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## The State Security and János Kádár Immediately after the Hungarian Revolution

**Węgierska służba bezpieczeństwa państwowego i János Kádár po rewolucji węgierskiej 1956 r.**

**Abstract:** In order to gain some public support, after 4 November 1956, János Kádár attempted to replace the state security personnel who had been in office before the revolution and to rearrange the organisation, an action which he deemed suitable for satisfying an important demand of the population. At the same time, his goal was to create a new state security organization that would be strictly under the control and supervision of the party leadership, with no independent means of power. However, Kádár was at a disadvantage in several respects when it came to state security. The most important of these disadvantages seemed to be that General Ivan Serov, who remained in Hungary continuously from the outbreak of the 1956 revolution until the end of November or early December, stood firmly and unequivocally behind the Hungarian state security officers who had been in office before 23 October, while Kádár was uncertain in his estimation of Moscow's intents. At the beginning of 1957, the standoff brought somewhat satisfactory results for both sides. The security staff retained its position as prior to 23 October, but in a new organization created by the Kádár government. The personnel was legitimized, but its legitimacy did not come from the past; rather it came from the new power established on 4 November 1956. The results of this study suggest that the KGB had a decisive say on the satellite state's security policy and at the same time an influence on the policy of the Soviet party leadership.

**Keywords:** János Kádár, Ferenc Münnich, Imre Nagy, Ivan Serov, 1956 Hungarian Revolution, Hungarian state security, KGB

**Streszczenie:** Aby zdobyć poparcie społeczne, po 4 listopada 1956 r. János Kádár podjął próbę reorganizacji służby bezpieczeństwa państwowego i zastąpienia tych funkcjonariuszy, którzy pełnili swoje funkcje przed rewolucją. Uznał to za odpowiednie rozwiązanie pozwalające zaspokoić żądania społeczeństwa. Jego celem było jednak stworzenie nowej

organizacji bezpieczeństwa państwowego, która byłaby ściśle kontrolowana i nadzorowana przez kierownictwo partii. Sytuacja Kádára pod wieloma względami była niekorzystna. Największą przeszkodą wydawało się to, że gen. Iwan Sierow, który od wybuchu rewolucji w 1956 r. do końca listopada lub początku grudnia stale przebywał na Węgrzech, jednoznacznie popierał węgierskich funkcjonariuszy bezpieczeństwa państwowego sprawujących swoje funkcje przed 23 października, Kádár zaś nie był pewien intencji Moskwy. Na początku 1957 r. wypracowano kompromis po części satysfakcjonujący obie strony. Funkcjonariusze bezpieczeństwa zachowali swoje stanowiska sprzed 23 października, ale już w ramach nowej organizacji utworzonej przez rząd Kádára. Personel został zalegalizowany, jego legitymizacja nie wynikała jednak z przeszłości sprzed 1956 r., lecz wiązała się z decyzją nowej władzy z 4 listopada 1956 r. Wydaje się, że KGB miało decydujący wpływ na politykę bezpieczeństwa państw satelickich, a jednocześnie wpływało na politykę sowieckiego kierownictwa partyjnego.

**Słowa kluczowe:** János Kádár, Ferenc Münnich, Imre Nagy, Iwan Sierow, rewolucja węgierska 1956 r., węgierskie służby bezpieczeństwa, KGB

The suppression of armed resistance had not even been completed when on 7 November 1956 János Kádár, the new head of the Hungarian government, arrived in Budapest in a Soviet armored car and the very same day issued a decree abolishing the state security<sup>1</sup> organs: “§ 1 [...] in some places in the countryside, the state security organs are being restored. All such measures are prohibited and illegal, since the Hungarian Revolutionary Worker-Peasant Government has put an end to these organs. [...] § 3 State security organs which have been set up in spite of the Government’s prohibition should be eliminated immediately.”<sup>2</sup>

The implementation of the decree was confirmed and regulated by a separate order issued by the second member of the government: “Comrade Münnich, Minister of [Armed Forces and] Public Security, sent an order to the district [interior – author’s remark] organs pointing out that state security organs had been set up in the countryside despite the government’s prohibition. He therefore instructed all the staff of the state security organs to stop all such activities and go home.”<sup>3</sup> Two months

<sup>1</sup> The name and legal status of the state security organization changed several times after its establishment in early 1945. At the height of Stalinist terror in Hungary, between 1950 and 1953, it was called the State Security Authority (ÁVH), but its members were commonly referred to as *ávós*, based on an earlier name (ÁVO, State Security Department).

<sup>2</sup> T. Pintér, “A megszüntetve megőrzött Államvédelmi Hatóság,” in *Államvédelem a Rákosi-korszakban: tanulmányok és dokumentumok a politikai rendőrség második világháború utáni tevékenységéről*, ed. Gy. Gyarmati. Budapest, Debrecen: Történeti Hiv., Alföldi Ny., 2000, p. 214.

<sup>3</sup> Serov’s telegraph from Budapest to the Central Committee (hereinafter: CC) of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (hereinafter: CPSU), 9 November 1956, *Rubicon* 8 (1994), p. 3.

later, at a meeting of the Provisional Administrative (later Political) Committee of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party (MSZMP) on 14 January 1957, the head of the National Police Headquarters announced: "The comrades working in the political [investigative – author's remark] department are all former state security officers and staff."<sup>4</sup>

There are several apparent contradictions within and between these texts. The ministerial decree issued on behalf of the government prohibited the re-establishment of the state security organs, but there is no trace of the legislation dissolving them. The decree referred to the rural services only, while the members of the state security in Budapest were already activated on 4 November. The decree stated that the security organs were dissolved, while the associated order only provided commands for the cessation of work and the sending home of the personnel. The decree and the order, apart from the contradictions in detail, are consistent in that both are directed against the functioning of the (provincial) state security organization and/or its staff, whereas on 14 January 1957 the National Police Chief informed the party leadership of the complete retention of the state security staff.

The story, which runs from 4 November 1956 to 14 January 1957, has three Hungarian protagonists: János Kádár, Ferenc Münnich, and Imre Nagy.<sup>5</sup>

There are several parallels in their political careers that are particularly significant in terms of the issue under discussion. First and foremost, all three were interior ministers for varying lengths of time, which meant that – to the extent that an interior minister was able – they were relatively familiar with the state security affairs and their place and role in a Soviet-style dictatorship. At the time of the revolution, all three were members of the party's top leadership (Kádár was first secretary of the party from 25 October), and of the revolutionary government. Imre Nagy was president of the Council of Ministers from 24 October, Ferenc Münnich was Minister of the Interior from 27 October,<sup>6</sup> and János Kádár was a member of the smaller cabinet created within the government on 30 October 1956. Münnich was not included in the leadership of the new Communist party, the MSZMP, formed during the revolution, and on 3 November, he was dismissed from his position as Minister of the Interior. Kádár was still *de jure* a member of the government on that day, but in fact, after secretly leaving the country with Ferenc Münnich on the night of 1 November and flying to Moscow, he severed all ties with it.

<sup>4</sup> *A Magyar Szocialista Munkáspárt ideiglenes vezető testületeinek jegyzőkönyvei*, vol. 1: 1956. november 11. – 1957. január 14., ed. S. Balogh, V.K. Némethné, and L. Sipos, Budapest: Intera, p. 305.

<sup>5</sup> J.M. Rainer, *Nagy Imre. Politikai életrajz. Első kötet, 1896–1953*, Budapest: 1956-os Int., 1996. J.M. Rainer, *Nagy Imre, Politikai életrajz*, vol. 2: 1953–1958, Budapest: 1956-os Int., 1999; T. Huszár, *Kádár János politikai életrajza*, vol. 1: 1912–1956, Budapest: Szabad Tér, Kossuth, 2001; T. Huszár, *Kádár János politikai életrajza*, vol. 2: 1957. november – 1989. június. Budapest: Szabad Tér, Kossuth, 2003.

<sup>6</sup> Münnich was appointed minister after the party leadership rejected both of Nagy's candidates.

During his first term as prime minister, Imre Nagy sought to democratize the system and rid it of the symptoms that were most unbearable to the population: the Kremlin's all-encompassing authority, widespread poverty, and unbridled terror. In 1955, he was removed from office partly because the reforms he had initiated went far beyond what Moscow considered necessary. Kádár and Münnich did not belong to the circle that tried to maintain the Stalinist system even after Stalin's death, and this was more or less common knowledge. At a meeting of the party's highest body, Kádár criticized the failure to purge and reform the state security, while Münnich, at the funeral of László Rajk on 6 October 1956 (the most well-known victim of the Hungarian show trials,) called the state security officers "sadistic criminals who had crawled out of the swamp of personality cults into the sunlight." After the revolution, he initially became a reluctant, then their ardent and supportive minister.

After recognizing in October 1956 that the main thrust of the revolution was fundamentally in line with his political program, Nagy was able to represent its demands with conviction; he became prime minister of the revolution, and remained until his death committed to a new democratic and socialist system offering a livable world. In contrast, Ferenc Münnich wanted to hinder or at least moderate the changes. Of the main personalities in this story, he was the one most closely aligned with the Kremlin, having been brought into the government on 27 October as a brake on the changes. His goal was to preserve the Soviet model, even at the expense of changes if necessary. János Kádár did not want a revolution, nor did he support revolutionary changes to the system either as party leader or as a member of the government, but – according to the limited sources available – he agreed to certain, not insignificant corrections. Instead of total and open domination by the Kremlin, he wanted a form of dependence that allowed the subjugated country some space for maneuver, where economic management took into account the need to raise the standard of living of the population, and where the machinery of terror did not persecute the entire society, but only those considered enemies.

It can hardly be considered a coincidence that Moscow chose two politicians to lead the restoration of order after 4 November who not only held the extremely important position of interior minister, but were also police chiefs for varying lengths of time. Kádár was deputy chief of the Budapest police in early 1945, while Münnich was the commander of it from 1946 to 1949.

The Soviet participants of the events are well known. During the October fights, the Soviet troops were led by the commanders of the forces stationed in Hungary, who were then during the November offensive replaced by front-line generals: Marshal Ivan Konev, commander-in-chief of the Soviet land troops and the Warsaw Pact's Unified Armed Forces, and Marshal Georgy Zhukov, then Soviet Minister of Defense and a member of the CPSU Party Presidium. Their deployment to Hungary shows how threatening the Kremlin saw the situation to be and how quickly it wanted to finish off the "rebellion." In the early morning of 24 October, two envoys of the

Soviet party leadership, Anastas Mikoyan and Mikhail Suslov, arrived in Budapest, tasked with providing credible information to the Kremlin and controlling the measures taken on the spot. The envoys remained until 30 October, when they returned to Moscow after the Hungarian party leadership and government had agreed to a political solution to the crisis. Mikoyan, who was the most committed to accepting and supporting the political solution, did not return in November, when Georgiy Malenkov came accompanied by Suslov and Averkiy Aristov to control the clean-up.

There was only one senior Soviet leader who was in Budapest for almost the entire duration of the revolution, from 24 October to the end of November or the beginning of December – the head of the KGB, General Ivan Serov. Although he undoubtedly did not arrive alone, there are few traces of his team. According to the author of a diary of uncertain authenticity attributed to Serov, he arrived alone in the Hungarian capital, but according to the editor of the volume he was accompanied by a “team of generals,” “the heads of the main departments and directorates of the KGB.”<sup>7</sup> That he did not arrive alone is confirmed by the course of events that has widely known Polish equivalents from 1945. On 3 November, negotiations began in the Hungarian Parliament on the withdrawal of Soviet troops. The second round was held, according to the customary rules of diplomacy, at the counterpart premises, in this case at a Soviet military base in a settlement near Budapest. Hungary was represented by two ministers (including the Minister of Defense) and the Commanders-in-Chief of the Army. “At midnight, while toasts were being drunk, Serov burst into the room, brandishing a Mauser pistol and followed by a group of KGB officers, arrested the entire Hungarian delegation, and ordered each to be locked in a separate cell.”<sup>8</sup> (Moreover, Serov personally detained the leader of the Budapest police, one of the commanders of the Revolutionary National Guard. Serov immediately told the leader that he would have him hanged on the highest tree in Budapest.<sup>9</sup>) Serov was not personally involved in the abduction of Nagy and his associates, only in the preparation of the operation. But it was his subordinates who arrested the prime minister, after he left the Yugoslav embassy, as well as several prominent Hungarian communists, together with their families, including children.

According to a monograph on the history of the KGB, “suspecting an imperialist plot, Serov ordered about a score of KGB illegals living in the West under assumed identities and nationalities to travel to Hungary to report on the situation and, if necessary, stage provocations to help justify military intervention.”<sup>10</sup> There were participants of the revolution who played a dubious role and had an obscure background, and for whom it cannot be ruled out that they were involved as KGB

<sup>7</sup> I. Szerov, *A bőrönd titkai: A KGB első elnökének titkos naplói és feljegyzései*, Pilisvörösvár: Időjel K., 2023, p. 518.

<sup>8</sup> Ch. Andrew, O. Gordievsky, *KGB. The Inside Story*, New York: Harper Collins Publishers, p. 430.

<sup>9</sup> S. Kopácsi, *Életfogytiglan*, [n.p.], p. 195. Instead of execution Kopácsi got life imprisonment.

<sup>10</sup> Ch. Andrew, O. Gordievsky, *KGB. The Inside Story*, p. 429.

agents, but the available sources do not allow this claim to be stated beyond doubt. The second part of the quote from Andrew and Gordievsky's book can be considered an error. There was a time when the bloodiest event of the revolution, the siege of the Budapest party headquarters on Köztársaság square, was considered by some to be a provocation aimed at preparing for a second Soviet military intervention, but this has been disproved by subsequent research. If ever, KGB agents only came into action after the second Soviet military offensive that began on 4 November, when they provoked various forms of resistance and overt organizations in order to allow Communist forces to achieve 'spectacular' successes in the defense of the state by detecting and neutralizing them.

Alongside the Soviet troops stationed in Hungary, five armed organizations were responsible for securing the public order and the country's defense. The army under the Ministry of Defense had mainly military tasks but plans were drawn up for its deployment to suppress any larger anti-regime movements. Its effectiveness was, however, considerably reduced by the fact that the rank-and-file troops were not trained in this way, nor were they properly equipped. The police under the Ministry of the Interior was primarily responsible for the maintenance of public order, but played a much greater role than the army in the operation and maintenance of the dictatorship, and were used as auxiliaries in major political campaigns (e.g. displacements, formation of cooperatives, etc.). The border guard, also under the Ministry of the Interior, performed police duties in the settlements along the frontier, in addition to border control and protection. There were no police in these areas. The border guard was a state security organ, its officers held the rank of state security officer. The internal police force, formally subordinated to the Ministry of the Interior, enjoyed great independence. It was responsible for securing sites of military, political or economic importance (military-industrial plants, arms depots, etc.) and its task was to suppress any anti-regime mass movement.

Finally, there was the most important body (of key importance for the maintenance of the dictatorship), the state security, whose members were known colloquially as "ávós" (regardless of the official name of the organization, which changed several times). This body was responsible for civilian and military counter-espionage, intelligence gathering, and all forms of fighting internal enemies. In 1953, after Stalin's death, following the Soviet model, the organisation was incorporated into the Ministry of the Interior, but it retained its autonomy, and its subordinates their rank and privileges. Since the subordination of the state security service to the Ministry was decided by secret decree and there was no open information about this, one of the main demands of the revolution was the dissolution of the ÁVH, which *de jure* had not existed for three years.

The pre-revolutionary ferment had affected all the armed forces, and ensuring their military preparedness was rendered all the more difficult by long-standing antagonisms between the various services, which were exacerbated by the dismiss-

als in 1956. Since one of the main protagonists of the study is the state security, it is necessary to indicate in a few sentences the state of this organisation at the outbreak of the revolution.

After Stalin's death in 1953, the state security personnel suffered several blows. Its members experienced as a loss the fact that Mátyás Rákosi had lost his exclusive power, and another political personality, Nagy, had taken his place in the leadership. From 1945, the state security organization was subordinated to and cooperated with Rákosi, while its staff never had confidence in Nagy, even mistrusting him. They perceived the integration of the state security into the Ministry of the Interior as a threat, but they managed to avert the danger and maintained their organizational autonomy. (In fact, it was not the Interior Ministry which incorporated the state security organization, but the latter which devoured the former.) Even in connection with the 'Zionist affair,' the leader of the state security unit, who had been in office from 1945, was arrested and, unlike the Moscow doctors, remained in prison after Stalin's death, because he was made the main culprit in the show-trials and of the crimes committed against leaders of the workers' movement. (The other victims were still unimportant by then.) They watched with concern that several Communist leaders convicted in made-up trials regained their freedom from 1954 onwards. Some of them were returned to the Ministry of the Interior and Kádár to the top party leadership. Kádár spoke out against the crimes of the state security officers that he had experienced personally. On 31 August 1956, "he sharply criticized the work of the state security bodies [...] for continuing to employ high-ranking fellow-workers who had been guilty of abusing their authority and using sadistic methods during investigations."<sup>11</sup> Kádár's speech was heavily revised in the minutes of the Political Committee (PB):

"The Political Committee concludes that after 1953, the PB made the right decrees for restoring the Socialist legitimacy in the organizations of the state security bodies within the Ministry of the Interior [...] there is substantial improvement in the work of the state security, but further measures are still needed to ensure that the work of the state security bodies meets the requirements under all circumstances and that the PB as a whole and its individual members should have absolute confidence in the work of the state security bodies."<sup>12</sup>

The PB not only took a stand, but planned to send "party cadres with party loyalty and leadership ability" to key positions into the state security, although it did not want to rush things, planning a year for implementation of decisions.

<sup>11</sup> Record of Conversation between Yuri Andropov and Ernő Gerő, 2 October 1956, in *Hiányzó lapok 1956 történetéből: dokumentumok a volt SZKP KB levéltárából*, ed. V. Szereda and A. Sztikalin. Budapest: Zenit Kv., Zrínyi, 1993, p. 79. *Nota bene* both Münnich and Kádár called the ÁVH-men sadistic (criminals) before the revolution and then co-worked with them after the suppression of the revolution.

<sup>12</sup> [https://adatbazisokonline.mnl.gov.hu/documents/mszmp\\_mdp/HU\\_MNL\\_OL\\_M-KS\\_276\\_53\\_301.pdf](https://adatbazisokonline.mnl.gov.hu/documents/mszmp_mdp/HU_MNL_OL_M-KS_276_53_301.pdf) (downloaded 17 May 2024.)



Even during Nagy's first term as prime minister, the rehabilitation of the convicted communists and the review of the proceedings against them began, but the state security succeeded in fending off this attack as well. Since the same investigation department and, frequently the same investigators who had conducted the primary investigations at the time were entrusted with the review of the cases, they could be sure that there would be no criminal consequences. That this was not quite the case was due to the speech made by Khrushchev at the 20th Congress of the CPSU. As a result, the review of the most important show-trial in Hungary, the trial of László Rajk and his associates, and the naming of those responsible became unavoidable. Rákosi did not accept personal responsibility, but sought to shift it to another member of the party's top leadership and to the head of state security and the investigators. In this way, he was able to prolong his stay in power for only a short time, while the detention of several senior state security officers before the revolution became inevitable. The effectiveness of the party's control as a result weakened. "Comrade Ishchenko, our chief advisor at the Ministry of the Interior, informed me that the unhealthy attitude is also increasingly manifest among staff members of state security institutions."<sup>13</sup>

Finally, it is necessary to outline the historical context in which the occurrences presented in this study took place. The 1956 revolution had four main stages. In the first period, from 23 to 28 October, the authorities fought an armed and political struggle with the revolution. The Soviet troops provided the backbone of the armed forces, while delegates from the Soviet party leadership controlled the Hungarian government. On 28 October, the Hungarian political leadership – the party and the government, Kádár and Nagy – declared a ceasefire with Soviet approval and undertook activities to meet demands that did not threaten revolution but, on the contrary, seemed to ensure the preservation, democratization and reform of the socialist system, namely by means of cooperation with the local organs of people's power (revolutionary councils), the creation of a people's guard known as the National Guard, and recognition of the control of factories and workplaces by revolutionary councils. This phase is thus characterized by a gradual cessation of fighting, with cooperation replacing confrontation. The third phase began on 4 November with the Soviet military offensive and the announcement of the formation of the Kádár government, lasting until 12 December, and saw the government and the new party leadership, adjusted to Soviet expectations, once again engaged in armed and political struggle against what was increasingly being called a counter-revolution rather than a rebellion, while the country resisted. Initially, the nation did so with arms. This time the Soviets did not fight the armed battle alongside with the Hungarian

<sup>13</sup> Record of Conversation between Yuriy Andropov and Ernő Gerő, 12th of October, 1956, in *The 1956 Hungarian Revolution: A history in documents*, ed. C. Békés, M. Byrne, and J. Rainer. Budapest, New York: Central European University Press, 2002, p. 182.



Army, but independently, using only state security officers in an auxiliary role (mainly reconnaissance).

In this phase, Kádár was in many ways in a much more disadvantaged position than Nagy until 4 November. Nagy was wanted as prime minister by the participants of the demonstration of 23 October, Kádár only by the Soviet party leadership. He had no domestic support, especially in the early days. As a result, if he disagreed with the Soviet delegates who controlled him, he was able to voice his dissent with much less weight than Nagy. Last but not least, the Soviet delegation lacked Mikoyan, who was the most aware of the conditions in Hungary and the only one who was able – by Soviet standards – to take into account the real situation when making decisions. And the country continued to resist after the fall of the armed struggle, protesting the occupation with a general strike, but even in December the resistance was still present, mainly against the return of state security officers. Regional workers' councils were formed on the basis of the factory workers' councils, the most important of which, the Budapest Central Workers' Council, was recognized as the central organ of the revolution by the student and intellectual organizations, by the political parties, and the vast majority of workers' councils in the country. Meanwhile, Nagy and his political followers held out at the Yugoslav embassy until 22 November, questioning the legitimacy of the Kádár government by their very existence. During the first half of this phase, Kádár had no party, no armed forces nor executive apparatus of any kind at his disposal. His only support was the Soviet party leadership and the Soviet armed forces. By early December, however, he had managed to gain the upper hand. The terror of the Soviet-backed internal police force had suppressed the resistance, and internment and martial law had crushed it. The reorganised Communist party (MSZMP), which had been formed during the revolution and then given a new direction by Kádár, had local and national leadership, albeit a small one.

The last, fourth phase of the revolution, from 12 December 1956 to 15 March 1957, was characterized by a one-sided struggle of power against the defeated nation that could no longer resist. The government outlawed and prohibited the revolutionary organizations, and an increasing number of their leaders, or those who were perceived to be their leaders, were arrested or interned. Moreover, the martial courts set up on 12 December went on to produce death sentences. Recent research points out some state security provocations which had previously appeared to be the last, desperate outbursts of resistance of the overt organizations, ended resulting in many leaders and members being executed. The revolution ended in mid-March 1957 with the Soviet party leadership confirming Kádár in his position and state security preventing the last action of the revolution, a demonstration or possibly an uprising on the anniversary of the 1848 Hungarian Revolution. It did so all the easier because it itself was behind the plan.

It is important to make this clear so that it should be manifest: the occurrences discussed began when the nation was still resisting Soviet troops and the restoration of

Soviet-type dictatorship. This occurred in a combat situation, when it was necessary to clarify the confusion surrounding the existence or non-existence of state security and to reconcile the conflicting positions related to the organisation. The above-mentioned occurrences happened during a war in which the state security officers played an important role alongside the Soviet troops. The confusion surrounding the state security dated back to the time of the revolution. On 28 October 1956, prime minister Nagy, with the agreement of the emissaries of the Soviet party presidium, announced that the government would immediately organize a new armed force to restore law and order, and that once order had been restored, a new unified police would be established and the former state security organization disbanded. This was confirmed on the same evening by the Minister of the Interior, Münnich, at a staff meeting in the Ministry, making it clear to the rank and file that Nagy – always viewed with suspicion by the state security officers – was not announcing a separate path, but was making public the position of the government and the party. According to Serov's report, "after this meeting, the morale of the [state security] staff deteriorated considerably. Some have left their jobs and have not checked in since."<sup>14</sup> The next day, the radio announced more: "The Minister of the Interior [...] has abolished all special police forces with special authority. He has also abolished the State Security Authority [sic!], because such an organization will not be needed in our democratic system. There are no longer any units on the streets of the capital pertaining to the state security."<sup>15</sup>

There is an important difference between the announcements made by the Prime Minister and the Minister of the Interior on the radio within twenty-four hours. Nagy spoke of the dissolution of the state security as a plan for the future, an intention, while Münnich announced it as a *fait accompli* – despite the fact that no decision or order had been issued to dissolve the organization. There is no trace of this in the records of the revolutionary government or in the minutes of the trials that followed 1956. The official dissolution of the state security was therefore not carried out; the subordinates were not deprived of their identity cards, weapons or other official equipment, and no inventory was made of the equipment in their premises or of the documents they had produced. It is still unknown whether Münnich's announcement on 29 October was an accidental mistake or deliberate disinformation. Nor can it be ruled out that he was talking about a process that had only just begun as complete, since the provision of police identity cards and uniforms to the members of the state security had already begun on 27 October.<sup>16</sup> Therefore the announcement could have been a façade for the covert protection of the state security.

Despite the fact that on the afternoon of 29 October the Minister of the Interior announced on the radio that the state security had been abolished, the next morn-

<sup>14</sup> Serov's report to Mikoyan and Suslov, 29 October 1956, in *Hiányzó lapok 1956 történetéből*, p. 123.

<sup>15</sup> L. Varga, *A forradalom hangja*, Budapest: Századvég, Nyilvánosság Klub, 1989, p. 188.

<sup>16</sup> Serov's report to Mikoyan, 28 October 1956, in *Hiányzó lapok 1956 történetéből*, p. 121.

ing most of the personnel went to work, and then, as if coordinated, later in the day everyone left their posts and went home, those near the border to Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia or Romania, and others to the Soviet troops. They did so at roughly at the same time, without any specific reason for their departure being apparent. Given the fact that in Budapest several central departments went over to the Soviets as units (some of them in a closed military formation) and returned with them on 4 November, it is reasonable to assume that the state security did not disintegrate on 30 October, as Hungarian historiography has long believed, but that the Soviets withdrew its personnel at the same time, giving the Hungarian government the opportunity to resolve the situation politically.<sup>17</sup> Apart from the simultaneous evacuation of state security objects, many other indications strengthen this concept. I consider the fact that on 30 October not only the state security troops but also the Soviets left Budapest as one such premise. Without Soviet military assistance, the state security officers did not want to remain in the capital, especially as by 30 October the insurgents were well on the way to being incorporated into the new police force, the National Guard, and the state security did not trust the army and police who were negotiating with the rebels. Apparently, this was the reason the state security withdrew with the Soviets. It should be noted that retreat is not necessarily dispersal or disintegration; it can be an organised military operation. Accordingly, what happened on 30 October was nothing more than the withdrawal of the state security from the open fight on the front line; it was supposedly given new tasks (reconnaissance for the Soviets), but also continued security work involving the interrogation of captured insurgents at Soviet military bases in the immediate vicinity of Budapest.<sup>18</sup> The withdrawal of state security is also referred to in Serov's report:

"In connection with the situation in the Ministry of the Interior, I intend to meet with Comrade Münnich and clarify his opinion on the continued presence of our staff here (with a view to the dissolution of the state security organizations) and the further coordination of our work."<sup>19</sup>

It is possible that Serov, after and despite the announcement of the dissolution of the state security, wanted to discuss with the Hungarian Interior Minister the further coordination of the work of the Soviet and the Hungarian state security. Although there is no information on whether or not the meeting took place, the passage discussed above does offer an explanation for the one-off dispersal of the state security

<sup>17</sup> The assumption that the Kremlin did not let Hungary go, but gave a relatively narrow window of opportunity for a political solution, is evidenced by Serov's diary entry. "Then [on the evening of 27 October] Imre Nagy stood up [and], with a sickly face, said: 'Comrade Mikoyan, we understand that the situation is very complicated, but give us a few days, we will sort everything out.'" (I. Szerov, *A bőrönd titkai*, p. 523.) There is no sign in any other Soviet source that they, either explicitly or implicitly, tied their approval of a political solution to a deadline.

<sup>18</sup> A. Szakolczai, "The Internal Affairs of the Reprisals Following the Hungarian Revolution of 1956," *NEB Yearbook* 2 (2016–2017), p. 226.

<sup>19</sup> Serov's report to Mikoyan and Suslov, 29 October 1956, in *Hiányzó lapok 1956 történetéből*, p. 124.

staff on the following day. (That Münnich had covert contacts with the Soviets during the revolution can be firmly established from the way he took Kádár from the Parliament to the Soviet embassy on 1 November.) Finally, there is one more circumstance which shows that after 28 October the state security did not disintegrate, but was withdrawn from Budapest by the Soviets; however, prior to presenting this premise, some things need to be clarified.

In the absence of available sources, there is no unified position among scholars as to whether the state security was dissolved, was close to dissolution, or was simply withdrawn to the rear after 28 October. An expert in Hungarian-Soviet relations stated that after that day the Hungarian state security “fell apart as an organ.”<sup>20</sup> However, this is contradicted by the fact that on 5 November, one hundred and fifty officers occupied the building of the Ministry of the Interior, and it is unlikely that such a large and strong force was organized in a single day. The author of a study on the Investigation Department of the state security was more cautious: “some continuity in the history of the political police [the state security] can be demonstrated, even during the revolutionary days. The organization may have come very close to a state of complete disintegration after 30 October, but this did not happen in the end.”<sup>21</sup> According to another work published in the same volume, “it is not really a question of formation, but of reorganization, of resuming the work that was forced to be interrupted in the last days of October.”<sup>22</sup> My position is that “the activities of the state security bodies did not resume on 4 November, but had been continuous in terms of their staff and close cooperation with the Soviet troops;” “They intended to carry on from where they had left off.”<sup>23</sup>

On 4 November, security officers returned with the Soviet troops and, in addition to supporting the occupation, immediately resumed their own work where they had left off, interrogating captured insurgents in the regained old compounds and, if necessary, recruiting them as agents. They immediately took over the central building of the Ministry of the Interior and detained those rebels whom they found there. In the provincial capitals, the practice was generally the same. There are few primary sources on their activities at this time. The majority of the sources are narrative, written at a time when Kádár had more or less stabilized his control over the state security, and the authors of the accounts adapted their narratives to this situation. They uniformly emphasized that the state security officers worked independently of everything and everyone. They searched, detained and interrogated ‘counter-revo-

<sup>20</sup> M. Baráth, “A politikai rendőrség újjászervezése 1956 után,” *Történelmi Szemle* 4 (2008), p. 536, [https://tti.abtk.hu/images/kiadvanyok/folyoiratok/tsz/tsz2008-4/535-563\\_barath.pdf](https://tti.abtk.hu/images/kiadvanyok/folyoiratok/tsz/tsz2008-4/535-563_barath.pdf) (accessed 6 November 2025).

<sup>21</sup> I. Papp, “A BM II/8. (Vizsgálati) Osztály,” in *A megtorlás szervezete: a politikai rendőrség újjászervezése és működése, 1956–1962: intézménytörténeti tanulmányok*, ed. G. Cseh and I. Okváth. Budapest: Állambiztonsági Szolgálatok Történeti Levéltára, L'Harmattan, 2013, p. 219.

<sup>22</sup> T. Takács, “A BM II/5. (Belsőreakció-elhárító) Osztály,” in *A megtorlás szervezete*, p. 126.

<sup>23</sup> A. Szakolczai, “The Internal Affairs,” p. 227.

lutionaries' under illegal or semi-illegal circumstances.<sup>24</sup> (There are signs that they received help from some leaders of the party and the government, but in 1956 they had not yet openly undertaken cooperation with them<sup>25</sup>). However, given the armed struggle in Budapest, and the fact that the city (like other large cities in Hungary at the time) was under Soviet military administration, this could not in any way imply independence from the Soviets, since without their permission no one could carry weapons, without which it would have been impossible to carry out their actions. There are several indications in the sources that they regained control of their objects with "Soviet protection" or "closely cooperated" with the Soviets.<sup>26</sup> This meant that, while Kádár was waiting a hundred kilometers from Budapest to come to the capital, the state security was already in full swing fighting the 'counter-revolution' on the Soviet side. In light of further developments, it is also significant that Münnich, who was in charge of the armed forces (Interior Ministry and Ministry of Defense), arrived in Budapest several days before Kádár and started to organize an armed force from among police and army officers. In other words, while the party's and the government's first man was rusting away in a small town, the minister in charge of the armed forces, which was particularly important in a combat situation, was already active in Budapest. Kádár's departure absence obviously influenced the power struggles of the first weeks.

Kádár had to rebuild the Soviet-type dictatorship from the scratch from 7 November 1956, when he arrived guarded by Soviet tanks at the Parliament, which he did not dare or could leave until the end of the month. The party, which had once accounted for ten percent of the population, had disintegrated. Those who claimed to be communists were Rákosists or followed Nagy. Kádár, who declared a two-front struggle but had not clearly defined his position, was left with only uncertain remnants at his disposal. The central and local institutions of executive power, as well as the army and the police, were under the direction, or at least the influence, of revolutionary councils. Kádár had only one certain (or rather, more or less certain) source of support, the Soviet party leadership and the Soviet armed forces. For until the spring of 1957, he was in a state of uncertain support from the Soviet party presidium. There is no evidence for this fact, but it cannot be ruled out that Kádár knew that Münnich had been in fact Moscow's first choice for the head of the Hungarian dictatorship to be rebuilt after the revolution. What he did know was that Münnich, who had been ambassador in Moscow for two years, had important personal contacts in the Soviet party leadership, while Kádár neither spoke or understood Russian. That Münnich was not only a partner, but also a rival who threatened his personal power, was clearly demonstrated by the concentration of power in his

<sup>24</sup> M. Baráth, "A politikai rendőrség," p. 538.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 537.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., pp. 537–538.

hands; he was not only the head of the armed forces and public security in the government, but also the second-in-command as a deputy prime minister.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, Münnich was not the only person with whom the Kremlin could replace Kádár if he was ineffective. Rákosi was in Moscow, as were many leaders of the defunct communist party, dissolved during the revolution (among them ministers from former governments, including two ex-prime ministers). Rákosi tried to convene a joint meeting of Hungarian party leaders in Moscow, which could be seen as an attempt to revive the old communist party, and bombarded Khrushchev with letters criticizing the new Hungarian leadership.<sup>28</sup> Other party leaders, who had distanced themselves from Rákosi, attacked Kádár's actions, indicating that they were ready to do the job better than he.<sup>29</sup> And then there was the state security under Soviet tutelage, which even before the revolution was not just an executive instrument of the dictatorship, but more or less its shaper.

In this situation, Kádár had two options for restoring order. The first one would be a heavy-handed policy: to crush all forms of resistance with brutal methods. This was presumably absent from his personality, which the Soviets repeatedly called soft, but it was also a politically dangerous path. Extensive use of Soviet armed force would have left him totally at the mercy of Moscow, even though Kádár had expressed his wish at the meeting of the Soviet party presidium that his government should not be a puppet.<sup>30</sup> On the other hand, Kádár knew that one of the main reasons for the revolution was open and total Soviet rule, and that its restoration (perhaps to an even greater extent than before) would make post-revolution consolidation impossible and prolong the danger of a new uprising. Moreover, a heavy-handed policy would have played into the hand of the state security, threatening to turn the purge into uncontrollable violence, to maintain the state security as a political force independent of the party leadership, and to pave the way for Rákosi's return, since the state security's commitment to the latter was obvious. According to his biographer, even in 1961 Kádár feared that the old-time members of the state security would form a Rákosist platform against him and his policies.<sup>31</sup>

The second option seemed more promising: to embrace some revolutionary demands and/or achievements of the revolutionary period, which could be implemented in the post-4 November situation, and thus create a social and political basis on which it would be possible to restore the party's exclusive power. From this stance, there were five important demands and/or achievements, some of which, if implemented, could lend a hand to consolidation after the restoration of order.

<sup>27</sup> Münnich headed the "top ministry, unique in the socialist camp of the time, with enormous, concentrated, armed power." T. Pintér, "A megszüntetve megőrzött Államvédelmi Hatóság," p. 180.

<sup>28</sup> T. Huszár, *Kádár János politikai életrajza*, vol. 2, p. 6; *Hiányzó lapok 1956 történetéből*, pp. 196–215.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 191–195.

<sup>30</sup> *The 1956 Hungarian Revolution*, p. 357.

<sup>31</sup> T. Huszár, *Kádár János politikai életrajza*, vol. 2, p. 91.



Kádár adamantly rejected two: the withdrawal of Soviet troops and the restoration of the Nagy government to power. He saw the Soviet troops – quite rightly – as the mainstay of communist power, and he knew that the Soviets would not allow Nagy to head the government, but he obviously did not want to relinquish power either. He did not, however, rule out retaining two other important achievements of the revolution: the multiparty system and the preservation of the revolutionary councils (mainly workers' councils). In this respect, he had two conditions: that the peasant parties left in operation should not attempt to restrict the communist party's autocracy, and that the revolutionary (and workers') councils should play a limited role under strict party control.

In this regard, the most important issue was the future of the state security. The abolition of the former state security was one of the main achievements of the revolution, and the prohibition of its restoration was one of the most common demands. Even a month after the suppression of the armed resistance, the open appearance of state security officers was still sparking new clashes in several parts of the country, thus preventing Kádár from achieving his main task of restoring order. There were two institutions whose opposition to the state security Kádár had to take particular account of, the workers' councils and the police. The stance of the workers' councils was of paramount importance for the legitimacy of the workers' movement as a basis for the political power which claimed to be the government of the workers (and the peasants allied to them). Recognizing this, Kádár held talks with delegations from the workers' councils (until early December 1956). And the police, responsible for maintaining public order, protested in every possible way against the reactivation of the state security officers by including (or hiding) them in the police, fearing, not without reason, that this would bring upon them the general hatred of these councils. Kádár therefore had a reason to prevent the reorganization or continued operation of the former state security.

It was a demand he supported not only for tactical reasons, but because he agreed with it for a number of reasons, and saw it as beneficial to his own power. It was the only possible means of visibly distancing his nascent regime from that of Rákosi. On the other hand, a constant element of Kádár's policy was to ensure the unquestioned supremacy of the communist party (subordinated of course to the Soviet party), and from this point of view he did not agree with the continuation of the old state security, whose autonomy and independence he had experienced as Minister of the Interior. And as a former prisoner, he felt a resentment which, even years later, led him to cry out vehemently: 'I was the subject of their occupation,' he said at an expanded police meeting at the Ministry of the Interior in December 1961, in an unmistakable reference to the fact that the state security had reduced those in its hands to subhuman beings.<sup>32</sup> At the same meeting, he spoke out against

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 89.



the *ávós* (Chekist) mentality which placed itself before and above the Party (and, it should be added, above the law) and which had as one of its main characteristics an adamant belief in the omnipotence of violence.<sup>33</sup>

And perhaps most importantly, Kádár was aware of the disadvantage in time and legitimacy which he was burdened with vis-à-vis the state security at the beginning of November 1956 (and for some time afterwards). He was obviously unaware of the dangerous statements made about him at the meeting of the Soviet party presidium on 28 October,<sup>34</sup> but he knew what he had done; he had voted for Hungary's withdrawal from the Warsaw Pact and cooperated in the dissolution of the Communist Party (by then already in tatters), thereby falling into the mortal sin of liquidating the party for the second time since 1943. In doing so, from the point of view of the state security, Kádár betrayed not only the Hungarian working class but also the international workers' movement, while they (especially in their post-4 November legends) stood their ground in the struggle until treachery and betrayal knocked the weapon out of their hands. (It should be noted that, especially in the countryside, there were state security officers who tried to integrate into the revolutionary order, but the mass anger against the organization did not allow this.) Last but not least, Kádár's opposition to the state security in early November 1956 was reinforced by the knowledge that while some officers of the state security had direct Soviet contacts, he, a non-speaker of the language, was at a disadvantage in this respect as well. Even in 1961, according to his biographer, "fears were still at work, explained by the extensive KGB connections of some state security officers [...]."<sup>35</sup>

With all this in the background the government decided to take action against the state security, and at the cabinet meeting on 7 November it made a decision to ban the reorganization of the rural state security, stating that only a minimum number of its members would be recruited to the police.<sup>36</sup> The decree was issued by Münnich on behalf of the government on the very same day. However, there are two obvious confusions about it.<sup>37</sup> One is the claim that 'the Hungarian Revolutionary Worker-Peasant Government has abolished these organs'. For there is no trace of such a measure, not only because the Presidential Council, exercising the powers of the head of state, only absolved Nagy's government five days later, on 12 November, so that the Kádár government could only then take the oath and act as a government, but also because the government did not issue any decree dissolving the state security before 7 November.<sup>38</sup> The decree therefore introduced a prohibition on the basis of

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 86.

<sup>34</sup> "Khrushchev: Kádár is leaning toward holding negotiations with the centers of resistance;" "Bulganin: Kádár kept lurching," *The 1956 Hungarian Revolution*, pp. 262, 264.

<sup>35</sup> T. Huszár, *Kádár János politikai életrajza*, vol. 2, p. 89.

<sup>36</sup> T. Pintér, "A megszüntetve megőrzött Államvédelmi Hatóság," p. 213.

<sup>37</sup> Beyond constitutional questions such as whether a member of the government has the right to issue a government decree.

<sup>38</sup> This also applies to the Nagy government.

a piece of legislation that never existed. On the other hand, it is hardly likely that the government was aware of the reorganization of the state security in the countryside and did not know that a unit of several hundred officers was operating in the immediate vicinity, in the building of the Ministry of the Interior. If the decree – which was sent to the rural communes together with the ministerial order on its implementation – did only deal with the rural state security units, it looks most likely that they only dared to act in the countryside, but did not undertake confrontation with General Serov in the capital.

Even if they tried to avoid it, they failed. The very next day, General Serov called Münnich to account for the action, claiming that the search for and arrest of counter-revolutionaries was an urgent task, carried out by Hungarian state security officers alongside Soviet forces.<sup>39</sup> Münnich did not accept any personal or ministerial responsibility, but excused himself by saying that he had acted on the orders and instructions of the government. It was at this point that Kádár intervened, who, unlike Münnich, not only defended the decree, but also objected to the actions of the Soviet armed forces on several issues, which was certainly unexpected behavior from a person put in power by the Soviets.<sup>40</sup> He complained that the Soviets were detaining not only the leaders of the ‘counter-revolution’ but also ordinary participants, while the government had promised that ‘those who lay down their arms and cease resistance will not be punished.’<sup>41</sup> He pointed out that the arrests were an obstacle to consolidation because workers were striking in protest against them. However, Kádár also criticized the fact that ‘counter-revolutionaries’ were being arrested by “former members of the state security services, disbanded by the government, alongside the Soviets. It is unfavourable to us in front of the people that the employees of the state security services are involved in arrests in Hungary. You should take into account the fact that in our country the mood of the masses is significant. The Soviet comrades and our state security service personnel may provoke the indignation of the masses by arrests.”<sup>42</sup>

If Serov’s report accurately reflects the course of the discussion, Kádár persisted in his objections even after the KGB chairman had swept aside his statements and stressed that “the associates of the state security in Hungary are currently doing useful work in rooting out counter-revolutionary rebels.”<sup>43</sup> Kádár raised the ante, and criticized not only the restoration and activities of the state security in the provinces, but also those in the center.

<sup>39</sup> Serov’s telegraph to the CC of the CPSU, 9 November 1956, *Rubicon* 8 (1994), p. 4.

<sup>40</sup> According to his biographer, in contrast to Serov, Kádár “sought the most politically acceptable solutions.” T. Huszár, *Kádár János politikai életrajza*, vol. 2, p. 7.

<sup>41</sup> Serov’s telegraph to the CC of the CPSU, 9 November 1956, *Rubicon* 8 (1994), p. 3.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3. Obviously, Serov did not take Kádár’s words literally, but it is still a good indication of the confusion surrounding the legal situation of the ÁVH, regarding the way Kádár referred to this three times in quick succession. First: ‘state security services, disbanded by the government’. Then, without any adjectives, as ‘state security services,’ and finally as ‘our state security service personnel’.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

“Comrade Kádár went on to say that an unhealthy situation had developed in the [building of the] Ministry of the Interior (Budapest), where many state security comrades were concentrated, because among the staff of the organs were persons who had worked in the organs under Rákosi and played a negative role. He therefore believes that these staff should be immediately withdrawn and sent to other jobs. In addition, he considers it worthwhile to dissolve the leadership, as its members are dishonest people.”<sup>44</sup>

Serov reacted harshly: he seemed to have excluded Kádár from the further discussion, since his name is not mentioned in the report, while Münnich’s is mentioned three times. He gave him instructions (literally “I expressed the wish”) to set up a people’s police and an immediately operational political police (presumably within the police), specifying also which departments the latter should consist of and that the majority of the staff should have covert status. “Comrade Münnich said he would sign such a decree tomorrow.”<sup>45</sup> There is no trace of any such decree, but according to the sources, on 8 November, the day of the meeting with Serov, the government-appointed head of the political police (the state security) took over the leadership.

He would have taken over, because the veteran of the Spanish Civil War, who served as a political officer in the Soviet Army during World War II (and for three years afterwards), was initially not allowed to enter the building of the Ministry of the Interior by the state security officers, who once inside, sabotaged his orders, not carrying them out. This shows that the state security took up the gauntlet and did not allow the party leader, twice the party’s liquidator, who had wavered during the revolution, to dispel the organization or subordinate it to his own man. The state security justified its stance with the not unfounded but distorted story that they had been the only body that did not falter during the ‘counterrevolution,’ and consistently repelled those attacks that blamed them for not having given timely warning of the conspiracy against the people’s democracy. In the theoretical dispute, Kádár blamed the state security officers for the show-trials having pushed decent communist cadres down a path that led to treason, and support for the ‘counterrevolution.’

In the early period of the conflict, the position of the state security seemed to be more favorable, and this appeared even more dangerous for Kádár due to the fact that Hungarian party leaders who had left for Moscow during the revolution immediately sided with the former, i.e. against Kádár:

“The manhunt against state security personnel and organs continues. [...] These comrades are burning with the desire to fight the counterrevolution, but they are not being used properly, on the contrary, they are being stigmatized and thus put at the mercy of the anti-people elements. While a significant number of these comrades

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

are being removed from the armed forces and shamed, the Hungarian government bodies are not taking any serious action against the counterrevolutionary plexus.”<sup>46</sup>

The shift of relations between Kádár and the state security was greatly influenced by the difference in Soviet support of the two sides. General Serov and his KGB officers and subordinates in Hungary firmly supported the (Hungarian) state security. Serov repeatedly spoke very favourably of that service. It therefore had the clear confidence and support of a member of the Soviet power structure who was present. In contrast, Kádár must have seen that his support in Moscow was uncertain. Had he been unsuccessful, he could always have been replaced by Münnich or any other of the Hungarian party leaders who had fled to Moscow on 29 October and were waiting for the opportunity to pounce. The fact that Khrushchev did not send Mikoyan back to Hungary in November must have been a suggestion of direction for Kádár. Mikoyan was the one man who among Soviet party leaders knew the country best and who was most willing to accept and support the maintenance of the regime through reforms. Kádár must have seen that the state security needed him less than he needed them. The state security officers received sufficient legitimacy from Serov and the Chekist tradition upholding that fighting the ‘enemy’ was not a task but a duty. Kádár, on the other hand, needed the Soviet armed forces (and Hungarian state security cooperating with them). He needed Soviet help to fend off various challenges in November and December 1956: to prevent the first attempt to form the Budapest workers’ council, to remove Nagy and his associates from the country, or to prevent the demonstration commemorating the second Soviet invasion from turning into an uprising. No other armed forces were available at home, since there were still total mistrust of the army and police at the end of November. At a meeting of the Provisional Administrative Committee on 21 November 1956, Münnich declared, “It is a fact that there are 7,000 officers in Budapest, but if we arm 5,000 of them tomorrow, it is not certain that the regime will endure.”<sup>47</sup>

Yet after the meeting with Serov, the relations between the centre of political power led by Kádár and the state security remained strained. The government, presumably in order to gain public acceptance, made public its position against the state security. Kádár and Münnich confirmed in the press that the government had abolished the state security, which the National Police Commissioner added to by saying that state security tasks had been transferred – temporarily – to the police; they would not hire former state security officers, who would not even be allowed to enter the headquarters.<sup>48</sup> On the other hand, the officers occupying the

<sup>46</sup> Letter from Gerő, Hegedüs and Kovács to the CC of the CPSU, 18th of November 1956. In *V Hiányzó lapok 1956 történetéből*, pp. 193–194.

<sup>47</sup> *A Magyar Szocialista Munkáspárt*, p. 77.

<sup>48</sup> T. Pintér, “A megszüntetve megőrzött Államvédelmi Hatóság,” pp. 225–226. Not only in Budapest, but also in the countryside. “A large part of the police also showed hostility towards them [the ÁVH-members], and in some rural police stations they refused to let them in.” Report of the head of the political police appointed

Ministry of the Interior building continued to sabotage the implementation of the orders of the government-appointed commander and, in the countryside, the order prohibiting the reestablishment of their organization. This was the first area where the government made some progress; by mid-November, in most of the provinces, the state security had evacuated their premises and handed them over to the police. However, this did not happen everywhere. The last places where the order was carried out, around 20 November, were those that were most important to the Soviets: on the Austro-Hungarian and Soviet-Hungarian borders and by the main base of Soviet troops. On the southern, Hungarian-Yugoslav border, a desultory solution appeared; the state security and the police were to carry out their tasks together.<sup>49</sup>

It is striking that, while on 30 October the state security staff obediently left their posts without formally disbanding the organization, after 4 November they were reluctant to do the same and resisted the government's attempts to disband them. I mentioned this in an earlier point of my thesis when discussing whether the state security was dismantled (or dispersed) on 30 October or simply was withdrawn with the Soviet troops. The situation on 28–30 October and 7–15 November was similar in many respects. Society saw the ÁVH as the main enemy in November just as it did in October. In both cases, a communist government tried to stabilize its power and restore order by taking measures against the state security. Kádár may have been seen by the state security staff as more acceptable to the Soviets, as he had replaced Nagy, and Kádár was both prime minister and first secretary of the party. If they did carry out unopposed the orders of the Nagy government and sabotaged the measures of the Kádár government, there must have been a particular reason, which is not known at present.<sup>50</sup> But what is most likely, and what many other indications point to, is that the state security did not disband on 30 October as ordered by the Nagy government, but retreated following orders from Serov obtained through Münnich. This does not imply that Serov opposed the decision of the Soviet party leadership, which gave free rein to the idea of a political solution to the crisis, but it does imply that he prepared his own tools in case the political solution failed.

Although there is no specific evidence in the sources, the temporal coincidence makes it likely that the abduction of Nagy and his associates from the Yugoslav embassy (22 November) was the turning point in the struggle between Kádár and the state security, although Kádár had taken the first important step towards them

by Kádár, 8 February 1957. Quoted in A. Szokolczai, "A fegyveres erőszakszervek restaurálása 1956–1957 fordulóján," *Évkönyv. Magyarország a jelenkorban* 7 (1999), p. 24.

<sup>49</sup> *Rendőrségi napi jelentések*, ed. E. Kajári, vol. 1: 1956. október 23. – december 12. Budapest: BM, 1956-os M. Forradalom Tört. Dok. és Kut. Int. Közalapítványa, 1996, pp. 34–82.

<sup>50</sup> The most likely reason for this could be the horror stories spread by the state security staff in October. Those stories had only a minimal basis in fact, but they could still be considered true by them.

the day before, at the meeting of the party leadership. However, by then he was already informed about the Soviet decision and the process of implementation. On 16 November, Kádár was summoned to a meeting with the Soviet party emissaries and Serov, where the Soviets let him know what would happen with Nagy and his circle.<sup>51</sup> This indicates that Kádár had to pay for the Soviet help (the removal of Nagy and his associates from Hungary) by softening his position on state security. At the meeting of the party leadership, he narrowed down the list of those to be removed (to the officers of the investigative bodies), and explained the public anger against the state security not only due to the violations of law committed by them, but also because of the fact that the 'reactionaries' had stirred up the masses against them. His position was supported by many, while no one spoke out against it. A scapegoat was immediately found in the person of the National Police Commissioner, who had announced the abolition of the state security and spoken out against its members. He was removed from his post of the head of the national police in early December and subsequently in February 1957 from his post as Deputy Minister of the Interior. (The circumstance that he was carrying out government orders, and that his statement was in line with those of Kádár and Münnich, was overlooked.) At the same time, the government banned and outlawed the revolutionary (and regional workers') councils, and suppressed the peasant parties. One of the main causes of these measures was that once reconciliation with the state security had begun, the government no longer sought to find support among the rebellious population. At the same time, and this was the other cause, it became clear that the revolutionary (and regional workers') councils and the parties were not content with the restricted role offered to them.

The Soviets immediately appreciated his turn of events: Kádár "made a good impression on us. As can be seen from his actions and behavior, he has recently begun to understand better that he must take a harder line in the fight against reaction, and is much more resolute in arresting counterrevolutionaries."<sup>52</sup>

They were also pleased with Münnich. "Comrade Münnich is currently taking measures to strengthen the organizations of the political police. Comrade Serov and his colleagues are actively assisting Comrade Münnich."<sup>53</sup>

Having failed to avert the reconstruction of the state security regardless of his disapproval, Kádár sought to prevent the complete (Rákosist) restoration of the organization. The means of doing this was to set up a new political police, incorporated into the national police headquarters, to dismiss the all state security staff by the 1 December deadline, and to stipulate that only those who had not been involved

<sup>51</sup> T. Huszár, *Kádár János politikai életrajza*, vol. 2, p. 11.

<sup>52</sup> Detailed report of Malenkov, Suslov and Aristov from Budapest, 22 November 1956, in *Hiányzó lapok 1956 történetéből*, p. 170.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid. Translating the Soviet jargon: Serov and his KGB subordinates are organizing the Hungarian political police, acting on behalf of Münnich.



in any crimes would be recruited into the new organization (which was in fact only new in name).<sup>54</sup> The decree, published on 27 November, was no longer aimed at dismissing the state security officers, but transferring them to the new organization. This is shown by the extremely tight deadline for the implementation (one month in the countryside, two months in Budapest). The other indication was the fact that information against the state security officers was expected from public reports at a time when the country was at the height of terror. And finally, the fact that only 0,3% of the staff were not certified during the review did not mean that they had to leave the (old-new) body for a long time; after a short break, one of the non-certified senior officers became deputy head of the Investigations Department, in charge of the special committee set up to investigate the Nagy case. At the same time as the review was ordered, the Hungarian government, at Serov's suggestion, requested the sending of twenty-three Soviet state security advisers to Hungary,<sup>55</sup> thus restoring the pre-revolutionary order not only in terms of personnel but also in terms of Soviet control. This brought with it also the use of old methods. In December 1956, approximately a thousand people were detained, half of whom were soon released. There are many indications that this was not because their guilt had not been proven, but rather they were released with a mission: to help uncover their fellow 'counter-revolutionaries' or to provoke a plot that the political police could then expose, thus proving its competence. Their work was immediately appreciated by the authorities. At the national police conference held at the end of the year, the Interior Ministry leadership did not hesitate to praise them and even the state security, which had been preserved intact, in sharp contrast to the position Kádár had taken on 8 November against Serov: "We must say clearly, unequivocally, that we are very proud of the militant work of the state security against the enemy over the past decade, and we want to transfer its good experience to the political investigative bodies functioning in the new police organization. [...] It is only the enemy who attacks the state security in any form."<sup>56</sup>

But the state security officers criticized even this review, and succeeded in getting the leaders they knew to be responsible for it dismissed.<sup>57</sup> Additionally, Rákosi sharply attacked the review from Moscow: "As for the members of the state security organizations, everyone who has served there at some time is checked by a special committee and, depending on the results of the check, they are handed over to the

<sup>54</sup> A. Szakolczai, "A fegyveres erőszakszervek," pp. 30–33.

<sup>55</sup> M. Baráth, "A politikai rendőrség," p. 545.

<sup>56</sup> "Beszámoló az 1956. december 28-i országos rendőri értekezleten," in M. Baráth, "Mi igen is büszkék vagyunk az Államvédelmi Hatóság harcos munkájára". Részletek a rendőrség forradalom utáni átszervezéséről tartott értekezlet jegyzőkönyvéből," *Betekintő* 1 (2008), [www.betekinto.hu/2008/12008/a](http://www.betekinto.hu/2008/12008/a) (accessed 6 November 2025).

<sup>57</sup> Serov played an active role in the removal of the National Police Commissioner, handing over compromising documents to Kádár, indicating that commissioner was not acceptable to the Soviets, especially to the KGB. M. Baráth, "A politikai rendőrség," p. 544.



prosecutor's office or given a special certificate that allows them to be employed (so far no one has dared to employ them)."<sup>58</sup>

As I indicated at the beginning of this paper, in mid-January 1957 (after the review of the state security officers had been finished ahead of schedule), the new national police chief had already informed the party leadership that "the comrades working in the political [investigation] department were all former state security officers and staff."<sup>59</sup>

The result managed to more or less satisfy both sides. The state security officers remained in the organization, and could retain their privileged position and satisfy their personal and corporate thirst for revenge. Kádár succeeded in abolishing the organization that had existed and functioned before 1956 (1953 to be precise). The staff could not derive its legitimacy from the past, but from the act of the government. The form was Kádár's, the content was the staff's. The new organization, with the old content (personnel), was successfully incorporated into the National Police Headquarters, but as the weight and authority of the state security grew in the retaliation (mainly with the investigation of the Nagy case), the organization was extracted from the police structures in the late spring of 1957 and became an independent, main department of the Ministry of the Interior – but that would be the subject of another study.

Thus, the dismissal of the state security officers on 7 November 1956 ended with the retention of the entire staff by 14 January 1957. The historian's task is to try to reconstruct what in fact happened. A researcher cannot claim what would have happened "if...", especially if an important element of the course of events had happened differently. In this case, however, Kádár's intention to dismantle the state security and dismiss its staff is palpable. If he had done so, he could have fulfilled an important demand of the revolution, which would have given him a larger social base and would not have been as dependent on state security as he became. The bottom line would not have changed; the dictatorship, the so-called people's democracy, would have remained, Hungary would have remained in the Soviet Bloc, but fewer people would have been imprisoned and fewer executed as was in fact the case. There are also indications that there would have been attempts to move away from the strict economic policy.

That this was not the case was largely – perhaps without exaggeration, it could be said decisively – down to Serov, the KGB chairman. The Hungarian state security returned to the battlefield on 4 November on the side of the Soviet forces, under Serov's control, and received from him and his subordinates in the countryside the support that enabled it to fend off attacks against it and thus prevent the government from gaining some social recognition. I do not regard it as a coincidence that Serov

<sup>58</sup> Rákosi's letter to Khrushchev, 9 January 1957, in *Hiányzó lapok 1956 történetéből*, p. 203.

<sup>59</sup> *A Magyar Szocialista Munkáspárt*, p. 305.

returned to Moscow not in mid-November (by which time the Soviet troops had succeeded in crushing armed resistance and the next phase of the clean-up required political rather than military and state security means), but in late November or early December, when the so-called review removed the danger of the political power taking control of the state security to an extent that was unacceptable to Serov. (The fact that he gave a long and thorough briefing to the new Minister of the Interior in March 1957 suggests such a presumption.<sup>60</sup>) There are many indications that, immediately after 4 November, the Kremlin's main objective, beyond the suppression of armed resistance, was to resolve the strike, since the working-class strike had de-legitimised the efforts supposedly aimed at restoring workers' power. There were two ways to end the strike. Satisfaction of meritorious demands, or at least one, the abolition of the state security. The other solution would be the brute suppression of the strike and the strikers. There is no trace of the Soviet party leadership position on this issue. However, Serov's stance was quite clear; he did not agree with the idea of restoring public order at the expense of state security. What happened in Hungary immediately after the revolution allows the assumption that the KGB had a decisive influence not only on the policy of the satellite states, but also on the policy of the Soviet party leadership.

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<sup>60</sup> "He proved to be quite a capable lad, quick to grasp everything," wrote Serov in his diary. I. Szerov, *A börtön titkai*, p. 538.

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