INDEPENDENCE BEFORE ALL ELSE:
HUNGARIAN ANTI-COMMUNIST RESISTANCE IN
THE EAST EUROPEAN CONTEXT, 1945-1956

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After the regime change in Hungary and generally in Central Eastern Europe resistance to the pre-1989 authorities quickly became a virtue. Claims of past resistance activities multiplied exponentially. Since this phenomenon is a natural concomitant of political earthquakes in the modern age it was something to be expected. In fact the process is so well known that it was immortalised in literature in the congenial novel of Giuseppe di Lampedusa, The Leopard. The prestige generating nature of past resistance knows no regional or temporal boundaries. But beyond the unsurprising fact of mushrooming personal claims—which were partly aroused by promises of material compensation—we could see ever increasing ambiguity shrouding the term itself. In the early 1990s this gave rise to blatant absurdities. One Hungarian MP went as far as stating publicly that he was resisting Soviet occupation, because he misdirected one single Russian soldier who was lost and asked for directions to his barracks. Of course the resistance credentials have been often backed by claims of staunch right-wing anti-communist convictions of both the real and retrospective resisters in the past. This created the impression—at least in Hungary—that ‘true’ resistance to communist rule required a right wing outlook. The following paper does not aim to give full justice to the genuine claims, or even to give a full account of Hungarian resistance before the 1956 revolution. It is rather an attempt to define this politically loaded term and to open a path to a better understanding of its actual manifestations.

To make a successful enquiry into the history of political resistance we obviously need a definition which is general enough to be applicable at least within a particular region and a significantly large historical period, but which is also specific enough to be a useful tool of for empirical distinction. A purely inductive method is unlikely to yield an appropriate concept, because ultimately it revolves around a normative question about legitimacy and rejection. We have to be able to tell apart
those social activities that belong to this category from those which do not. Simply applying the dictionary definitions would not help greatly. The New Oxford Dictionary, for example, would give two meanings that are relevant for our purposes: “armed or violent opposition,” or “a secret organisation resisting authority, especially in an occupied country,” which are obviously too narrow in the context of communist regimes. Most of the literature on World War II resistance uses a functional approach to the phenomenon. M. R. D. Foot in his seminal work simply distinguished between intelligence, escape, and subversion as the major aims of resistance (with the latter further divided into sabotage, attacks on troops, politics, and insurrections). Some historians would even claim that we cannot find a common typology, since resistance is ‘part of each country’s national historiography of the subject and is in some cases contested.

Finding general characteristics may not be an entirely hopeless endeavour though. One of the criteria that we might agree on sounds fairly trivial: the activity must possess at least an indirect potential to weaken the stability of the regime. This regime-undermining capacity is measurable, at least theoretically, on a continuous scale. At one end of the scale would be activities that possess a less than minimal chance of weakening the political establishment. An example would be the solitary murmuring of a person behind closed doors. This obviously lies outside the scope of the concept. Organizing an underground political movement, however, would obviously be within its realm. This continuum resembles the classification of Werner Rings, who distinguished between symbolic, polemic, defensive, and offensive resistance.

Some of the activities that we normally subsume under the term can threaten the regime individually, in themselves, like political assassinations (or ‘terrorist activities’ from the regime’s point of view). Some others would require mass participation usually beyond a more or less clear threshold in order to have substantial political effect, like a general strike. It also seems rather obvious that any given activity must be motivated by political intentions. Robbing the entire gold reserves of a national bank may substantially contribute to the downfall of a government and still we would not want to consider it as political resistance if the perpetrators are driven by sheer greed. Such a case would simply be a crime that is rightfully persecuted by any state.
For the time being let us disregard the otherwise important fact that organs of the 'revolutionary legality' of the communist regimes were inclined to construct standard criminal charges against the arrested members of resistance. This only makes retrospective identification—the task of the historian—more difficult. After ascertaining the relevant facts, the problem disappears if we take as our yardstick of categorisation not the then valid laws of the communist states but the penal code of an ideal state under the rule of law. On the other hand there are actions that are criminalized almost exclusively by authoritarian regimes and we still have no reason to classify them as a case of political resistance. At the roots of conscientious objection we find serious and commendable moral convictions, but these are not political motivations in the strict sense.

What should exactly be the content of the political motivations is impossible to define in a straightforward manner. The history of dictatorships is replete with episodes of deadly power struggles within the ruling oligarchy. The personal ambition of the party bosses might have an exquisitely political coloring when they plot to neutralise or liquidate each other, and yet it would not be appropriate to view their plans and actions as examples of resistance. When Khrushchev decided to move against Beria, he wasn't engaged in something that would have made him morally comparable to Solzhenitsyn—whatever we may think of their individual political beliefs. Of course this statement does not deny the possibility that those who served or benefited from a regime may become its adversaries. Here however, the details and context of what happened before and after these conversions 'on the road to Damascus' matter greatly and our judgment may differ from case to case.

The set of political motivations must include the conviction that the right of those in power to rule over their subjects is politically and morally unacceptable, that the political systems lacks legitimacy. This is the criterion, which enables us to separate the otherwise highly similar cases of political resistance and civil disobedience. Under this definition those civil rights, anti-discrimination movements, for example, that reject some of the specific rules of the political system and propagate non-compliance will not count as resistance organizations.

Beyond the denial of legitimacy, the actions of the resistance groups (or individuals) should breach the laws, regulations or tacit rules of the political game. For example in any regime where freedom of speech is
in institutionally guaranteed even a most accomplished orator who makes an undeniably inflammatory speech against the government in public is not performing an act of resistance but exercises her right, however strong her political motivation might be. This will hold true even if her rhetorical act contributes directly to the fall of that government. This very same criterion enables us to distinguish resistance groups from even the most radical reformers, who—by definition—must operate within the confines of the existing laws, regulations and rules.

Theoretically all the above considerations could—and in my view should—be separated from the normative question whether the given act, which we identify as a case of resistance is morally acceptable or not. For instance the problem of political assassinations engages political theorists since the ancient Greeks. Although a large set of arguments has been compiled ever since in defense of tyrannicide, it is still clear that political terrorism widely conceived, e.g. setting off bombs in train stations or crowded markets is morally unacceptable under any condition. The ethical boundary seems to be the premeditated sacrifice of innocent lives that are lost or endangered independently of the nature of the political regime. This latter restriction is important because in my view the number of probable casualties resulting from the conceivable brutal repression by the authorities puts the would-be assassins in a moral dilemma, but it does not make them automatically responsible for the innocent lives lost. Jan Kubiš and Jozef Gabčík, the assassins of Heydrich cannot be seen as the murderers of the people of Lidice and Ležaky. It is not, however, incoherent to set the ethical standard in a way that the basis of judgment should be the—usually hypothetical—will of the compatriots of the potential victims of reprisal. This would indeed assign ethical responsibility to the resisters also.

In sum, an action to count as resistance, it needs to have some negative impact on the regime, which is discernible to observers; the perpetrator must have political motivation beyond a simple striving for power. It also must involve a conscious disregard for the rules of the regime and the belief that its legitimacy is questionable. With some simplification we can see these requirements as the necessary and sufficient conditions for the notion of resistance.

On the basis of this logic we would be compelled to say that those who were active in the resistance against the communist regimes of Eastern Europe were committed anti-communists. This might sound
obvious and it is one version of the current folk wisdom in the region, but it is strongly misleading. As it stands it is a mere tautology. The negative definition is in fact empty, it is a placeholder for almost any world view, political conviction, party attachment or diffuse political affection; its actual content may vary from person to person. For the very same reason it is futile (contrary to another folk wisdom) to try to order the different political ideologies on a scale of implacability towards communism. The difference between the Hungarian representatives of Nazism, traditional conservatism, liberalism, populism and social democracy at the end of the war lies emphatically not in their hostility or tolerance towards the full-blown Soviet system. Still, however broad this category might be, it cannot include those who were orthodox Leninists, because it would lead to self-contradiction. Yet there are cases, most notably from the 1956 revolution, where the historian can come close to examples of the species that should not exist, the anti-communist communist. The commander of the freedom fighters in Tűzoltó utca, Budapest, István Angyal is the best known among those who proudly identified themselves as communist believers. And he held on to the communist political credo till the gallows, so we have no reason to doubt the strength and sincerity of his convictions. Without questioning the consistency of the thoughts of this young and highly educated freedom fighter, we can point to one crucial fact. As a leader of an armed group fighting against the communist state, he must have rejected one tenet of the Leninist ideology: the belief in the unerring historic wisdom of the Party. This is a crucial difference though. If one is unwilling to concede that the policies and leaders of this omniscient metaphysical entity can be criticized only on the appropriate fora and through the prescribed rituals then one is no longer among the true believers. Such a person cannot be a member of the elect, even if she agrees with them in everything else: the questions of the just society, the good polity and the nature of historical development.

For our own analytical purposes we may in good conscience accept the verdict of ‘the Movement.’ István Angyal, who took up arms against the ruling party could not be a true comrade of those willing to sentence him to death. But then again, are we not slipping into the vulgar Marxist verbiage of the interrogators of Angyal, who maintained that he—and his likes—were ‘objectively’ counterrevolutionaries. I think not, and the test is a negative one. The secret police interrogators did not even try
that old stratagem on Angyal, which seemed to work on a host of arrested party members earlier from Zinoviev to Rajk: 'the Party asks a final sacrifice from you.' They were absolutely sure that in this case it would not work.

Organized Political Resistance in the Soviet Zone

In the summer of 1944 the victorious Red Army and the NKVD troops moving behind it faced a situation not encountered since the Civil War. In the rear of the quickly moving front from the Black Sea to the Dvina smaller units detached from their regiments or companies were attacked by irregular groups in ever increasing numbers. In some areas of the large East European space the intermittent skirmishes grew into real guerrilla war by the summer of 1945. Although it had no effect on the gigantic operations of the Eastern Front and it could not prevent the reoccupation of the lands annexed in 1940, it was important enough for the Latvian Central Committee of the party to hold an extraordinary session in August 1945 with one item on the agenda: the war against the 'bandits.'

In the Baltic states the armed groups of varying size and ethnic composition were enshrined in popular memory under the generic name of 'Forest Brothers.' The most important leaders, as the Estonian Ants Kaljurand, grew into mythic figures in the local folklore. The historical reconstruction of the activities of these groups is obviously not made easier by these 'counter-memories' and 'counter-histories.' On the basis of some more reliable sources we know that between 1945 and 1947 the Baltic engaged significant NKVD forces, controlled serious a considerable proportion of the less densely populated areas, and they committed numerous acts of sabotage and were involved in armed clashes with the security troops. These came on top of those merely symbolic gestures through which they reasserted their existence and commitment to the population. Mart Laar estimated the peak number of membership of the resistance groups as 10-15 000 in Latvia, while the number of active members of the Estonian Armed Resistance League (which had a nationwide organization) was—according to his estimates—between 2 000 and 5 000.

Of course, these numbers are debatable as they are based on rough estimates and therefore can in some cases be greatly exaggerated. It is beyond doubt though, that the final winding up of the Baltic resistance
groups required a large scale operation of the local state security troops (the numbers of which had increased greatly in the previous three years) augmented by substantial reinforcements sent from Moscow in the second half of 1949. By that time the smallholder peasantry, which had offered both the local bases and continual provisions to the guerrillas, had effectively been wiped out by the deportations of the collectivization drive of the spring of 1949. A few groups survived even this dramatic showdown and they kept worrying the all-powerful political police of the new republics until the mid-fifties.8

We know close to nothing about the political views of the members of these groups beyond the fact that they took as the final overriding aim of their activities the restoration of full independence to their countries. So their reference point was the status quo ante. Some of the groups managed to establish and to maintain for a couple of year’s precarious connections to the émigré representatives of the pre-occupation political elites. Frequently they tied their own legitimacy to the constitutions of the ‘golden age’ of independence. But the political-constitutional arrangements of these countries in the last year of peace were far from the ideal of democracy. Only the Estonian political system can be labeled as parliamentary. In Lithuania the one-party system was officially introduced in 1936. In Latvia after the suspension of the constitution the semi-presidential regime of Ulmanis was closer to an authoritarian state than to a democracy. Does it follow from this that the majority or even a large number of the Forest Brothers were necessarily against democracy or that they held extreme right beliefs? It is customary to recall at this juncture the socio-political trends, the spirit of the second half of the 1930s, when democracies in Europe—temporarily—lost ground, when genuine social support for authoritarian systems was on the rise. But there is no need whatsoever for this type of explanation until we have no reliable data about the ideological political divisions among the members of resistance. It is easy to see why this assumption is neither necessary nor self-evident logically and politically. Quite independently of the otherwise important question whether the Leninist-Stalinist system was an Evil Empire or not in all its aspects, it is more than clear that the regime blatantly disregarded the most basic political rights, that of free speech, free assembly and organization. Therefore in these small annexed countries it was not unnatural to think that the restoration of national independence is a sine qua non for even the emergence
of democratic politics. We can assume just as easily that the majority of
the young activists of the resistance did not have clear political commit-
ments beyond the imperative of independence. In the whirlwind of a
guerrilla war, under the circumstances of extreme mutual dependence
among comrades the minimalist political program of "national unity" has
serious content. (This constitutes perhaps the most striking political
difference from the world of émigré leaders.) It is inevitable that the
group should banish the detailed discussion of political differences into
the coveted future of national independence. In such an environment the
romantic patriotism of 'All Hungarians/Estonians/Latvians join us!' is
not just a mobilising factor but also a common political creed that is
necessary sometimes for physical survival. Of course it does not follow
from all this, on the other hand, that any percentage of the resistance
fighters must have been committed democrat. Indeed, when faced with
serious ethical-political dilemmas they often made questionable, or even
morally indefensible decisions. The only claim is that these decisions
were not necessarily rooted in the antidemocratic views of the groups or
their leaders.

In many respects similar events were unfolding in Western Ukraine
in 1946-47. The Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists, the partisan
army under the leadership of Stepan Bandera was engaged in almost
continuous warfare with both the Soviet, the Polish and the Czechoslo-
vak security troops in the dark woods of the Carpathian Mountains.
Though the strength of the OUN was estimated at 6-8000 men in the
immediate postwar years, they held down two full divisions of Soviet
internal security troops supported by armoured units of the army until
the summer of 1947. That summer Pavel Sudoplatov the commanding
officer of the NKVD unit specializing in political assassinations met
Nikita Khrushchev, who was sent by Moscow to put the Ukraine into
order. First they decided to "dispose of" the leader of the Ukrainian
nationalists, but the plan failed. Finally the insurgent army was mopped
up through a large scale concentrated army operation similar to the one
carried out in the Baltic. In August a few dozen Ukrainian partisan
fought their way through Czechoslovakia, slipped through the Soviet
occupation one in Austria and turned up with their guns in hand at the
headquarters of US occupation forces in Bavaria. In this case we also
know very little about the political attitudes of the insurgents beyond the
unflinching desire for independence. It is clear though that in the last
months the bands also terrorised the villages in their sphere of operations and—unlike their comrades in the Baltic—they forcibly commandeered the necessary supplies. With this they exposed the exhausted rural population of Western Ukraine to continuous reprisals.

The relatively best known drama in the history of East European anti-Communist resistance is the Polish ‘civil war’ between 1945 and 1948. As in all the other cases the number of participants is highly debated. Estimates vary so widely that one of the most knowledgeable authorities on the subject, Krystina Kersten was unwilling even to make a wild guess at the true numbers in her book, which is still counts as the standard work on the period. The Home Army (Armia Krajowa—AK) lost its most fighting-fit units during the Warsaw uprising in August 1944, practically in front of the eyes of the Red Army. On 19 January 1945 the AK was formally disbanded, but some of the remaining units were regrouped in the secret organization of the Delegacy Armed Forces (Delegatura Sil Zbrojnych—DSZ). Altogether there were at least a dozen different armed resistance groups, some of which functioned as the armed wings of the illegally organized political parties. At least ten thousand poles fought the NKVD and later the polish Security Forces in a hundred large and dozens of smaller partisan units. Suppressing them also required substantial military force and lasted until the end of 1948.

The strange story of the Romanian post-war resistance is much less known to the general public. In the remote corners of the Danube-delta and the high Carpathians a few groups have engaged in sporadic guerrilla activities since the summer of 1944, but in 1946 a remarkably strong anti-Communist partisan unit appeared on the scene. But these units, which were loosely affiliated to the opposition National Peasant Party, emerged at least partly due to western instigation. In the summer of 1946 the diplomatic pressure applied to Turkey by the Soviet Union was considered such a grave test of resolve in Washington which evoked even the possibility of a new world war. Recent research confirmed that the amount of information pointing to the possibility that the USSR was planning to invade Turkey that it simply had to be taken very seriously in the US and Britain. In September the Chiefs of Staff asked the Office of Special Operations to organize intelligence networks and stay-behind groups. OSO duly contacted the leaders of the Peasant Party in Bucharest with the idea of creating a partisan army. The Peasant party did not need much prodding as they were already engaged in establishing a
clandestine anti-Communist armed group. Lieutenant Ira Hamilton and colonel Thomas Hall conferred with Niculescu-Buzesti—the former foreign minister and personal advisor to Iuliu Maniu—and other personalities from the Peasant Party. Hall, Hamilton and the Romanian politicians worked out a scheme detailing the tasks of the clandestine army in the case of war. The major objective was to cut the Soviet supply lines were hostilities to break out with Turkey. The guerrillas were supposed to slow down Soviet troop deployment through diversionary activities. The whole plan went roughly on the analogy of the French maquis attacks on German reinforcement lines in Operation Overlord. But the war crisis abated by October and the quickly forged plan became redundant. Hall and Hamilton compromised themselves with the Romanian secret police when they tried to smuggle Niculescu-Buzesti out of the country. The head of the American Military Mission on the Allied Control Commission in Bucharest, Brigadier General Courtlandt Van Rensselaer Schuyler—who was not privy to the plans—demanded from Washington the immediate cessation of secret operations in a white rage.12

The politicians from the Peasant Party who were in on the scheme were left alone, out in the cold. They stood trial for conspiracy and treason in October 1947. As opposed to the show-trials of the later period in this case the majority of the charges were true. Due to the abrupt cessation of the military emergency and to the squabbling between State and SSU, the Romanian secret police wound up an armed anti-communist movement that was potentially the strongest in Eastern Europe before the guerrillas could mount a single operation.

Active Resistance in Hungary

Of course, the examples listed here are not meant to do justice to the rich history of post-World War II anti-communist resistance in Eastern Europe. It shows, however, that the form of resistance that we consider central to any definition, armed guerrilla activity was widespread in the region—even if it may have been hopeless from the very beginning. But in Hungary we have no knowledge of any armed groups similar to the ones mentioned above. Probably the oldest platitude in epistemology says that proving the non-existence of a thing or a phenomenon is a logically impossible, still one has reasons to consider this claim about Hungary as factually correct.
For sure, the documents of the state security terror-machine have to be treated with more than a pinch of salt. We have, however, a source whose author was interested precisely in establishing the true level and forms of resistance. Upon the request of US Army Counterintelligence (G-2) Georgetown University prepared a detailed research report entitled “Hungary: Resistance Activities and Potentials” dated January 5, 1956. The date is all the more important since the analysts could not have searched—not even unconsciously—for signs of the impending uprising. It transpires from the summary that the authors of the report had access to the intelligence debriefings of Hungarian émigrés and relevant documents of the CIA and military intelligence.

Of course this document is also not a spotless imprint of reality, but at least it is presumably free from most of the self-serving distortions and exaggerations, we are prone to encounter in Hungarian secret police files. The US Army had a vital interest in obtaining as reliable a picture as possible on the ‘resistance potential’ of the Soviet zone. The final verdict of the report is disconcerting: “[t]here is no evidence that any armed partisans in Hungary endured for any length of time [...]. There is no evidence of any current partisan activity in Hungary.” A couple of pages later the analysts identify a potential cause for this state of affairs: “[t]here is no tradition or history of active resistance in Hungary and all evidence indicates that this tradition has not been broken.”

We can accept that the most obvious form of resistance, the activities of armed guerrilla groups is, for all intents and purposes, missing in Hungary before the 1956 uprising. This fact, especially if we compare it with the examples from the neighbouring countries, seems to be intriguing, something that requires explanation. Obviously it is not Hungarian society, that would exhibit affinity towards the imposition of a Stalinist dictatorship, more than any of its unlucky neighbours. The arguments based on national characteristics were retrospectively debunked by the revolution. (We owe it to the analysts though, that for them the Hungarian ‘tradition’ simply meant the similar lack of organized resistance during the war. This lacuna—embarrassing as it may be— is again certainly not something buried in collective unconsciousness or inexplicable in sociological terms.)

The most important reason seems to be fairly prosaic: the topography of the country. The area confined by the Trianon borders is relatively densely populated. In fact there is no point on the map of the
country from where on could not find a settlement within a day’s walk. But then underground armed groups need secret bases, withdrawal and redeployment areas that are out of easy reach, and safe hideouts to be able to survive the first encounters with the authorities. There are only two areas in Hungary where such locations could possibly be identified: the Bakony mountains above Lake Balaton, and the mountainous stretch in the north of the country. However, for the very same reason these same regions contain the largest number of military installations, bases, artillery practice ranges and depots. In the vicinity of such locations it is a fairly difficult business to create a safe partisan hideout unobserved. If we compare this with the geography and topology of the East-European countries mentioned in the examples the difference is obvious. Hungary lacks the natural infrastructure needed for guerrilla operations.

This cannot be the full story though. However clear it might be in retrospect that the political dynamics of the short post-war democratic period (known in Hungarian historiography as the ‘coalition era’) led inexorably to the final communist take-over, contemporaries regularly saw this otherwise. Prime Minister Ferenc Nagy, for example, despite all the ominous signs pinned his hopes on the signing of the peace treaty to the very end and beyond. He believed—or made himself to believe—that Hungary would regain its full sovereignty, Russian troops would depart and the country could shortly overcome the leftist totalitarian threat. Freedom of political organization was curtailed by the Allied Control Commission under Soviet chairmanship, which had the power to authorise political parties. This, however, was not so stringent that the opponents of communist policies would not be able to find a legal corner in the political arena to give vent to their enmity, misgivings and foreboding. The ‘salami tactics’ of Rákosi was effective in more than one respect. That part of the non-communist political elite, which was qualified for political leadership both by its abilities and its social prestige did not find full underground illegality appealing as long as there was room for them in the public political scene, even if it was constantly shrinking. On top of all this the new regime based its legitimisation partly on the rejection of the constitutional and political arrangements of the inter-war political system. After all, the new parliament, where the Smallholders Party had the majority of seats did not pass Act VII of 1946 (On the defence of the democratic system and the republic) as part of the criminal code in a fit of absentmindedness. It was a highly flexible and at the
same time very harsh piece of legislation. As such it reflected the pervasive fear of the full spectrum of the new political elite: a hypothetical ‘restoration’ may meet with the approval of large sections of Hungarian society. (Of course the object of these apprehensions was not a return to Szálasi’s Arrow Cross rampage but rather the perceived ‘silent nostalgia’ towards the rigidly conservative Horthy regime of the late 1930s.) So it happened that one of the first victims of the draconian law became the ‘Hungarian Community’ (‘Magyar Közösség’), which was more of a somewhat racist exclusive club and a nationalistic solidarity network than a genuine conspiracy. Rajk the Minister of Interior was forcing the portrayal of the group as a menace to democracy, and his extortion was partly made possible by the elastic definitions of the new law.

The Resistance Groups and their Political Orientation

It looks as though there was no important illegal anti-communist resistance in Hungary between 1945 and 1947. The American memorandum on resistance potential considered 15 organized illegal groups at least plausible, and all of them were formed after 1947. The most important were: the White Guard (the memo itself takes the 20,000 members reported by dissidents to be ‘rather improbable’), which was an armed group formed mostly from the former members of the Democratic People’s Party going underground; the White Cross group based in Szeged, which was practically eliminated by 1951; the Sword and Cross; the Double Cross (referring to the cross in the Hungarian coat of arms); the romantic sounding Black Eagle; the group of right-wing social democrats in the MÁVAG factory; Youth Fighters Union for Free Hungary (formed in 1950); the National Resistance Movement (of which more will be said below); and smaller groups in Makó, Hódmezővásárhely, Kisújszállás, and in Zala county. The authors of the report were not willing to risk precise estimates on the membership numbers of this group. They occasionally cited alleged numbers from the dissident reports, which they themselves considered unlikely.

These groups were known to the propagandists-historians of the political police after 1956, and used them to justify their version of history. In the narratives of Ervin Hollós and János Berecz all of these illegal groups were precursors to the grand conspiracy of 1956. What do we know about them beyond their mere conspiracy? First of all we know, that by 1955-56 the ÁVH either eliminated these groups or kept
them under ‘close operative control.’ The White Guard (a.k.a. White Partisans) or the social democrats in the MÁVAG works is mentioned as an example in the ‘report on foreign and domestic reaction’ by the Minister of Interior, László Piros prepared for the Politburo of the Hungarian Workers’ Party on 19 October, 1954. The Sword and Cross group was liquidated in 1949, the White Cross in 1951, and the National Resistance Movement was finally mopped up in 1954.

We know very little about the political orientation of the members of organized resistance. The ÁVH and the communist kangaroo courts were keen on producing links with the Hungarian Nazis or at least with the Horthy regime, but in many cases this was a fraud. Many of the organizations were led by the local members and leaders of the legal parties of the 1945-1947 period. In some cases the local party cells were formed again but by now illegally. But from about 1949 the young active participants of the spontaneous peasant resistance augmented the membership of these groups. An example would be the sketchy story of the National Resistance Movement (Nemzeti Ellenállási Mozgalom) which László Domonkos attempted to reconstruct on the basis of oral history interviews with survivors. Although there is at least as much methodological trouble with individual memories of long past events as with police files, the basic story is engagingly simple. In 1949 a handful of youngsters at Békéssámson in the south-eastern corner of Hungary decided to give vent to their discontent on home-made fliers. It started as a highly romantic but certainly dangerous pastime. As the village of Békéssámson contained about 5,000 inhabitants, after the first missions they targeted the nearby towns of Makó, Szolnok, and Békéscsaba. Eventually the ‘conspiracy’ spread to Budapest and the western parts of the country. The political convictions of the instigators, István Annus, Ferenc Cseszkó and Imre Zöld seems to have been the same radical desire for independence and diffuse anti-communism that we have seen in the other groups in Eastern Europe. But this attitude does not require a full-blown right wing political identity and program. The emotionally laden calls for national independence and general anti-communist feelings reflected in their fliers seemed to embody the same ‘resistance minimum’ that we could identify in the Baltic case. At this moment it is not entirely clear how their activities related to those fliers that were sent in by balloons and were also signed ‘National Resistance Movement.’

It may have been the case that the attractive acronym NEM, which in
Hungarian means 'no,' was so appealing to the CIA that they simply appropriated it for the purposes of the balloon operation. However, there is no conclusive evidence either for this explanation or for its alternatives. The group distributed their fliers widely, but this was not enough for the ÁVH. When arrested, the young peasants from Békés county had to be portrayed as an armed conspiracy, though in fact they had only hypothetical access to the cache of small arms in the local Defence Association. This, however, enabled the prosecutor to ask for capital punishment. In the end the appeals court changed the sentence to life imprisonment.

What was the actual size and extent of organized anti-communist resistance before 1956? There are different numbers available, most of them produced by the secret police, all of which are partial and not particularly reliable. In a memorandum prepared for the 8 September, 1953 meeting of the Board of the Ministry of Interior the following data can be found:

The state security organs arrested 2096 people in 1951, 3228 in 1952, and 1871 people up to 1 August 1953 for various political acts. From this the following number of persons were apprehended for the gravest crimes (spying, subversion, terrorism, sabotage, conspiracy): 450 persons in 1951, 1035 in 1952, and 681 up till 1 August, 1953.

According to the report of László Piros mentioned above: '[a]t the moment the ÁVH pursues operative work against 28 cases of continuous counter-revolutionary conspiracy, and 87 hostile groupings.' In June 1956 Rákosi had said to the Politburo that the ÁVH uncovered two new counter revolutionary conspiracies on a monthly average. These numbers are not only contradictory—they are positively meaningless from our point of view. Since the communist security services and the judicial practice in effect criminalized all forms of passive resistance as well (and made them 'crimes against the state' at the same breath), and was not averse to forging evidence in the individual cases, it is very difficult to establish how many of these were fictional cases that in reality would not fit our definition of resistance.

Let us attempt a rough chronological periodization of the known facts about post-war resistance. It seems that there was no serious organized anti-communist resistance between 1945 and 1947. Confrontation was played out in the legal political arena of the constrained multi-
party system, known as the ‘coalition period.’ The first illegal organiza
tions were formed roughly between 1947 and 1950 mainly under the
tutelage of the local radical opposition, whose members were edged out
of the realm of legal political competition. During the period of under-
ground (re-)organization those groups which initially may have had
more sophisticated political goals gradually moved onto the general
platform of fighting for independence. Together with a diffuse anti-
communist attitude (which was in many respects non-political or pre-
political) this stance offered the potential for wider support. Since the
groups needed broad appeal the details of the possible political program
were pushed into the hypothetical future to be worked out after the
‘regime change.’

After 1949-50 the singularly brutal collectivisation drive and the
persecution of the churches and their members drove large numbers of
the peasantry into resistance activities or among the supporters of these
groups. This hostile group was therefore created by the Stalinist regime
itself. It was achieved through the continuous terrorisation of the other-
wise traditionally politically passive masses of the countryside. What is
more this group was also the source of the ever swelling new working
class generated by the grandiose industrialisation drive that plunged
large parts of the population into abject poverty. The young blue-collar
workers who had just moved into the towns from the peasant back-
ground of their families could experience both the anti-kulak campaigns
in the villages and the oppression meted out to the ‘ruling class.’ They
would form the bulk of the armed insurgents of the revolution.

Between 1953-55 the more lenient atmosphere of the ‘new course’
inagurated by Imre Nagy and then the return of the hard-liners
inescapably strengthened the desire for change and elicited ever more
radical demands. In the two years preceding the revolution the commu-
nist system displayed all the relevant characteristics of a dying ancien
regime. The ruling elite was fatally divided, public opinion became more
and more independent and vocal, old adversaries whom the regime had
thought were suppressed for good reappeared, the leadership was con-
vinced that changes are unavoidable and were also paralysed by the very
thought. All was set for a rapid collapse even though the opposition had
not been organized into an effective political force. That is why October
1956 was a genuine revolution and not a mere conspiracy.
**The Rational Core of the Secret Police Paranoia**

Within the wide field of resistance there is one delicate issue that cannot be avoided in the Hungarian case either. According to the ruling ideology of the state security interrogators and case officers, the anti-communist groups were always directed from the background by ‘imperialist spy-centres.’ The additional charge of spying, and high treason made it easier to demonstrate the crookedness of the accused (the effect is similar to the charges of ordinary crimes). There is some truth in this line of thought, because our everyday moral intuition finds it difficult to put spying into the basket of justified resistance to an oppressive regime. And we have seen in the Romanian example that the ‘western connection’ was not necessarily an entirely unfounded charge. Until very recently Hungarian historiography was settled on this issue, namely that the majority of such accusations were false. However, it is at least possible that the anti-communist groups instigated and organized by U.S. intelligence were not merely a figment of András Berkesi’s literary and interrogator fantasy.

It is obvious that there were genuine western spies in Hungary. It is also likely that their agents were trying to get in touch with the sporadic groups of active resistance. They must have succeeded at least in some cases. But we know next to nothing about this ratio. Can we not assume that the ÁVH itself created most of these cases? It might be true, but then it is not at all clear what was the function of the complicated spy stories in those cases where the absence of public trial provided no extra propaganda opportunity. One, rather unconvincing answer would be that this was part and parcel of the ideologically motivated requirements on case officers.

However, the spy-paranoia of the ÁVH had a rational core. Destabilizing the Soviet zone through special operations was an important element in the Cold War western strategy. In 1948 George Kennan came to the conclusion that he had to revise his earlier predictions. It might not take decades for the Soviet empire to erode, since it had seemingly already cracked. What was more—he thought—the decay might be accelerated through secret subversive operations. NSC 10/2, the 1948 National Council Directive established the Office of Special Projects, which was responsible for the secret programs aimed at rolling back the frontiers of the emerging Soviet empire. Its definition of ‘covert operations’ included ‘assistance to underground resistance movement.’
The unit was renamed into the rather innocent-sounding ‘Office of Policy Co-ordination’ and was under the joint supervision of the State Department (practically Kennan) and the CIA, but received a separate budget. In 1952 the office was integrated into the organizational structure of the CIA but still enjoyed a modicum of independence as a separate department. They initiated dozens of operations in Eastern Europe, of which we know only about a handful. The American administration was late, however, with its assistance to guerrilla groups. It is a tragic irony of the story that all around the region the communist secret police mopped up the genuine armed resistance groups by the time these covert operations started in 1949. Those groups that the western secret services contacted at this time were almost without exception bogus organizations controlled by the communist security services, which were partly even set up to lure the agents of the western services. The most famous such trap organisations was the Polish ‘Freedom and Independence’ the Polish acronym of which—WiN—must have been quite appealing to the CIA and MI6. Still one of the best accounts of the spectacular intelligence failure is Harry Rositzke, *The CIA’s Secret Operations* (New York, Reader’s Digest Press, 1977) p. 170 passim.

The fact that the existence of OPC was no secret to the MGB must have been known in Washington as well, because on 22 August, 1948—barely two weeks after the creation of the office—*Pravda* run a story on the formation of a secret American organization, whose major functions they described in a language remarkably close to the NSC 10/2 directive. Whatever conclusions Washington and London drew from this fact, we have to resign to the fact that when the Soviet ‘advisers’ assigned to the ÁVH ordered their Hungarian subordinates ‘to unmask the imperialist saboteurs and spies’ they were not only displaying their ideological alertness, but also their well founded convictions.

The seemingly paranoid spy-mania of the communist secret police was not irrational, but it was searching for something that the United States would have loved, but was unable to accomplish. Still it was only by the turn of 1952-1953 that the Truman administration realised that the program of overthrowing the East-European communist regimes through covert action was futile. The second malevolent irony of history is that this enlightenment came exactly at the moment when ‘liberating the captive nations’ became the recurrent theme in the Republican election campaign.
Conclusions

What makes the historical reconstruction of anti-communist resistance a daunting task? The answer is disappointingly simple. We have to make use almost exclusively of such sources that historians usually consider the least reliable: police files, oral recollections, political memoirs, intelligence reports, immigrant interviews. This is true not only about the period in question. Mapping out riots and uprisings runs into the same problems, whether we talk about the French Revolution, the Spanish guerrilla against Napoleon, or anti-Nazi resistance. It is in the nature of things that illegal organizations rarely document their own activities out of sound security considerations. The authors of all other types of sources may have ample individual reasons to distort or reinterpret the facts either wittingly or unwittingly. Those participants, who recall their memories fifty years later may be caught in the web of their changing memories even with the most sincere of intentions. All of us are prone to see continuity in contemplating our political and moral identity. This fact makes the true past political beliefs of the resisters particularly elusive.

In the oral history interview of István Bibó, member of the 1956 government of Imre Nagy and one of the most astute Hungarian political thinkers, we find an interesting piece of recollection. Bibó was surprised to see in the prison of Márianosztra, where he spent his sentence, how quickly the mostly young freedom fighters of 1956 came under the influence of the 'old inmates' and acquired a radical nationalist extreme-right political outlook. But we now need not be that much surprised. Working class youngsters in their twenties rarely possess a congruent, sophisticated political belief system supported by accurate historical knowledge. It is not surprising—though neither it is unavoidable—that young people with a diffuse world view who fought for radical ideas of national independence and freedom should emerge after the prison sentence and the continuous suppression with extreme right views. This does not affect the merit and heroism of their past deeds.

Notes


6. Those, who assign moral responsibility to the two agents tend to see guerrilla warfare in World War II also as ethically dubious and counterproductive in terms of innocent lives. The most interesting arguments are to be found in Rab Bennett, *Under the Shadow of the Swastika* (New York: New York University Press, 1999).


8. Laar, *War in the Woods* p. 113, 175. For the World War II background of the Latvian part of the story see Geoffrey Swain, *Between Stalin and Hitler: Class War and Race War on the Dvina, 1940-45* (London: Routledge, 2006). It is unclear as yet, what was the relationship between these groups and the mostly pro-Nazi vehemently anti-Semitic quasi-fascist groups of the year of Soviet occupation. For some details see Arvydas Anasauskas (ed.), *The Anti-Soviet Resistance in the Baltic States* (Vilnius: Genocide and Resistance Research Center, 2000) pp. 75-78.

9. Pavel Sudoplatov and Anatoli Sudoplatov, *Special Tasks* (Boston: Little Brown, 1994) p. 235. Brezhnev and Chernenko had also had a spell of service in the region, while Zhukov was assigned the post of the Commander of the Odessa military district in 1946. Post-war work in the 'normalisation' of the Ukraine was an obvious stepping stone in party career. See: John Prados, *Presidents' Secret Wars* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee Inc., 1996) pp. 53-54.


18. 'Report on foreign and domestic reaction' MOL (Hungarian National Archives), MDP (Hungarian Workers' Party) 276 f., 53 cs., 203 ő.e.


21. Állambiztonsági Szolgálatok Történeti Levéltára (Historical Archives of the State Security Services) Belügyminisztérium kollégiumi ülések (Meetings of the Board of the Ministry of Interior) 8 September, 1953 Mtg., 180-1423, p.1.

22. ‘Report on foreign and domestic reaction,’ p. 3.

23. Memorandum of Mátyás Rákosi to the Politburo of the HWP, 13 July, 1956, MOL, MDP, 276 f.,65 cs., 26 Ó.e.


25. Of course the security services kept tabs on the spy cases, which are as unreliable as those on general resistance activities. One number cited by László Borhi is 120 cases investigated between 1949 and 1953. See László Borhi, ‘Rollback, Containment, or Inaction?’ *Journal of Cold War Studies* 1:3 (1999), p. 88. In my view Borhi accepts the numbers produced by the ÁVH a little too uncritically.


