Tabajdi and Ungváry, p. 11)

The biggest contribution of the book is to show that being recruited was not the decisive part. After all "half of the new recruits did not even turn up for a second meeting [with their handler] as an agent!" and, "due to narrowing of the channels for obtaining intelligence and to passive resistance, 20 per cent of all agents were discarded every year." (Tabajdi and Ungváry, p. 292)

Among those who had the greatest experience of the secret services, and who were hardened during the 1950s in the Gulag or the notorious forced labour camp set up at the copper mine of Recsk, were three anti-German army officers of the Horthy era, Ottó Hátszegi-Hatz, Gyula Kádár and Kálmán Kéri. All three of them, as a chapter about them discusses, were recruited, but they also knew enough about what they were doing to be able to evade the task.

A large part of their work as agents was taken up by preparing reports about each other. Each masterfully played down the task, and for quite a long time they succeeded in doing so, which is hardly surprising given that all three were outstanding army officers and far better instructed in the tricks of the secret-service trade than their nominal masters, as well as being good friends. (Tabajdi and Ungváry, p. 269)

It emerges from the staggering, even astounding story of Ottó Hátszegi-Hatz's (1902–1977) life what extraordinary personal integrity or severe sacrifices a person could give proof of, if they were unlucky enough to become entangled with intelligence organisations. This well-trained, successful army officer (and also world champion fencer at foil) served during the Second World War as Hungarian military attaché in Ankara and was one of the key figures in Horthy's attempts to get out of the War. He became involved in intricate double and triple games with the Allied, German and, of course, the Hungarian secret services in the interest of all kinds of noble aims, such as assisting Poles who had fled to Hungary, passing on aid parcels, making contacts with the western Allies, and so on. In November 1944, he flew over to join Soviet troops and played a part in anti-fascist propaganda efforts, but meanwhile back in Hungary his mother and his fiancée, judged to be Jewish, were arrested and then hauled off to be liquidated in Ravensbrück. In 1945 he was arrested by the NKVD, and sentenced to 25 years of forced labour, which was the automatic term for any "enemy" military attaché. He was released in 1955, returned to Hungary, got married and had children and was active as a fencing coach.

Hátszegi strove to maintain good relations with everybody as a diplomat–cum–mediator and strove to win everybody's confidence, which left him open to accusations and blackmail from all quarters. As a condition for being allowed to be rehabilitated in Hungary, to live peacefully and rebuild his existence, he had to let himself be recruited into the informer network and to maintain contacts with former fellow officers who were living abroad in exile, write reports on them and help in recruiting them too into the network.

Hátszegi did not trust the regime, and the Ministry did not trust Hátszegi. Rehabilitation failed to come about, he was treated with ever greater severity; his home was bugged, he was shadowed, a large number of agents kept him under observation, he was provoked, made to write "declarations of honesty". He was supposed to prove his loyalty by, among other things, participating in the recruitment of his younger brother, who was then living in Austria. A heart complaint that he suffered from was worsened by stress. He worked for a few years in the GDR as a fencing coach for the sports club of the East German police, who then loaned him to the Stasi. He was shut out of the network of agents a couple of years before he died in 1977, without their even bothering to inform him. Hátszegi bore a long, forced secret–service contact for the whole time without ever establishing any confidential relationship with the officers who handled him, without ever identifying with either the service or his tasks, and last but not least, without ever being of any real use to the secret service.

Kálmán Kéri (1901–94) was chief of staff to the Hungarian 1st Army in early October 1944, when Horthy signalled his willingness to accept the Allies' conditions for a provisional ceasefire. Kéri joined the deputation that was setting off for Moscow to formally sign the terms. Following the war, he was arrested in 1949 and sent to an internment camp and a work camp, then on release worked as a night watchman, an unskilled labourer, warehouse–man and cellar man. He was finally rehabilitated in 1990, re–appointed to the army at the rank of major general (later lieutenant general), and became the oldest M.P. in the first intake (1990–94). It is now known that he, too, compromised as little as he could with the security services under Kádár, to the point that he was eventually thrown out on account of his stubbornly unforthcoming reports. All the same, it hardly bears thinking what would have happened if it had come out under the central–right Antall administration that one of the symbolic historical figureheads of the government coalition had actually been a recruited agent of Kádár's secret service.

The lesson that can be drawn from this book is that no general conclusions can be drawn about the possibility of refusing to cooperate with the state security services. There are large numbers of nameless citizens of quite ordinary mettle who were able to, and did in fact, refuse to cooperate without any particularly unpleasant consequences, whereas for others such refusal had shattering consequences. Potential recruits were in such varied positions that in some cases it took a lot more courage to cooperate nominally than it did for some others to flatly refuse to cooperate.

Both of the books under review are helpful in giving a better understanding of the extent to which, and in what sense, the Kádár dictatorship could be said to have been totalitarian. A key sentence occurs in the summing–up chapter of János Rainer's book: "From the early Sixties on, the service did not seek to be *omnipotent* so much as *omnipresent*" (Rainer, pp. 261–162; emphasis as in the original). That was exactly the stance of the post–1956 consolidation. The Kádár regime reduced its totalitarianism inasmuch as this was possible by any state in the Soviet camp. It did not aspire to total terrorisation of society, or to

have a monolithic say on how people thought, lived their lives or earned a living; in short, it gave up the role of being an omnipotent power. It was not, however, able to give up its claim to undivided (i.e. total) political legitimacy, because that was the very nub of the Soviet-style exercise of power. If a legitimate, constitutional opposition is not allowed to exist, then every activity, person and group represents a threat to national security should it carry the seeds of dissidence. That is conceivable about almost anything or anybody. The logic by which such a regime operates regards as dissidence anything that deliberately obstructs the assertion of the will of the Party enmeshing society.

Furthermore, since the will of the Party, like a political will of any kind, infringes interests and generates contrary opinions, the potential for dissidence is likewise total. There is no nook or cranny of society that might not harbour the threat of dissidence, which in turn means that there is a necessity for the state-security service to be omnipresent and have oversight of everything.

The Kádár regime, as with many apparently monolithic states, saw the striking of informal bargains. This left scope for individual and collective aspirations. Though any ranking of costs and benefits ruled out open dissidence for most people, there remained some limited room for manoeuvre. Thus, from the standpoint of national security, the potential for dissidence was total, whereas in practice it was minimal. This created a huge chasm between potential and real threats to national security, with one justifying an apparatus of enormous dimensions, the other one of a much more modest size. A necessary consequence of that was a gigantic waste of resources and money, despite constant efforts to cut costs. As intelligence organisations do everywhere, Hungary's surveillance apparatus fabricated and exaggerated threats to demonstrate their importance and defend their budgets.

An absurdly typical example of the conflicts this created was the story of how the network was built up inside the Red Star Tractor Factory in Kispest (Tabajdi and Ungváry, pp. 204–213). For a long time an immense Ministry apparatus idled away at the factory, but it was unable to detect a sign of even the most microscopic irregularity to act as a pretext for the endless stream of documents that were being churned out:

In 1962, the scrawling of the Kossuth national coat of arms of 1848–49 and a graffito referring to October 23rd on a wall in the toilet set in motion an investigation... once again thorough plans of action were worked up, but the investigation likewise bore no fruit. Still, it was enough to keep them busy for years on end with the activities of hostile elements, even though one can discern from the summaries that the number of unusual events had meanwhile dropped to zero. (Tabajdi and Ungváry, p. 209)

In 1961 there had been not even one, but the summary appraisal for 1962 asserted that in the factory there was still "a highly active centre of internal reactionary forces" (Tabajdi and Ungváry, p. 459). The only serious business that might have been stopped, and of course was not stopped, was the 1975 appearance in Berlin of Miklós Haraszti's *Darabbér* (published in English translation a few years later as *A Worker in a Worker's State: Piece-Rates in Hungary*), an early and highly influential samizdat work, the material for which the author had collected mainly while he was working as a semi-skilled labourer in that very factory.

János Rainer's book deals with the intensive activities that were engaged by the secret police, from 1956 right up until the change of regime, directed at József Antall. (Antall was later to be leader of the winning party — Hungarian Democratic Forum, MDF — in the country's general election of 1990 and hence prime minister of the first post-Communist government.) This was in spite of the fact that such attention could only be said to have made any "sense" up until roughly 1959, which is when the young Antall, then a charismatic teacher at the Toldy *Gimnázium* in Budapest, was in a position to "infect" the pupils and the teaching staff with his gestures of resistance. By the end of 1959 it had been settled that his father's internationally recognised merits and highly positioned contacts were strong enough to save Antall himself from being arrested, though they were not sufficient for him to be allowed to stay in his teacher's job in such close proximity to corruptible young people.³

The efforts to recruit or incriminate them on the part of the security services, with both father and son, were to no avail, but a satisfactory, long-lasting and stable *modus vivendi* acceptable to both parties could be established, meeting their respective needs for safety. That safety rested on the premise that both father and son knew where the regime drew the limits of toleration. In private life Antall was able freely to expound his anti-dictatorship views, but he just as consistently refrained from voicing these to the alternative public of active oppositionists as he did from demonstrations of support for the regime, restricting his public activities to the politically neutral ground of his job, after he had accepted a post in the regime's public service as director of the Museum of Medical History. Thus peaceful co-existence was under no threat until the Communist regime collapsed, a collapse which Antall had nothing to do with.

In short, the Antalls kept to certain rules of the game, but in spite of that

almost thirty persons in the informer network busied themselves around both Antall Snr and Jnr from 1957 until the early 1980s, among them at least 24 agents... The said 24 persons in the informer network wrote a total of almost 480 reports about the Antalls, who in their turn did not suffer any direct, demonstrable disadvantage attributable to informer activity as a result of the confidential investigations that were pursued against them... the duration, taken together with the "results", of the informer activity against the Antalls throws a certain light on the thoroughness and efficiency of secret-service work in the Kádár era... Essentially nothing was done with any of the information brought to light by the group that was mobilised around them. (Rainer, p. 77)

Altogether, over a period of three decades, around one hundred secret-police officers were involved at some time or other with the network of informers that was put in place around the Antalls. Rainer is very careful in his choice of words when he writes of "direct, demonstrable disadvantage attributable to informer activity", because it was of course a disadvantage in itself that this family was obliged to live most of its life under the eyes of the secret police, and that two men who are cut out to be politicians both lost thirty years from their political careers. However, none of this was directly due to informer activity but rather to the regime that propped up that informer activity and was in turn propped up by it.

In the spring of 1967 Antall is recorded as having said, in his accustomed daydreaming mode, on a train steaming from Gyôr to Budapest, something along the lines that someone really ought to organise a "shadow government". That light-hearted idea is recorded in a report by György Kiss, his travelling companion and closest friend and, at the same time, the most diligent informer against him. The secret police, however, spent over three years, from then until 1970, "investigating" this "shadow government" idea. In 1968 there were days when half a dozen detectives tailed Antall around Budapest (Rainer, pp. 225–232). Similarly, in 1980 Pál Tar, then living in Paris and in his late forties and subsequently destined to become Hungarian ambassador to Washington under the Antall administration, dropped a remark that he would like to write a book about Hungary when he came to retire, and that his friends Antall and Kiss could help him with collecting material for it. Kiss reported even that; the secret police opened a separate file, and for a year and a half were furiously busy investigating the gathering of material that was never undertaken for a book that was never written (Rainer, pp. 68–69).

When Antall became prime minister and learned the truth about Kiss, the first thing he did was appoint Kiss, a person he could now reliably blackmail, to handle press and media relations in the Office of the Prime Minister. In order to take over the national daily *Magyar Nemzet* he put another friend, József Horti, in charge. Horti in his turn had been the bravest of all in refusing to report on Antall, and during the bleakest year of the post-1956 reprisals threw back in the face of the female police captain who was attempting to recruit him that "he would accept any sanction, but he was unwilling to cooperate with the police's political department." As a result, Horti indeed lost his job and was placed under police surveillance (Rainer, pp. 131–132).

The reports written about József Antall Snr by an agent with the cover name of Budai, one Tivadar Pártay, who had been a leading politician in the Smallholders' Party, were particularly malicious. Pártay was at one and the same time an agent of the dictatorship, a target for them, a collaborator and an opponent. He informed on rivals within the party, but meanwhile preserved his image as being a politician of views that were markedly divergent from those of the Communists. He was imprisoned and after his release kept under close surveillance, so when he tried to re-activate his political career and sought contacts with émigré Smallholders (via an agent provocateur who was assigned to him, of course), the secret service renewed its relationship with him (Rainer, pp. 80–84). Pártay strove to portray himself to the Kádár apparatchiks as the cleanest of the Smallholder politicians and the most suitable to work with others, with Antall Snr being just one of more than a few whom he blackened, but he also sought to find favours with Antall Jnr after 1989–90. (When a scandal threatened to bring down the whole government coalition that Antall was heading, Pártay, with secret assistance from the prime minister, founded the Historical Independent Smallholders' Party on the grounds that "there was a need for a Smallholder party that stuck firmly by the coalition.")

There were some fascinating psychological relationships among the admirers and traitors who teemed round Antall Jr. Gyula Mikus, for instance, "admired Antall, but his unsparingly detailed and intentionally highly damaging reports also testify to a suppressed hatred" (Rainer, p. 133). Mikus's respect for Antall perhaps derived from the latter being able to maintain his political identity and personal integrity after the 1956 revolution. Since Mikus had not been able to do so, his self-hatred might have driven him to hatred for Antall. He was able to give vent only via his reports as the role given him by the secret service specified he should be in awe of Antall.

Antall thought himself an expert at guarding against the attentions of the secret service. There is a record of this because he told that to one of his pupils. The pupil in question, Ferenc Huszár, reported it, being himself one of the informers who were to be guarded against (Rainer, p. 116). To make matters worse, Antal himself had earlier suspected Huszár of being precisely that, which we know because he shared that suspicion with another informer, the aforementioned Gyula Mikus, about whom he had no such suspicions (Rainer, pp. 115–116).

Antal intrigued his recruited pupil too, who seemingly did not think of him as pitifully gullible for choosing to instruct Huszár, of all people, in how to recognise a grass. Based on the latter's reports, Rainer sketches the image that Huszár formed of Antal in the following manner:

There was something grandiose, demanding of respect, in Antal's comprehension, his resolve, his tactical sense, his professional routine, even in his (ultimately, of course, futile) skirmishing with the secret service. A worthy opponent, at times genuinely enthralling, and one who, for that very reason, it was worth duping, worming one's way into his confidence, taking up the fight alongside. (Rainer, p. 118)

The enthralled young man indeed proved unable to detach himself from the fight with enemies of the regime, and he served for his entire professional life, up until the change in regime, as a secret-service officer.

The anthropologist István Kiszely served the secret service for even longer, over four decades, and was one of the most effective of agents involved in the brutal anti-Church measures during the sixties and seventies. Around 1,500 pages of reports, together with covert tape recordings and photographs, are evidence of how enthusiastically he assisted the operations run by organs of the service. In one pamphlet drafted by him he urged total eradication of the Church's network in Hungary. While he single-mindedly made use of the Ministry's support to build up his own livelihood and scholarly career, he lent a hand in the denigration of more than one Catholic priest and played a big part in the imprisonment of Frigyes Hagemann, a former Benedictine fellow student. When the Antal administration took office, he joined Hungarian Television to boost their foreign news department and to serve later as deputy mayor for the First District of Budapest. To this day he is treated by the rightwing fringe as some sort of victim of communism, and he even has a report on his vetting which declares that he had no dealings with the secret service. He in turn regularly besmirches his professional opponents as being Communist hirelings and informers. (Tabajdi and Ungváry, pp. 214–227). Another who played a role resembling Kiszely's in the campaign against Frigyes Hagemann was János Tudós Takács, who operated under the codename "Sándor". Since the changeover, he has been on the staff of Pannon Front, a right-extremist weekly, has been a speaker at meetings of the infamous "Blood and Honour" Cultural Club and was translator of pseudo-historian David Irving. Even as recently as 2004 he was listed in an article published by the Catholic weekly *Új Ember* as being among the victims of the Communist persecution of the Church. (Tabajdi and Ungváry, p. 478)

Pál Szalai, once a prominent dissident, had this to say when contemplating the case of a friend who had informed on him for decades on end only to become a rabid Hitlerite in his senility: "One wonders if my friend's turning fascist had anything to do with that none too splendid career. I don't know. It may well be

that such enforced schizophrenia pervades the whole soul, and one day has to come out."

- ¹ Gábor Tabajdi and Krisztián Ungváry, *Elhallgatott múlt. A pártállam és a belügy. A politikai rendőrség működése Magyarországon 1956–1990* [Silenced Past: the Party–State and the Interior Ministry. The Operation of the Political Police in Hungary, 1956–1990], Budapest, 1956–os Intézet & Corvina, 2008, 515 pp.
- ² János M. Rainer, *Jelentések hálójában. Antall József és az állambiztonság emberei 1957–1989* [In a Web of Reports. József Antall and the Shattered Mirrors of State Security Men, 1957–1989], Budapest: 1956–os Intézet, 2008, 295 pp.
- ³ József Antall Sr. played a part in the Independent Smallholders' Party before the Second World War, acting as a link between opposition politicians and Anglo–Saxon sympathisers in circles round Horthy. After the outbreak of the war he became Government Commissioner for Refugees, as such helping individuals without regard for religion or racial background, whether they were Polish refugees, Allied prisoners of war, Jews in hiding or German children who had been bombed out of their home. He resigned that post the moment that Germany invaded Hungary in March 1944, and due to his widely known oppositionist stance he was held in detention by the Gestapo.

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