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## Them and Us: Narratives of Agents from the Kádár Era<sup>1</sup>

Today a good deal of scholarly work has been published the authors of which use, as their primary sources, the documents that were created by the state security services of the communist dictatorships of East Central Europe. These documents reveal a great deal concerning the primary characteristics of the mechanisms of state security and, more specifically, the network of agents. Most of the inquiries that have been published so far have been of a moralizing nature, in that they seem to have been motivated at least in part by the desire to pass judgment on those who cooperated in an organized way with the state security services of the dictatorial states or, in some cases, to find justifications for the conduct of the people involved by offering explanations according to which they were compelled to collaborate. I have set a very different goal in this article. I examine how the people in the network interpreted their cooperation with the state. I draw on recollections that were written not after the fall of the Kádár regime, but rather in its early stages. These texts offer different perspectives on the identity of the agent and shed some light on how the collaborator him or herself understood his or her acts of collaboration with the dictatorship.

Keywords: collaboration, recollections, state security, agent network, Kádár era, communist regime, Hungary

A few years ago, in his reflections on the moralizing narrative mode of the assertions that have been made in Hungary regarding the network of the state security services of the fallen regime, Balázs Berkovits raised the essential question: “Can one speak of agents in any other tone than that of moral outrage, victimhood, and forgiveness? Can one escape the moral defining terms that infer one another, the vicious cycle of sin—confession—forgiveness? How can we avoid the ethical and psychological/sociological conjectures and aims that already determine, before we have begun our examination, where we will end up?”<sup>2</sup>

The moralizing that seems to prevail in discussions of the topic seems to be tied to the tendency in public opinion to identify the people who were in the network as “denouncers,” i.e. people whose endeavors are almost always deleterious, whatever the culture or society in question, and even more so in

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1 This article was written with the support of program number K-104408 of the Hungarian Scientific Research Fund (OTKA).

2 Balázs Berkovits, “Erkölcstelen besúgók, tehetséges áldozatok, áldozatos erkölcsbírók”, *anBlok* 3. (2009): 13.

the case of a dictatorship. The foundation of this discourse is the assumption according to which the simple citizen (as the agent *seems* to be) owes his loyalties first and foremost to his own community, in other words to the society that has been subjugated by the dictatorial power. Thus, if someone cooperates with power, for instance by providing information concerning his fellow sufferers, he or she merits the label traitor.<sup>3</sup> This “transgression” seems more damnable in retrospect than it did at the time because at the time of the dictatorial regime it was “invisible,” as it was committed in secret and only came to light after the fall of the regime. As Hungarian historian Gábor Gyáni has observed, however, with this disappearance of the world of the dictatorship, “denouncing lost any ethical justification and its ‘usefulness’ also frayed.” Consequently, “this form of cooperation with the oppressive power of yore is simply stamped as immorality or futility.”<sup>4</sup>

The moralizing approach is also dominant in the scholarly research on the network of agents who worked together with the state security services. Practically, this means that the historian cannot completely avoid or ignore entirely the influence of the interpretive models that prevail in public opinion and thus is inevitably compelled to orient him or herself to this narrative mode. The practice of historical scholarship involves a series of ethical and moral choices, from the selection of a subject of focus to the manner in which findings are put in writing, and even if a historian is cautious to avoid making explicit judgments, his or her use of language nevertheless bears certain (inherent) values.<sup>5</sup> This problem lies more in the fact that (as the citation from Berkovits’ work suggests) the moralizing approach results in methodological and thematic narrowing in the research on the network of agents used by the state security, essentially as if the only genuine goal of an inquiry into this history were to “name” the “guilty” with the intention, whether admitted or not, of denouncing and pillorying them.

The foundation of moralizing in the case of scholarly inquiries is the use of the top-down model based on a sharp distinction between “power” and

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3 Cf. Sheila Fitzpatrick and Robert Gellately, “Introduction to the Practices of Denunciation in Modern European History,” *The Journal of Modern History*, 68 (1996): 765–66.

4 Gábor Gyáni, “Kollaboráció és a hatalom titka,” in *Az ügynök arcai. Mindennapi kollaboráció és ügynökkérdés*, ed. Sándor Horváth (Budapest: Libri, 2014), 43–44.

5 Richard T. Vann, “Historians and Moral Evaluations,” *History and Theory*, Theme Issue 43 (2004): 3–30.

“society.”<sup>6</sup> Accordingly, historians tend (retrospectively) to present the period between 1945 and 1990 as a struggle between the “good” and the “bad,” the “oppressed” and the “oppressors.” The picture, however, is hardly this black-and-white. For instance, even research on “informants” (both people who only occasionally provided reports and those who regularly worked as part of the established system) shows that this distinction does not hold up under scrutiny. There were innumerable links and relationships between the system and Hungarian society. Indeed, this is logical. In order to ensure that their subjects remain submissive, disciplined, and “normal,” first and foremost modern states must be able to keep the citizenry under observation and keep records of its acts. In addition to the various techniques and institutions that are used to enforce discipline, power cannot do without the cooperation its citizens, whether we are speaking of casual informers of those who violate its rules, deviants or non-conformists, or members of the more or less structured informers’ network of the (political) police.<sup>7</sup> It is quite clear that in authoritarian systems, which wish to exercise more than usual supervision over society, there is an even greater desire for this kind of participation on the part of the citizenry in the maintenance of power. This is true in part simply because, since any potentially critical organ of the press has essentially been silenced and the freedom of speech denied, the people in power have more difficulty obtaining reliable information about those “underneath” them.<sup>8</sup> From the perspective of the regime, this means that the much-feared *Stasi*, for instance, would not have been nearly as effective without the active participation of tens of thousands of citizens.<sup>9</sup> From the perspective of society, this means essentially that people were coopted and made part of the mechanisms of their own surveillance.<sup>10</sup> As Corey Ross noted with regards to the GDR, “the state did not so much rule *over* society as *through* it.”<sup>11</sup>

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6 This is by no means true exclusively for conditions in Hungary. Jens Gieseke, „Staatssicherheit und Gesellschaft – Plädoyer für einen Brückenschlag,” in *Staatssicherheit und Gesellschaft Studien zum Herrschaftsalltag in der DDR*, ed. idem (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011), 7–22.

7 Fitzpatrick and Gellately, “Introduction”, 759–63.

8 Robert Gellately, “Denunciation in Twentieth-Century Germany: Aspects of Self-Policing in the Third Reich and the German Democratic Republic,” *The Journal of Modern History*, 68 (1996): 931–33, 966–67.

9 Paul Betts, *Within Walls: Private Life in the German Democratic Republic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 23, 49.

10 Robert Gellately, “Denunciation as a Subject of Historical Research,” *Historical Social Research* 26, no. 2 (2001): 20.

11 Corey Ross, *The East German Dictatorship: Problems and Perspectives in the Interpretation of the GDR* (London: Arnold, 2012), 63.

If we wish to further a more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon at hand (rather than pass judgment on the people involved), we would definitely do better to regard the network of agents as a tool of the everyday exercise of power and a medium of communication. There are innumerable ways of studying the acts of agents, from examination of contemporary documents produced about and by the agents to interviews with agents themselves. Naturally, active informants did not reflect in their reports on their endeavors. In general, functionaries of the state security offices assessed and interpreted the work of the people who were members of the network. The interviews gave the former agents a chance to speak about how they remembered their activities, though of course one must keep in mind that whatever statements they made were products of memory acts, retrospective constructions that were to a large extent determined by the circumstances under which they were recollected, the attitude of the person retelling his or her memories at the time, and so on. Furthermore, in this case the *gap*<sup>12</sup> between the narrating subject and the narrated subject in the memoirs or autobiographies is inevitably much more emphatic, since the *former* agent (who is, in other words, no longer an agent) is the person conjuring the figure of the agent from the past.

In this essay I examine recollections that active members of the agent network wrote at the request or order of the state security (auxiliary materials that the operational officers used in training). Among the documents of the secret police of the period of state socialism in Hungary there are four such texts: two reports found in a dossier entitled “A network man’s recollections of his own secret work,” one dated May 27, 1958, the other dated May 28, 1958;<sup>13</sup> a text entitled “Dear Friend! The recollections of an agent,” which bears the initials T. M. and was written sometime around 1960;<sup>14</sup> and a recollection entitled “How I saw it. Anonymous notes from an abandoned apartment,” written in 1969–70 by an agent who went by the code-name “Koroknai.”<sup>15</sup>

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12 István Dobos, *Autobiographical Reading*. Spectrum Hungarologicum, vol. 3 (Jyväskylä–Pécs: University of Jyväskylä, 2010), 9.

13 Állambiztonsági Szolgálatok Történeti Levéltára (hereafter: ÁBTL) 4.1. A-3253.

14 ÁBTL 4.1. A-3783.

15 ÁBTL 4.1. A-2103.

## *Us and Them*

The texts in question here constitute only one possible world<sup>16</sup> of the network of the state security, though this is perhaps their principal merit: they shed light on the functioning of this world from a perspective that one does not find in other documents. They contain the remarks of agents who had been working in the service of the state for a long time and who reflect explicitly on their work as agents. Thus, the narrators provide narratives only they could provide, narratives that are, given the circumstances of the narrators, genuine and are not found, or are found only in an implicit and highly embedded form, in the reports they and other agents submitted. These narratives can offer some understanding of the stresses and demands involved in the execution by the agents of the tasks they were assigned, tasks that were considered simple by the case officers (“*tartótiszt*”, the state security officers who were responsible for the reports of an informant) who assigned them, whether we are speaking of obtaining a manuscript, coming to a meeting, or authoring a report. In addition to providing insights into the everyday workings of the network and the ways in which agents themselves experienced life as part of this network (i.e. the construction of the aforementioned “possible world”), the recollections also help further our understanding of collaboration with the secret police and in general the dictatorial system. In this article I examine the documents in question primarily from the latter perspective.<sup>17</sup>

For T. M., the author of “Dear Friend,” his recruitment must have been a decisive experience, since the description of it comprises almost half of the text of his recollections. This description sheds light on how the “candidate” experienced his apprehension by the authorities, the interrogation (which was like a prelude to his recruitment), and, finally, his recruitment. For some time, he did not actually know what was happening to him, and when he finally did begin to understand what they were asking of him, he was not particularly opposed. Indeed, on the contrary he was eager to bring the whole process to an end. (The fact that he was in a hurry to meet with the ambulance in order to be able to take his sick children to the hospital played a role in this.) Later, however, he recounts the “troubled and unpleasant months” following his recruitment, when for a long time he felt like an “ethical corpse.”

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16 Jerome Bruner, *Actual minds, possible worlds* (Cambridge–London: Harvard University Press, 1986).

17 I have analyzed these texts in greater detail elsewhere: Tibor Takács, *Besúgók a besúgásról. Ügynök-nisszaemlékezések a Kádár-korszakból* (Budapest: L'Harmattan, 2013).

There are signs in the other recollections that initially having accepted the role of denouncer left the agents with a feeling of moral trepidation and they were troubled by doubts concerning the ethics of their work as “snoops.” As one reads in the report of May 28, 1958, “when a beginner starts to work, he is full of inhibitions, fears, and ethical scruples. He thinks that what he is doing in his work is the most scandalous act one could commit. He does not trust his contact, and he ponders how to free himself from the ‘burden’ that ‘weighs him down.’” The most effective means of doing this was “de-conspiring,” i.e. the person who had been enlisted would inform the people around him that he had been enlisted. “There is a decisive moment at the beginning of the position: the first inner impulse of someone who becomes a secret employee is the thought that he can only free himself from ‘ethical slavery’ if everyone discovers his secret—he drives away anyone who is burdened with sin in order to avoid causing him harm. This is a kind of obsession with the protection of one’s integrity, and it is coupled with a compulsion to speak, which the beginner hopes will liberate him from his inhibitions.” The case officer who maintained ties with the author of the report, however, made him understand “that every word spoken, every bit of chatter would destroy me ethically, for no matter where I went to complain, they would cast me out with the greatest disgust.”

As a means of assuaging their ethical anxieties and mollifying their inner fears, the agents could create new identities for themselves, separate from their former selves, a kind of informer “I,” who in their minds would not entirely displace their former, ethical selves. This was made a bit easier by the use of a code-name, which would allow an informer to perform his or her tasks as a member of the network of the security services almost as if in secret from him or herself. From this perspective, the fact that, as of the 1950s, agents were not designated with numbers or letters, but rather with actual code-names was of tremendous significance. We cannot know whether this was one of the purposes of this change, but it unquestionably made it easier for the people involved to accept roles as informers and regard their informing selves as separate identities. We also cannot know whether it was thanks to this psychological strategy or not, but whatever the explanation, in time the agents managed to get over their initial concerns and at least by the time they were recording their recollections the conflict between the person referred to by the code-name and the citizen designated by his or her actual name did not seem to cause any problem. The doubts and ethical concerns they initially had had were distant memories, which they could recall, but which, by the time they were writing them down, clearly

no longer bothered them too terribly. Instead, they felt that their “normal” lives came into conflict with the roles they played when they went by their actual names, which they did in the interests of being able to perform tasks as part of the state security services. In other words, the principal problem for the agents was not the activities in which they had engaged as denouncers, but rather the fact that—in order to perform these activities—they had had to appear to be enemies of the system.

The author of the report dated May 28, 1958 complained that he had to show two faces to the world: “One was the face presented to the bosses at the offices, whose complete trust I had to have in order to be able to do my work properly. They regard me as an individual with a progressive spirit. But there is another layer at the establishment whose ‘favor’ I cannot lose, because they will spread the rumor that one must be suspicious of me, because I am a communist who has gone wild. This fraternization, however, must be superficial. I must make them think that because of my position I fear and avoid committing any and all unguarded statements or acts. Then I can count on their well-intentioned sympathies.” This duplicity caused problems in the informers’ private lives as well: “My wife was very perturbed when an enemy element came to the apartment and, right in front of her, alas, what a flavorful reactionary speech I held, how fiery my ‘counter-revolutionary’ mood was! And then, again among colleagues, on another occasion I resembled a good, honest, conscientious worker.” T. M. complained at length to his “dear friend” of how, because of his work as an agent, he again had to become part of a social life that had already dispersed: “I had to learn about the interests of many people and understand the spirit of their thoughts, which at times were obsessive, so that we would be able to converse coherently and in a manner that was interesting to me.” Similarly, “Koroknai” only met, whether regularly or sporadically, with former associates from the Independent Smallholders’ Party and people with whom they shared a similar mentality when it was in the interests of the work he did in the defense of the state. After 1956, the only change that took place was that he was able to represent the politics of the Communist Party openly and was not compelled to dissemble (“I found myself in a political stance in which there was no chance of misunderstanding between my official work and my tasks in the defense of the state,” as he wrote).

Complaints about tedious socializing or having to play the part of an enemy of the system can be also understood as tools with which the people in question freed themselves of moral reservations. The authors of these narratives seem to

have striven to distance the target individuals from them: clearly it was much easier for them to perform their tasks if they observed not normal, honest people (as they fancied themselves), but rather the enemy. This stance was necessary if they were not going to regard the work they were performing for the state as snooping or denunciation, in short as betrayal. After all, one can only betray people with whom one shares an allegiance, people with whom one forms an “us,” but as far as the agents were concerned, the people they had observed or informed against were not part of this “us,” but rather were members of a “them.” This attitude was common among agents, as indeed the case of László Borsányi also shows. One of Borsányi’s principal tasks as an agent who later became a successful ethnographer and anthropologist was to keep the participants in the “Indian camps” under observation (it is ironic that later, as a scholar, Borsányi dealt with the culture of North American Indians). Although he himself was a regular participant in the camps, in his reports he does not refer to himself as one of the camp members, but rather recreates himself as a university student of ethnography, thereby creating a kind of textual world (at least) in which he was not betraying his “own.” In his case, the agent and the camp member should not be conflated, while “the position of the agent and the role of the scholar can be reconciled—at least according to the logic of power [at the time]—and indeed the role of Indian, free of contradictions, emerges as the only possible variation to the parallel life of the scholar and the agent.”<sup>18</sup>

One could reformulate this more explicitly by saying that the authors of the recollections did not regard themselves as snoops or denouncers, but rather as spies. What is the difference? According to Karol Sauerland, the denouncer is someone who passes on information about someone to an institution of power and in doing so may well bring grief to the person on whom he or she informs. The denouncer may act out of personal motives or in response to an assignment. Among the latter one finds those who worked as part of the network employed by the state security (for whom a number of colloquial terms were invented, such as snoop or brick). The reports they submitted, of course, were only cases of “denunciation” if they caused injury or harm to others. In contrast, the spy arrives as an outsider among people who represent the enemy in order to gather information that is important to the people with whom he shares an allegiance. In order to infiltrate this group, he must wear a figural mask. He must pretend to be one of “them,” and this requires considerable preparation and

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18 Kata Horváth, “A Borsányi név. A politikai és a tudományos megfigyelés határai,” *anBlok* 3 (2009): 37.

involves significant risk. While the terms denouncer and snoop bear negative connotations, in general the spy is presented and regarded a figure worthy of admiration, even a genuine hero. According to Sauerland, the person who was member of the network of the state security can hardly be considered a spy, for even if he did wear a guise, he did not arrive from the outside, but, on the contrary, moved from the inside towards the outside, and however much he may identify with those who give him his tasks, he will never become a stranger who was accepted from the outside.<sup>19</sup> Of course, from the perspective of the agents who were looking back on their careers, this last contention is irrelevant, since the question of how outsiders regarded the work of the people who had been part of the network was not the issue. The question, rather, was how the agents looked back on the work they had performed. It is not hard to understand that they preferred to regard themselves as spies who had been exposed to manifold dangers among the enemy instead of snoops who had skulked around in the wake of their friends and acquaintances in search of secrets.

There are innumerable signs in the recollections indicating which “side” the narrators put themselves on and the perspective from which they interpreted their lives as informers. For instance, in the report of May 27, 1958 one finds the following remark: “I regard the current tasks as good. Accomplishable, the details can also be thoroughly elucidated, because the active enemy stands opposite *us*.” The author of the report dated May 28 made a list of people who spoke in a striking manner of “denouncers” and “snoops,” noting, “I found that in almost 100 percent of the cases anyone who spoke like this was one of *our agents!*” T. M. wrote the following to the addressee of his letter: “I trust you to decide how much you make use of it, how much you use in the interests of attaining *our common goals*.” Elsewhere, he wrote, “I am not a genius, but perhaps I can determine whether someone whom I have known for more than ten years and an essay that I heard and read are useful *to us* or not.” While in the previous citations, the emphasis is mine, in this case the agent himself felt that it was important to underline the word “*nekünk*” (to us), thereby drawing emphasis to his perception that he was one of the people who worked in the defense of the state. “Koroknai” referred to the example set by two journalists in order to demonstrate that the motivations for the people who worked as part of the network were at times very different. For one of them, secret collaboration was

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<sup>19</sup> Karol Sauerland, *Harminc ezüst: Beszűgások és árulások*, trans. Péter Várnai (Budapest: Helikon, 2001), 249–58.

just a tool, the price he had to pay, as it were, in order to be able to travel abroad and work as a reporter in the West. The other, in contrast, genuinely devoted himself to the defense of the state (and the system in general). The first “works for us,” “Koroknai” wrote, while the second “is our man.”

Thus, the people who worked as part of the network saw themselves as devoted followers of the socialist system who had become close to the communist party independently of their recruitment. This is perhaps the most striking in the case of “Koroknai.” For him, recruitment was only a stage on his path to the Communist Party, a path he had set out on of his own free will. Though he had been one of the local leaders of the Smallholders’ Party, he had approached the secretary of the Hungarian Workers’ Party in Debrecen at his own initiative, informed him that he wanted to work together with the party, and sought his assistance. It was not important to him how or where he would serve. If, for instance, he were asked to work as an informer, in the service of the secret police, then so be it. He did not even go into detail concerning the process of recruitment. His description suggests that it was little more than a simple conversation with the political police, who had asked him whether he wanted to work for them, and he had replied yes. Whether this description is accurate or not we cannot know. We can only be certain that after having worked as member of the network for some ten or twenty years, “Koroknai” and his associates saw themselves, the work they had performed, and the people on whom they had informed according to the outlines sketched above. When we conjure our past, we do so in a manner that ensures that it will be consistent with our knowledge, sentiments, attitudes, etc. at the moment of recollection, and this helps sooth and even extinguish the sense of discomfort (what is referred to as cognitive dissonance) that we may feel because of the conflict or tension between thoughts or ideas we may once have had and thoughts or ideas we have now. In simple terms, we have a tendency, when looking back on the past, to think of ourselves as having always had ideas and views similar to the ideas and views we have at the retrospective moment. This is not necessarily a deliberate form of dishonesty so much as it is a mental effort that helps us interpret our lives as a coherent whole.<sup>20</sup>

In the texts under discussion, in any case, one finds many indications that existence as an informer helped the narrators deepen and strengthen their

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20 Daniel L. Schacter, *The Seven Sins of Memory: How the Mind Forgets and Remembers* (Boston–New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2002), 138–49.

commitment to the system. The author of the report dated May 27, 1958 writes expressly of his development in the ten years that he spent working for the state security, in the course of which, “coming from the borderlands of a worldview with a different direction,” he came so close to “the socialist ideology” that he was willing to put the needs of the party before the interests of family. (In 1954, for instance, because of his work as agent he left his family for three months. As he noted, he would not have been willing to do this in 1949.) One does not find the same kind of continuity in T. M.’s narrative, but according to the methodological introduction added as an afterthought, the narrative provided a good “mirror of the thoughts and feelings that arise in someone in the wake of our work. It is also proof of how, in the maintenance of the network, proper guidance can bring the agent—mistakes he has committed notwithstanding—closer politically, and in the end the agent becomes one of the enduring supporters of our people’s democratic system.”

This comment calls our attention to an essential fact, namely that the network was not merely a tool with which information was gathered, it was also a tool with which people were indoctrinated, since the conversion, as it were, in the course of his work as an informer (or even as a consequence of this work) of someone who was regarded as an enemy of the system into someone who supported the system was a significant achievement. According to the internal affairs commands regarding the network, the case officer was supposed to indoctrinate the agent.<sup>21</sup> The officer was charged not simply with the tasks of training and guiding the agent, but also with his or her political indoctrination. According to one study written for state security officers in the case of an agent who hailed from enemy circles and against whom compromising or incriminating evidence had been used in order to leave him or her little choice but to enlist, “the ultimate goal was to change their worldview and make them understand and accept Marxist-Leninist ideology.” This of course was the most ambitious goal, but the officer at the very least had to manage to make the informer grasp that “the people’s democracy is the only system and the dictatorship of the proletariat the only just form of social life that ensures the welfare of the majority. One

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21 ÁBTL 1.11.5. 2-3/6/1955. A belügyminiszter 6. sz. parancsa az államvédelmi szervek ügynöki munkájának alapelvei című instrukció kiadásáról, February 9, 1955; ÁBTL 1.5. 2-10/94/1956. A belügyminiszter 94. sz. parancsa az államvédelmi szervek ügynöki munkájának alapelvei című okmány kiadásáról, October 8, 1956; ÁBTL 4.2. 10-21/33/1958. A belügyminiszter 33. sz. parancsa az államvédelmi szervek ügynöki munkájának alapelvei című okmány kiadásáról, December 5, 1958; ÁBTL 4.2. 10-21/5/1972. A belügyminiszter 005. sz. parancsa az állambiztonsági szervek hálózati munkájának alapelveit tartalmazó szabályzat kiadásáról, April 5, 1972.

must nurture love of the socialist homeland in him, which is the most elevated and most righteous form of patriotism.”<sup>22</sup>

### *Me and Us*

As is apparent, for the people who were recalling their lives as agents, the fact that they had had to inform on people was not a source of displeasure. Rather, it was the fact that their bosses had not regarded them as people who were on their side and therefore had not trusted them. The author of the report dated May 27, 1958 was very upset when at a meeting his case officer’s superior said the following about the information he had provided: “This is something. Get information like this, then we’ll be alright. But if you don’t get information like this, then you can lie down at our feet and swear that you are our man, but we won’t believe you.” “Koroknai” also complained a great deal about how for a long time the case officers treated him as an enemy, “like someone who had been accused, though the accusation remained unspoken.” This explains in part why he was also displeased by the warning he was given by the member of the secret police who recruited him: “do not let anyone learn of your conspiring, for it would bring great shame on you if people were to know of our relationship.” The agent envisioned the development of a “principled” relationship, since he regarded himself as someone who stood on the side of the defense of the state, while the officer saw him as an enemy who had been compelled to serve as an informer. Yet, as he put it, “by the time the counter-revolution broke out I looked on the authorities like Endre Ady looked on God: my concern is your concern...”<sup>23</sup> He regarded his private life and the work he did in the service of the state security as a unified whole: “The nature of my work so closely resembled the nature of my secret tasks, they intersected at so many points that I was able to understand the whole thing as a single unified progression. I likened myself to streams part of which flows underground, as some subterranean streams do.”

The signs suggest that this was a general problem, and in time the internal affairs leadership noticed this too. According to a 1968 summary on the agent

22 ÁBTL 4.1. A-3087. József Muzslai and Ottó Szélpál, *Az ügynökség vezetésének és nevelésének alapelvei és módszerei* (Budapest: BM Tanulmányi és Módszertani Osztály, 1957), 37.

23 The citation is from the last stanza of a poem by twentieth-century Hungarian poet Endre Ady entitled *A kímérák Istenéhez*, or “To the God of Chimeras”: “My concern is your concern / For if you do not keep your faithful / no one will believe in you in time: / God, Secret, draw your sword!” *Ady Endre összes versei* (Budapest: Szépirodalmi, 1967), 375.

network of the state security services, “in general it can be stated that we do not know well enough the people who are among the first whom we expect to uncover and bring an end to enemy activities. In practice, this means, for instance, that often we entertain doubts in our assessments of the reliability and trustworthiness of the agents who maintain direct relationships with the enemy.”<sup>24</sup> We do not know how much the situation changed after this.

The use of terminology by the narrators also clearly indicates that they saw themselves as soldiers who served in defense of the system, since they referred to themselves not as “members of the network” or “agents,” but rather as *secret* (in some cases *external*) employee. As of 1972, the term “secret employee” („*titkos munkatárs*”) served as a designation for one of the categories of people who were active as part of the network, though all of the texts in question here were written well before this, thus clearly the authors were not using the term in this sense. Towards the end of the 1960s, the suggestion was made to use the term secret colleague instead of network member, since the relationship of the agents to the state security services “was decisively founded on patriotic conviction.”<sup>25</sup> It is perhaps not coincidental that in 1968 (i.e. at roughly the same time) the state security of the German Democratic Republic also changed the official term that was used for informers from “Geheimer Informator” (secret informer) and “Geheimer Mitarbeiter” (secret colleague) to “Inoffizieller Mitarbeiter,” or unofficial colleague. This change was motivated by the realization that people did not like to identify themselves as denouncers, but they were able to interpret cooperation in the defense of the state and the social order as responsible and respectable work. Also, the term “colleague” implied that the officers and the informers worked together as (almost) equal partners.<sup>26</sup> Clearly, the members of the state security services in Hungary also would have like to have thought this.

The narrators of the retrospectives regularly referred to the state security employees designated in the official phraseology as case officers as their (higher) associates, or contacts. Presumably, the operatives did not use the expression case officer in front of the agents, since the term in Hungarian (“*tartótiszt*”) would have been associated with keeping animals, and the agents would have

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24 ÁBTL 1.11.10. A Belügyminisztérium III. Főcsoportfőnöksége ügynöki hálózata, a hálózati munka fejlődése és feladatai, December 11, 1968 (II. sorozat, 60. doboz).

25 ÁBTL 1.11.10. Jelentés. A BM állambiztonsági szervek hálózata, a hálózati munka feladatai, July 12, 1968 (II. sorozat, 60. doboz).

26 David Childs and Richard Popplewell, *The Stasi: The East German Intelligence and Security Service*, (Basingstoke–London: Macmillan, 1996), 83. Jens Giesecke, *The History of the Stasi: East Germany's Secret Police, 1945–1990* (New York–Oxford: Berghahn, 2014), 79–80.

found this less than flattering. (One can imagine how unflattering they would have found it had they learned that the officers often used the term “gopher” to refer to them.)<sup>27</sup>

Essentially, the agents regarded the state security officers as colleagues (T. M. referred to them as colleagues many times in his letter). The only difference between them, according to the agents, was that the officers openly served the state, while the agents did so undercover. This, however, did not mean that the relationship between them was always harmonious. Almost all of the agents complained that the case officers did not obey the basic rules of conspiratorial work. Clearly the agents were more sensitive to this because they were the ones at risk. The principal source of potential danger was the arrangement of meetings, especially if a meeting was held in a public place and not a private apartment. In the case of the latter, if the superior did not arrive in time this could be a source of trouble. “Many times I waited for hours, and it was particularly difficult not to draw attention to myself and watch and wait for the possible arrival of my contact,” writes the author of the report dated May 28, 1958. He added, “I had to take the stairs around our apartments many times before the contact arrived. In particular, before October 23, 1956 almost every apartment was on the fourth or fifth floor.” Reading the agents’ dossiers, one realizes how little one appreciates the trials and tribulations endured by the informers...

In the case of T. M., it is particularly clear that he regarded himself as significantly more important and more intelligent than the people who had engineered his recruitment and his later contacts. (Even the person to whom he addressed his letter was not an exception.) This occasionally gave rise to comic contradictions in his recollections. For instance, before 1953 he had still been angered by the fact that he had to deal with insignificant trivialities, but after 1953 he was angry because the case officers had warned him not to insist on grappling with so many things at once. Before 1953, he was grieved by the fact that he had to write reports on the public mood, whereas in 1956 it bothered him that his superiors did not heed his reports on the general mood. But T. M. was not the only agent who from many perspectives was more Catholic than the pope (or more communist than Lenin, as it were). All of the retrospective narratives contain episodes in which the agents allegedly knew better than their superiors what they should do and how they should do it. In the report dated

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27 ÁBTIL 1.11.10. Jelentés. A BM állambiztonsági szervek hálózata, a hálózati munka feladatai, July 12, 1968 (II. sorozat, 60. doboz).

May 28, 1958, for instance, one finds the following contention: “sometimes, in unusual cases I had to work according to a preplanned method. If something didn’t go according to the plan, my contact was always angry at me. When I told him that if he was going to get so angry when things didn’t go according to plan it would be more expedient to familiarize the enemy with the plan and hold a rehearsal, well, he delivered such a strident philippic that for some time I could hardly stand on my own two feet. And I lost my critical ‘bravery.’”

The agents drew a distinction between themselves and their contacts on the basis of how they had held their ground during the 1956 Revolution, as well. As T. M. wrote when reflecting on how he had seen the man who had recruited him on a bus during the tumultuous days of the uprising, “outside all kinds of kids armed with pistols were taking the law into their own hands, but I still had to be at my post, indeed then more so than ever, but there were no tanks protecting me, nor did I have the sense of security created by knowing you have the possibility of retreat.” In other words, he was superior to the members of the secret police, who fled and left him on his own with no instructions or guidance. As he noted, “after 23 October no one with whom I could have spoken rationally or answered my telephone calls [...] in 1952 it was easy to give orders, but in the fall of 1956 at least they should have given some information regarding the circumstances. They didn’t.” The members of the secret police took flight, while he had to stay, the difficult circumstances notwithstanding, to save what could be salvaged. It is quite clear who he was thinking of when he asked the question, “and 1956. Who stood their ground better?”

“Koroknai’s” narrative also reveals that even in the most trying times he continued to submit reports, though for him this represented the community of fate and common stance he shared with the officers. According to his account, though he did not know exactly where they were, he maintained continuous contact with his connections, speaking with them three times a day on the phone. “I also knew that the leaders had fled. I knew that they too were afraid, though we never spoke of this.” In other words, even surrounded by danger, the agents knew their duties and saw to their tasks, which made their leaders look even worse for having fled. The differences between the two narratives notwithstanding, “Koroknai” and T. M.’s accounts of 1956 were based on a similar model: in both narratives, “we” (in the case of “Koroknai,” the secret agents and their contacts, in the case of T. M., only the agents) referred to the people who had stood their ground, and the significance of this act was augmented by the fact that “they” (the leaders of the state security services, or in

the case of T. M.'s recollections the officers of the secret police in general) had not braved the dangers, but rather had fled.

The authors of the recollections preferred to perceive the relationship between agent and case officer as something more than a simple official relationship.<sup>28</sup> The author of the May 27, 1958 report envisioned the ideal contact as someone who would be like a stern but understanding father, who would insist on the proper execution of the tasks and methodically indoctrinate the agent, but who at the same time who takes an interest in the agent's family life, for instance. (This father figure soon gave the agent—who was struggling with serious financial problems—a significant amount of money, he was able to get a ticket to the Hungarian-English soccer match, or he took the agent to visit his mother in a car owned by the office.) One finds traces of this in the report of May 28. The case officers were not always just or consistent (in comparison with one another), but they loved their “children,” i.e. the agents who could have learned from them: “One was never on time, the other always nervous, a third was angry because I had gone to the meeting in spite of the fact that I was sick, while another did not accept my illness as an excuse. There was one who urged me to get the person under observation to drink so that I could learn more from him, and another who thought it was disrespectful of me if I was tipsy after having completed a task. I was also disparaged for going to the bathroom on the occasion of a meeting. Nonetheless, *I learned a great deal* from each contact, and I sense that *they were fond of me*. I also think back on all of them with a *warm heart*” (my emphasis).

“Koroknai” sensed the solicitude behind the scolding: “looking back on the criticisms [made by the contacts], I think that I badly needed them, especially because neither the people around me nor my superiors have regularly shown value for my work or my conduct.” In other words, it was important to him to have someone pay attention to what he was doing, and the assessments helped him become a better person. However, he preferred to see the case officer not as a father-figure, but as a friend. On one occasion he wrote the following: “a long time ago, sixteen years ago, a political officer came looking for me in my apartment. I was not at home. When I returned home, my wife used the following phrasing to ensure that our little boy would not understand: a friend of yours was here. At the time, this was a code-word. Over the course of the years it acquired meaning and no longer had to be used in quotations marks.”

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28 This was true of the informers for the *Stasi* as well: Betts, *Within Walls*, 46–47.

On the basis of his narrative, in order for this to happen it was necessary for the state security officers to become uncertain as a consequence of 1953, the dissolution of the independent secret police, and the political changes that took place following Stalin's death. The agent could only sense that the contacts were no longer working according to prefabricated schemes, but rather were brooding, which altered the nature of the meetings as well. No longer did they resemble interrogations in which the agent had to provide an official account, rather they were more as if "two people were conversing in a room." This changed the agent's relationship to the case officer: "I felt as if I were working not only in the service of a political view, but was also personally helping the people who maintained a relationship with me in their work. And I used all my abilities to help them. I remember, once I had a contact who was old and too slow in the head to understand what was going on around us at the time. I have never been as attentive in preparing my reports as I was with him. I wanted him to be able to hold his ground as well as he possibly could in front of his superiors. I think of him with respect and fondness to this day." T. M. had similar sentiments. At the beginning of his letter he makes the following impassioned complaint: "During those ten years—oh, how many times did I speak about this to deaf ears—I missed friendship more than anything else. I worked together with antipathetic colleagues, indifferent colleagues, and congenial colleagues, but I was always missing a friend." This is why he was so joyful and satisfied to be able to refer to his contact at the time, the addressee of his letter, as his friend.

This all draws attention to one very important factor. It is quite clear that the authors of the retrospective narratives did not regard themselves merely as parts of a network, but rather considered themselves colleagues—external, working in secret—of the state security services. However, apart from the declarations they made when they were recruited (the legal weight of which was debatable), the only thing that tied them to the machinery of the state security (which for them was obscure and vague in its outlines) was the case officer. The relationship between them and their case officers decisively shaped the attitude of the informer towards his work and his commitment to the system. One notices a similar phenomenon in the case of the unofficial collaborators with the *Stasi*. As far as they were concerned, the contact officer essentially embodied the institution, indeed to such a degree that they referred to their contact officers as "my *Stasi*."<sup>29</sup> This suggests

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29 Barbara Miller, *Narratives of Guilt and Compliance in Unified Germany: Stasi Informers and their Impact on Society* (London–New York: Routledge, 1999), 64.

that collaboration should not be understood as some abstract relationship between an individual and “the” power. This relationship had a personal side as well: from the perspectives of the collaborators, cooperating with the system or an institution of the system meant working together with someone, i.e. with another person.

One of the episodes recounted in “Koroknai’s” recollections shows that from the perspective of collaboration with the Soviet occupation forces and the communists the importance of personal relationships extended beyond the network of agents. As the editor of the journal *Debreczen*, a periodical of the Smallholders’ Party, he came into official contact with an employee of the Soviet embassy (which had its headquarters in Debrecen, which served as the temporary capital of the country) who worked as a censor. (Presumably this was Bela Ianovich Grygoriev, i.e. Béla Geiger, who had moved to the Soviet Union with his parents as an emigrant. This seems likely given that, according to the description, the conversation between them was held in Hungarian, without an interpreter.) In time, their relationship became personal and even amicable. In the course of their talks, “Koroknai” came to know a man who was cultured, wise, and always unperturbed, and he claimed that it was because of this acquaintance that as a politician and newspaper writer of the Smallholders’ Party he never made an anti-Soviet speech and never wrote an anti-Soviet article. He portrays the Soviet censor as a man of unimpeachable integrity, who he also later was able to regard as a stable point, drawing strength from his example, which strengthened his commitment to the system.

### *Me and Them*

The recollections of the agents share many affinities, perhaps the most significant of which are the authors’ perceptions of their relationships to the state security and their attitudes towards the work they performed as agents. These similar perceptions stem fundamentally from the fact that the agents in question found themselves essentially in the same situation at the moment when they were writing their recollections. Each of them had performed tasks as part of a secret network for years, presumably to the satisfaction of their superiors, as is indicated by the fact that they were asked to write about the experiences they had gained in the course of their work. This similarity in the circumstances in which they found themselves when looking back on their careers led them to adopt similar perspectives in their recollections and offer similar portrayals of the state security network. It is not clear, however, whether

or not the stances that emerge in these writings can be considered average, typical, or prevalent. Of course, this can perhaps never be determined with any degree of precision. In my view, however, the value of these recollections lies not in their statistical relevance. They are interesting and valuable as texts, thus the “scope” of the conclusions one can draw on the basis of them could perhaps best be determined by comparing them with the recollections written at the same time (in the Kádár era) by agents who found themselves in different positions. No such “control group” exists, however, as it is difficult to imagine that the authorities would have had someone write down his experiences who only reluctantly had agreed to serve as an informer, had quickly shunned the work because of moral scruples or for some other reason, or for whatever cause had proven useless as an agent. In the end, one cannot entirely exclude the possibility that the experiences of a reluctant or ineffective agent would have been useful to the state security services, but it seems unlikely that someone who was not eager to cultivate the best relationship with the political police would have accepted this task. Whatever the case, however useful they would be as additional methodological sources, to my knowledge no other recollections of former agents similar to those discussed above survived.

The situation, however, is not entirely hopeless. The narratives can be compared with a text that was written under the injunction of the political police, if perhaps under entirely different circumstances. The document in question is a confession written on March 22, 1957 by J. P., a man who was put on trial after 1956.<sup>30</sup> Proceedings were brought against the man primarily because of acts he had committed in the course of the events of the uprising, but he was also accused of having revealed his ties to the state security to others. The circumstances under which the document was written demonstrate that at the moment of composition J. P. was in an entirely different relationship with the organs of state security than the other four agents. He was not a respected agent who was considered useful, but rather a suspect accused of treason. (Given the nature of the text, it was not anonymous, but I will not include the name of the author here, since it would not contribute in any meaningful way to its significance in this context.)

The story begins with a description of his recruitment. In this description, the soon-to-be agent plays no role whatsoever as initiator. On the basis of the account, he agreed to cooperate only under pressure from the officers of the

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30 ÁBTIL 3.1.9. V-145842. 33–37. P. J. önvallomása, March 22, 1957.

secret police: “I was very afraid [...] that my family ties could cause me grief. So in order to prove that I thought differently, I agreed to follow their instructions.” (The principal goal of recruiting J. P. was to establish contact with his cousin, who had been sentenced to eight years in prison for having participated in underground organizational efforts in 1952, but who had escaped from a coal mine, where he had been serving time, in June 1955 and fled to the West. The agent was supposed to lure his cousin back to Hungary.)

In spite of the fact that the documents were written under very different circumstances, the confession bears many similarities to the recollections of the less reluctant agents. After having been recruited, J. P. was also troubled by moral misgivings for having accepted the role of a denouncer. His contacts attempted to dispel these anxieties by insisting that he was not serving as a denouncer, but rather was only providing characterizations. It is not clear, on the basis of the text, whether this explanation provided him with any solace or not. It is revealing, however, that he almost compulsively emphasized that by submitting “characterizations,” he did not wish to malign anyone. He strove to say good things about the people he was asked to inform on. But he also emphasized that he did not intend to mislead the secret police either. His remarks suggest uncertainty, which stems from the fact that he sought to meet a variety of divergent expectations at once, but he did not know how to present himself in the best colors to the people to whom his confession was addressed. This tension is palpable in his relationship to the primary target, his cousin who had escaped to the West. On the one hand, he was not willing to attempt to persuade his cousin to return to Hungary and thereby betray him, while on the other he held his cousin responsible for the position in which he found himself.

J. P. also emphasized that he established and maintained relationships with the people he kept under observation only because he had been ordered to do so by the secret police. He was noticeably pleased if his superiors praised him or expressed satisfaction with his work, and he was also bothered when the case officers did not follow the most basic rules of conspiratorial work. Clearly as an agent, he did not know specifically what these rules were, but a bit of commonsense was enough for him to realize that if he received telephone calls from the police station and the meetings were being held at his place of work, those around him might well realize that he was in the service of the state security. As he said in connection with the letter that he was supposed to send to his cousin (which was dictated to him by one of the officers), such steps were not productive, since the addressee would be suspicious. And indeed he was

probably correct, his cousin probably was suspicious, for he never replied to the letter and never wrote to J. P. again.

In J. P.'s account, 1956 understandably could not be portrayed as a period of committed moral integrity in the face of armed opposition (as it had been described by T. M.), if for no other reason than simply because he had been arrested specifically for the acts he had committed during the revolution, but also because it was at this time that what the agent had feared the most had come to pass: more and more people had informed him that they knew about his ties to the state security. From a certain perspective, however, his situation nonetheless bore affinities with the situation of the other four agents. First, even after the revolution had broken out, he continued to “work,” though in his case this meant little more than routine execution of his responsibilities for a time (on October 24 he discussed a letter that he was supposed to send with his case officer). Second, and this is considerably more significant, he had a chance to experience abandonment: the county secret police fled the country and left him behind. Thus, he had to face the emerging threats and the possibility of being exposed on his own. His solution to the situation was to expose himself as someone who had worked for the secret police and try to win the goodwill of the revolutionaries.

J. P. did not use the expressions agent or case officer either, though he also did not refer to himself as a colleague of the officers, nor did he call the officers contacts. The position in which he found himself at the time of retrospection did not make it possible for him to regard the officers of the state security services as colleagues. In my view, this was not because in the eyes of his “colleagues” (or more precisely their colleagues) he was a man suspected of having committed counter-revolutionary acts. According to all signs, he did not even see a link between the state security that had been dissolved in 1956 and the people who were interrogating him, for even after his arrest, he was convinced that he had been detained because he had worked for the discredited secret police. The explanation, in my view, lies rather in the fact that J. P. conjured his memories under circumstances and at a time that did not make it possible for him to make his agent self an integral part of his identity. He could not proudly admit to having worked in the service of the state security, nor could he interpret the deeds he had committed as acts of spying on the enemy. Unlike the other four agents, the circumstances did not enable him to regard himself as anything other than a denouncer. While for the other four narrators the tension between their dual roles did not lead to a split in their psychological lives (at least not a lasting

split), for J. P., who found himself in far less auspicious circumstances, his work as an agent clearly caused serious inner crisis and suffering.

### *Conclusions*

The retrospective narratives under discussion here offer illuminating illustrations of the fact that the state security network was the shared product of “power” and “society”: in its organization, the secret police took the initiative, but in order for it to come into being they needed the cooperation of members of the citizenry who had been selected as candidates for recruitment. Research on ideological dictatorships has shown that among the motivations of these informers one finds notions of patriotism or ideological commitment, but most of the people involved were influenced by personal interest.<sup>31</sup> The informers and their superiors thus used one another, and also depended on one another. From the perspective of power, this meant that the informers contributed to the maintenance and functioning of the system and also that the need for the information they provided made the system dependent to some extent on them. This realization may have played a role, for instance, in the fact that—unlike the *Gestapo*—the *Stasi* strove to rely on the organized network of informers.<sup>32</sup> The institutionalization of informing, however, did not mean that personal, material or other considerations were not among the motivations of the unofficial coworkers of the East German secret police.<sup>33</sup>

The texts under discussion here paint a picture according to which the authors accepted the role of informer out of loyalty to the system and commitment to ideology. (Clearly, the authors did not consider it tactful to mention personal motives in narratives intended for their superiors.) This is the most apparent in “Koroknai’s” recollections. He had already offered his services to the Communist Party when he was recruited. However, this gesture could suggest another kind of motive. Perhaps as he bore witness to the creation of the one-party system, the Smallholder politician realized that if he wanted to remain politically active he would have to find new opportunities and new spaces

31 Fitzpatrick and Gellately, “Introduction”, 751; Gellately, “Denunciation as a Subject,” 23–24.

32 Idem, “Denunciation in Twentieth-Century Germany,” 956–59; Betts, *Within Walls*, 44–45.

33 Alon Confino demonstrates this in an excellent case study: “The Travels of Bettina Humpel: One Stasi File and Narratives of State and Self in East Germany,” in *Socialist Modern: East German Everyday Culture and Politics*, ed. Katherine Pence and Paul Betts (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2008), 133–54. Also see Betts, *Within Walls*, 46–47.

for action. The dictatorship offered him the role of informer, and he accepted it. His case suggests that, for the people who were part of it, the network of informers could serve as a tool for political participation in regimes in which there were few other such opportunities.<sup>34</sup> (In the Soviet Union under Stalin, for instance, letters in which people were denounced served as a tool with which control was exercised, nominally at least by common members of the citizenry, over people in power, a practice the roots of which went back to the time of the czars.)<sup>35</sup>

In my view, we may be better able to break from the moralizing narrative mode if we regard the acts of agents or “denouncers” as “a kind of citizen activity in their own right, one of the few powerful forms of agency available to them.”<sup>36</sup> Thus the network used by the state security services can be regarded as one of the tools of dialogue between power and society, of course a tool that power offered certain members of society, who either rejected this “opportunity” or made use of it, out of fear, compulsion, possible advantages in the future, etc. Whatever the case, we can examine the work performed by the informers as a social practice, as one of the forms of collaboration with the dictatorship (using the term collaborator to refer not only to people who cooperated with the forces of Soviet occupation, but more generally with the dictatorial system). Indeed, we can study it as an unusual form of collaboration, in part because an agent could be regarded as a collaborator in a legal sense, since his or her recruitment was an act of (admittedly precarious) legal weight, and in part because, given the essential nature of this form of collaboration, it had to remain a secret and thus obliged the agent to lead a double-life, at least for a time. Of course, this approach does not entirely exclude the possibility of passing ethical judgment, but it creates an appropriate foundation for a nuanced study of the state security network of the Bolshevik dictatorships.<sup>37</sup>

Nonetheless—and this is essential—the agents never referred to or thought of themselves as collaborators. They did not contextualize the services they

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34 Fitzpatrick and Gellately, “Introduction”, 752; Gellately, “Denunciation as a Subject,” 25.

35 Sheila Fitzpatrick, “Signals from Below: Soviet Letters of Denunciation of the 1930s,” *The Journal of Modern History* 68 (1996): 845–49; Vladimir A. Kozlov, “Denunciation and Its Functions in Soviet Governance: A Study of Denunciations and Their Bureaucratic Handling from Soviet Police Archives, 1944–1953,” *The Journal of Modern History* 68 (1996): 867–98.

36 Betts, *Within Walls*, 49.

37 See Sándor Horváth, “»Apa nem volt komcsi« – a mindennapi kollaboráció és az ügynökkérdés határai”, in *Az ügynök arcai. Mindennapi kollaboráció és ügynökkérdés*, ed. Sándor Horváth (Budapest: Libri, 2014), 7–37.

had provided in the complex relationship between power and society. Indeed, they draw no such clear distinction between the two in their narratives. They characterize their work and in general the work of the secret police as having been entirely in harmony with the society around them, or at least the society of honest workers, and something that was done in the interests of this society. In addition, they regarded the circles of the employees of the state security, whether people who worked openly for the state (the officers) or people who worked in secret (the agents), and the work they performed as a unified whole. One could say that they effaced entirely the border between “power” and “society,” and in doing so also effaced the border between officer and agent.

With the exception of the numerically small group of people who actively opposed the regime, everyone was compelled to cooperate with the communist system to some extent or to flee the country. Everyday life was shaped by various ways of relating to the regime. Perhaps, instead of speaking of collaboration, which implies a sharp dichotomy, it would be more productive to speak of various (and possibly diverging) degrees and forms of cooperation with the system.

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