

New York – Washington – London. Fejezetek a pártállami hírszerzés angol–amerikai osztályának történetéből, 1950–1970. [New York – Washington – London. Chapters from the History of the Anglo–American Department of the Intelligence of the Single-Party State, 1950–1970]. By István Pál.

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Máté Gergely Balogh 

North American Department, Institute of English and American Studies, University of Debrecen,
1 Egyetem tér, 4032 Debrecen, Hungary; balogh.mate@arts.unideb.hu

On 17 May 1967, news broke that János Radványi, *chargé d'affaires* of the Hungarian Legation in Washington, D.C. and a member of Party Secretary János Kádár's inner circle, had left his station and sought asylum in the United States. This was the third defection of a high-level diplomat from the People's Republic of Hungary within the span of two years, and while the other two did not cause such public stir, they were at least as impactful for the country's foreign intelligence. László Szabó defected from London in 1965, and Ernő Bernát from Washington a few weeks before Radványi. Unknown to the public at the time, both were "resident spies" (the equivalent of a station chief of the CIA for the intelligence agencies of the Eastern Bloc) of the Hungarian state security at their respective foreign missions, which means that by switching sides, they compromised their entire intelligence network. This put a fitting end to two decades of largely unsuccessful activity by the Anglo-American Department of the Hungarian State Security, the topic of István Pál's volume. The book contains eight studies by the author, who is assistant professor at the Department of Modern and Contemporary History at the Eötvös Loránd University in Budapest.

István Pál's main research area is the history of US–Hungarian and British–Hungarian relations in the twentieth century, with a special focus on the operation of intelligence services. In this work, Pál covers episodes from the first twenty years of the state security organisations of the Ministry of the Interior of the People's Republic of Hungary against the United States and the United Kingdom. During this

period, relations between the People's Republic of Hungary and the two Western countries were at their lowest point. The first half of the 1950s was characterised by the repressive regime of Mátyás Rákosi, and after the crushing of the 1956 Revolution, bilateral relations hit rock bottom. While there was some significant improvement during the early Kádár regime in the 1960s, it was only in the late 1960s and early 1970s, at the end of the period presented in the book, that Hungary's relations with the West were normalised. Being a member of the Eastern Bloc, in the period covered, Hungarian state security viewed the United States as the "main enemy," and the United Kingdom as the "second greatest enemy."

After acknowledgements, the volume starts with an extended Introduction to be followed by the eight case studies of individuals who were in some way involved with Hungarian intelligence in the United Kingdom or the United States—as officers, agents, or prospective agents. The book ends with a useful bibliography and an index of names. The Introduction defines the relevant topical and temporal frameworks, provides an overview of the operation and the organisation of Hungarian state security in the period, and touches upon certain methodological and theoretical issues. Accessing the relevant sources is a common challenge for historians of intelligence services, given that the files often contain classified material. The reasons for the classification are often national security, or that they contain sensitive personal information. In the countries of the Eastern Bloc, civilian intelligence agencies generally operated under the Ministry of Interior, while military intelligence was part of the military, and eventually, the Ministry of Defence. The focus of Pál's research is the operation of the civilian intelligence service, whose documents can be found in the Historical Archives of the Hungarian State Security (Állambiztonsági Szolgálatok Történeti Levéltára, ÁBTTL). The documents of the military intelligence of the People's Republic of Hungary (MNVK-2) are not at all available for research—even though the biggest Hungarian-related spy scandal of the Cold War, the Conrad case, was the outcome of their work. Pál explains that this is because the targets of military intelligence were NATO and neutral countries (Austria, Italy, West Germany, etc.), which are now Hungary's allies. In several cases, the information given about these countries' military structures or order of battle is still relevant, which is the justification for keeping the documents classified (pp. 9–10).

Considering the documents available in ÁBTTL, there is a debate among Hungarian historians about their source value (pp. 42–44). A large number of the files of the civilian intelligence are missing from the archives, and the ones that can be accessed are often incomplete and have considerable bias. Pál agrees with György Gyarmati that, for this reason, materials in the ÁBTTL should be approached with considerable source criticism, and ideally, their content should be compared to that of other archives. It is a major problem that it is even more difficult, often impossible, to

access the material of the intelligence and counterintelligence agencies of the United States and the United Kingdom, especially for a foreign researcher. Almost every chapter in the book contains a reply from the relevant British or American agency to Pál's inquiry, usually stating that they cannot even confirm or deny whether the requested documents exist. Thus, the source material mostly comes from Hungarian archives, first and foremost the ÁBTL. For secondary sources, Pál uses the findings of the most recent Hungarian scholarship, including the works of Magdolna Baráth, Mária Palasik, Krisztián Ungváry, and many others. With regard to the work of the American and British agencies, he also cites the most prominent scholars of the field, such as Nigel West, Cristopher Andrew, and Tim Weiner.

In his Introduction (Bevezető), Pál divides the 1950–1970 period into two sections considering the activity of the state security of the People's Republic of Hungary in the United States and the United Kingdom. Before the 1956 Revolution, Hungarian intelligence was characterised by “total amateurism:”

“[...] in selecting officers, loyalty to the regime was more important than competence. Many of the officers were completely unsuitable for the task, were not properly prepared, some did not even speak English, thus could achieve very limited results, if any. During the Revolution, the security of the documents of the Ministry of Interior, including state security, was compromised, and the identity of many officers and their agents was revealed. As a consequence, after 1956 the foreign intelligence networks of the state security had to be completely reorganised. The new generation of intelligence officers were better prepared than their predecessors: they were »well-educated, spoke a number of languages, [and] had the power to enlist the services of intellectuals and public figures perceived to be independent of the regime [...]«”

—which, from the perspective of their adversaries, made them more competent and dangerous (pp. 15–16).

Each of the eight chapters presents a different episode from the history of Hungarian intelligence: in the first four chapters, episodes in the United Kingdom, and in the second four, episodes in the United States. The first story is that of István Kennedy, a doctor who had been involved in the communist movement in Czechoslovakia before the war and personally knew one of the leaders of the Communist Party of Great Britain. Still, it was difficult to convince him to cooperate with the Hungarian state security, and even when he did agree, he failed to provide any useful information. The cooperation ended when in 1956, Kennedy started praising the Petőfi Circle, an organisation in Hungary that was openly critical of the regime. Pál argues that this was a conscious decision on his part, his way of getting

out of this entanglement.

In the second chapter, we read about the state security's failure to approach another Jewish doctor. László Blitz, who was also tending to the Hungarian embassy in London, held moderate political views, and though he had rejected the Horthy regime, could not identify with the communists either. Pál argues that while he was in contact with the Hungarian state security, Doctor Blitz was probably secretly cooperating with the British authorities.

The third case study presents Éva Delfin, a young computer scientist, a Holocaust survivor who left Hungary after 1956. Other than the difficulty of approaching young intellectuals and professionals, many of whom were weary of the regime in Hungary, this episode sheds light on the professional shortcomings of Hungarian state security, whose members failed to respect operational security by, for example, giving instructions on the telephone.

In the fourth chapter, we read about the case of István Komáromy, an accomplished sculptor. Gábor Pados, an officer of the Hungarian intelligence, managed to establish good rapport with the sculptor, which caught the eye of the British services. They warned Komáromy that Pados was an intelligence officer and probably enlisted the sculptor to their service. Pál concludes that this episode clearly shows that MI5 had been familiar with the Hungarian officers' identity and their intelligence network already before Szabó's defection.

The first story from the United States is that of László Back, who used to work as a tourist guide in Budapest. Before moving to the United States, he had already been reporting on tourists to the Hungarian authorities, and given the expectation that he would continue working for the state security, he was allowed to move to New York. This was unusual at the time, especially considering that he was of military age. Once he settled in America, Back did not follow instructions from Budapest and practically sabotaged cooperation, thus he was eventually dismissed from service.

The protagonist of the sixth chapter is Fülöp Katz, who was a prominent member of the influential Jewish freemason lodge and non-profit organisation *B'nai B'rith*. Given that Zionist organisations were among the Hungarian state security's main targets after the Six-day War in 1967, they attempted to recruit him. While the Hungarian officials managed to establish a good relationship with Katz and he praised the treatment of Jews in Hungary, further cooperation became impossible, when he criticised the Soviet Union for its antisemitism, and even tried to get János Kádár to intercede on their behalf. This was, of course, not realistic.

The topic of the seventh chapter is the relationship between János Radványi and the influential American foreign policy journalist Bernard Gwertzman. Gwertzman worked for the *Washington Evening Star* at the time but later became editor of *The*

New York Times. Unknown to the Hungarian state security at the time, in addition to the State Department, he had good connections with the CIA as well. In the 1960s, the leadership of the People's Republic of Hungary was aiming to improve their image in the American press, thus they were hoping to be able to influence Gwertzman. János Radványi established a close relationship with the American journalist—but eventually, it appears that it was Gwertzman who ended up having an impact on the Hungarian diplomat, contributing to his eventual decision to switch sides.

The last chapter is about Ernő Bernát, whose defection caused even more damage to Hungarian state security than that of Szabó in the United Kingdom. Unlike the British services, the Americans had probably not been familiar with the Hungarian intelligence network before. Szabó's act did not just compromise the (relatively few) active agents that the Hungarian intelligence had in the United States, but also the intelligence officers themselves, as well as the forty–forty-five prospective agents that they were hoping to enlist.

As noted in the blurb, at first sight, the cases introduced in the volume seem to have little in common. But in fact, the episodes provide insight into the operation of the civilian intelligence services of the People's Republic of Hungary in the Rákosi era and the early Kádár years. Pál fills a historiographical gap, shedding light on a practically unknown and understudied side of Hungarian–American and Hungarian–British relations. *New York – Washington – London* is based on meticulous and extensive archival research, ideal for Cold War historians, scholars of intelligence, and students of Hungarian–American relations. The Introduction provides an especially valuable overview of the organisational structure, personnel, and activity of Hungarian intelligence. The studies clearly demonstrate that while between the 1950s and the 1970s, state security was a feared institution in Hungary, in their activity abroad, at least in the cases the book presents, they seem to have been far less formidable. It is laudable that Pál offers a vivid picture of the personal dilemmas of those involved in the Cold War espionage games, be it potential candidates, intelligence officers, or diplomats like Radványi.

The volume uses an academic tone, with occasional dry comments on the regime, which suits historians, but may deter general readers. Its extensive documentation, the bibliography and the index enhance scholarly value. Unfortunately, however, the volume lacks a cohesive thread beyond the topic, which could have strengthened its impact—but at the same time, given that it is a collection of previously published studies, this is understandable. One important element that is missing from the book is the Soviet connection, which should have been addressed, at least in the Introduction. Considering Hungary's position in the Eastern Bloc, it would have been useful to show how Hungarian intelligence activity fit into the larger picture. How did the Hungarian services cooperate with their counterparts in

the Soviet Union and other Eastern Bloc countries? Was there a “division of labour” between the agencies? Still, the largest shortcoming of the book is that at least half of each story, namely the American and British side, is missing. Admittedly, this is due to the topic and the circumstances, and is definitely not the author’s fault, as he clearly did everything within his means to gain access to the relevant documents. But until (if ever) researchers have access to all the sources on all sides concerned, the history of intelligence during the Cold War remains incomplete.



