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Resistance groups and organizational matters in Borsod during the Rákosi era

Thesis of doctoral (PhD) dissertation

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Introduction, research objectives

Between 1945 and 1956, the Hungarian press was full of stories about anti-democratic and anti-Soviet conspiracies, and even armed organizations. Reactionary military officers' "armed counterrevolutionary organization," the "B-Guard," Ambrus Szólás, a priest and teacher in Esztergom, and his students, Father Kiss Szaléz and his associates, the Hungarian Brotherhood, the Rajk affair, the Grősz trial, and numerous other “fascist conspiracies” dominated the daily news. However, most of these cases did not involve illegal resistance organizations at all; they were fabricated by the Communist Party, which was striving for power and then working to establish a proletarian dictatorship, and by the political police. Their "exposure" was a propaganda ploy and a tool of power, which was then followed by acquittals or light sentences, but often executions, depending on the current interests of the Communist Party. Under the pretext of conspiracy charges, the Communist Party, ostensibly acting in defense of democracy, eliminated rival politicians, associations, organizations, and parties, and this was no different even within the party itself.

These illegal trials are now well known, and their history has been documented in numerous publications, monographs, and studies. However, compared to conspiracy cases of national significance, investigations involving only a single county or municipality have been less thoroughly explored, and the history of actual resistance organizations remains largely unknown.

The aim of our paper is therefore to partially remedy this deficiency by exploring the history of organizational matters and resistance groups in Borsod

County. The joint discussion of these two topics stems from the internal mechanisms of the Rákosi regime; we have made cases classified as conspiracies by the political police the subject of our investigation. This approach also offers the opportunity to distinguish between fabricated cases and actual resistance groups, which has not been possible in Borsod County due to a lack of basic research. It also allows us to examine which target groups the political police acted against in Borsod County between 1945 and 1956 and what means they used to do so. During the investigation, we present each case in relative detail in order to reveal the contradictions in the documents, the changes in concept, and the political intentions behind them.

The usability and methodology of documents from concept trials

There is no complete consensus among Hungarian historians regarding the usability of political police documents and how they should be used. The debate, which primarily concerned the Ilona Tóth case but more generally focused on the reprisals following the 1956 revolution, brought to light fundamental differences of opinion, represented on one side by László Eörsi and on the other by Attila Szakolczai, among others. Eörsi believed that during the proceedings, "the authorities generally sought to uncover the facts and the truth, and handed down judgments in accordance with the laws of the time, which were far from being based on the rule of law." In his research on Béla Király, he concluded that "even in the most terrible Rákosi era, not all trials were fabricated." Attila Szakolczai, on the other hand, believed

that some of the 1956 trials were clearly politically motivated, and that even the most basic documentation of the reprisals was fabricated. Nevertheless, Szakolczai emphasized that there is a justification for examining the show trials, but they must be subjected to a more detailed analysis than usual.

György Gyarmati believed that the organizations were often discovered before they even became "cases," or, in the absence of cases, they were "manufactured," and with "polished" torture, they made mountains out of molehills, or "in the absence of molehills, they created phantom mammoths." The ÁVH (State Security Authority) muddled the threads so much that “it is almost impossible to separate from the surviving documents, which contain layers upon layers of lies, what was – if anything – the actual subject of the charges.” As a result, it becomes “problematic” "to reconstruct the resistance according to professional conventions."

Gyarmati's concern regarding the use of state security documents and the disclosure of the history of resistance organizations is justified. The investigation of organizational matters is only possible as a result of data collection and processing that requires extraordinary attention. Even in the simplest cases, there may be two or three variations in the documents relating to a single event or moment, and in more complex cases, there may be as many as ten variations. In most cases, it is clear that the political police intended to conceal the truth, either in part or in whole, but at the very least to mix it with fabricated, conceptual elements.

The difficulty of the research is compounded by the fact that the documentation of show trials generally

presents a complete whole. The interrogation transcripts, the indictment, the trial transcripts, and the court judgments all reveal a single story, which often remains credible even when the concept changes. There is very little internal tension between the statements in the documents, and even if it is recognizable, it does not provide sufficient reason to question the "crime." Therefore, additional sources are needed to catch the concept in the act, through which the defendants or the executors of the concept can speak to us. Fortunately, the documents themselves contain such sources.

In terms of the source value of the investigation files, we must distinguish between documents from before and after Stalin's death. While until 1953 suspects had very little chance of maintaining their denials and sticking to their own accounts during interrogations, after 1953 it is clear that they did have this opportunity, albeit not always. During proceedings conducted after 1953, suspects could attempt to contradict their interrogators and deny the charges brought against them. By this time, state security officers were no longer allowed to use physical violence “officially,” which repeatedly undermined the possibility of suspects accepting the concept. However, the tools of psychological manipulation remained at their disposal. This did not simply mean that interrogators who had previously sought to establish a good relationship and behaved in a friendly manner suddenly became extremely rude and berated the suspect in a harsh tone. Milder methods included allowing the suspect to smoke cigarettes or wear warmer clothing. In more severe cases, of course, threats were made about the suspect's future situation (the gallows, death in prison) or even about the fate of family

members. There is no doubt, however, that in the proceedings conducted after 1953, the defendants were effectively manipulated and persuaded to make confessions or sign statements that were not in line with their sense of justice. The public trial in the White Partisans case in Miskolc also shows that even without physical violence, the defendants could be persuaded to make statements during interrogations or court hearings that were contrary to their own interests, even if it meant facing the death penalty, in order to please the prosecutor.

All this can best be demonstrated by examining another, equally controversial source material, namely the reports of prison guards, and comparing the data contained therein with information presented in other forums. Prison guards were essentially in the service of state security, and their goal was to obtain further information from suspects about alleged or actual crimes. However, they also had to record the mood of the suspects and defendants, and this information can reveal tensions that significantly call into question the veracity of the official documents. In their reports on the behavior of suspects in custody, those involved reported on the techniques and "tricks" used by their interrogators to extract incriminating confessions from them, but they also reported on which parts of their confessions were untrue.

Another source base could be the mass of documents and petitions generated during review, clemency, or rehabilitation proceedings. Since these documents were prepared after the violations of the law had been made public, most of the convicts already openly represented their own position. It was at this point that they usually reported for the first time – and often for the last

time – what means, including torture, had been used to coerce them into making false confessions. There is little reason to doubt the credibility of these interpretations. However, with regard to the proceedings conducted after 1953, it is also clear that, after the Rákosi terror became public, several former convicts sought to portray the proceedings against them as entirely politically motivated, thereby concealing their former anti-regime activities. In such cases, historians can only attempt to resolve the contradictory statements by conducting a comprehensive internal comparative analysis of the entire body of documents. In fortunate cases, these can be compared with the recollections of those involved. However, regardless of place and time (in exile, at home, under the Kádár regime, or after the change of regime), memoirs must also be treated with a high degree of source criticism.

Nevertheless, based on the available sources, the trials of the 1950s can also be examined. Although in some cases it is only possible to raise questions, in many cases the stories are clearly outlined and suitable for drawing conclusions supported by the rules of the profession. We carried out our work with this belief and hope.

Key findings and conclusions of the research

In the cases of the organization in Borsod between 1945 and 1948, it is striking that they remained cases and, even if they went to court, by that time the charges had been significantly modified and had become almost insignificant. The reason for this was basically that the cases were initiated on political orders, and once the political goal had been achieved, the case and the fate of the suspects/defendants fell outside the sphere of interest.

This is how it happened that Lajos Dancza was initially suspected of organizing an "armed gang" and plotting to kill the leaders of the state police in Miskolc, but when he was arrested, the "informant card" appeared, which took advantage of the situation and took center stage. In the meantime, his person had become a national issue, as, according to the schedule for the takeover of power, the newly returned Muscovites, overheated with vigilance, immediately set about removing dissidents within the party, the "factionists," and included Dancza among them. The picture of a national conspiracy brought to life by fascist informers disguised as communists was already taking shape when the concept developers modified the formula again and finally released everyone except Pál Demény, including Dancza.

Current political objectives also drove the outbreak of the “fascist officer conspiracy” case in the 7th Military District of Miskolc. Using the pretext of a "reactionary" officer conspiracy that was trumpeted to the world, the Communist Party began replacing the senior officers of the army after the November 1945 elections, and at the same time, the proceedings against the army officers became moot. The charge of conspiracy evaporated, and in the end only one first lieutenant was convicted of incitement.

The political persecution of the Smallholders' Party and the persecution of the Kolláth family served to support the concept of the Hungarian Brotherhood. Taking advantage of the criminal case against Gyula Kolláth Jr. the left-wing press presented the country with an image of a fascist, extremist organization armed by the Hungarian Community and committing assassinations against the

"liberators," an anti-democratic organization. Then, the relentless press campaign was suddenly followed by silence. The concept changed again, and although the criminal case against the Kolláth family was pursued, it was no longer considered to be of "public interest," and even if penalties were imposed on those involved, they were insignificant.

In contrast, the trials conducted in 1950 were held in the utmost secrecy, behind closed doors, and resulted in severe prison sentences and, in some cases, death sentences. The persecution of the Miskolc residents accused in the military officer and social democrat trials served a dual purpose. Their confessions were intended to substantiate the guilt of a national-level politician or military leader. Thus, the confessions of Géza Jándy Sr. and Jr. were primarily intended to be used in the proceedings against György Pórffy (and, ultimately, Sándor Nógrádi, which did not come to fruition), while among the social democrats of Miskolc, Anna Kéthly was intended to be used against Sándor Virág, Sándor Poprádi was to contribute to the collection of data against Sándor Rónai, then President of the Presidential Council, and István Juhász against Ferenc Reisinger, former State Secretary for Internal Affairs, in all likelihood for the purpose of planned criminal proceedings.

The selection of defendants naturally took local interests into account. The arrest of Sándor Virág and his associates effectively decapitated the “right-wing” social democratic movement in Borsod County, while the imprisonment of Géza Jándy and Tibor Szalay sent a strong message to the non-communist resistance during the war.

The Viszneki case, which was conducted in 1950, and the Venkovits case, which was heard in 1951–1952, both ended with the execution of two death sentences. The former involved an investigation into a “spy ring,” while the latter involved an investigation into an anti-regime illegal group, the Black Eagles. The two criminal cases are linked by the charge of espionage, which raises doubts in both cases. The documents of the Viszneki case almost unanimously support the commission of the crime, but the internal tension between the data indicates that the findings of the judgment did not or could not have happened that way. The questions raised in the relevant chapter could only be answered if other information were available. This could include prison guard reports exonerating Károly Venkovits, the leader of the Black Eagles, from the charge of espionage.

The social democratic trials held in Miskolc and Ózd in 1952–1953 also reflected the changed political circumstances. While in the case of Miskolc, the defendants were exclusively former Social Democrats, in the 1952 trial in Ózd, with the involvement of "Horthyist" chief magistrates, gendarmes, and military factory commanders, the Social Democrats were practically placed on the same platform as the "Horthyists," declaring that the traitorous Social Democrats were servants of the "fascist state system." Interestingly, more energy was spent proving this than proving espionage, which was simply taken for granted based on conversations with Sándor Virág.

The trials of Lajos Láng and Imre Hódy, who were arrested in 1953 and brought to court as right-wing social democrats, as well as the proceedings against both István

Baloghs, who were accused of organizing in the Kazincbarcika internment camp, are clear evidence that, as a result of the June policy announced by Imre Nagy, there had indeed been positive changes in the functioning of the judicial institutions in the name of eliminating violations of the law. Lajos Láng, who had previously been accused of war crimes, organizing, and espionage, was convicted in October 1953 solely for incitement and sentenced in the first instance to only one year and two months in prison. At the same time, Dr. István Balogh, who had previously been accused of espionage and crimes against the state, among other things for his activities in the Kazincbarcika internment camp, was also sentenced to 3 years and 9 months for incitement. István Balogh, a civilian worker involved in an escape plan at the Kazincbarcika internment camp, who had previously been accused of organizing a terrorist group and espionage, but was ultimately sentenced to seven years for the crime of hiding ammunition instead of being hanged, could also consider himself lucky.

At the same time, "conspiracy" case in Nagybarca also highlights that what was valid "outside" could not work "inside." In early 1950, the Budapest headquarters of the ÁVH (State Security Authority) did not even want to deal with the suspects in the fabricated Nagybarca conspiracy case, so it simply interned them. However, when the internment camp in Kistarcsa was closed down in 1953, they were also charged, unlike the Social Democrats and Communists. In September 1953, without investigating the merits of the case, the court sentenced the defendants to 10, 7, and 6 years in prison for membership in a non-existent organization.

The two Balogh cases in Kazincbarcika highlight another problem: the agents were essentially just as interested in successful “investigations” as their handlers. This sometimes led them to be overly active. In the two Balogh cases, it is clear that agent József Máté tried to act as an agent provocateur in the Soviet Union and, upon his return, in the Kazincbarcika internment camp, to incite his fellow prisoners and then István Balogh to commit some kind of political “crime,” which in the latter case was successful. In addition to all this, as a former resident, he also used another agent with whom he was supposed to mutually control each other's reports. The agents caught with "iron fists" were therefore able to create cases when necessary and even control them without the knowledge and permission of their case officer. Due to his excessive independence and “initiative,” the handler of agent “Várkonyi,” who was assigned to former members of the Anonymous Spiritual Organization, reprimanded him, warning him that if he continued in this manner, he would become the leader of the organization. In the absence of network reports, this cannot be substantiated, but in the case of the Borsodnádasd organization, it also appears that the agent was much more proactive than he was "supposed" to be.

The political situation in June also had an impact on the investigative methods of the ÁVH. Physical violence was significantly reduced. Prison guard reports and petitions for clemency written years later testify that after 1953, psychological pressure was primarily used, which was effective on suspects who feared torture and beatings. The constant alternation between a friendly and an aggressive tone, often openly threatening, kept the

interrogated in a state of permanent uncertainty. the withdrawal of privileges without reason, the threat of having family members taken away – supplemented by the constant persuasion of prison guards to cooperate with the interrogators – was enough to make the person concerned make incriminating statements against themselves in accordance with the concept. The public trial of József Fiala and his associates also clearly shows that the state security services were able to manipulate their victims so effectively, even without the use of physical violence, that they voluntarily made comprehensive “confessions” in which they “sang” about everything, which then led to some of them being hanged.

The use of concepts in cases remained characteristic throughout the entire period, although after 1953 it was not evident in every single case and was used in a “reduced mode.” In the case of József Abóczky, which was heard in 1955, the use of concepts is not apparent. At the same time, in the White Partisans trials conducted around the same time, the formation of the Tardi “armed” group, the breakup of the production cooperatives, and the sabotage actions against the cooperatives can be clearly demonstrated. The "reduced mode of operation" is also noticeable here: although József Fiala's interrogator tried to "induce" him into espionage, after lengthy "struggles" he finally accepted that the man was unwilling to do so. In 1955, however, there was a noticeable shift, a strong desire to reverse the process of relaxation that had begun in 1953, which was reflected in the severity of the prison sentences imposed in the Borsodnádasd and White Partisans cases, as well as in the six death sentences that were carried out.

Based on the investigative practices of the ÁVH

after 1953, it is also striking that investigations were launched or previously suspended investigations were resumed even in cases of lesser importance, which had previously been considered less significant. For example, after three years, in 1954/55, the investigation into the White Partisans was reopened and the case was reopened, but proceedings were also initiated in minor cases such as the Borsodnádas or József Abóczky "movements," which, like similar cases—such as the alleged organizing activities in the Izsófalva area in 1952—had previously been neglected in terms of a full investigation. After the central orders to crack down on various political and social groups (the Smallholders' Party, social democrats, churches, kulaks, “Horthyist” military officers, etc.) had ceased, the ÁVH focused on organizations that had previously been considered irrelevant, undoubtedly with the intention of proving that the Authority was still necessary to maintain the proletarian dictatorship under the changed political circumstances.

The illegal organizations of the 1950s were less effective than the ÁVH (State Security Authority) had assumed. A significant portion of these anti-regime groups were formed under the influence of propaganda from Voice of America and Radio Free Europe, which claimed that World War III could break out at any moment and that the hour of regime change was approaching. The Venkovits brothers and József Fiala also became active, trusting in American help. However, they had no chance of mounting any meaningful armed resistance, as even American intelligence agents acknowledged. Like most resistance groups, their activities were limited to recruiting members, distributing leaflets, and making plans. Both

groups were active in this area, and the White Partisans were particularly successful in distributing leaflets throughout various parts of the country. Although both groups were essentially "harmless" to those in power, their opposition to the regime resulted in severe reprisals, which cost some of them their lives.

Looking at the suspects and defendants in the organized crime cases constructed during the Rákosi era, it is striking that they have almost nothing in common. They come from different backgrounds and, if their opinions are known at all, they profess different political values. Lajos Dancza belonged to the camp of those who thought differently, while the majority of social democrats in Miskolc and Ózd represented the moderate left wing. In the Kolláth family case, the target was an intellectual petty bourgeois, smallholder family and its circle, while in the Kaffka case and the generals' trial, the target was the so-called "Horthyist" army officers, and in the Nagybarca show trial, the traditional rural "elite".

Looking at the membership of the actual resistance groups, we can see a wide range of people. Tamás Meszerics rightly noted that the first illegal organizations were formed under the leadership of local representatives of the radical opposition who had been pushed out of the legal political world. Although the foundations of the group that later became known as the White Partisans were laid by Oszkár Binder, a politically marginal figure, the actual leader of the resistance group was József Fiala, the former county secretary of the Sulyok Party. It can also be verified that violent collectivization and the persecution of believers drove significant numbers of peasants into illegal groups. The White Partisans groups in the Miskolc area

and southern Borsod County came specifically from this circle. János Rainer M.'s assertion that the old middle class, those on the fringes of the local political and prestige elite, strengthened the anti-regime movements. The father of the Venkovits brothers, who founded the Black Eagles organization, was a wealthy printer who was deprived of his business and, for a time, his freedom. The Fiala organization also had many members who had previously held important administrative positions or played significant social roles in their local communities (in towns, districts, or even counties) in a narrower or broader sense. When reviewing the membership of the actual organizations in Borsod, it is important to note that the most active members were the petty bourgeoisie and the working class, who were mostly subsistence farmers. Although workers represented only a small percentage of the organizations, the most active members of the group led by Dr. Gyula Hargitai came from the ironworks, thanks to István Viskolcz. The workers were just as much enemies of the system that officially proclaimed workers' power as the soldiers and officials who had been demoted to "Horthyists." Some of them were even members of the Communist Party, but their party membership was more a means of survival than proof of political commitment. Their common ground, as Tamás Meszerics pointed out, was merely the idea of independence and a diffuse anti-communism. Anti-Soviet and anti-communist sentiment and a desire for democracy led people from all walks of life and with very different backgrounds to express their political dissent through leaflets and and to prepare jointly and in an organized manner for the end of the dictatorial system and the creation of an independent and democratic

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