Zsófia GÉMES: The main tool of the subversion of the church: recruitment and network

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1. Introduction

After World War II, Hungary became part of the Soviet sphere of influence. Due to the Soviet occupation, the country could not fully regain its sovereignty, and consequently, classical intelligence services, which aim to protect and preserve the internal and external sovereignty of the state, could not be established. In contrast, the Soviet intelligence model was characterized by the class-oriented, constant, structured, uninterrupted search for enemies, forming the foundation of state security.[1] The communists considered the church and religion among their greatest political and ideological enemies. To reduce the risk the church posed, the communists relied on state security services in their anti-religious and anti-clerical struggle.[2] My study follows an organizational overview of Department III/III of the Ministry of Internal Affairs. I will examine subversion as a primary strategy in the fight against clerical reaction, as a state security tool, focusing particularly on its indispensable pillar, the network, and illustrate its practical implementation by describing a recruitment document.

2. Establishment of the Department III/III

According to a decision of the Political Committee of the Central Committee of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party, the state security organization was reorganized, resulting in the formation of the form of state security structure in 1962 that, with minor

[1] SZ. KOVÁCS Éva: Néhány gondolat az egykori magyar állambiztonság működéséről (elvek, eszközök, akciók) [Some reflections on the functioning of the former Hungarian state security (principles, instruments, actions)] In: *Levéltári Szemle [Archives Review]* 61. 2011, No. 1, p. 5.
[2] KÓSA László: Jelentés a „klerikális reakció" elleni frontról [Report on the front against "clerical reaction"] In: *Kommentár [Commentary] 2012, No. 3. p.* 113.

modifications, operated until the regime change.[3] Up to this point, the activities of state security were characterized by a high degree of continuity, primarily evidenced by the personnel, and the methods employed to acquire information.[4] As a result of the reorganization, the division into main directorates and departments replaced the previous system. The Ministry of Internal Affairs Department III (hereinafter referred to: MIA III) was responsible for carrying out state security tasks within this system. The activities of the MIA III were overseen by the main director, who was directly subordinate to the Minister of the Interior, and its activities were complemented by the county police headquarters, which essentially operated as the MIA III's county branches. Within MIA III, 5 departments were established, among which Department III/III was responsible for countering internal reactions, and its 1st department was responsible for countering ecclesiastical reactions (this form was established in 1972). Countering ecclesiastical reactions extended to all state security tasks that arose within all churches, sects, and religious orders. Accordingly, within the 1st department, tasks were divided as follows: countering internal reactions connected to the Roman Catholic Church and its leadership, countering internal reactions connected to Protestant and other churches, and countering sects.[5] It is important to note that the operation of the department as described was not yet fully established in 1962. After the reorganization, Department III/III required modification within a short period, and its organizational regulations only took their final form six months later. As a result, the organizational structure for countering internal reactions stabilized only in 1963.[6]

3. Subversion as a state security tool

Among the tools of Department III/III, subversion, along with isolation, discrediting, and detachment, were the most used. Subversion is a set of state security tools aimed at weakening groups, institutions, and disrupting group cohesion. Although the use of these tools was not novel, as similar combinations had been used previously, their significance increased with the change in the security mindset within state security, to which their

[3] BM KI 2180/1963. Quoted from: CSEH Gergő Bendegúz: *A magyarországi állambiztonsági szervek intézménytörténeti vázlata [The institutional history of the Hungarian state security services], 1945-1990,* In: Gyarmati György (ed.): *A Történeti Hivatal Évkönyve [Yearbook of the Historical Office].* Budapest, Alföldi Nyomda, 1999, p. 79.
[4] TABAJDI Gábor*: A III/III krónikája, [The Chronicle of III/III].* Budapest, 2013, Jaffa Kiadó, p. 13.
[5] CSEH, *op. cit.*, pp. 79-85.
[6] TABAJDI, 2013, *op. cit.* p. 15.

dissemination is also attributable. The transitional period and the feeling of sufficient power by the one-party state after 1962 led to the omission of continuous demonstrations of power. The declaration of the consolidation of the system served as the background for the establishment of the MIA III. In contrast to the Rákosi era's "whoever is not with us is against us" mentality, the Kádár regime translated into practice the slogan "whoever is not against us, is with us" in the state security practice, leading to the spread of covert, sophisticated methods manipulating human relationships. Subversion and discrediting methods that did not disturb social peace were sufficient for managing groups that remained hostile even after prolonged retribution. In line with these trends, the primary task of state security agencies was primarily to prevent the development and seriousness of criminal activities rather than to impose retrospective penalties. Therefore, the primary goal was to interrupt hostile activities at an early stage without resorting to legal means.[7] The following section provides a more detailed examination of subversion among the mentioned tools.

For the emerging personnel of Department III/III, a comprehensive system of new solutions was available from 1963.[8] Subversion techniques were applied in four cases:

"1. in the case of small-scale, loose groupings, where no deep hostile activities were uncovered in the background (e.g., friendly or class reunions, card parties, rural cellar gatherings),
2. to prevent more serious crimes,
3. in the case of broader hostile activities, to detach the misguided,
4. if there was an opportunity to interrupt the entire operation by highlighting a single person."[9]

Such measures could only be taken after careful consideration. Before initiating actions, it was necessary to consider the domestic and foreign policy situation, as well as whether the activities of the hostile group were adequately controlled, investigated, and documented.

[7] TABAJDI Gábor – UNGVÁRY Krisztián: *Elhallgatott múlt: A pártállam és a belügy, A politikai rendőrség működése Magyarországon 1956-1990, [The Silenced Past: The Party State and the Home Office, The Political Police in Hungary 1956-1990*] 2008, 1956-os Intézet, Corvina Kiadó, pp.168-169.
[8] *Ibid.*, p. 169.
[9] *Ibid.*, p. 169.

Furthermore, care had to be taken to monitor and observe the leading figures. Various types of subversive procedures were applied, enumerating which highlights the possibilities that could be deployed by state security. Two main groups can be distinguished, direct and indirect methods, which can be further subdivided into numerous subtypes.[10]

Within the direct subversive procedures, three subgroups can be distinguished: open police measures, covert police measures, and actions to be carried out by agencies. In the case of open police measures, attempts were made to achieve a deterrent effect through demonstrations of public authority by law enforcement agencies. These included open, violent, operational measures, such as violent surveillance or police identification checks. A telephone threat, warning, sending anonymous letters, or misusing some compromising information unknown to others about the target person also qualified as covert or veiled measure. The dissemination of such rumors (essentially slander) was frequently applied, and established practice by the political police at the time. Actions in the third subtype, i.e. subversive measures via agencies, could only be carried out after the establishment of an appropriate network. Special attention had to be paid to legalizing the data so that the person infiltrating the target group did not become suspicious of their associates. In cases where state security had several network people in a particular group, different roles were planned. In such cases, the main goal was for the infiltrated person to become a leading figure in the group and gradually steer meetings in a direction compatible with the one-party state. Exploiting the institutional system of social relationships proved to be an effective method to dismantle and divide the target group. An example is when a member of a group sentenced to subversion is obliged to report on the group's activities, and thus the "connection" itself essentially begins to subvert the group.[11]

Indirect subversive methods encompassed the application of various types of propaganda. However, the lack of their application appeared as recurring negative feedback in the state security summaries. Nevertheless, several cases became known where the publication of certain messages on television, press, and radio was motivated by some state security initiative.[12]

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[10] *Ibid.*, p. 169.
[11] *Ibid.*, pp. 169–170.
[12] *Ibid.,* p. 170.

4. Church Subversion

During the organization of Department III/III of the Ministry of Internal Affairs III, commander István Berényi (who was already experienced in "clerical reaction suppression"), briefed on future tasks and past experiences for the personnel, with particular emphasis on intelligence work against the Vatican. In his presentation, he clarified the purpose and exact meaning of subversion in relation to the Church within the conceptual framework of the political police:[13] "*Using standard operational tools and other possibilities, we identify and search for internal contradictions within the category (ideological, personal, material positions, etc.), or we create such artificially to divert and weaken the strength of the category through internal conflict and discord, to bring opposing groups to the surface and expose them, to push reactionary elements out of their positions, to bring progressive forces to the forefront, and finally - since our presentation deals with the Church - to disillusion the believers.*"[14] Berényi also drew attention to the perspective based on experience, highlighting that stoking conflicts and tensions, and subverting the Church should be the focus, as this is far more valuable in the long term than arresting a certain number of priests. Additionally, he advocated for the immediate nationwide coordination of political police activities, operations, and surveillance. Subversion aimed, among other things, to influence the Church press and integrate into the Catholic Episcopal Conference. However, the primary focus of Department III/III was the detection of centers of clerical reaction, but their activities also aimed to map and manipulate the hidden connections with the Vatican. To achieve this, emphasis was placed on increasing tension between the Episcopal Conference and priests and weakening our connections with the Vatican. It is also important to note the goal of integrating into seminaries, students, and faculties, and special attention was paid to those who left the profession, as they were considered potential recruits, thus expanding the network within the Church.[15]

[13] TABAJDI Gábor: *Bomlasztás, Kádár János és a III/III, [Subversion János Kádár and the III/III]* Budapest, 2019, Jaffa Kiadó pp. 37–39.
[14] ÁBTL 4.1. A-3794. In: Ibid., pp. 37–38.
[15] *Ibid.* pp. 37–39.

5. The Significance of Networks in Hungarian State Security Operations

The primary tool of covert operations was the network, consisting of collaborators of state security services and agents.[16] The pivotal role of network activities was due to their unique capacity for in-depth intelligence gathering, unmatched by any other means, as political investigators owed much to this method. Within the scope of this intelligence work, network personnel could gather secret data and evidence about individuals, groups, and organizations, infiltrate organizations performing subversive activities, and obtain state security-relevant information from capitalist countries. Furthermore, they could detect and document traces, and anomalies, uncover the locations of documents and records, gain access to premises, and introduce operatives where it would not have been possible by other means and tools. The framework and comprehensive regulation of network operations were defined during the stabilization of state security in 1963. The operation of the network, and certain mechanisms, was carefully, and in sufficient detail.[17]

It is important to mention that the operational forces of state security, which, as an official, social relationship, or occasional operational connection, were composed of those who did not form part of the agent network directly; however, like the state security, they expected reports from them. They could be categorized as official contacts, leaders of social and economic life, party secretaries, various ranks of military leaders, factory directors, etc. Due to their position, they were obliged to cooperate with state security, as when they accepted the given position, they essentially committed to cooperating with state security, but they were not registered. Unlike agents, their reports were always verbal, which was recorded by a professional state security officer. The loyalty of people to power was a social relationship that was considered, which approached or volunteered information, and supported state security work. Foreigners, foreign citizens, who volunteered to cooperate out of leftist ideological conviction, formed this group. Those in the category of official contacts were not registered either and did not have a file or a cover name. They did not sign a cooperation agreement, as they were not established with them by recruitment, but were commissioned into the service of state security. Their main task was primarily information sharing, which

[16] Sz. KOVÁCS, *op. cit.*, p. 6.
[17] TABAJDI, 2019, *op. cit.*, pp. 171-176.

they collected at political and social events, and during foreign trips. The third category, that is, the occasional operational relationship, was represented by individuals who assisted in the work of state security agencies in a specific action. As with the other two categories, they were not registered, acted without a cover name, and their reports were also verbal.[18]

6. Tasks of the Recruited Individuals and their Recruitment Process

In addition to their tasks of secret information exploration and collection, the recruited individuals had numerous tasks. Among other things, research, enemy mining intensification, surveillance, prison exploration and prison clearance, positive influence, or, on the contrary, isolation, and detachment also fell within their responsibilities. Furthermore, in addition to these state security-relevant tasks, it was also important for the network to carry out important activities, such as finding and studying candidates and in certain exceptional and justified cases to execute foreign recruitment, thereby ensuring their connection. The previously detailed subversive activity was also part of their job description, which detailed the ecclesiastical aspects later. The recruited people had specific obligations. In addition to the precise execution of the tasks they took on, they were required to continuously update and expand their operational opportunities and political knowledge, as well as report on relevant state security data and the criminal activities that came to their knowledge. Following the greatest obligation, they were required to prevent serious crimes against the state, risking not only exposure but even their lives. It was a unique feature of Hungarian state security that it not only defined the duties of the employed but also set out their rights and informed them of the compulsory recruitment when commissioned. Based on these, the network personnel were entitled to compensation if they were harmed in the course of their duties. In the event of long-term and "fruitful" cooperation, they were able to seek assistance in the event of existential, financial problems. Furthermore, the actions they carried out under instructions did not burden them with responsibility, as it was the state security service that bore responsibility. The very first step in the recruitment process was the selection of candidates, which took place along four basic principles: the reliability of the person in question, the goal, suitability, and the possibility of establishing secret cooperation. For example, they considered the person's relationship with

[18] Sz. KOVÁCS, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

the target objectives as an operational opportunity, possibly even the person's position there. Ecclesiastical centers also counted as target objectives. This step was followed by the candidate's study and verification through complex steps. Part of this was a personal acquaintance, which an experienced operational officer, who reacted well to unexpected situations, usually took on. This recognition could be open or covered. In the latter case, the officer measured the candidate through a fictitious identity, with a fabricated excuse, in a well-justified meeting. It is important to mention that at this stage, it was prohibited to take any recruitment or recruitment steps. The next task was to process the collected data and based on these conclusions and analyses, proposals and acquisition plans had to be prepared, specifying the place, time, the basis of recruitment, and its method, as well as the candidate's specific and frame-based tasks. In carrying out the acquisition, it was crucial to write the declaration of cooperation, which, along with personal data, had to be signed by hand under a real name in one copy. If incriminating data played a role in recruitment, the declaration stated that after a certain time worked off, the candidate would be relieved of their responsibilities.[19]

7. Church personnel's recruitment

Recruitment affected numerous church personnel, enabling infiltration to initiate the internal erosion of the church. This, along with employing other tools of erosion, significantly impacted church operations and consequently increased the vulnerability of worshippers to political interests. The phase functioning as the antechamber to church-related recruitment required special attention during candidate scrutiny to the candidate's position and placement within the group they sought to infiltrate. This was primarily due to the hierarchical structure of the church, which posed limits on information acquisition. Higher-ranking church officials often deemed it inappropriate to engage in confidential discourse with those lower down in the hierarchy. Therefore, despite the potential for a candidate's recruitment to serve as valuable reconnaissance, hierarchical constraints could hinder the acquisition of relevant information. Thus, during candidate selection, it was essential to designate individuals who held equivalent authority within the target group or category, treating them as peers. Furthermore, considerations included understanding relationships, friendships, and conflicts among the target group and the candidate, as well as assessing the candidate's level of fanaticism. Evaluations also focused on the candidate's suitability and aptitude, with significant emphasis placed on understanding their life, environment, habits, and mindset. Knowledge of these

[19] TABAJDI, 2019, *op. cit.,* pp. 171–176.

aspects was crucial for recruitment, as familiarity with them facilitated leveraging information disparities in favor of state security. Information gathering encompassed organizational structure within the church, distinctive features of the candidate's diocese, and its issues. This ensured candidates recognized and internalized that all information regarding them and their surroundings was known, leaving no room for evasion. Prior to recruitment, research was conducted into the candidate's political, moral, and economic activities, as compromising aspects therein were often utilized during recruitment.[20]

Officers utilized persistent and extensive fatigue tactics preceding actual recruitment. This involved years of regular visits by handlers to prospective candidates, gradually involving them in network activities step by step, a process that could extend over 6–7 years. Following the assessment of church personnel in their prospective roles, the recruitment process ensued. Specific methods of handlers differed from standard recruitment practices at certain points. Notably, with clerics, their unique spiritual perspective from years of communal living was considered as was their higher intelligence, enabling them to easily detect inconsistencies and draw conclusions. Thus, handlers generally avoided using authoritative or confrontational tones with church personnel. They approached these individuals with patience, emphasizing their willingness for state security work, while reinforcing their steadfast faith in God. For cases where clerics insisted on limiting their availability to certain areas or conditions, recruitment hinged on evaluating the utility of their potential activities, ensuring confidentiality and agreement. To prevent agent exposure, church personnel were strictly prohibited from being recruited in internal ministry or police settings, as initial suspicion in ecclesiastical circles was directed towards anyone connected with law enforcement. Among the most pressing concerns during clerical recruitment was the risk of conscience. While this issue also existed among secular individuals, it posed a particularly high danger to clerics, given the methods affecting the consciences of the masses employed in priestly activities. Consequently, it was mandatory to meet with new agents during the most critical period, 3–4 days following recruitment, establishing a sincere atmosphere to unearth specific information during potential confessions.[21]

In addition to recruited church connections, state security agencies maintained "social relationships," which proved notably effective, as clerics were more inclined to accept this type of

[20] KISS Réka – SOÓS Viktor Attila – TABAJDI Gábor: *Hogyan üldözzünk egyházakat? Állambiztonsági tankönyv tartótiszteknek [How do we persecute churches? State security textbook for prison officers]*, Budapest, 2012, L'Harmattan Kiadó, pp. 140-142.
[21] *Ibid.* pp. 142-143.

engagement over an agent position. Although Catholicism was the focal point of counterintelligence activities, state security agencies employed agents and social connections in every church, including unrecognized religious congregations, from upper leadership circles down to lower clergy.[22] Surprisingly, the most revealing venues for recruitment were church-affiliated, particularly Catholic secondary schools. During the period under review, Hungary had such schools, each with an average of 300 students, half of whom resided in boarding facilities. In the 1960s, state security agencies conducted reconnaissance and counterintelligence through a "factional agency" concerning ecclesiastical secondary schools. However, reports from monks primarily concerned factional activities, limiting the political police's access to information crucial for erosion (teacher-student relationships, internal life within secondary schools, hostile expressions). This led to a strategic shift in the mid-1960s, emphasizing recruitment among young students, identifying those suitable for information service and agent duties, and expanding "social relationships" into this realm.[23] Related to this, I will summarize the content of a report made about recruitment.

8. Recruitment of Agent Musician - study of a symptomatic case

Following an overview of the cornerstones of political police activities, church subversion, and recruitment, I am analysing an excerpt from a description of a recruitment process. This detail allows for a comprehensive examination of how the stages interweave during recruitment, illustrating the practical application of various techniques and tools. The description focuses on the recruitment of a candidate under the codename "Musician".[24] But how did agents of state security establish close contact with a student from a monastic high school?

Those responsible for recruitment were informed that an investigation had been initiated into a 17-year-old student at the monastic high school within their area of oversight, based on allegations of forcible sexual intercourse. Agents of the political police joined the investigation early on, and as a result, based on information provided by individuals interviewed early in the process, new individuals were summoned for questioning, including the candidate "Musician". During his interrogation, a friendly atmosphere was

[22] KÖBEL Szilvia: „Aktív ateista propaganda" Politikai rendőrség és egyházpolitika ["Active atheist propaganda"- Political police and church politics] In: *Beszélő [Speaker]*, 2002. szeptember-október, No. 9-10. p. 70.
[23] *Ibid.* p. 71.
[24] TH 260/49 In: *Ibid.* p. 72.

established, and as a result, without tension, he readily responded to the questions posed to him, thereby providing valuable information to the officers, piquing their interest. Following the interrogation, the officers visited a pastry shop the candidate had previously mentioned as a favorite hangout, ensuring they were present when students left the boarding school. The officers' goal was to maintain the appearance of a chance encounter. They succeeded in this endeavor as the candidate recognized the officers and invited them to his table. The young man enthusiastically and with childlike openness inquired about the conditions required to become a detective. The officers evaded a direct response by claiming it was a complex question that would require another occasion for discussion. Nevertheless, according to the account, they "naturally" told the boy that as a religious student, he would not be a good detective and would not meet the necessary criteria. Later, the officers invited the candidate to a more suitable place than the pastry shop, where they discussed topics related to the "detective school" and related questions, continuing the conversation paused at the pastry shop. During the meeting, it became apparent that the candidate was extremely interested in these subjects and wanted to learn judo, at least a few moves. The officers assured the boy that there was no obstacle to teaching him a few moves and that they would provide him with novels on topics of interest to him in the future. Furthermore, they drew his attention to how uncomfortable it would be for him if his educators were to become aware of this – whether through him or one of his peers – thus beginning to instill in him the awareness that he should not speak to anyone about these conversations or meetings. Moreover, the officers asked him whether he would be capable of keeping secret the information provided to him for internal use, even during confession before his superior. The boy assured the officers that he was not accustomed to discussing his private affairs with either his peers or his superiors. He further explained, *"Even though I attend a monastic high school and receive a religious education, I'm not so stupid as to confess everything."*[25] Following these discussions, the officers summarized their experiences with the candidate, evaluated what had been said during their conversations, and decided to prepare a plan for maintaining contact with him in the future. They believed that recruiting the candidate was necessary and that the information gathered about his

[25] *Ibid.* pp. 72.

suitability was promising. Thus, the selection of the candidate was made, and the second phase mentioned above, involving the study and verification of the candidate, began.[26]

The description further details how the officers employed several operational tools during this phase: they checked the boy's reliability and, through environmental studies, became acquainted with his family. As promised, they also considered teaching him a few self-defense moves in a secluded place away from the city, alongside emphasizing the importance of silence and discretion on every occasion. They succeeded in making the boy feel that they were doing him a favor, that it was advantageous for him to obtain valuable information through them, which would become worthless as soon as he mentioned it to anyone else. During the meetings, despite the candidate's lack of attention, they managed to obtain valuable information from an operational perspective regarding the internal order of the church high school and its boarding school. The candidate gradually allowed the infiltrating officers closer into his confidence and, after some time, sought their help with his personal, cherished, youthful problems, stating that he did not have a suitable friend or teacher with whom to discuss these topics. The Musician also emphasized to the officers that they were the first people in his life with whom he could comfortably share these concerns. It became clear to the officers that the school's catering left much to be desired, so they offered him sweets and sandwiches alongside the theater and movie tickets on occasion. Initially, he received these to take his female acquaintances along; subsequently, the officers designated companions for him to attend performances, whom they found operationally interesting. Summarizing the study and verification phase, the officers considered Musician to be charismatic, possessing above-average intelligence, and reliable, thus proceeding with the recruitment.[27]

After discussing the Musician’s academic plans and family circumstances on the morning of the recruitment, the officers directed the conversation towards the actual recruitment. They outlined for Musician the relationship between the state and the church, agreements, and requirements concerning monastic high schools, and discussed a few disobedient, reactionary teachers who did not meet state requirements, highlighting the detrimental

[26] *Ibid.* pp. 72.
[27] *Ibid.* pp. 72-73.

effects of their actions. They thoroughly reviewed the consequences of hostile education and how it would affect the youth's entire life. Following this introduction, they moved on to explain that their task was to prevent this from happening, for which they needed the opinions of reliable, intelligent, serious individuals to identify and halt those engaging in reactionary activities and redirect the youth onto the right path. They further explained that those involved in such activities needed to become part of a group where members were sufficiently reliable, emphasizing how important it was for the existence and activities of this group to remain secret. Subsequently, they invited Musician to assist them in achieving these goals. The candidate responded affirmatively, expressing his condemnation of certain superiors' behavior and providing information about them. This reassured the officers that the candidate understood the task, agreed with the ideological aspect, and wanted to play a part in the fight against reactionaries. Musician drafted the confidentiality statement and made a concrete agreement with the officers regarding their future relationship. Subsequently, they selected a codename for the candidate, officially becoming "Musician". The friendly relationship and minor financial rewards completely tied the student to the network, allowing Musician to unconditionally and unscrupulously provide information about his teachers, classmates, the internal life of the high school, and the boarding school to state security. In this way and similarly, the state security apparatus managed to entrap numerous individuals, including the 17 monastic students, into serving the political police from their convictions or out of fear or compulsion, thereby betraying masses of people to the state.[28]

9. Summary

As we have seen, the activities of Division III/III were extremely extensive and complex during its operational period, employing various tools and methods to achieve the objectives of internal counterintelligence. Their activities spanned numerous areas, applying general methods with variations in certain areas, and adapting specific strategies to the characteristics of the environment. In line with Hungary's state ideology, countering clerical reaction required more meticulous planning within the political police regarding church systems and church education characteristics. Following the concise description of

[28] *Ibid.* 73-74.

the organizational structure and the summary of the general characteristics of subversion, as well as the specific characteristics of church subversion, I wanted to illustrate this through the summarization of the general and church-specific methods of establishing networks, following a detailed description of the recruitment process of a student attending a monastic high school. In conclusion, in service to the ruling ideology, the political police went to extremes, employing highly sophisticated, time-consuming but highly effective processes to build their most powerful weapon against internal reaction: the extensive, all-encompassing network.