

bradscholars

Touching Base: Hungarian Intelligence and the School of Slavonic and East European Studies in the 1960s

Item Type	Article
Authors	Batonyi, Gabor
Citation	Batonyi G (2023) Touching Base: Hungarian Intelligence and the School of Slavonic and East European Studies in the 1960s. Slavonic and East European Review. 101(2): 313-356.
DOI	https://doi.org/10.1353/see.2023.a904398
Rights	(c) 2023 The Author. Full-text reproduced with author and publisher permission.
Download date	2026-05-20 07:13:25
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/10454/19461

SLAVONIC & EAST EUROPEAN REVIEW



ISSN 2222-4327

Volume 101, Number 2, April 2023

Gábor Bátonyi, *Touching Base: Hungarian Intelligence and the School of Slavonic and East European Studies in the 1960s*, pp. 313–356

Project MUSE, doi: 10.1353/see.2023.a904398

<https://muse.jhu.edu/journal/823>

<https://www.jstor.org/journal/slaveasteurorev2>

Copyright in the individual articles and reviews published in the *Slavonic and East European Review* is vested in the authors. For permission to reproduce material, please apply to the Managing Editor (seer@ucl.ac.uk).

The Modern Humanities Research Association and the School of Slavonic and East European Studies, University College London

Touching Base: Hungarian Intelligence and the School of Slavonic and East European Studies in the 1960s

GÁBOR BÁTONYI

EDUCATIONAL institutions in Britain witnessed many of the secret skirmishes between intelligence operatives that typified ‘the hot end of the Cold War’.¹ Hence, the historiography of espionage is replete with tales of Cambridge, the ‘magnificent five’ and the Soviet success in recruiting British scholars.² However, much less ink has been spilled about the infiltration of universities and research centres by Eastern European agents.

One is hard pressed to find secondary sources on the academic exchange programmes run with Communist states³ and the challenges these

Gábor Bátonyi is Assistant Professor of History at the University of Bradford.

I wish to thank Géza Jeszenszky, István Pál, Mária Palasik, Attila Pók, Martyn Rady, Rachel Unsworth and *SEER*'s anonymous reviewers for sharing their knowledge and expertise. I am grateful to the Hungarian Academy of Sciences for funding my research.

¹ P. Hennessy, *The Secret State: Preparing for the Worst, 1945–2010*, London, 2010, p. 4.

² The five Cambridge spies, whether ‘magnificent’ or not, were Kim Philby, Guy Burgess, Donald Maclean, Anthony Blunt and John Cairncross. C. Andrew, *The Defence of the Realm: The Authorized History of MI5*, London, 2009, pp. 420–41.

³ The sparse secondary sources in English that exist are, in the main, concerned with scientific exchange programmes between Eastern bloc countries and the United States. A Bulgarian scholar rightly highlights, in a recent article of this kind, that the ‘control of the communist-era intelligence bodies over the exchange of researchers from both sides of the Iron Curtain remains a little-studied area’. S. V. Samuilova, ‘U.S.-Bulgarian Exchange of Scientists and State Security: Cold War Case Study’, *International Journal of Intelligence and CounterIntelligence*, 35, 2, 2022, pp. 339–52 (p. 341). Secondary sources in Hungarian comprise a few studies on the academic exchanges between Hungary and the West during the 1960s, two of which discuss in detail the selection process for the individuals permitted to travel, and the interference in this process by the security services. K. Somlai, ‘Ösztöndíjjal nyugatra, a hatvanas években: Az Országos Ösztöndíj Tanács felállítása’, in J. Tischler (ed.), *Kádárizmus: Mélyfúrások*, Budapest, 2009, pp. 273–314; K. Somlai,

presented to MI5's 'defence of the realm'.⁴ Historical works on the 'cultural cross-pollination' and knowledge transfer of the 1960s tend to focus on 'the processes that cut across political divides', without reference to clandestine intelligence activity specifically designed to disrupt these processes.⁵ Correspondingly, most specialist studies on the 'munitions of the mind' are limited to the examination of information warfare and propaganda, concentrating exclusively on the great powers.⁶ Few Anglophone historians have paid attention to the nefarious role of minor Communist secret services and their less conspicuous, but far from insignificant, contribution to the East-West conflict.⁷

Admittedly, the Eastern Europeans were not so adept at utilizing cultural opportunities as the Soviets; nonetheless, by the 1960s they were sending covert operatives to London in the guise of impresarios, curators, arts administrators, journalists, students and researchers. Taking advantage of loopholes in their bilateral cultural and scientific exchange agreements with the United Kingdom, the satellite states of the Soviet Union liberally used their educational quotas to deploy and train their secret service staff, as well as their army of informers and 'social

"Kiutazása érdekünkben áll": A Nyugatra utazó ösztöndíjasok és a hírszerzés kapcsolatai a Kádár-korszakban', in Gy. Kozák (ed.), *Kádárizmus: Átereszek*, Budapest, 2010, pp. 241–62.

⁴ Andrew, *Defence of the Realm*. The official history of MI5 dismisses the threat posed by the Eastern European intelligence services. Tellingly, it makes no mention of Hungarian spies.

⁵ A. E. Gorsuch and D. P. Koenker, 'Introduction: The Socialist 1960s in Global Perspective', in A. E. Gorsuch and D. P. Koenker (eds), *The Socialist Sixties: Crossing Borders in the Second World*, Bloomington, IN, 2013, pp. 1–21 (p. 2); E. Rindzevičiūtė, *The Power of Systems: How Policy Sciences Opened Up the Cold War World*, Ithaca, NY, 2016, p. 184.

⁶ See, for example, P. M. Taylor, *Munitions of the Mind: A History of Propaganda from the Ancient World to the Present Era*, New York and Manchester, 2003; L. H. Schwartz, *Political Warfare against the Kremlin: US and British Propaganda Policy at the Beginning of the Cold War*, New York and Basingstoke, 2009; P. Romijn, G. Scott-Smith and J. Segal (eds), *Divided Dreamworlds? The Cultural Cold War in East and West*, Amsterdam, 2012; J. Jenks, *British Propaganda and News Media in the Cold War*, Edinburgh, 2006; R. Aldrich, 'Putting Culture into the Cold War: The Cultural Relations Department (CRD) and British Covert Information Warfare', *Intelligence and National Security*, 18, 2, 2003, pp. 109–33.

⁷ The few available books in English often contain a personal dimension by the authors, and typically deal with the East German Stasi and the Romanian Securitate. See, for example, T. Garton Ash, *The File: A Personal History*, London, 1997; M. Fulbrook, *Anatomy of a Dictatorship: Inside the GDR: 1949–1989*, Oxford, 1995; D. Deletant, *In Search of Romania: A Memoir*, London, 2022; D. Deletant, *Ceaușescu and the Securitate: Coercion and Dissent in Romania, 1965–1989*, London, 1995; K. Verdery, *My Life as a Spy: Investigations in a Secret Police File*, Durham, NC, 2018; K. Verdery, *Secrets and Truths: Ethnography in the Archive of Romania's Secret Police*, New York and Budapest, 2014.

contacts'.⁸ Defying Britain's Security Service and the ever-looming threat of expulsions, the visitors were engaged in surveillance, reconnaissance, 'talent spotting' and other forms of spycraft they could practise without the need for diplomatic cover. In return for plying their dark trade, they were hosted and subsidized by the very country they were attacking. Along with precious study opportunities and modest material gains, the visitors hoped to reap operational benefits, not least favourable openings for cultivating high-level connections inside the British cultural elite. Driven by such pragmatic considerations, whilst doggedly pursuing long-term strategies of ideological subversion, the foreign intelligence branch of Hungarian State Security, known as Directorate III/I (signifying the First Directorate of the Third Chief Directorate, within the Interior Ministry), launched multiple operations in May 1966 against British cultural and teaching institutions.⁹

As the tenth anniversary of the 1956 Revolution approached, the spymasters of János Kádár's regime were no longer satisfied with having hostile émigré groups shadowed, or with commissioning reports on fractured Magyar social and political associations, in the United Kingdom. Following consultation with Russian 'friends', the officers of Section III/I-1-B, the unit responsible for espionage in Britain, shifted their focus from monitoring exile communities in major cities to penetrating high-profile cultural organizations and institutes of Sovietology and Hungarian studies.¹⁰ The logical primary target was the British Council, as it was the first point of contact for visiting scholars.¹¹ The attempted infiltration of the School of Slavonic and East European Studies (SSEES), at the University of London, was a closely related operation. Although Soviet and Eastern

⁸ In a dictionary of spy terms circulated within Hungary's Interior Ministry, a 'social contact' (*társadalmi kapcsolat*) is defined as 'a person with Socialist sympathies who voluntarily, or after some prompting, gives regular help and information to our security services'. A. Gergely (ed.), *Állambiztonsági Értelmező Kéziszótár*, Budapest, 1980.

⁹ A hallmark of the secrecy of János Kádár's regime was that after 1956, the reorganized State Security divisions were designated solely by numbers. On the instructions of the Interior Minister, from 3 May 1957 the various intelligence branches could not be named in official correspondence. Directorate III/I was created in 1962, as a result of major restructuring. M. Palasik, 'A Hírszerző Osztály szervezete és állománya 1956–1962', *Betekintő*, 4, 2, 2011, pp. 1–37 (p. 13). For a basic sketch of the evolution of Hungarian State Security during the Cold War, see G. B. Cseh, 'A magyarországi állambiztonsági szervek intézménytörténeti vázlata, 1945–1990', in Gy. Gyarmati (ed.), *Trezor 1. A Történeti Hivatal Évkönyve*, Budapest, 1999, pp. 73–90.

¹⁰ Within the First Directorate, Department III/I-1 oversaw operations in the United States and in international organizations. Section III/I-1-B was a unit of this department.

¹¹ Budapest, Állambiztonsági Szolgálatok Történeti Levéltára (Historical Archives of the State Security Services; hereafter, ÁBTL), 3.2.5. O-8-103/1, debriefing of Mrs Kiss on her studies at King's College London and the hospitality of the British Council, 30 September 1965.

European intelligence services had identified SSEES as a military ‘object’ in the 1950s, by virtue of the language training it provided on behalf of the Joint Services School for Linguists, in the mid 1960s Hungarian operatives were mainly investigating its links to the Foreign Office and MI6.¹² They were on the lookout for pliable or corruptible civil servants and area specialists, not to mention students with career prospects in the British Foreign Service. Thus, the combined reconnoitring of the British Council (seen by Hungarian Intelligence as a small state within the secret state) and the University of London was purposefully planned. Targeting some of the same individuals with the same agents, the dual reconnaissance was part of an aggressive overarching design.

‘East-West contact bridge’: The British Council and the cultural Cold War

On 10 May 1966, after a couple of years of preliminary work, Directorate III/I initiated a detailed methodical study of the activities, personnel and administration of the British Council.¹³ Paradoxically, the impetus for this sharpened scrutiny was the gradual normalization of cultural relations between Hungary and Britain, which had begun in the early 1960s.

The Anglo-Hungarian exchange programmes, which were renegotiated at regular intervals from 1963, helped to rebuild cultural ties between the two countries that had been severed in 1950.¹⁴ From the Hungarian perspective, however, the agreements offered first and foremost ‘operative possibilities’ in the United Kingdom, besides a chance for counter-intelligence to probe

¹² The Joint Services School for Linguists (JSSL) was a military establishment, where more than five thousand national servicemen ‘were semi-secretly pushed through intensive training in Russian’ between 1951 and 1960. The JSSL’s purpose ‘was to produce linguists to work in Britain’s “early warning” Signals Intelligence system, Sigint’. Two ‘special enclaves’ of the JSSL were formed at the universities of London and Cambridge to provide advanced courses for interpreters, ‘who could be called on by the Armed Forces and the intelligence services if real war came’. G. Elliott and H. Shukman, *Secret Classrooms: An Untold Story of the Cold War*, London, 2003, pp. 11–12.

¹³ ÁBTL, 3.2.5. O-8-103/1, directive authorized by Lieut. Col. T. Kovács to open an object dossier on the British Council, code-named ‘NIGHT CLUB’, 10 May 1966. The code name appears in the English form in both the directive and the dossier.

¹⁴ The signing of the Anglo-Soviet cultural, technical and scientific agreement by Christopher Mayhew, Chairman of the Soviet Relations Committee at the British Council, and Yuri Zhukov, Chairman of the Soviet State Committee for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries, on 29 March 1959 paved the way for similar arrangements between Britain and the satellite states. The first short-term exchange with Hungary was concluded on an ‘experimental basis’ in October 1961. From 1963 it was renegotiated annually or biennially. For a detailed study in Hungarian, see M. A. Madarász, ‘Ami a 6:3 után jött. Brit-magyar külkapcsolatok 1956–1970 között: Mire képes a kultúra és a propaganda a hidegháború idején?’, unpublished doctoral thesis, Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, 2017, pp. 90–91, 112.

British visitors attending summer courses or other events in Hungary.¹⁵ Whereas the Hungarian academics posted to the University of London were vetted and instructed by the First Directorate, the English language teachers bound for universities in Budapest and Debrecen were tracked by both the spy catchers and the spy recruiters of Hungarian State Security.¹⁶ As the departing Cultural Attaché, Richard Auty, warned his successor at the British Embassy in Budapest: 'Friendly co-operation with officials is essential to reduce any suspicion of "infiltration tactics" against which they are very much on their guard.'¹⁷

For all the police attention, the British Council's representatives in the Embassy, working nominally as cultural attachés, fostered unofficial relations with a select group of writers, film directors and historians. In Auty's words, this group acted 'as an East-West contact bridge', from which 'interesting views on the politico-cultural situation and possibilities of co-operation' arose.¹⁸ Unlike the French Embassy staff in Budapest, British diplomats were courting neither the apparatchiks nor the opposition:

It is unwise and counter-productive to cultivate with obvious enthusiasm either the hard-core party people or those clearly hostile to the regime in political terms. The Embassy's cultural contacts are largely with the centre range of liberal minded people, including many party members. They are also as a group the most significant academically and artistically in national life.¹⁹

By reaching out to regime-friendly moderates, the British Council and the affiliated East Europe Committee were actively promoting cultural and intellectual diversity in a monolithic Communist country. British experts from university institutes, such as SSEES, assisted in forging personal and institutional links, outside the restrictive official exchange agreements.²⁰ As a result, Hungarian intelligence files reveal not only a dread of Britain's security services, but a heightened alert about a 'full frontal attack' by its

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

¹⁶ See, for example, the monitoring and planned recruitment of English Lector Paul Christopher Aston in Debrecen from 1965 to 1966. ÁBTL, 3.2.5. O-8-103/1, 'NIGHT CLUB' dossier.

¹⁷ Kew, The National Archives (hereafter, TNA), British Council Papers, BW 36/26, handover notes by R. M. Auty, 23 July 1968.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ ÁBTL, 3.2.5. O-8-103/1, memorandum by I. Pintér on the East Europe Committee, 25 March 1966.

area specialists.²¹ For instance, in 1962 when the SSEES scholar George Cushing arranged to visit two libraries in Budapest, he was suspected of travelling to the city, at the behest of the British Council, to meet with 'certain individuals'.²² Cushing, who had been ejected from Hungary in 1949,²³ was granted a visa so that his movements could be watched. Hungary's Ambassador in London, Jenő Incze,²⁴ astutely summed up the state of Anglo-Hungarian cultural relations and the underlying tension:

English cultural achievements are well known at home. What the British are trying to do in Hungary is to convert cultural ties into social connections and political influence. Hence, the 'mutuality' of the official exchange agreements favours us, whilst personal contacts plainly benefit them.²⁵

The bloated 'object dossier' (*objektum dosszié*) on the British Council, collected by Hungarian Intelligence from 1966 to 1968 and luridly code-named 'NIGHT CLUB',²⁶ oozed scepticism about the Council's stated mission as a purveyor of British high culture.²⁷ For Hungarian officials, the British Council was not an instrument of cultural relations, merely a specialist arm of the intelligence services. As Incze reported:

²¹ ÁBTL, 3.2.5. O-8-103/1, memorandum by I. Molnár, 10 January 1964.

²² ÁBTL, 3.2.5. O-8-075, report by 'Koltai', 14 February 1962.

²³ M. Rady, 'Cushing, George Frederick (1923–1996)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (hereafter, *ODNB*), 2010 <<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/60644>> (para. 2 of 5).

²⁴ On 2 December 1963 Hungary's diplomatic representation in Britain was elevated to ambassadorial level, making Jenő Incze the first Hungarian Ambassador to serve in London. M. Baráth and L. Gecsényi, *Főkonzulok, követek és nagykövetek, 1945–1990*, Budapest, 2015, p. 115.

²⁵ ÁBTL, 3.2.5. O-8-103/1, memorandum by J. Incze, 11 June 1964.

²⁶ ÁBTL, 3.2.5. O-8-103/1 and O-8-103/2, object dossier on the British Council, code-named 'NIGHT CLUB', opened on 10 May 1966 and closed on 21 August 1968. By the time of the dossier's closure, the material had expanded into two thick bundles. An 'object dossier' such as NIGHT CLUB (and others cited in this article) was a file containing information gathered by Hungarian State Security on an identifiable Western 'object' of interest, typically an institution or an association.

²⁷ For scholarly analysis of British cultural diplomacy, propaganda and the role of the British Council, see P. M. Taylor, *British Propaganda in the Twentieth Century: Selling Democracy*, Edinburgh, 1999, p. 78; E. Corse, *A Battle for Neutral Europe: British Cultural Propaganda during the Second World War*, London, 2013, p. 7; E. Corse, 'The British Council behind the Iron Curtain: Cultural Propaganda in Early Cold War Poland', in M. Connelly, J. Fox, S. Goebel and U. Schmidt (eds), *Propaganda and Conflict: War, Media and Shaping the Twentieth Century*, London, 2021, pp. 229–51.

95 per cent of the [Council's] budget is provided by the British government and just 5 per cent stems from 'donations'. In the light of the increase in funding from the Foreign Office and other ministries, the Council is gradually losing its 'semi-official' status, and more evidently becoming an organ of the British state.²⁸

Despite the 'hectic de-Stalinization' of the Hungarian secret services in the aftermath of 1953, their 'Chekist vigilance' against sedition showed no sign of fading in the 1960s.²⁹ Section III/I-1-B was specifically tasked with profiling all those Eastern European experts and senior officials of the British Council who had come into any contact with the Hungarian authorities.³⁰ Meanwhile, the London Rezidentúra (as Hungary's operatives called the spy station, borrowing from Russian intelligence jargon), which by the late 1950s encompassed almost the entire diplomatic and ancillary staff of the Hungarian Legation, was given an offensive general assignment.³¹ Its officers were explicitly urged to make use of Anglo-Hungarian educational and cultural exchanges in pursuit of the 'ultimate strategic objective': penetrating Whitehall.³²

Considering the small size of the Hungarian spy network in Britain and its poor track record, this was a hopeless undertaking. Slightly more credible was the immediate proposition of identifying and cultivating suitable individuals in academia, the media and cultural diplomacy as 'social contacts', with an eye to their recruitment. But even this was a tall order, in view of the near-complete rupture of personal and institutional links that had occurred in 1950, after an audacious show trial in Budapest against an English businessman, Edgar Sanders. Hungary had expelled all British Council officials in the spring of that year, the first Eastern

²⁸ ÁBTL, 3.2.5. O-8-103/1, report by J. Incze to the Foreign Ministry, 21 December 1964.

²⁹ Gy. Gyarmati and M. Palasik, 'Hectic De-Stalinization and the Secret Services in Hungary, 1953–1956', in Gy. Gyarmati and M. Palasik (eds), *Continuities and Discontinuities: Secret Services after Stalin's Death in Communist Central and Eastern Europe*, Budapest and Pécs, 2017, pp. 25–45 (p. 38).

³⁰ ÁBTL, 3.2.5. O-8-103/1, directive authorized by Lieut. Col. T. Kovács to open an object dossier on the British Council, code-named 'NIGHT CLUB', 10 May 1966.

³¹ In 1967, according to an authoritative source on the Hungarian diplomatic service, 27 per cent of Hungary's diplomats in the West were officers from the First Directorate, and 10 per cent were from Military Intelligence. The proportion was significantly higher in bigger missions, such as that in London, which had a Rezidentúra. Baráth and Geccsényi, *Főkonzulok, követek és nagykövetek*, p. 66.

³² ÁBTL, 3.2.5. O-8-075, directive authorized by Lieut. Col. T. Kovács to open an object dossier on SSEES, code-named 'CENTER', 10 May 1966. The code name appears in the (American) English form in both the directive and the dossier.

bloc country to do so. As a lasting legacy of the Sanders case, and in the bitter wake of 1956, the Kádár regime stubbornly refused to confer formal recognition on Council employees right up to the end of the 1980s.³³ In 1965 when the British Foreign Secretary, Michael Stewart, pressed the visiting Hungarian Foreign Minister as to why his government was so exceptionally rigid on this subject, János Péter cut short the discussion with the contrived response that there was no point in rehearsing such 'hoary old Cold War controversies'.³⁴

Bureaucrats of the Hungarian party state regarded British cultural institutes abroad as sinister front organizations in the intelligence war.³⁵ This was extreme even by Eastern European standards. Whereas the Czechoslovak administration was ready in 1965 to contemplate reopening the British Council's offices in Prague, if only as a 'pre-emptive move to control and limit the spread of British propaganda', the Hungarian attitude remained intransigent.³⁶ At a Romanian Embassy reception in London in 1966, a senior Council representative, S. G. West, pointedly described Hungary as a country 'stuck in the early 1950s', adding that it was simpler to conduct cultural relations with Romania or Bulgaria.³⁷ He also endeavoured to impress on two intently listening Hungarian diplomats that 'inappropriate activities were wholly contrary to the British Council's aims', whilst conceding that he could not vouch for all members of his staff.³⁸ The pair of agents, code-named 'Pusztai' and 'Kőváry', were unpersuaded by this protestation of innocence.³⁹ One of their superiors expressed still greater incredulity, penning in the margin of their report: 'As if subordinates would go and spy of their own accord!'⁴⁰

³³ G. Bátonyi, 'Diplomacy by Show Trial: The Espionage Case of Edgar Sanders and British-Hungarian Relations, 1949–53', *Slavonic and East European Review*, 93, 4, 2015, pp. 692–731 (pp. 719–20, 731).

³⁴ Budapest, Magyar Nemzeti Levéltár Országos Levéltára (State Archives of the Hungarian National Archives; hereafter, MNL OL), XIX-J-1-j (Anglia) 1965, box 18, memorandum by J. Péter, 31 May 1965.

³⁵ ÁBTL, 3.2.5. O-8-103/1, report by J. Incze on his meeting with R. L. Speaight at the Foreign Office, 4 July 1964.

³⁶ ÁBTL, 3.2.5. O-8-103/1, report by J. Incze on the British-Czechoslovak cultural exchange programme, 5 March 1965.

³⁷ ÁBTL, 3.2.5. O-8-103/1, agent report by 'Pusztai' and 'Kőváry', 5 February 1966.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ 'Pusztai' and 'Kőváry' were the respective code names of István Berényi and János Hegedűs, Second and Third Secretaries of the Hungarian Embassy in London. (See also note 158 below.)

⁴⁰ ÁBTL, 3.2.5. O-8-103/1, agent report by 'Pusztai' and 'Kőváry', 5 February 1966.

The hardliners of the security apparatus in Budapest were truly alarmed by the prospect of opening up to the West, especially as far as cultural relations were concerned.⁴¹ Yet when in 1963 the eminent economist Nicholas Kaldor queried why the Hungarians were neglecting to follow the Soviet example of sending postgraduates to London, Oxford or Cambridge, it eventually dawned on some officials that they had been missing a valuable opportunity.⁴² By the time the Soviet Embassy in London verified that there was a cohort of fully funded Russian students in the United Kingdom, the isolationist Hungarian attitude had already started to shift. Major Gábor Pados of Directorate III/I, signing himself 'Budai', proposed to capture the available grants for the purpose of deploying 'young university-educated intelligence officers as well as trained and seasoned operatives'.⁴³ Suddenly, the Hungarian security services no longer objected to the involvement of the British Council in hosting visitors and administering funds, as the eagerly anticipated benefits outweighed the risks.

The planned infiltration of British institutions with junior officers was effectively contained, if not actually prevented, by MI5. The British Ambassador in Budapest, Sir Alexander Morley, categorically told the Hungarians in July 1966 that the practice of nominating Foreign Ministry staff for language training, as part of the bilateral academic exchange programme, was unacceptable.⁴⁴ According to the Hungarian records:

He wished to state plainly that Her Majesty's Government had no intention of contributing to the English teaching of persons in the pay of Hungarian Intelligence, who would employ their knowledge and skills against this country.⁴⁵

Amidst the spy scandals of the 1960s, Britain's defences proved to be difficult for minor Communist secret services to breach. As the English

⁴¹ L. Borhi, *Dealing with Dictators: The United States, Hungary, and East Central Europe, 1942-1989*, trans. J. Vincz, Bloomington, IN, 2018, pp. 8-9.

⁴² MNL OL, XIX-J-1-j (Anglia) 1965, box 21, report by B. Szilágyi, 26 April 1963.

⁴³ ÁBTL, 3.2.5. O-8-103/1, agent report by 'Budai', 31 March 1963.

⁴⁴ Many of the Foreign Ministry staff were, in reality, officers from the First Directorate, within the Interior Ministry, or from Military Intelligence, within the Defence Ministry. In June 1967 the Interior Ministry listed forty-five of its staff as serving in foreign missions under diplomatic cover. In the same year 70 per cent of all diplomats were working for the intelligence services on a voluntary basis. Baráth and Gecsényi, *Főkonzulok, követelek és nagykövetelek*, pp. 65-66.

⁴⁵ ÁBTL, 3.2.5. O-8-103/1, memorandum by Lieut. Col. I. Veres, Head of Department III/II-9, 14 July 1966.

historian Peter Hennessy has noted, British spy catchers saw the Eastern Europeans as ‘much easier’ to work against than the Soviets, and with good reason.⁴⁶ It is testimony to the reputed efficiency of MI5 that in 1967 Hungarian Military Intelligence (MNVK 2) devoted an entire textbook to the Security Service.⁴⁷ In September 1966 the Foreign Office issued a stern protest to the Hungarian Ambassador in London, naming five Hungarian spies caught making improper use of the bilateral exchange agreement.⁴⁸

It is safe to say that the clandestine Hungarian plans to penetrate the British elite brought few, if any, tangible results. After restructuring within the First Directorate, in August 1967 the task of monitoring British cultural institutions was passed on to a newly created fifth department, responsible for technical and scientific intelligence. By August 1968 the specific targeting of Council personnel had ceased altogether.⁴⁹ In contrast, the efforts to gather information on university research centres of Eastern European studies — at London principally, but additionally at Oxford, Birmingham, Lancaster and Glasgow — continued well into the era of détente.

‘Most suitable vantage point’: SSEES and the search for a base in Britain

In the mid 1960s the University of London was judged by Hungarian counter-intelligence officials to be ‘the most suitable vantage point to take a look at English cultural life’.⁵⁰ In particular, the self-governing School of Slavonic and East European Studies was earmarked for extensive espionage operations.⁵¹ Foreign intelligence analysts duly came up with a lengthy overview of the history, organization and staff of SSEES,⁵² albeit not before requesting information and guidance from the Soviets, who had kept a close eye on the School since the interwar years.

⁴⁶ Hennessy, *Secret State*, p. 2.

⁴⁷ I. Pál, ‘A brit arcvonal 1967-ben: Az angliai ügynökhelyzet bemutatása az MNVK 2 operatív tankönyve alapján’, *Betekintő*, 10, 1, 2017, pp. 1–16.

⁴⁸ K. Ungváry, “Anglia a második legnagyobb ellensége Magyarországnak”: A londoni magyar hírszerző rezidentúra működése saját jelentései tükrében 1951 és 1965 között”, *Századok*, 147, 6, 2013, pp. 1513–60 (p. 1555).

⁴⁹ ÁBTL, 3.2.5. O-8-103/2, directive authorized by Lieut. Col. J. Szombath to close the ‘NIGHT CLUB’ dossier, 21 August 1968.

⁵⁰ ÁBTL, 3.2.5. O-8-103/1, report by Section III/II-6-B on the Anglo-Hungarian exchanges planned for 1964–65, 27 November 1964.

⁵¹ ÁBTL, 3.2.5. O-8-075, report by Lieut. J. Oláh on the reasons for extending the surveillance of SSEES, 10 February 1966.

⁵² MNL OL, XIX-J-1-j (Anglia) 1966, box 23, memorandum on the history, organization and staff of SSEES, R. Sándor to B. Szilágyi, 7 June 1966.

As Faith Wigzell, Emeritus Professor of Russian Literature and Culture, explains: 'The Soviet services were very anxious about the danger to the USSR from émigrés, and there were plenty at SSEES.'⁵³ The contingent of exiled Russian language instructors at the School in the 1930s, though, was offset by a strong Communist presence. MI5 was investigating both staff and students at the institute, but as late as 1943 the view prevailed that 'it would not greatly matter if communists taught languages to Service students provided there was a minimum of fraternisation.'⁵⁴ By the 1950s agent reports about Communist sympathizers at SSEES met with more concern but much vacillation from British intelligence chiefs,⁵⁵ despite one report which claimed that 'the low grade type of service personnel sent to the School of Slavonic Studies' were being used by Communist spies as 'unconscious sources of information about certain Government Departments.'⁵⁶ During the early Cold War, if the report is to be believed, a network of 'about 50 active Party members and probably a further 50 active collaborators' clustered around the School (then gravitated to Birmingham).⁵⁷

Back in the 1930s even one of 'Stalin's Englishmen', the notorious Guy Burgess, had briefly appeared in Senate House to study Russian, on a mission 'to befriend fellow pupils, who might be MI6 officers'.⁵⁸ Burgess had not persevered with his language lessons, and 'never progressed beyond kitchen Russian'.⁵⁹ He had, however, conveyed to Moscow his impression that SSEES numbered so many SIS officers amongst its students that it was 'a focal point of the local firm'.⁶⁰ According to his biographer, it may also have been Burgess who in 1935 drew the attention of the People's

⁵³ F. Wigzell, 'Dorothy Galton (1901–91): SSEES Administrator and Apiculturist: Was She Also a Soviet Spy?', <<https://www.ucl.ac.uk/ssees/dorothy-galton-1901-91-ssees-administrator-and-apiculturist-was-she-also-soviet-spy>> [accessed 4 August 2020] (para. 16 of 20).

⁵⁴ TNA, KV 2/3049, W. Ogilvie to R. H. Hollis, 24 August 1943. In 1956 Roger Hollis became Director General of MI5.

⁵⁵ The seemingly 'dilatatory' response to intelligence about one known sympathizer formed the subject of some heated correspondence. TNA, KV 2/3050, minute 136 by E. L. Spencer, 28 April 1954, and minute 137 by E. M. Furnival Jones, 30 April 1954. Martin Furnival Jones succeeded Hollis as Director General in 1965.

⁵⁶ TNA, KV 2/3049, report by MI5 officer 'B.4.D.' on Communist plants at SSEES, based on information from 'an established and reliable source', unsigned and undated; TNA, KV 2/3050, minute 130 by R. T. Reed, 22 March 1954.

⁵⁷ TNA, KV 2/3049, report by MI5 officer 'B.4.D.' on Communist plants at SSEES, unsigned and undated.

⁵⁸ A. Lownie, *Stalin's Englishman: The Lives of Guy Burgess*, London, 2015, p. 60.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 284.

⁶⁰ Elliott and Shukman, *Secret Classrooms*, p. 19.

Commissariat of Internal Affairs (NKVD) to the pro-Soviet sentiments of the School's formidable Secretary, Dorothy Galton.⁶¹ Declassified MI5 documents, which cover the period from 1932 to 1958, imply that the administrator was a Communist plant. Her links to Soviet Intelligence were not proven beyond reasonable doubt, although some of the relevant British records are still withheld.⁶² Hungarian State Security files, on the other hand, contain conclusive evidence that from 1936 she was working for Moscow.⁶³



Photograph of Dorothy Galton, Historical Archives of the State Security Services, Budapest. © ÁBTL.

⁶¹ Lownie, *Stalin's Englishman*, p. 60.

⁶² TNA, KV 2/3049 and KV 2/3050 contain the security files on Dorothy Galton, but some of the material has been retained or redacted by MI5.

⁶³ See, for example, ÁBTL, 3.2.4. K-575 2959-61, security file on Galton, 30 March 1960.

After the war Kim Philby, the most infamous of the Cambridge spies, was busy digging into MI5's material on Galton, as well as that on her former boss, Sir Bernard Pares. Philby was following up an enquiry by the FBI into the ex-Director's 'remarkable conversion from anti-Soviet views' during his stay in the United States.⁶⁴ The Americans assumed that the Secretary was instrumental in changing the Professor's mind about Stalin's regime. The Sovietologist Jonathan Haslam contends that Sir Bernard was never really reconciled to Stalinism, notwithstanding his 'irrepressible Romanticism' and his 'love [for] the people of Russia', which had been stirred by 'the common struggle against fascism'.⁶⁵ At any rate, the FBI enquiry afforded Philby a good opportunity to check what MI5 knew about Soviet spies inside SSEES.

In 1947 the Security Service identified the successor of Pares, Professor William Rose, and 'at least two of his assistants (Messrs Rothstein and Malnick)' as crypto-Communists.⁶⁶ The School even struck one observer as being 'a nest of poisonous Kremlin fanciers'.⁶⁷ The student body, too, grew more left-wing 'in the immediate post-war period when the ex-servicemen began to attend'.⁶⁸ Reportedly, the Students' Union was a 'Communist-controlled organisation' from the moment of its inception in 1946.⁶⁹ In any event, the political atmosphere altered dramatically with the onset of the Cold War.

The new Director, George Bolsover, was a Russian expert of a different ilk. In the assessment of MI5, he was 'a stabilising influence'.⁷⁰ He had experience of a wartime diplomatic posting in Moscow, where the Soviets had him marked down as an SIS man. His role in removing a suspected NKVD asset, Andrew Rothstein, from the School in 1949 reaffirmed the Soviets' conviction that the Director had ties to Britain's secret services. Hungarian intelligence files indicate that, under Bolsover's guardianship,

⁶⁴ TNA, KV 2/3049, J. A. Cimperman to R. H. Hollis, 15 January 1947, and R. H. Hollis to J. A. Cimperman, 29 January 1947.

⁶⁵ J. Haslam, 'Pares, Sir Bernard (1867–1949)', *ODNB*, 2004 <<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/35378>> (para. 6 of 7).

⁶⁶ TNA, KV 2/3049, N. P. E. Whitestone to Sqdn Ldr N. C. Harrison, 15 April 1947. 'Mr' Malnick was in fact Dr Bertha Malnick, Reader in Russian Studies from 1946 to 1966.

⁶⁷ Wigzell, 'Dorothy Galton' (para. 8 of 20). See also, H. Shukman, 'Bolsover, George Henry (1910–1990)', *ODNB*, 2010 <<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/62188>> (para. 3 of 6); J. Keep, 'SSEES in the late 1940s', <<https://www.ucl.ac.uk/ssees/centenary/ssees-past/alumni-columns/alumnistories/johnkeep>> [accessed 5 August 2020] (para. 6 of 8).

⁶⁸ TNA, KV 2/3050, extract from a source report on SSEES [filed 24 June 1953], 30 July 1953.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ TNA, KV 2/3050, agent report, unsigned and undated.

the School redesigned its curriculum to reflect the priorities and staffing requirements of the British warfare state, 'to the detriment of academic values'.⁷¹ Security was notably tightened: staff flagged as possible moles were put under watch by Special Branch. Nevertheless, in 1953 fears persisted that the institute was undefended from the 'inquisitive gaze of the Russian Intelligence'.⁷²

By then the School was under such domestic scrutiny that Eastern European spies could not necessarily rely on the KGB for 'fraternal' assistance. The Soviets were, moreover, in the habit of protecting their agents and informants even from their closest allies. During the 1960s the Hungarian Rezidentúra was, essentially, left to fall back on its own resources in exploring the institute. Information sharing with Soviet security advisors, and the much smaller group of 'KGB liaison officers' who replaced them in 1964, tended to be a one-sided affair throughout the Cold War.⁷³ The KGB supplied a few snippets of intelligence, confirming, for example, that SSEES was 'a training base for area specialists to be employed by the Foreign Office, the armed services and MI6'.⁷⁴ It named a number of the 'occasional students' who subsequently served at various British missions in Eastern Europe, and passed on specific tips to Hungarian recruiters.⁷⁵ Yet the Soviets rarely revealed any operational details.

Still, the information at their disposal was enough for the commanders of the First Directorate to deem the School a suitable setting for agent development and network building.⁷⁶ The presence of Hungarian students and staff certainly added to the importance of the risky undertaking, as it offered a pool of potential candidates for clandestine work. The Magyar émigré community in Britain had swollen to some 20,000 in 1956, and its links with the institute had not escaped the notice of the government in Hungary. What is more, Bolsover, the Director from 1947 to 1975, and his

⁷¹ D. Edgerton, *Warfare State: Britain, 1920–1970*, Cambridge, 2008; ÁBTL, 3.1.5. O-13624, report by Lieut. L. Tóth, 18 April 1968, providing commentary on the perceived political motivation for the curriculum redesign.

⁷² TNA, KV 2/3050, extract from a report on the JSSL, 14 December 1953.

⁷³ M. Baráth, 'Szovjet tanácsadók a magyar állambiztonsági szerveknél', in Gy. Gyarmati and M. Palasik (eds), *A Nagy Testvér szatócsboltja: Tanulmányok a magyar titkosszolgálatok 1945 utáni történetéből*, Budapest, 2012, pp. 49–65 (p. 64).

⁷⁴ ÁBTL, 3.2.5. O-8-075, directive authorized by Lieut. Col. T. Kovács to open an object dossier on SSEES, code-named 'CENTER', 10 May 1966.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.* Information about 'occasional students' who learnt Eastern European languages before taking up diplomatic posts in the Soviet satellite states was also gathered by Hungarian lecturers at SSEES. See, for example, ÁBTL, 3.2.5. O-8-075, agent report by 'Gyulai', 11 February 1966.

⁷⁶ ÁBTL, 3.2.5. O-8-075, directive authorized by Lieut. Col. T. Kovács to open an object dossier on SSEES, code-named 'CENTER', 10 May 1966.

colleague Cushing, a Lecturer in Hungarian Language and Literature since 1947, enjoyed direct personal connections with the country: Bolsover had a Hungarian wife, Stephanie Kállai,⁷⁷ whilst Cushing was a former PhD student of Eötvös College in Budapest.⁷⁸ Besides, Bolsover had been listed in 1963 as a leading member of the newly formed East Europe Committee, a cultural relations body viewed by Hungarian State Security as a Trojan horse of the British Council.⁷⁹ His active involvement in the Committee's Hungary Group was noted with concern in Budapest. The observed nexus between SSEES, the East Europe Committee and the British Council was, without doubt, a contributory factor in the decision to infiltrate the School.

It is no coincidence that on the same day in May 1966 that the foreign intelligence unit III/I-1-B placed the British Council under surveillance, it opened another object dossier, code-named 'CENTER', initiating the gathering of agent reports on SSEES.⁸⁰ In addition, for the duration of these institutional probes, and beyond, separate records were kept on one member of staff in particular: László Péter, a refugee from Hungary with an Oxford doctorate, who in 1963 had become the School's first Lecturer in Hungarian History.⁸¹ The historian was shadowed by spies even after the offensive against the 'CENTER' was stopped in 1968. By that point, counter-intelligence officials had given SSEES their own code name, *BÁZIS* ('BASE'), reflecting the culmination of their aspirations and suspicions regarding the School.

What follows here is a partial reconstruction of Hungarian espionage activities and the attempted infiltration of SSEES, drawing on hitherto unexplored material at the Historical Archives of the State Security Services in Budapest. Admittedly, the available primary sources are patchy. In Hungary approximately 30 per cent of intelligence files were destroyed at the time of the Communist regime's collapse; roughly 10 per cent remain in the possession of the successor services.⁸² Crucially, in the

⁷⁷ Shukman, 'Bolsover' (paras 1, 2 and 4 of 6). In June 1966 an agent code-named 'László Hódos' was sent to Britain to renew his childhood acquaintance with Bolsover's wife, who is called Ilona Kállay in the Hungarian intelligence files. ÁBTL, 3.2.5. O-8-075, report by Lieut. J. Oláh, 17 June 1966.

⁷⁸ Rády, 'Cushing' (para. 2 of 5).

⁷⁹ ÁBTL, 3.2.5. O-8-103/1, memorandum by I. Molnár on the annual report of the British Council for 1962-63, 4 January 1964.

⁸⁰ ÁBTL, 3.2.5. O-8-075, object dossier on SSEES, code-named 'CENTER', opened on 10 May 1966, authorized for closure on 12 December 1967 and closed at an unspecified date the following year.

⁸¹ I. W. Roberts and R. Bartlett, *History of the School of Slavonic and East European Studies 1915-2005*, London, 2009, p. 49.

⁸² K. Ungváry, 'England, Sir Martin Gilbert and Hungarian State Security', *Journal of*

absence of the relevant MI5 records, the Hungarian documents can only provide a lopsided and distorted picture. As the American anthropologist Katherine Verdery has remarked on the papers of the Romanian Securitate, 'Everything we know about how the files were put together diminishes their likely truth-value'.⁸³ Intelligence documents tend to be 'factual' and 'authentic', in as much as they are compiled for practical purposes and not for posterity, yet they often tell us more about the pursuers than the pursued. The documents deposited in Hungary's State Security Archives, in the words of its first historian-director, are merely the 'residues of a regime's squalor' (*egy rendszert szennyiratai*).⁸⁴ That said, the idea of focusing on Hungarian intelligence operations against foreign cultural and educational institutions is not to demonstrate the moral decrepitude or incompetence of Kádár's spies. This has been done elsewhere. The author's aim is to shed new light on the role of Hungary's self-appointed guardians in countering the transformative changes instigated by Western cultural diplomacy during the 1960s.

'Shabby grocer's shop': The Rezidentúra after a revolution and a defection

Why did the Hungarian secret service decide to infiltrate SSEES at the very moment when relations with Britain started to improve? Why did a beleaguered regime spend precious resources on dubious ventures abroad, which conflicted with its declared policy of normalization? To answer these questions, one needs to consider briefly the short- to medium-term impact of the Hungarian Revolution, as well as the far-reaching consequences of a defection by a lowly diplomat.

'No contact, no problem', exclaimed Kádár in 1965, reflecting cheerily on the simplicity of his stand-off with the West in the immediate aftermath of 1956. Of the present juncture, some nine years later, it pained him to admit to the Soviet Premier, Alexei Kosygin, that his country had been forced to seek contact with the West as it suffered from increasing economic strain, and that this renewed engagement had brought complications with it. 'Now we have contact, we have problems', concluded Kádár.⁸⁵

Intelligence History, 15, 1, 2016, pp. 1–16 (p. 2).

⁸³ Verdery, *Secrets and Truths*, p. 72.

⁸⁴ Gy. Gyarmati, *Kísértő közelmúlt*, Budapest, 2011, p. 7. The Hungarian word *szenny* more literally denotes 'filth'.

⁸⁵ Gy. Földes, *Kádár János külpolitikája és nemzetközi tárgyalásai, 1956–1988*, 2 vols, Budapest, 2015, 2, p. 181, memorandum by K. Erdélyi on the negotiations of János Kádár, First Secretary of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party (HSWP), and two other members of the HSWP's Politburo, Antal Apró and Béla Biszku, with Alexei Kosygin, Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the Soviet Union, and Leonid Brezhnev, General

By this time, Kosygin was already encouraging the Hungarian government to normalize relations with member states of the Common Market, and with Britain. The complete isolation of the Hungarian economy was too burdensome for the Soviet Union; the resultant shortage of hard currency necessitated East-West trade. Sensing an opportunity, the crafty tactician Kádár secured authorization for more intensive diplomatic overtures to NATO countries. He emphatically reassured his Soviet sponsors, 'We are navigating our economic problems without becoming politically dependent on the West'.⁸⁶ To this end, the gradual improvement in Hungary's foreign relations, the first enquiries about IMF membership and the dedicated search for economic and cultural partners in Western Europe were offset by bellicose intelligence and propaganda initiatives expressly designed to impress and placate the Kremlin.

A striking instance of the Kádár regime's dependability, anti-British credentials and subservience to Moscow was the abduction in broad daylight of the businessman and MI6 operative Greville Wynne in November 1962, at a trade fair in Budapest's leisurely City Park (Városliget).⁸⁷ In full sight of five English spectators, Wynne was bundled into a green car by plain-clothes policemen brandishing revolvers.⁸⁸ Despite sustained diplomatic protest from the Foreign Office, the abducted man, who had been aiding the defection of a Russian military intelligence officer, Colonel Oleg Penkovskii, was denied legal aid or consular access by the Hungarians. Wynne was quickly handed over to the Soviets to be tried and imprisoned in the USSR. The story of Penkovskii, especially his involvement with MI6 and the CIA during the Cuban Missile Crisis, is a well-documented and significant chapter in the history of Cold War espionage.⁸⁹ Yet Hungary played only an incidental and subsidiary part in the 'clash of the secret worlds'.⁹⁰ The Hungarian security services of the Communist era have been justifiably compared by two specialists to 'a shabby grocer's shop' ('egy szegényes szatócsbolt') belonging to 'Big Brother'.⁹¹ Due to the country's

Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, Moscow, 24 May 1965.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 183.

⁸⁷ TNA, FO 953/2264, report entitled 'The Abduction of Mr Wynne', Foreign Office News Department, 8 November 1962.

⁸⁸ I would like to thank my Hungarian colleague István Pál for showing me his unpublished manuscript on the Wynne case.

⁸⁹ L. Scott, 'Espionage and the Cold War: Oleg Penkovsky and the Cuban Missile Crisis', *Intelligence and National Security*, 14, 3, 1999, pp. 23-47 (p. 24).

⁹⁰ Hennessy, *Secret State*, p. 4.

⁹¹ Gy. Gyarmati and M. Palasik, 'Bevezetés a Történelmi Levéltár jubileumi tanulmánykötetéhez', in Gyarmati and Palasik, *A Nagy Testvér szatócsboltja*, pp. 7-19

‘modest strategic importance’, its undercover operations were relatively limited in scale; they were no match for those of the Czechoslovak StB, the Polish SB or the East German Stasi.⁹²

‘Does a small country like Hungary have any need of a foreign intelligence agency?’ This earnest question was posed by senior Interior Ministry officials in November 1956, at a time when all Hungarian espionage activities had ground to a halt.⁹³ On the political consolidation of the post-revolutionary government in the 1960s, though, the State Security apparatus regrouped and regained its sense of purpose. One Hungarian scholar has asserted that the professionalization and expansion of the reorganized intelligence services was a sure sign of a slowly evolving independent foreign policy.⁹⁴ However that may be, the duplicity of the twin-track strategy of combining diplomatic rapprochement with heightened intelligence confrontation was an enduring hallmark of the Kádár regime’s hypocrisy in foreign affairs. In particular, it strongly affected Hungary’s dealings with its designated ‘no. 2 enemy state’, Great Britain.⁹⁵

In the wake of the Revolution, the Hungarian Legation in London was in utter disarray. Officials who opted not to defect, but who refused to return to Hungary, headed for the Soviet Embassy. Handlers lost touch with their agents and destroyed case files. Staff divided up the Legation’s meagre funds. What little was left of the espionage network was easily mopped up by MI5.⁹⁶

Under such inauspicious circumstances, from 1956 to 1965 the Hungarian secret service expended disproportionate energy on reconstituting its London station. The principal objectives were to repatriate Hungarian refugees, or use them to penetrate the British establishment. There were at least 150 prominent Britons, typically with close links or family ties to Hungary, who were studied, followed or approached by covert operatives, with a view to recruiting them through blackmail or bribery. By the early 1960s the spies of the London bureau had sixty-two ‘social contacts’

(p. 9). The book’s title, intended as a metaphor for Hungary’s security services during the Cold War, roughly translates as ‘Big Brother’s Grocery’, with the Hungarian word *szatócsbolt* connoting a down-at-heel grocer’s shop (or a run-down corner shop).

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Palasik, ‘A Hírszerző Osztály szervezete’, p. 6.

⁹⁴ M. Benedek, ‘Az állambiztonság és a külpolitika kapcsolata Magyarországon 1945–1990 között’, *Nemzetbiztonsági Szemle*, 2, 2, 2014, pp. 111–38 (p. 135).

⁹⁵ Ungváry, ‘Anglia a második legnagyobb ellensége Magyarországnak’, p. 1513.

⁹⁶ Palasik, ‘A Hírszerző Osztály szervezete’, p. 6.

on whom they could call.⁹⁷ In a recent assessment by the Hungarian historian Krisztián Ungváry, the Rezidentúra in the British capital, for all its inefficiency and bungling, was 'the most important foreign base of the Hungarian intelligence services'.⁹⁸ Unlike the attempts to cultivate well-connected members of the English political elite, which yielded next to nothing, the targeting of the Magyar émigré community was more fruitful. According to a Joint Intelligence Committee report, by the 1970s the British Hungarian Friendship Society was high on MI5's list of subversive Communist front organizations.⁹⁹

In a State Security estimate, by 1959 three quarters of the seventeen thousand Hungarians remaining in Britain were 'politically loyal'.¹⁰⁰ This was a grossly inflated figure. Some records suggest that by 1961, half a decade on from the Revolution, Hungary's security personnel in London still lived in trepidation of an attack on the Legation building by tough former freedom fighters who had settled in industrial cities of the north, such as Bradford.¹⁰¹ The most serious obstacle to Hungarian intelligence operations in Britain, however, was not the militancy of a tiny segment of the exile community, but a near-total collapse of the spy network after the defection of a secret agent.¹⁰²

Major László Szabó (alias 'Acél'), was sent to England on 8 September 1965 under diplomatic cover, as Second Secretary of the Hungarian Embassy in charge of economic affairs. His main allotted task was to liaise with the other Eastern European spy stations in Britain. On 16 October 1965, within six weeks of his arrival in London, he exited his office with a steel box containing classified documents, and applied for political asylum at the United States Embassy.¹⁰³ Whether he was simply a disgruntled officer with a chip on his shoulder, or a burnt-out individual who left his diplomatic post, and his wife and daughter, in pursuit of a Finnish-American woman, is unclear from the Hungarian sources. There

⁹⁷ Ungváry, 'Anglia a második legnagyobb ellensége Magyarországnak', p. 1550.

⁹⁸ Ungváry, 'England, Sir Martin Gilbert and Hungarian State Security', p. 1.

⁹⁹ Hennessy, *Secret State*, p. 129.

¹⁰⁰ ÁBTL, 3.2.5. O-8-002/3, object dossier on Hungarian émigrés in Britain, code-named 'DOWER', estimate of the size and political loyalty of the Hungarian émigré community by 'Kárpáti', 1 June 1959. The dossier's code name appears in the English form.

¹⁰¹ ÁBTL, 3.2.5. O-8-002/3, debriefing of an informer named László Balogh on the plan by a group in Bradford to occupy the Legation building, 'Kárpáti' to 'Szirtes', 28 March 1961.

¹⁰² M. Palasik, 'A szolgálati helyéről eltűnt hírszerző: Az USA-ban politikai menedékjogért folyamodó Szabó László története', *Betekintő*, 9, 1, 2016, pp. 1–29 (pp. 15–18); Ungváry, 'Anglia a második legnagyobb ellensége Magyarországnak', pp. 1552–59.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

was plenty of speculation that he was kidnapped or persuaded to defect. His lover, whom he had befriended in 1964 during a British Council-run summer course, was a civilian employee of the American military who lived on an air-force base outside Abingdon.¹⁰⁴ Whilst this may strike one as a textbook case of ‘creative cooperation’ between Britain and America in turning an Eastern European spy, the Hungarian investigators did not find any evidence pointing to such a scenario.¹⁰⁵

What is certain is that Szabó was taken to Frankfurt, where he was interrogated by the Americans. He eventually surfaced in Washington on 2 March 1966, when he testified to an intelligence subcommittee of the House of Representatives about the activities of the Hungarian security services. This was a disaster for his last employers. In Budapest the Interior Minister, András Benkei, launched an internal enquiry, which concluded that the ‘deserter Szabó’ was familiar with fifteen active Hungarian operatives deployed abroad, seven of whom were located in the United Kingdom. He could, additionally, list twenty-five people pursued by Hungarian recruiters, eighteen of whom were British.¹⁰⁶

As a previous Deputy Head of Section III/I-1-B, he knew the identities of the residents and operatives in London, New York, Washington and Ottawa. He was privy to the work of counter-intelligence, and that of the department overseeing industrial espionage. All told, Szabó was acquainted with seventy-eight Hungarian spies. Moreover, he could identify fifteen agents of the ‘sister services’, including seven KGB assets in England.¹⁰⁷

Undoubtedly not so big a catch as the defectors Michał Goleniewski and Józef Światło from Poland, Jan Šejna from Czechoslovakia or Ion Mihai Pacepa from Romania, nonetheless the middle-ranking Szabó — derided by his erstwhile colleagues as an ‘arty type’ and a ‘sensitive soul’ — inflicted serious and lasting damage on the Communist secret services.¹⁰⁸ One Hungarian historian has gone so far as to claim that Hungary’s foreign intelligence apparatus did not recover until the late 1970s.¹⁰⁹ The immediate impact of the defection was particularly keenly felt by the London Rezidentúra, which was fully compromised. The Embassy was in

¹⁰⁴ Palasik, ‘A szolgálati helyéről eltűnt hírszerző’, pp. 13–15.

¹⁰⁵ For scholarly treatment of the British and American encouragement of defection, see K. P. Riehle, ‘Early Cold War Evolution of British and US Defector Policy and Practice’, *Cold War History*, 19, 3, 2019, pp. 343–61 (p. 351).

¹⁰⁶ Palasik, ‘A szolgálati helyéről eltűnt hírszerző’, p. 16.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*; Ungváry, ‘Anglia a második legnagyobb ellensége Magyarországnak’, p. 1556.

¹⁰⁸ Palasik, ‘A szolgálati helyéről eltűnt hírszerző’, pp. 13, 19.

¹⁰⁹ Ungváry, ‘Anglia a második legnagyobb ellensége Magyarországnak’, p. 1556.

no less a state of disarray than was the Legation in 1956. This did nothing to dim the resolve of the Kádár regime's security chiefs. As the bullish Deputy Interior Minister, József Galambos, reasoned in April 1966:

We have been pondering how to capitalize on the weaknesses of enemy propaganda in the case of Szabó. On the tenth anniversary of the Counter-revolution [on 23 October], we can scarcely expect to have an easy ride. It may be best not to limit ourselves to defensive responses, but to go on the offensive.¹¹⁰

Taking on the United States and the CIA directly was hardly practicable, albeit a wild scheme of kidnapping an American diplomat was briefly entertained. Not for the first time, undercover operatives were also scrutinizing the security at the American Embassy in London, as part of a wider probe.¹¹¹ In the event, the Hungarians retaliated only against the United Kingdom. They had already arrested an employee of the British Embassy in Budapest, a Chancery guard called William Fraser, and denied him his diplomatic immunity, using the pretext of a traffic accident on 13 October 1965.¹¹² This was followed up by operations in London. Along with establishments such as the British Council and the BBC World Service, London University's School of Slavonic and East European Studies appeared to be a suitable target.

In a 27-page document, which contained drawings of Senate House, the Institute of Historical Research, some numbered buildings on Russell Square and the University of London Union, together with suggestions on how to get hold of the keys of the caretaker, a Mr Sims, the case officer laid out a detailed plan of action. Conceding that Szabó may have known about the early preparations for the infiltration of SSEES, he declared defiantly: 'His betrayal cannot prevent us from carrying on with our work.'¹¹³ Three agents code-named 'Gyulai', 'Gyűrűs' and 'András' were directed to

¹¹⁰ Ibid., p. 1558.

¹¹¹ ÁBTL, 3.2.5. O-8-104, object dossier on the United States Embassy in London, and on American and other Western diplomats in the English capital, code-named 'OVERSEAS'. The code name appears in the English form. The dossier was opened on 24 September 1964 and closed on 21 August 1968.

¹¹² MNL OL, XIX-J-1-j (Anglia) 1965, box 18, Foreign Ministry memorandum by G. Miklós on the 'Fraser case' and a bad-tempered exchange with H. Carless, First Secretary of the British Embassy, 25 October 1965. See also, G. M. Szebeni, 'A "külügyes Szabó", aki "liftaknába zuhant"', *Grotius*, 17 April 2011, pp. 1–13 (pp. 4–5) <www.grotius.hu/doc/pub/TDSESM/2011_112_m.szebeni.geza_a.kulugyes.szabo.pdf> [accessed 5 August 2020].

¹¹³ ÁBTL, 3.2.5. O-8-075, report by Lieut. J. Oláh on SSEES containing operational instructions, 10 February 1966.

undertake further reconnaissance.¹¹⁴ Meanwhile, the Rezidentúra was sent meticulous instructions:

The operative officers should utilize all their acquaintances and visit the School as regularly as possible [...], courting Cushing and Péter. Comrade Hegedűs must introduce Péter to the operatives shortly arriving in London.¹¹⁵ All Hungarian visitors to the School should be thoroughly debriefed. [...] We must look for new candidates amongst students, replacing those compromised by Szabó. From the staff our first choice is László Péter. In advance of his scheduled trip to Hungary, all of his Hungarian connections should be investigated. [...] We need to make sure as well that the Lector posted to the School happens to be our own nominee.¹¹⁶

In addition to these measures, the author of the document recommended entering into a 'double game' with students from SSEES who were attending a summer school in Debrecen. It was taken for granted that a few of them had been 'dangled by the British security services'.¹¹⁷ Hitherto, Section III/I-1-B had received two concrete tips. One concerned a candidate code-named 'Margou', whom the would-be recruiters had subjected to a charm offensive featuring a couple of potential boyfriends and a female confidante.¹¹⁸ After the case had been referred to the Soviets, it was abandoned on the grounds that Szabó was aware of her identity. This was not the first, or the last, occasion that the KGB stopped a Hungarian intelligence operation involving SSEES.

¹¹⁴ Péter Egri (alias 'Gyulai'), Reader in English Literature at Debrecen University, was appointed Hungarian Lector at SSEES in September 1965. Imre Patkó ('Gyűrűs') was London Correspondent of the daily *Népszabadság*. His wife, Lívia Patkó ('András'), was Cultural Attaché of the Hungarian Embassy in London. (The alias 'András', the Hungarian equivalent of the English personal name Andrew, was part of the female agent's cover.)

¹¹⁵ For Hegedűs, see note 39 above.

¹¹⁶ ÁBTL, 3.2.5. O-8-075, report by Lieut. J. Oláh on SSEES containing operational instructions, 10 February 1966.

¹¹⁷ Ibid. To 'dangle' someone, in espionage parlance, is to select a person from one's own side who will attract the attention of recruiters on the other side.

¹¹⁸ Elisabeth A. Stewart, code-named 'Margou', attended the summer school at Debrecen in 1963 and 1964. On 6 July 1965 Hungarian Intelligence opened a file on the SSEES student with a view to recruiting her.

'We could engage her profitably': Secretary Dorothy Galton

The methodical exploration of SSEES by Directorate III/I dated back to 1959, when a covert operative was tasked with contacting and cultivating the Secretary of the School, Dorothy Galton.¹¹⁹ Employed as the general factotum of the Professor of Russian History in 1928, 'Galton was in effect in charge', especially once the School became a self-governing body in 1932.¹²⁰ Relegated 'firmly to the role of academic administrator' by Dr Bolsover, she continued to control the day-to-day business until her retirement in 1961.¹²¹ According to the official history of SSEES, the Secretary was 'a tower of strength' for thirty-three years.¹²² Conversely, she was labelled as 'domineering', and as 'a most seriously unpleasant and unbalanced woman', by a protected MI5 'sub-source'.¹²³ Yet, 'through her industry and her policy of interfering in every aspect of the School's activities, she exerts considerable influence', noted the same hostile informer.¹²⁴

In spite of 'her stern exterior and forthright manner', Galton welcomed 'active contact with like-minded people', including Eastern Europeans.¹²⁵ Her special attachment to Hungary, and to Hungarian Socialists, can be traced back to the mid 1920s, when she was secretary of the exiled aristocrat Mihály Károlyi. She accompanied the 'Red Count' and his wife on their travels to France, living with the Károlyi family from 1925 to 1926. Galton's earliest police record, produced by Scotland Yard, describes her as a 'young English girl' working in Paris for the ex-President of Hungary.¹²⁶

By the time the Hungarian secret service was knocking on her door, Galton was nearing retirement. László Báti, the Cultural Attaché, was ordered to win her friendship and trust. The recruiter, who had been a teacher at Eötvös Loránd University in Budapest, was initially given the code name 'Professor'. From 1958 he was stationed at the London Legation, reporting as agent 'Aradi' to Department II/3 (the precursor of Directorate III/I), until his appointment as Director of the Hungarian Cultural Institute

¹¹⁹ ÁBTL, 3.2.4. K-575 2959-61, agent report by 'Aradi' on Galton, 5 February 1959.

¹²⁰ Wigzell, 'Dorothy Galton' (paras 1 and 3 of 20); K. Showler, 'Galton, Dorothy Constance (1901-1992)', *ODNB*, 2009 <<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/51046>> (para. 2 of 5).

¹²¹ Wigzell, 'Dorothy Galton' (paras 1, 3 and 5 of 20); TNA, KV 2/3050, agent report on L.S.S.E.E.S. [London School of Slavonic and East European Studies], unsigned and undated.

¹²² Roberts and Bartlett, *History of the School*, p. 51.

¹²³ TNA, KV 2/3050, agent report on L.S.S.E.E.S., unsigned and undated, and extract from a source report on SSEES [filed 24 June 1953], 30 July 1953.

¹²⁴ TNA, KV 2/3050, extract from a source report on SSEES, 30 July 1953.

¹²⁵ Wigzell, 'Dorothy Galton' (paras 5 and 9 of 20).

¹²⁶ TNA, KV 2/3049, note by Capt. Miller, 26 June 1925.

in Paris three years later.¹²⁷ By this point, the diligent operative had gathered information on 120 people in the United Kingdom. Admittedly, he had some misgivings. As his controller recorded subsequent to their last meeting in a safe house:

He has been more than happy to work for us, but he feels that his talent is wasted here. Too often he has been set futile assignments. He thinks we pay too much attention to individuals who are not worth the effort.¹²⁸

Did Bati have Galton in mind? He certainly must have sensed the futility of his labours. The operational planners in Budapest barely considered whether it was wise for an Eastern European diplomat to linger around the School administrator's office with the lame excuse of looking for programme brochures. Moreover, they neglected to check at the outset whether their chosen target had any past dealings with the KGB or other Warsaw Pact security services.

It was a former Hungarian specialist at SSEES, Miklós Szenczi,¹²⁹ who brought Galton to Bati's notice, commending her as a Socialist and a personal friend.¹³⁰ Although her life-long support for the Labour Party did not count for much with the hardliners of State Security, in the aftermath of the Soviet invasion British admirers of the Kádár regime were in short supply. The maverick Englishwoman was not only privately sympathetic to the Communist Hungarian administration; she was blatantly antagonistic to several of the Magyar dissidents she encountered at work.

In Budapest the foreign intelligence branch opened a folder on her with the irreverent code name *CSONTOS* ('BONY').¹³¹ Whereas a SSEES colleague had characterized her as 'Dorothy "Queen Wasp" Galton',¹³² agent 'Aradi' found the task of befriending her easier than expected:

¹²⁷ ÁBTL, 3.2.3. Bt-925, files of agent 'Aradi' 1958–67, proposal by Lieut. M. Kőszeg to recruit László Bati, 12 September 1958.

¹²⁸ ÁBTL, 3.2.3. Bt-925, memorandum by Lieut. I. Huszár on the transfer of 'Aradi' to Paris, 7 July 1961.

¹²⁹ From 1937 to 1945 Dr Szenczi worked in London as the School's first Lecturer in Hungarian Language and Literature. In 1947 he took up a position at Budapest's Pázmány Péter University, but lost his job there in 1949. He was rehabilitated in 1957, becoming a Professor and Head of English at Eötvös Loránd University (as the university was then called). The counter-intelligence branch put him under renewed observation in 1969. Roberts and Bartlett, *History of the School*, pp. 29, 33–34; ÁBTL, 3.2.4. K-575 2959-61, curriculum vitae compiled by Miklós Szenczi after 1956, and request by Maj. M. Péter to study the files on Szenczi, 20 October 1969.

¹³⁰ ÁBTL, 3.2.4. K-575 2959-61, agent report by 'Aradi' on Galton, 5 February 1959.

¹³¹ ÁBTL, 3.2.4. K-575 2959-61, note by 'Alföldi' on Galton, 10 October 1959.

¹³² Wiggzell, 'Dorothy Galton' (para. 8 of 20).

Miss Galton approached me before I had a chance to contact her. Upon my arrival she wrote to me confirming her wish to visit Hungary. I went to see her in early January [1959]. Her political views are reassuring. As she explained, SSEES is so Conservative that even Labourites are suspected, and her left-wing sympathies have to be well hidden. Accordingly, she asked me to send her visa application form to her home address. [Her boss] Mr Bolsover is brazenly right-wing.¹³³

The response from Budapest, handwritten on Bati's report, was enthusiastic: 'It is important that we should engage her.'¹³⁴ In September Galton travelled to Hungary, sharing a car with Professor Szenczi. To her complete surprise, for the duration of her stay in the capital, she was put up at a plush guest house of the Communist party. Plainly, the Hungarian authorities were eager to impress her.¹³⁵

The feedback in London was more cautious. A psychological profiler provided this stark assessment of 'BONY':

In her personal relations she never stops halfway. If she likes people, she accepts and trusts them without reservation. When she feels antipathy for someone, she is liable to display extreme loathing.¹³⁶

Fortunately for 'Aradi', Galton liked him. The files suggest that she was vigilant in her habits, for example refusing to answer the phone at home, mindful that it was bugged by MI5. Yet little did the Hungarian agent imagine that the amicable Secretary was no novice to the spy game.

Bati next called on Galton at SSEES in November, on two occasions,¹³⁷ despite her explicit prior warnings that 'all Hungarian visitors wandering about in the School were bound to be taken for spies', and that he should keep away from Bolsover.¹³⁸ In December Major General András Tömpe, Head of Department II/3, got in touch with the Czechoslovak, Romanian and Bulgarian state security services, as well as the KGB, to request information about the Director of SSEES.¹³⁹ Enquiries were subsequently

¹³³ ÁBTL, 3.2.4. K-575 2959-61, agent report by 'Aradi' on Galton, 5 February 1959.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ ÁBTL, 3.2.4. K-575 2959-61, memorandum by 'Aradi', 11 November 1959.

¹³⁶ ÁBTL, 3.2.4. K-575 2959-61, report by L. Nagy on Galton, 23 January 1960.

¹³⁷ ÁBTL, 3.2.4. K-575 2959-61, agent reports by 'Aradi', 11 and 19 November 1959.

¹³⁸ ÁBTL, 3.2.4. K-575 2959-61, agent report by 'Aradi', 5 March 1959.

¹³⁹ ÁBTL, 3.2.4. K-575 2959-61, information request by Maj. Gen. A. Tömpe to Warsaw Pact security services, 3 December 1959.

made 'at friendly embassies' about Galton's association with Rothstein.¹⁴⁰ It gradually dawned on the case officers that the sporadic, impromptu visits to the School by a Hungarian operative were decidedly risky, and they needed to know more about their target before they could offer employment or any type of incentive.¹⁴¹

The systematic plans for Galton's 'initiation' were drawn up in March 1960, but by this stage it became evident that she had been a KGB asset. The Soviets acknowledged in writing that she had been an active agent between 1936 and 1954, 'performing various tasks from time to time'.¹⁴² As for what exactly those tasks were, the Hungarian files contain a single wry allusion. She had handed to her controller a register of attendance from one of the special courses for the military. It did not take long for the KGB to detect that the list was composed of false names.¹⁴³ Apparently, her 'snooping' around the Joint Services School for Linguists had been discovered and reported to MI5 by the head of the Russian programme, Ronald Hingley.¹⁴⁴ Alerted by the Air Ministry, the Joint Intelligence Committee had warned service departments — and, by extension, service students — to be on their guard in dealing with the Secretary. In spite of concern about Galton's 'possible "underground" interests',¹⁴⁵ an MI5 source had concluded that 'her field of vision is a very narrow one'.¹⁴⁶ Whilst she could gain access to restricted information, she could not read material of the highest grade. The Soviets had broken off contact with her, noting that 'she no longer had any real prospects'.¹⁴⁷ The particulars supplied by Moscow did not discourage the Hungarian recruiters, who maintained: 'With her help we should be able to form a clearer picture of the institute and the student body; we are ready to start the ball rolling and enlist her.'¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁰ ÁBTL, 3.2.4. K-575 2959-61, 'Alföldi' to 'Barna', 22 March 1960. See also, Wigzell, 'Dorothy Galton' (paras 8–9 of 20). According to the authors of the history of the JSSL, Andrew Rothstein was 'an NKVD officer tasked with agent development'. This may explain why the Hungarians were interested to know more about Galton's association with her former SSEES colleague. Elliott and Shukman, 'Secret Classrooms', p. 152.

¹⁴¹ ÁBTL, 3.2.4. K-575 2959-61, 'Alföldi' to 'Barna', 22 March 1960.

¹⁴² ÁBTL, 3.2.4. K-575 2959-61, security file on Galton, 30 March 1960.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Wigzell, 'Dorothy Galton' (para. 9 of 20).

¹⁴⁵ TNA, KV 2/3049, letter by M. F. Serpell, 8 July 1947. The recipient's name has been redacted by MI5.

¹⁴⁶ TNA, KV 2/3050, MI5 minutes, unsigned, 18 January 1954.

¹⁴⁷ ÁBTL, 3.2.4. K-575 2959-61, summary of information provided by the KGB, unsigned, 30 March 1960.

¹⁴⁸ ÁBTL, 3.2.4. K-575 2959-61, unsigned report from the London Rezidentúra, 31 March 1960.

A month later further details were disclosed by the Soviets. Galton had been recruited during her second trip to the USSR in 1936. Contrary to the assumption that she had resigned from the Communist Party of Great Britain that year simply as a precaution to protect her position at SSEES, the archival records imply that she followed foreign 'advice', as MI5 had suspected all along. From the files passed on by the KGB, Captain Péter Szikla of Department II/3 surmised that the Soviets had another, better-placed operative inside the School. In his judgement, the sharing of the files was proof that his Russian counterparts had no objection to the idea of re-activating 'BONY'.¹⁴⁹ Characteristically, for the humble Hungarian secret service, even a discarded KGB spy seemed to be a good catch. He added revealingly, 'We could still engage her profitably, at least in our modest ways'.¹⁵⁰

'Aradi' continued to appear at the institute on the pretext of visiting the library, typically in the late afternoon to avoid bumping into Bolsover.¹⁵¹ He often had tea with Galton after work in the lounge of the Russell Hotel. He also paid visits to her cottage in Essex. They met repeatedly up to, and beyond, the Secretary's retirement. By May 1960 the Hungarians regarded Galton primarily as a useful 'social contact', rather than as a prospective recruit.¹⁵² However, it was only in March 1961 that they learnt the main reason why the Soviets had dropped her. In 1954 she had been spotted in the company of her Russian controller by British detectives. Naturally, this made her re-employment 'impracticable'.¹⁵³ Remarkably, it took the Soviets more than fifteen months to prevent an allied country's intelligence service from recruiting one of their own compromised informers. In any event, this fiasco was not the end, but just the beginning, of the planned penetration of the 'CENTER'.

'We have to treat him as our most precious asset': Lector Péter Egri

The first Hungarian agent planted in SSEES was the Lector Péter Egri. His arrival in London in September 1965 was due to the official Anglo-Hungarian cultural exchange programme. A Lecturer in English Literature at the University of Debrecen, he had been identified by intelligence officers as a suitable 'scholar type' and a lively socialite during

¹⁴⁹ ÁBTL, 3.2.4. K-575 2959-61, summary by Capt. P. Szikla, 25 April 1960.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ ÁBTL, 3.2.4. K-575 2959-61, 'Aradi' to 'Erdei', 10 October 1960.

¹⁵² ÁBTL, 3.2.4. K-575 2959-61, 'Alföldi' to 'Barna', 24 May 1960.

¹⁵³ ÁBTL, 3.2.4. K-575 2959-61, handwritten note by Lieut. Col. Kapitány, 9 March 1961.

a brief stay in England in 1963 funded by the British Council.¹⁵⁴ He returned to London a couple of years later (by then a Reader), ostensibly to teach Hungarian to undergraduates and complete a manuscript on Ernest Hemingway. His literary output, in actuality, expanded to include detailed handwritten accounts of his working life at SSEES for the Hungarian secret service, under the pen name 'Gyulai'. He was instructed by Section III/I-1-B to get in touch with 'Comrade Széplaki', the Scientific Attaché, every six to eight weeks.¹⁵⁵ In compliance with strict 'conspiratorial' rules, Egri was to draft his reports in the Embassy library, usually two to three days after his clandestine meetings with his handler.¹⁵⁶ Unsurprisingly, he was seen by MI5 watchers entering and leaving the mission at regular intervals. The Foreign Office issued a polite warning through diplomatic channels, yet the meetings carried on regardless. 'Széplaki' recorded:

I have built up excellent professional relations with 'Gyulai'. He is disciplined, precise and thorough. I keep drawing his attention to security measures whenever I can. He is not shy at asking for our help and guidance either. In short, it is a delight to work with such a secret operative.¹⁵⁷

The Head of the London Rezidentúra, 'Comrade Pusztai',¹⁵⁸ appended some cautionary words: 'Personal interaction with the agent should be less frequent; we have to treat him as our most precious asset.'¹⁵⁹ The Lector received a crash course in shaking off his tail and other basic tricks of the trade, which could be taught 'without striking fear into his heart'.¹⁶⁰ He was trained never to ring the mission, but to put a magazine or journal in the post instead. The date stamp on each envelope signalled a meeting two days later, at an agreed time and place.¹⁶¹

The initial workload of the secret operative was far from onerous: he had to attend drinks parties, befriend colleagues, profile his four

¹⁵⁴ ÁBTL, 3.2.5. O-8-103/1, information passed on to the London Rezidentúra by 'Hargitai', 28 October 1963.

¹⁵⁵ 'Széplaki' was the code name of Miklós Kőszegi, Third Secretary of the Hungarian Embassy in London.

¹⁵⁶ ÁBTL, 3.2.3. Mt-149/1, 'Széplaki' to 'Pusztai', 19 February 1966.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ The Head of the Rezidentúra in London from 1964 to 1968 was István Berényi (alias 'Pusztai'). His lowly diplomatic rank as Second Secretary of the Embassy served as cover for the intelligence officer's seniority.

¹⁵⁹ ÁBTL, 3.2.3. Mt-149/1, comments by 'Pusztai' on the handling of 'Gyulai', 19 February 1966.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

undergraduate students and subscribe to the *Slavonic and East European Review*.¹⁶² The annual subscription fee of two pounds was thought to be exorbitant by the Hungarian bureaucracy, so 'Gyulai' was originally ordered to try and get hold of the journal for free. Only when he failed to do so was he allowed to part with the requisite sum.¹⁶³

After his second debriefing, the Lector was set more challenging assignments: he had to write a comprehensive history of SSEES, along with an assessment of the administrative hierarchy, academic quality and 'real purpose' of the School. Additionally, if less exactly, he was requested to pen a few character sketches of staff.¹⁶⁴ Egri composed little vignettes of Bolsover, Cushing, Péter and others, whose lives he anatomized with precision and concision.¹⁶⁵ The Head of the Rezidentúra enumerated several further demands:

The agent should observe and cultivate all people in key positions, especially those who show sympathy towards Hungary and interest in Eastern European political developments. He should endeavour to forge close relations with colleagues. Such steps could be followed up by future overtures. When he comes back to Hungary, he could invite one of his English 'friends' of our choosing.¹⁶⁶

These instructions were based on wishful thinking rather than a realistic appraisal of the agent's possibilities. Subsequent to Galton's retirement in 1961, visiting Hungarian teachers had been hard pushed to find Communists or fellow-travellers at SSEES. Even in 1960 a student had said of the School, 'If we had a Communist round here, we'd pickle him in aspic'.¹⁶⁷ According to Egri's reports, most colleagues refused to be drawn on questions of politics. His case officer rightly suspected that this was not entirely due to the fabled 'English reserve'.¹⁶⁸ The Lector was invited to the home of his fellow dons, but he presumed this was 'purely to keep an eye

¹⁶² The four students profiled were Susan Marie Hargreaves, Edith Hohlbaum, Elisabeth A. Stewart and Michael Wharton.

¹⁶³ ÁBTL, 3.2.3. Mt-149/1, 'Sós' to 'Pusztai', 10 December 1965, comments by 'Pusztai' on the handling of 'Gyulai', 19 February 1966, and memorandum by 'Széplaki' on his meeting with 'Gyulai', 19 February 1966.

¹⁶⁴ ÁBTL, 3.2.3. Mt-149/1, 'Széplaki' to 'Pusztai', 6 December 1965.

¹⁶⁵ ÁBTL, 3.2.3. Mt-149/1, agent report by 'Gyulai' on SSEES staff, 2 September 1966.

¹⁶⁶ ÁBTL, 3.2.3. Mt-149/1, comments by 'Pusztai', 6 December 1965.

¹⁶⁷ Wigzell, 'Dorothy Galton' (para. 9 of 20).

¹⁶⁸ ÁBTL, 3.2.3. Mt-149/1, comments by Lieut. J. Oláh on the final report from 'Gyulai', 2 September 1966.

on him'.¹⁶⁹ It is indicative of the operative's political isolation that in March 1966 he was required to renew contact with Galton, whom he had met in Debrecen,¹⁷⁰ and progressively 'deepen' his bond with her.¹⁷¹ By then the pensioner was out of touch with SSEES, devoting her time to beekeeping in Norfolk.¹⁷² Nevertheless, 'Gyulai' ventured to tap into her knowledge of the School without divulging the true nature of his enquiries.¹⁷³

The First Directorate was impressed by the Lector's performance, and attempted to arrange the continuation of his contract for another year. Any such arrangement was thwarted by MI5. On returning from a summer holiday abroad, Egri and his wife were stopped in Dover and interrogated. Despite their vehement protests, they were denied entry to the United Kingdom. The Hungarian files also reveal that the academic had previously been approached by two secret servicemen who tried to turn him. Egri's case officer concluded that his cover had been blown by László Szabó, and took no responsibility for the consequences of the debacle:

We can confidently state that the mission of 'Gyulai' lived up to expectations. If he had not been barred from extending his stay, he could have become even more valuable to us. This was not to be. Still, we can and we will use the information he provided to help with the induction of our new candidate, assuming that the relevant section of the exchange agreement [which concerns the sending of lectors to the universities of London and Debrecen] remains in force.¹⁷⁴

Egri went back to Debrecen, where rumours of his expulsion did not prevent him from succeeding the acclaimed lexicographer László Ország as Head of the English Department in 1968.¹⁷⁵ The British Council representative at the Budapest Embassy sought to smooth over Egri's espionage case and the ensuing diplomatic row:

¹⁶⁹ ÁBTL, 3.2.3. Mt-149/1, 'Erdei' to 'Pusztai', 22 August 1966.

¹⁷⁰ In the early 1960s Galton taught English (without the British Council's endorsement) at Eötvös Loránd University and Debrecen University. TNA, BW 36/17, R. Bruce to B. Tripp, 19 December 1963; ÁBTL, 3.2.4. K-575 2959-61, M. Szeneci to I. Sinkovics, 3 July 1965; ÁBTL, 3.2.3. Mt-149/1, agent report by 'Gyulai' on his acquaintances, 11 February 1966.

¹⁷¹ ÁBTL, 3.2.3. Mt-149/1, 'Sós' to 'Pusztai', 14 March 1966.

¹⁷² Showler, 'Galton' (para. 4 of 5); Wigzell, 'Dorothy Galton' (para. 6 of 20).

¹⁷³ ÁBTL, 3.2.3. Mt-149/1, 'Sós' to 'Pusztai', 14 March 1966.

¹⁷⁴ ÁBTL, 3.2.3. Mt-149/1, assessment by Lieut. J. Oláh of the work of 'Gyulai', 2 September 1966.

¹⁷⁵ For a history of the English Department at Debrecen University, including details of Egri's career, see K. Zs. Virágos and I. Pálffy, *A debreceni angol tanszék története (1938–2014)*, Debrecen, 2014, pp. 71, 261–63.

It is to be hoped that some means can be found, in our own interests, of re-habilitating him in order to re-establish his contact with Britain and offset his potentially negative influence on his students of English.¹⁷⁶

The academic was directed by his former handler to lie low, and steer clear of British visitors, in Debrecen. Hungarian State Security dispensed with his services for the time being. Meanwhile, Egri's intended replacement, Béla Korponay, was judged by the selectors to be 'unreliable' and 'unsuited to operative work'.¹⁷⁷ István Pálffy, the man who eventually replaced him, was posted to London in September 1967.¹⁷⁸ He reported to the Rezidentúra under the code name 'Dr János Szabó'. Dispatched so hurriedly that he could not pause to be briefed in Budapest, Pálffy had been recommended to the London Resident as 'an informer from another branch' with a wide acquaintance in émigré literary circles.¹⁷⁹ The incoming Lector pretended not to know what had happened to his predecessor, and seemingly kept his nose to the grindstone. Yet, according to his final report, he was discreetly ticked off by Dr Cushing, as well as by Professor Ország back in Debrecen, for 'working too much for the Embassy'.¹⁸⁰

What did all this feverish intelligence activity amount to? The profiling of students, especially those set to join the Foreign Service, was highly prized by the First Directorate. The lectors made university contacts and offered recruitment tips, often to be passed on to the other Eastern European services. They attended meetings of expatriate organizations, testing the slowly changing political atmosphere. Their main role, though, was to court the Hungarian specialists, particularly the historian Dr László Péter. They were assessing his standing at SSEES, gauging his political sympathies and evaluating his attitude towards Hungary. Péter's 'light pink Oxford lefty' politics were dismissed as 'nondescript'; however, his 'patriotic' perspective on Hungarian history captured the attention of the recruiters.¹⁸¹ The Head of the Rezidentúra considered his personality

¹⁷⁶ TNA, BW 36/30, report by R. M. Auty for 1967–68, 10 May 1968.

¹⁷⁷ ÁBTL, 3.2.3. Mt-149/1, summary by Lieut. J. Oláh of his final meeting with 'Gyulai', 29 March 1967.

¹⁷⁸ István Pálffy was a colleague of Egri's from the English Department in Debrecen. He was co-author of the departmental history, Virágos and Pálffy, *A debreceni angol tanszék története*.

¹⁷⁹ ÁBTL, 3.2.5. O-8-002/9, Col. S. Rajnai to Col. L. Tóth, 25 September 1967, and 'Géza' to 'Pusztai', 27 September 1967.

¹⁸⁰ ÁBTL, 3.1.5. O-13624, digest of the final report by 'Dr János Szabó', 30 July 1968.

¹⁸¹ ÁBTL, 3.1.5. O-13624, agent report by 'Gábor Ugron', 22 December 1967, and digest of the final report by 'Dr János Szabó', 30 July 1968.

‘interesting’, sensing that he had not only extensive social and professional connections in Budapest, but a strong attachment to his country of origin.¹⁸² Emotional blackmail of homesick individuals was a trusty method practised against dissidents, and Péter was seen as easy prey. Some ten years after he left Hungary, he was preparing to return on a research trip, with the intention of visiting family and friends in the course of his stay. The First Directorate was determined to contrive a way to ensnare him on his homecoming.

‘He could be put to good use’: Historian László Péter

British historians were favoured targets of Hungarian Foreign Intelligence. The best-documented case is the ‘bungled attempt’ to recruit the young Martin Gilbert.¹⁸³ In the case of Péter, there were additional reasons why the secret service was keen to entrap him. When he fled Hungary in 1956, he was alleged to have taken with him a bundle of state papers and operative files. As he later recalled, he spent five days during the Revolution in the headquarters of the State Security Authority (ÁVH), on an assignment ‘to render safe the documents of the Interior Ministry’.¹⁸⁴ A group of engineering students were on the verge of incinerating a pile of papers, at which moment Péter arrived with three fellow archival historians and another friend in tow.¹⁸⁵ They systematically searched the premises, combing through multiple categories of intelligence files and recordings with a view to preserving them.

Péter continued sifting through the papers on his own until 3 November, when ‘unidentified people’ started to appear in the building, including a man ‘with his right hand in his pocket’. Péter promptly exited the Gresham Palace, where the sprawling ÁVH headquarters were partly housed, with a sheaf of documents under his overcoat.¹⁸⁶ Subsequently, a number of police reports suggested that the revolutionaries had made off with a truckload of material from the premises. The police investigations could only ascertain that two brown folders were missing.¹⁸⁷ A further six or seven dossiers had

¹⁸² ÁBTL, 3.2.3. Mt-149/1, ‘Sós’ to ‘Pusztai’ on the surveillance of László Péter by ‘Gyulai’, 14 March 1966.

¹⁸³ Ungváry, ‘England, Sir Martin Gilbert and Hungarian State Security’, p. 1.

¹⁸⁴ L. Péter, ‘My (Abbreviated) Career in the Interior Ministry’, in L. Péter and M. Rady (eds), *Resistance, Rebellion and Revolution in Hungary and Central Europe: Commemorating 1956*, London, 2008, pp. 321–40 (p. 321).

¹⁸⁵ ÁBTL, 3.1.5. O-13624, proposal by Lieut. L. Tóth for Directorate III/II to recruit László Péter, 24 April 1968; Péter, ‘My (Abbreviated) Career’, p. 323.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 321, 336–37.

¹⁸⁷ ÁBTL, 3.1.5. O-13624, agent reports by ‘Tábori’, 6 and 7 April 1966.

already been restored to the Interior Ministry by one of the three archival historians, János Varga.¹⁸⁸ There were reports, too, that Péter's mother had squirrelled away some documents, yet these could not be verified. An informer also claimed to have witnessed the historian carrying off tapes in his rucksack from the Ministry building. The disgruntled former colleague was hardly a reliable witness, though, as she was calling for the dissident scholar to be banned from setting foot on home soil ever again.¹⁸⁹



Photograph of László Péter, Historical Archives of the State Security Services, Budapest. © ÁBTL.

¹⁸⁸ ÁBTL, 3.1.5. O-13624, record by Capt. F. Szécsi of his meeting with László Benczédi, 13 September 1966.

¹⁸⁹ ÁBTL, 3.1.5. O-13624, information from Mrs K. Laczkovits cited in reports by Lieut. J. Oláh, 3 June 1966, and Capt. I. Könczöl, 8 August 1966.

Between 1966 and 1969 the British researcher entered Hungary five times.¹⁹⁰ This posed a dilemma for various branches of Hungarian State Security. The First Directorate wished to use Péter as a 'social contact', and ultimately to lure him into working for them.¹⁹¹ By contrast, the counter-intelligence officials of the Second Directorate planned to arrest and charge him for removing classified papers, prior to putting him on trial. They hoped to trace the missing documents, and catch the visitor receiving any packages from his 'accomplices', three of whom were on the radar of the secret police as prominent research fellows at the Historical Institute of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences.¹⁹²

The plan to try Péter on such a charge was shelved in August 1967, when the investigations took a new direction, due to a firm conviction formed by this date that the British academic had been sent to Hungary 'on a covert mission'.¹⁹³ From very early on, his scheduled archival work on nineteenth-century constitutional history was deemed to be largely a cover story, and Péter was classed as 'a suspected agent'.¹⁹⁴ An officer had confidently asserted in June 1966: 'He can be accused of demonstrably hostile activity'.¹⁹⁵ Still, one of the officer's superiors had been minded to give the accused the benefit of the doubt, leaving a question mark in the margin of the report. As Péter paid more visits to Hungary — two in 1966 (April–May, August–September), a third in 1967 (July–October), a fourth in 1968 (March–May) — his motives for doing so came under mounting suspicion. Yet the evidential basis for charging Péter with espionage was always lacking. In April 1968, after a couple of years of striving to make a case against him, his pursuers had to admit:

It is open to question whether HISTORIAN [Dr László Péter] is a spy. Undoubtedly, he reports on his travels, but that is normal practice in

¹⁹⁰ The number of visits László Péter made to Hungary during the 1960s is confirmed in the last file of an information dossier on him, code-named *TÖRTÉNÉSZ* ['HISTORIAN']. ÁBTL, 3.1.5. O-13624, summary by Dr L. Tóth, 11 November 1969. The dossier was opened on 22 November 1968 and closed on 14 April 1970.

¹⁹¹ See, for example, ÁBTL, 3.1.5. O-13624, report by Capt. F. Szécsi, 1 September 1966, which records that between April and August 1966 Directorate III/I studied László Péter with a view to recruiting him.

¹⁹² ÁBTL, 3.1.5. O-13624, proposal by Lieut. Col. S. Házi to arrest László Péter, 8 July 1966.

¹⁹³ ÁBTL, 3.1.5. O-13624, operational plan for the surveillance of László Péter, unsigned, 2 August 1967.

¹⁹⁴ ÁBTL, 3.1.5. O-13624, summary by Lieut. Col. T. Kovács for Department III/II-2, 4 June 1966.

¹⁹⁵ ÁBTL, 3.1.5. O-13624, report by Lieut. J. Oláh, 3 June 1966.

our institutions, too. There is no evidence that he is a clandestine agent; nonetheless, within the cultural sphere he could be put to good use without employing him or even telling him.¹⁹⁶

All along, the intended fate of the visitor was uncertain. Totally different scenarios were envisaged by different planners. From April 1966 the case was handled by the foreign intelligence branch, before being passed on to Section III/II-2-B (within the Second Directorate) a few months later, as part of 'offensive counter-intelligence operations' against SSEES.¹⁹⁷ In spite of the preparations for Péter's arrest and trial, the option of winning him over was preferred from the outset. There were no legal grounds for the British researcher's detention, and the softer approach offered an important operational bonus. By trailing the expatriate scholar in Hungary, the police could test the loyalty of his numerous historian friends who had remained there in the aftermath of 1956. They were all respected members of the cultural elite, several of whom belonged to the reformist wing of the political establishment. The contact observed between some of these senior historians and diplomatic staff at the British Embassy added another dimension to the domestic intelligence gathering.

The option of banning Péter from returning to the country was never ruled out, yet by letting him cross the borders repeatedly over three and a half years — he was permitted a fifth visit in 1969 (July–October) — the Kádár regime could demonstrate to the world its 'openness'. Accordingly, the authorities allowed him more than once to extend his visa, in order to gain his trust and lull him into a false sense of security.¹⁹⁸ They aimed to appeal to his left-wing sympathies and his patriotic sentiments in equal measure. In this they were encouraged by reports that the British guest, despite his 'dual identity' and split loyalty, was attached to his homeland and not averse to the idea of eventual repatriation.¹⁹⁹ As an agent report bluntly stated:

His reputation in Hungary and his academic connections here are key to his success in London. László Péter can exist and prosper as a Hungarian

¹⁹⁶ ÁBTL, 3.1.5. O-13624, report by Lieut. L. Tóth, 18 April 1968.

¹⁹⁷ See, for example, ÁBTL, 3.1.5. O-13624, report by Capt. F. Szécsi, 1 September 1966, and proposal by Lieut. L. Tóth for Directorate III/II to recruit László Péter, 24 April 1968.

¹⁹⁸ ÁBTL, 3.1.5. O-13624, proposal by Lieut. L. Tóth to recruit 'HISTORIAN', 13 August 1969.

¹⁹⁹ ÁBTL, 3.1.5. O-13624, reports by Capt. F. Szécsi, 19 October 1966, and Lieut. L. Tóth, 28 July 1967 and 18 April 1968.

historian *in England*, but never as an *English* historian. The frequent visits are vital for his research.²⁰⁰

Admittedly, contradictory elements were present in the operational design of comparable cases, especially those involving influential Hungarians abroad. As the files on the National Peasant Party politician Imre Kovács illustrate, plans to repatriate, discredit, arrest or recruit individuals from the émigré community were often studied and pursued in parallel.²⁰¹ Péter's case, by comparison, encompassed more than twenty pre-eminent intellectuals living in Hungary, and was integral to wider operations in both Budapest and London. The Second Directorate justified the targeting of the visitor on the following grounds:

Most of his friends are leading scholars, scientists and artists. His acquaintance with the cream of the intellectual elite gives him unlimited opportunities to explore the political, social and economic conditions in this country. He exhibits a rather keen interest in our ideological and cultural problems. Considering that Soviet State Security sees his university department as a training base for British operatives, we have every reason to check up on him.²⁰²

In consequence, the British academic was at one point being investigated by all three directorates, including the notorious III/III, the secret police. When, in the summer of 1966, the directorates were instructed to delegate an officer each to coordinate their separate operations, a service chief scribbled in the margin of the document: 'Too many cooks [...]'.²⁰³

Since 6 April the profilers of III/I had maintained a dossier on Péter, assigning the code name *TAGUET* to their target. On 27 July they arranged to hand the files to their counterparts at III/II, who renamed the hunted

²⁰⁰ ÁBTL, 3.1.5. O-13624, Department III/I-1 summary of an agent report on László Péter's visit in 1968, 2 November 1968.

²⁰¹ I. Papp, 'A Magyar emigráció és az állambiztonság', in Gyarmati and Palasik, *A Nagy Testvér szatócsboltja*, pp. 263–77 (p. 264).

²⁰² ÁBTL, 3.1.5. O-13624, authorization by Lieut. L. Tóth and Maj. M. Péter, Head of Section III/II-2-B, to open an information dossier on László Péter, code-named 'HISTORIAN', incorporating material gathered since 1966, 5 October 1968. The Romanian Securitate characterized SSEES in a similar vein as 'an agency of British espionage'. Deletant, *In Search of Romania*, p. 185.

²⁰³ ÁBTL, 3.1.5. O-13624, Lieut. Col. S. Házi on the operative work relating to László Péter, 8 July 1966. 'Too many cooks [spoil the broth]' is the English equivalent of the Hungarian proverb *Sok bába [közt elvész a gyerek]* used here, for which the literal translation would be 'Too many midwives [lose the child]'.

man, and the dossier, *TÖRTÉNÉSZ* ('HISTORIAN').²⁰⁴ Meanwhile, the police had been digging deep into Péter's past in Hungary. For example, they had unearthed the story of a nominal first marriage. According to the records, the gallant historian had stepped in to marry a jilted bride, Mária Kollár, thereby helping her to acquire a flat offered to newly-weds by the state. They later divorced, having never lived together. All the same, the woman still bore Péter's name in the 1960s; the investigators hoped to use her, as well as her sister, Katalin Kollár (an ex-girlfriend of his), to tighten the screws on *TAGUET*.²⁰⁵ Undercover operatives and informants were also profiling his English wife, and shadowing his mother and sister who lived in Piliscsaba near Budapest.²⁰⁶ However, the main attempt to lure Péter into the net of the intelligence services was via the blackmail and recruitment of one of his closest friends and colleagues, László Benczédi.

A historian of early modern Hungary, Benczédi was one of the people who had entered the abandoned ÁVH headquarters with Péter on 30 October 1956. By the 1960s he was a Senior Researcher at the Historical Institute of the Hungarian Academy, and a candidate member of the party. Therefore, he was regarded by State Security as 'approachable'.²⁰⁷ He could be intimidated, initially by accusing him of removing sensitive material, then by questioning him about his acquaintances in the West.

During an interview in September 1966, as it dawned on the cornered Benczédi why he was being interrogated in such an intimidating manner, he pleaded nervously, 'Please leave László alone!'²⁰⁸ By the end of the interview, he had volunteered his services. A police captain, Ferenc Szécsi, minuted:

Benczédi could not hide his anxiety. [...] He is clearly fond of Péter, in spite of their political differences. Nevertheless, he is well aware of the danger this poses to him. [...] In our assessment, his proposition was carefully weighed. He is serious about persuading his friend to work for us.²⁰⁹

²⁰⁴ ÁBTL, 3.1.5. O-13624, authorization by I. Molnár, Head of Section III/I-1-B, to transfer the files on *TAGUET* to Section III/II-2-B, 27 July 1966, and by Lieut. L. Tóth and Maj. M. Péter to open an information dossier on László Péter, code-named 'HISTORIAN', 5 October 1968.

²⁰⁵ Information about László Péter's marriage to Mária Kollár was initially provided by his former landlady, Mrs J. Oszwald, and was subsequently confirmed by informers. ÁBTL, 3.1.5. O-13624, reports by Maj. M. Nemez, 6 April 1966, and Lieut. J. Oláh, 21 April and 3 June 1966.

²⁰⁶ ÁBTL, 3.1.5. O-13624, agent report by 'Gábor Ugron', 11 May 1967.

²⁰⁷ ÁBTL, 3.1.5. O-13624, report by Lieut. J. Oláh, 13 May 1966.

²⁰⁸ ÁBTL, 3.1.5. O-13624, report by Capt. F. Szécsi, 13 September 1966.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

In subsequent weekly meetings, the informer ‘calmed down and lost his inhibitions’.²¹⁰ He performed his tasks exactly as prescribed by his case officer:

In the course of a friendly chat, he must quiz HISTORIAN about his job at SSEES. Feigning basic human interest, he should enquire about the Hungarian exile community and spontaneously ask about his wife’s family. He should, in addition, check the visitor’s travel itinerary and track his movements in Hungary.²¹¹

Benczédi supplied detailed accounts of Péter’s busy social life in Budapest, as requested. Yet tracing every step of the British traveller proved to be too much even for the ‘professionals’. In the spring of 1966, on his first visit to Hungary since 1956, Péter had managed to shake off his tail three times. ‘He is very fast-moving [...]. He keeps changing trams and buses, often at the last minute, or jumping into taxis’, recorded an embarrassed police officer.²¹²

Of course, Péter could have been in no doubt that he was being followed wherever he went. As he told several of his acquaintances, he knew that his phone was being tapped, his letters were being opened and his belongings searched.²¹³ At Ferihegy Airport, as he was departing from Hungary on 30 April, he was detained by customs officials who confiscated all twenty-four volumes on Hungarian constitutional history he had bought in second-hand bookshops. The police expected to find stolen documents. When they failed to do so, they branded the law books an illegal purchase. In a characteristically loud outburst of righteous indignation, Péter called the men who had made him miss his plane ‘semi-literate half-wits’.²¹⁴ The books were eventually returned to the British educator, in the teeth of dogmatic objections from the censor:

In my judgement, these volumes should be impounded because of the legal ideas they enshrine. They glorify the nation’s oppressors, such as [István]

²¹⁰ ÁBTL, 3.1.5. O-13624, report by Capt. F. Szécsi, 22 September 1966.

²¹¹ ÁBTL, 3.1.5. O-13624, report by Capt. F. Szécsi, 13 September 1966.

²¹² ÁBTL, 3.1.5. O-13624, report by Lieut. Col. J. Földesi, 9 May 1966.

²¹³ During both visits he made to Hungary in 1966, and during visits made in later years, László Péter and all his Hungarian contacts were put under surveillance. See, for example, ÁBTL, 3.1.5. O-13624, reports by Lieut. Col. I. Vincze on the technical scrutiny (‘K’ sanctions) of Péter and his acquaintances for sixty days, 29 July 1966, and Capt. F. Szécsi on the operative details of searching Péter’s hotel room, opening his letters, tapping his phone and following his every move, 19 October 1966.

²¹⁴ ÁBTL, 3.1.5. O-13624, memorandum by Dr J. Somogyvári, 7 August 1966.

Werbőczy; hence, they are inappropriate sources for teaching Hungarian history abroad.²¹⁵

The Communists denounced Werbőczy's seminal law book as an unsuitable educational resource for foreigners, despite the fact that in the centuries 'since 1517, the *Tripartitum* has been published more than any other secular work in Hungarian history'.²¹⁶ Be that as it may, Péter's fine-grained research on constitutional matters was perceived, even by some of his specialist colleagues in Hungary, as rather 'quaint'.²¹⁷ By contrast, his writing on nationalism was then extremely topical, to the extent that it garnered a positive review in the party-controlled periodical *Társadalmi Szemle*.²¹⁸ In 1967 he was pleasantly surprised to receive an official invitation to a conference in Budapest, marking the centenary of the Hungarian Historical Society.

At this point, a historical controversy was raging amongst Hungarian scholars about such constructs as 'bourgeois nationalism' and 'socialist patriotism'.²¹⁹ The Kádár regime was searching for a new source of legitimacy, and historians hymning 'the true love of the people and the homeland' seemed to provide the key.²²⁰ Benczédi devoted a whole book to the subject, and tried in vain to convert his British friend to his views.²²¹ Their heated exchange was analysed by the secret service from a purely personal angle. What the case officer was looking for was evidence of loyalty from the informer and vulnerability from the target:

The stance of HISTORIAN in the patriotism debate is highly relevant for us, as he is bound to re-examine his place in the world and redefine his attitude towards this country. From his reaction we can gauge the strength of his emotional attachment to Hungary.²²²

²¹⁵ Ibid.

²¹⁶ M. Rady, *Customary Law in Hungary: Courts, Texts and the Tripartitum*, Oxford, 2015, p. 20.

²¹⁷ ÁBTL, 3.1.5. O-13624, memorandum by Lieut. F. Benkő, 12 September 1968.

²¹⁸ Gy. Balázs, 'Két disszidens kétféle tanulmányáról', *Társadalmi Szemle*, 36, 1, 1967, pp. 98–104 (p. 103).

²¹⁹ J. Mark and P. Apor, 'Socialism Goes Global: Decolonization and the Making of a New Culture of Internationalism in Socialist Hungary, 1956–1989', *Journal of Modern History*, 87, 4, 2015, pp. 852–91 (p. 863).

²²⁰ M. Pap, "A Nép és a szülőföld igaz szeretete": A szocialista hazafiság fogalma a Kádár-rendszerben', *Politikatudományi Szemle*, 72, 1, 2013, pp. 68–83 (p. 72).

²²¹ L. Benczédi and D. Csatári (eds), *Szocialista hazafiság: szocialista történetsszemlélet*, Budapest, 1967.

²²² ÁBTL, 3.1.5. O-13624, report by Lieut. L. Tóth, 18 April 1968.

As a result of their scholarly disagreement, the historians' friendship cooled a little. Benczédi was ordered to carry on cultivating Péter nonetheless. By May 1968 the Second Directorate was closing in on 'HISTORIAN', now daring to approach him directly. Under the convenient cover of the National Central Office for Controlling Foreigners (KEOKH), Péter's case officer Lieutenant László Tóth, using the false name 'Dr Tordai', politely summoned the British visitor for a face-to-face meeting.

The objective of the 'amicable' two-hour dialogue was to build 'good relations, sympathy and trust', in anticipation that 'HISTORIAN' would offer his services, voluntarily, to the Kádár regime.²²³ Dr Péter, however, imagined an entirely different role for himself. He mistakenly assumed that his interlocutor would be satisfied by his proposal to act as an academic proponent of Hungary in London. According to one of the few intelligible transcribed fragments of the recorded conversation, he was hoping to obtain some official endorsement for his plans.

P. Let me ask you a blunt question.

X. Go ahead.

P. How do you regard me? You may see me differently, which I fully accept. But I have set myself an important task. [...]

X. What is that?

P. Well, I teach Hungarian affairs in London. When a historical work is published in Budapest, I make sure it is reviewed in British journals. I help to make this country part of the curriculum. I foster professional links [...]. Can I count on your cooperation?²²⁴

The State Security officer conducting the interview, in line with his superior intently listening next door, pretended to be interested in Péter's proposal. Yet, for them, his patriotic offer was first and foremost a sign of loyalty and likely compliance. Consequently, the cat-and-mouse game between the recruiters and their target continued even after the visitor had gone back to London.

'Too much obfuscation' no longer appeared necessary; the spy catchers decided that during Péter's next visit they should be more forthcoming. In their estimation, 'HISTORIAN' could scarcely be in any doubt about the ultimate purpose of the authorities in courting him.²²⁵ The case officer noted:

²²³ ÁBTL, 3.1.5. O-13624, report by Lieut. L. Tóth, 6 May 1968.

²²⁴ ÁBTL, 3.1.5. O-13624, transcript of a recording, 3 May 1968, and summary of the conversation by Lieut. L. Tóth, 6 May 1968.

²²⁵ ÁBTL, 3.1.5. O-13624, proposal by Lieut. L. Tóth to recruit 'HISTORIAN', 13 August 1969.

Notwithstanding his explosive style and short temper, he is very unlikely to object. His entry into this country is far too precious to him for professional, social and family reasons. Any mention of his activities in 1956 may also unsettle him. We may be able to turn this to our advantage.²²⁶

Still, the recruiter had badly misjudged Péter's character. When he approached 'HISTORIAN' again in the autumn of 1969, the conversation grew less amicable. Péter took exception to being interrogated about his personal relations with members of the British Foreign Service in Budapest. Riled by the interview, he paid visits to influential historian friends, notably Iván T. Berend and György Ránki, from whom he sought protection against the police state. The official enquiry into the abortive recruitment bid concluded:

Seemingly, it did not even occur to him that we wanted to win his cooperation. It is difficult to credit that he completely misunderstood us. In all likelihood, he expected us to spell out our offer. Alternatively, he may have presumed that he is protected from us and that we would not attempt to recruit him. In any event, he must now realize that we are in charge.²²⁷

In the margin of the document someone penned:

He is not as naive as he would have us believe. He is, though, petulant and talkative, and thus utterly unsuited to engage in covert work for us. He has already told seven people about our approach, including one of our informants.²²⁸

The British tourist was expelled from Hungary in October 1969, despite a representation by the First Secretary of the British Embassy, and a polite reminder about the negative impact of such a measure on bilateral cultural negotiations.²²⁹ In March 1970 Péter's name was blacklisted.²³⁰ Thanks to his colleagues and friends at the Hungarian Academy, he was able to return to Hungary before the end of the Cold War. The 'HISTORIAN' dossier was formally closed in April 1970, but Péter's files were in use by Hungarian

²²⁶ ÁBTL, 3.1.5. O-13624, report by Lieut. L. Tóth, 24 April 1968.

²²⁷ ÁBTL, 3.1.5. O-13624, official assessment of the last report by L. Benczédi and the attempt to recruit László Péter, 3 October 1969.

²²⁸ Ibid.

²²⁹ ÁBTL, 3.1.5. O-13624, report by B. Mészáros, 22 October 1969.

²³⁰ ÁBTL, 3.1.5. O-13624, authorization by Lieut. Col. A. Kovács to blacklist László Péter, 16 March 1970.

Intelligence as late as 1984, when Margaret Thatcher visited Budapest. On being transferred to Hungary's Office of National Security in 1997, the documents were swiftly reclassified as 'state secret' until 2003.

As the editor of his last publication wryly observed, 'László Péter had the knack of turning personal confrontations into incidents of world-historical significance'.²³¹ His encounters with the spies and the secret police of the Kádár regime coincided with the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia and major changes within Hungary. Péter found himself in the midst of a power struggle between reformers — who numbered some of his close acquaintances amongst them — and the Stalinist old guard. As a representative of SSEES with a valuable social and academic network in Budapest, he was inevitably and invidiously caught up in Hungary's hidden war against Britain.

Conclusion: Back to base

The 'long 1960s', which stretched from 1962 to 1974, are usually portrayed in Hungarian historiography as a period of slow, steady normalization in the country's domestic and foreign affairs. According to the historian János M. Rainer, however, what really set Hungary apart from the other satellite states was the regime's determination to improve the country's image in the West.²³² Why then did the Hungarian security services so aggressively target British cultural and educational institutions?

There is no proof that they received direct instructions from Moscow in this regard. As the case of Dorothy Galton exemplifies, the Soviets were less than obliging in providing operational support or sharing timely information. More than once they put a stop to Hungarian initiatives. Bearing in mind the Kádár regime needed almost a decade to begin to shed its pariah status in the West, the economic and political risks it ran in trying to infiltrate such establishments as SSEES and the British Council, or the BBC Hungarian Service, were considerable. Yet the obstacles and intermittent setbacks only increased the recklessness of the planners. Whilst staying strictly 'within the confines of subordination' to Moscow, Hungary's spymasters were desperately striving to impress their Warsaw Pact allies. In this sense, the archival material presented in this article fits in well with recent findings about the competitiveness of the East German and Czechoslovak secret services.²³³

²³¹ L. Péter, *Hungary's Long Nineteenth Century: Constitutional and Democratic Traditions in a European Perspective: Collected Studies*, ed. M. Lojkó, Boston, MA and Leiden, 2012, p. xiii.

²³² J. M. Rainer, *'Hatvanas évek' Magyarországon*, Budapest, 2004, p. 19.

²³³ V. Černý and P. Suchý, 'Spies and Peaceniks: Czechoslovak Intelligence Attempts to

With the easing of travel restrictions, the expansion of cultural activities and the opening of diplomatic channels came new espionage opportunities. Exchange students and researchers, who moved far more freely in the Western capitals than diplomats, enjoyed access to 'strategically important' seats of learning in the United States, the United Kingdom and West Germany.²³⁴ Having failed to establish a suitable base in London, in the 1970s the First Directorate 'hatched a plan to fund a Hungarian position at an American university, where the holder of the chair would be a clandestine operative of the counterintelligence service tasked with identifying possible recruits'.²³⁵ In Britain the Hungarian lecturers at SSEES kept on reporting to the Rezydentúra, although the archival evidence becomes significantly more patchy for the last two decades of the East-West conflict.

What concrete advantages did the Kádár regime hope to gain by penetrating university centres? Was the offensive driven by ideology or by pragmatism? Clearly, travelling academics furnished the Hungarian secret service with vital contacts and information. They were also sources of 'counter-propaganda' against the West, for what it was worth.²³⁶ Whether they cooperated with the authorities willingly, or merely fulfilled the minimum reporting requirements, the cultural travellers helped to bolster the controlling power of the party state over Hungarian intellectual life. The price of academic mobility was compliance, and the predominant psychological motives for compliance were fear and insecurity.²³⁷ The intensive monitoring of the scholars who visited London was undoubtedly prompted by concerns about their loyalty, whereas the aggressive counter-espionage operations against SSEES and the British Council were arguably fuelled by a deep sense of unease about English cultural reach in Hungary. The files on László Péter demonstrate how the intelligence services combined his case with the scrutiny of several distinguished public figures who had ties to Britain or the British Embassy. These investigative documents expose not only the depth of disquiet about Western influence, but the degree of infighting between the reform-oriented Communist elite and the Stalinist remnants in the Interior Ministry who still had the upper hand.

Diplomatic relations between Britain and Hungary grew more cordial under the first Labour administration of Harold Wilson, despite a brief

Thwart NATO's Dual-Track Decision', *Cold War History*, 20, 3, 2020, pp. 273–91 (p. 275).

²³⁴ Somlai, 'Kiutazása érdekünkben áll', p. 241.

²³⁵ Borhi, *Dealing with Dictators*, pp. 8–9.

²³⁶ Somlai, 'Ösztöndíjjal nyugatra', p. 300.

²³⁷ Somlai, 'Kiutazása érdekünkben áll', pp. 241–42.

'freeze' from late 1965 to early 1966 following the defection of László Szabó.²³⁸ Yet the Hungarian obsession with cultural infiltration and political subversion remained undiminished. The secret service imposed on the Hungarian Foreign Ministry a ban on recognizing the British Council, which took years to be lifted, even after Thatcher's breakthrough visit of 1984.²³⁹

British government officials had good reason to suspect that the Communist propaganda about 'peaceful coexistence' was a sham.²⁴⁰ Kádár was accomplished at selling his country's benign image and his own reformist credentials. British observers noted with interest an address he made to the Central Committee in November 1967, in which he hinted at a liberalization of 'scientific and cultural life' in the near future, as a complement to the introduction of economic reforms.²⁴¹ The intelligence files examined here from the same period, however, show the Hungarian regime in a much darker light. The relatively non-belligerent rhetoric and the persistent courtship of Western creditors belied the hostile intent and the continued militancy in Hungary's covert conduct of the cultural Cold War.

²³⁸ TNA, BW 36/27, P. J. Goulden to T. H. Williams, 10 November 1967.

²³⁹ G. Bátonyi, "'Creative Ferment in Eastern Europe': Thatcher's Diplomacy and the Transformation of Hungary in the Mid-1980s", *Diplomacy and Statecraft*, 29, 4, 2018, pp. 638–66 (p. 658).

²⁴⁰ G. Hughes, *Harold Wilson's Cold War: The Labour Government and East-West Politics, 1964–1970*, Rochester, NY and Woodbridge, 2015, p. 165.

²⁴¹ TNA, BW 36/27, memorandum by G. E. Millard on cultural reforms, 8 January 1968.