

## Professional frictions among Hungarian and German secret agents within the Eastern bloc

Jobst Ágnes, *A Stasi működése Magyarországon - A keletnémet és a magyar állambiztonság kapcsolata 1955-1989*. Budapest: Jaffa Kiadó, 2015, 256 pp\*

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Eastern European state security organizations, which were more or less subordinated to Moscow, acted with shocking cruelty against their own citizenry. If they did not act in such a manner, then initial misunderstandings were often developing into strong disagreements among themselves. This was the case regarding the official relationship between Stasi and the Hungarian state security services. It is an illustrative example as the Stasi complained that Hungarian authorities have treated far too humanely a GDR family at the beginning of the 1980s. There have been several Hungarian authors up to now who have searched to process intricate communist legacies by concentrating on the past of certain secret agents and co-workers. As a consequence, the readership already had the possibility to read about interesting issues as infiltrated secret police spies in artist's or sportsmen's world or bugged living residences or about the well cached triangle connection between the nomenclature and ministry of internal affairs inclusively intelligence services and similar subjects. This list is enriched now by the latest research of Ágnes Jobst<sup>1</sup> as she is addressing a rather unexplored topic in her new book by presenting various hidden operations carried out by the

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\* Ágnes Jobst, *The functioning of the Stasi in Hungary – The relationship of the East German and Hungarian state security 1955-1989*. Budapest: Jaffa, 256 pp.

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<sup>1</sup> Ágnes Jobst was born in Budapest in 1959. She visited the Árpád High school in Budapest between 1974–1978. Jobst absolved teacher training by studying Hungarian language and literature combined with book science at the Eötvös Lóránd University from 1979 to 1984. She earned her PhD degree at the same university in the field of philology in 2007. After that she worked as librarian, museologist and was teaching media history at the Eötvös Lóránd University. Since 2003 she works as librarian at the Historical Archives of State Security Services in Budapest.

Stasi on the territory of Hungary. More precisely, the historian<sup>2</sup> deals with the relationship between the East German (Stasi) and Hungarian state security.

The photo of the cover page of the book with the partially accident-damaged Trabant is a successful attention getter. After a short introductory section the volume is separated into five main chapters with corresponding subdivisions as shown below: I. The splitting of Europe,<sup>3</sup> II. The cooperation between the state securities of the Hungarian People's Republic and the German Democratic Republic,<sup>4</sup> III. To go or to stay?,<sup>5</sup> IV. The Hungarian opening policy,<sup>6</sup> and finally V. The East Germans and Hungarian border opening.<sup>7</sup> Jobst's work also has an Appendix with the following subtitles: The organizational structure of 1989 of the East German Ministry for State Security (Ministerium für Staatssicherheit – Stasi), Pictures of the leading circles of the Stasi and finally Pictures of the members of the operative group of the Stasi in Hungary. After the next section (The list of book references) there are two additional practical parts (Notes and Name index), which are offering detailed references and orientation to persons, places and time.

The basis for argumentation of the author is mainly declassified intelligence source that is a valorous and immense archival material.

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<sup>2</sup> Ágnes Jobst has the following main research topics: - the international aspects of the East German state security collaboration, - press and history of public relations and the language of media, – the medical historical and historical aspects of history of civilisation.

<sup>3</sup> Subchapters of the first chapter are as follows: The iron curtain, The Hungarian section of the iron curtain, The division of Germany, The establishment of the political police of the German Democratic Republic and finally The closure of the inner German border and the Berlin Wall.

<sup>4</sup> Subchapters of the second chapter are as follows: The creation of the Hungarian residency in Berlin, Cooperation in the field of counter-intelligence and intelligence service and finally Cooperation in the field of operational technical improvements.

<sup>5</sup> Subchapters of the third chapter are as follows: The criminalization of border crossing, Another back home: refugees, immigrants or resettling people? Over the hills and far away, The operative group of the Stasi in Hungary, The "Balaton-brigade" and finally Problems in cooperation and Hungary through the eyes of the Stasi.

<sup>6</sup> Subchapters of the fourth chapter are as follows: The reform process, Decision on the breakdown of technical enclosures, The repercussions of the Hungarian opening in the GDR, The reception of the border opening in Austria and finally Joining the Geneva Convention on Refugees.

<sup>7</sup> Subchapters of the fifth chapter are as follows: The East German refugees and Hungarian authorities, Protest and picnic against the division of Europe, The impossibility of the protection of the western border, Wait and see attitude, The border opening, The consequences of the border opening in the GDR and finally Rundown.

Accordingly, Jobst examined the relevant documents of 1955 to 1989 of the Hungarian state security (ÁBTL) and Stasi (BstU). As stated in the introduction of the volume, the historian puts emphasis on various political factors, which generated the breakdown of the Iron Curtain as this red line leads to the first stage (the symbolic border opening) and then to the second stage, thus, the factual opening of the Hungarian-Austrian border. Jobst thinks and stresses that the suitable dealing with the situation of East German refugees was crucial concerning Hungary's international reputation and its internal transformation by the turnaround time of 1989/90. Indeed, it was a highly complicated task for Hungarian authorities to answer to a mixture of challenges and make the best decisions related to thousands of citizens who quit the GDR maybe forever with the confident hope to resettle in the Western World (pre-eminently in the FRG). Jobst states the following in the introduction: „After the responsible decision of the Hungarian political leadership, the issue of the East German asylum had a successful final outcome. With the opening of the western frontier of Hungary, it became possible to circumvent the Berlin Wall, and thereby a new era had begun in the European history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.”

The narrative of the book begins with the story of the eastern and western separation of Europe (and the world), continues to the emergence of the Iron Curtain and then the author includes various facts about the construction of the Berlin Wall. This is not the only sequence of the volume which makes the viewer consider the often too extensive historical accounts. Another example of this is the presentation of the changes and fine points of the asylum law. Such complex explanations are not necessarily directly related to the Stasi and its secret operations executed on Hungarian territory. Central Europe was a popular tourist destination for visitors all over the world and beside a high number of East Germans there were several West German citizens who were often spending their holidays in certain regions of Hungary. Therefore, it frequently happened that Germans of the two separated states (FRG and GDR) were coming into contact with each other on their vacations to Lake Balaton or other favourite locations. Officials of the former East German state have seen serious national risks in such spontaneous or pre-organized appointments of their citizens, because they were quitting the GDR on a massive scale. Beside the enormous loss of highly qualified personal and human capital they perceived such mass exodus strictly ideologically and tried to misuse German-German migration for propaganda purposes as well. Thus, Stasi agents intensively verified its

nationals in multifaceted clandestine operations and precast setups in order to artificially prevent by all means transmigration to the west.

However, spies of the Stasi were not only dispersed in Hungarian key regions, but they were also operating in other target areas within the Eastern bloc countries such as Bulgaria and Czechoslovakia. In spite of all that, the initial cooperation between the East German and Hungarian state security services was at first perfectly managed but, from the 1970s and especially in the 1980s there were repeatedly serious frictions between the two sides. In line with this, it gradually becomes clear that most of the undercover agents of the Stasi and their basic network in Hungary had been mainly commissioned with the task to prevent the escape of its citizens to the west. The name of the German operating secret unit in Hungary was the "Balaton-brigade". The historian focuses above all on this famous operational unit of the Stasi and step by step it comes out that the official observers and unofficial informants of the famous secret police were nearly all over the country, especially where East German citizens were spending their holidays. The Stasi had a conspiratorial apartment even in Pécs (the fifth largest city) located in the south-west of Hungary, close to the border with Croatia.

Although there are issues addressed as "Cellophane-69" and "Steam-68" in the blurb of Jobst's book, the reader will hardly receive further details about the letter opener device later in the text of the book. However, the issue is roughly concerned indirectly by the author and one can only read about the circumstance that German and Hungarian specialists of the interior ministry were consulting about electronic data processing and the utilization of the optical spectrum analyzer. Regardless of the imbalance between certain too short or too extensive accounts, it is to see that author searches to construct a bigger picture of the historical proceedings, backgrounds and she successfully collects highly scattered data into a harmonious whole or more precisely puts the various puzzles together in the frame of a complete book. More to the point, specific records and statistics related to the special subject cannot be traced neither in secret archives of Budapest nor Berlin, thus concerning the argumentation strategy of the historian presented in this volume it is to admit that it is a life's work. Following this, it is to observe that the language is rather subject-specific and the composition of the text lacks any kind of light reading material that could be of interest for the larger public.

Lake Balaton and its area are often addressed by author as it was the most desired excursion destination of German tourists from both

states. However, the relation among Stasi and Main Division State Security was developing into a strong conflict in the meantime. That happened mainly because of the intensive operation line of the German “Balaton brigade” in Hungary that was strongly focused on discovering and preventing escape attempts of its (GDR) citizens to the FRG. There was a case when the Stasi suddenly wanted to spy on fellow countrymen on houseboats from the lake, but the Hungarian interior ministry concisely refused to approve the proposal on the grounds that such constructions would be greatly conspicuous for other tourists, simply because such vehicles are quite atypical for the Balaton. Unfortunately the author only touches superficially on this attention-grabbing critical incident. It seems probable that this circumstance originates from the fact that relevant documents are missing as they were destroyed, or still undetected or even kept secret.

A permanent conflict among executives of the two state security agencies was because the East Germans considered that the Hungarian authorities were not doing enough in order to prevent the escape of GDR citizens to the FRG or other western destinations. Moreover, the Stasi accused the Ministry of the Interior and the Hungarian state of not being sufficiently cooperative to hand over all sensitive information about West German citizens (taking a holiday in Hungary) who were directly or indirectly helping to organize the flight of East Germans to the Occident. There were hundreds of people who were suspected of taking part in illegal border-crossing attempts at the end of the 1980s in Hungary and they were deported on a massive scale back to the GDR in order to be made responsible for their “punishable act”. Now it is time to learn about the rigorous criminalization of illegal border crossings as East German citizens caught on escape risked a prison sentence from two to five years in the GDR. Prosecution was considering as very aggravating factors if somebody was trying to leave the country in a group, was hiding in a car or was destroying the technical installations of the border protection staff.

Nevertheless, the Hungarian government merely granted permission for the activities of professional Stasi officers of the Balaton brigade. They not only authorized secret missions but also recruited civilians as agents and informants for the Stasi in Hungary. Such people gathered insightful information about relevant interactions without the consent of the Ministry of the Interior. Moreover, unofficial Stasi co-workers were collecting data on several occasions about crucial Hungarian domestic affairs as well, which were seen very suspiciously by officers of the Main Division State Security. Notwithstanding the above,

the German Balaton brigade was a rather complex network: a small part of Stasi informants already lived in Hungary before being officially commissioned or studied there getting jobs as language teachers or they were well-integrated in several other ways. As an example, there were more than 20 people in such positions from 1987 to 1989 around the Lake Balaton, whereas the majority of them arrived at the face on intermittent basis for special missions mainly during the summer peak tourist season. The operations of the German Stasi network in Hungary can be subdivided into certain aiming points as follows: most of the monitoring activities were made in the region of the Lake Balaton, then in Budapest (around 30%) and finally in other built up areas of the country (roughly 10%).

Indeed, Hungarian authorities were more indulgent concerning the above presented matter, because they did not want to destroy the outside image and the tourist industry of their own country through the complex risks by practicing surveillance against West German holiday-makers. Despite all the care taken, the Stasi remained continuously very curious about West German citizens as well, because they were actively helping East Germans to quit the GDR individually or in organised groups. Moreover, it can be also observed that the Hungarian side practiced a zero tolerance policy via Stasi officials' special desires concerning espionage on West German nationals. However, the Ministry of the Interior remained reluctant to spy on citizens of the FRG with the aim to make data transfer to the GDR. This circumstance was not the only mistrust among Stasi and local officials as Hungarian specialists were usually also criticized by the Eastern secret agency members to be no real experts in performing certain fine tasks in security issues. According to Jobst (interview about the book in the *Múlt-kor* magazine), the relationship between Stasi and Main Division State Security staff can be well characterized by another estimation of East German state security officers as they often spoke among themselves about their Hungarian counterparts as "chekists of the coffeehouse". It is readily identifiable that the reader learns quite a bit about the German Balaton brigade, but predominantly about particular issues such as: where they were delegated in Hungary, how many agents were involved in some clandestine operations, how much convertible currency they get for secret missions and what kind of official responsibilities were allocated to commissioned officers and civilian co-workers as well.

It makes sense that Jobst offers special summaries of several key figures, because this brings very close the events and people of that time

to the reader, but such significant details are at the very end of the book. The author introduces various undercover players of the period, for instance the public educator “David” who was taking landscape and nude photos in his spare time; - In turn he was recording a whole series of anti-communist graffiti in campsites and outbuildings for the Stasi. More to the point, there is the case of “Steffen”, who not only teaches mathematics but is also interested in foreign touristic services. He was recruited in 1969 by the Stasi and after an upgrade training course he was getting the managerial position of the East German travel agency in Budapest. However, the official status of “Steffen” or W.W. was that of an unofficial co-worker by the East German secret police being delegated in special missions abroad. Despite this status, “Steffen” belonged to the line of German experts in particular foreign affairs within internal circles of the Stasi. He had been tasked, among other things, with the operational observation of his own travel agency and adjacent branches, which covered the verification of all staff members, which also meant the observation of their leisure activities. Moreover, “Steffen” worked closely with the internal operative group of the Stasi that carefully followed the activities of West German travel agencies. Therefore, he was collecting relevant data about where the West German tourist offices were opening their branch offices in Hungarian key regions and reported about business-related operations as well. Finally, “Steffen” also informed the Stasi about current Hungarian political events. As he was spending most of the year abroad, “Steffen” allowed the Stasi to use his own apartment in Hungary as conspiratorial device for secret missions. “Steffen” was charged with the management of the East German travel agency of London beginning with 1977.

Perhaps another interesting codename is that of the dentist “Maca”. He was working as undercover agent for the Stasi in Sopronhorpács. Disappointingly, there are no further particulars about “Maca”, thus also this operative profile remains rather underexplored. One would also learn more about agents as ”Berger, Uwe” (U. S.), ”Dröse, Joachim” (N. H. ), ”Lubinski, Barbara” (M. B.), ”Paulsen, Rolf” (G. P.), ”Schwalbe, Horst” (H. F.) or concerning the ambiguous case of ”Wien, Ernst”. The reader can only guess why only a few facts about agents are disclosed. Outlines of officers are sometimes linked with interesting operative situations in a quite short narrative and yet other profiles such as ”Stern, Gertrude” (1933, R. L.) or „Thieme, Bernd” (1921, K.-E. P.) are described at some length. It may happen because of strict data protection regulations or missing archival material...

To sum up, it is noticeable that the volume can be used as proper tool in order to see behind previously “top secret” institutional structures of the communist regimes in Hungary and GDR. It becomes clear that there were relevant structural differences between the Stasi (which was independent of the ministry of internal affairs, being close to the Soviet centre) and Main Division State Security (was directly subordinated to the interior ministry). Likewise, one must not forget that the Stasi was a very powerful organisation in comparison to the Hungarian division and some other smaller eastern secret police agencies. The Stasi obtained far more financial resources and means as its counterparts in Central Europe. Certain shortcomings of the book related to the details of secret agent profiles or the shift of priorities concerning the detailed information flow about the asylum law are definitely not originating from an investigative slip-up by the author. Reading between the lines one realizes that Jobst is an expert concerning documents of the two secret services, which is proven by the well-constructed tables including meaningful and new findings. The well-chosen photos harmonize perfectly with the messages of the strictly non-fictional text. Accordingly, it would be interesting to read a more expanded version of the book or maybe a continuation of the story where the language of the narrative could be even more general and if possible literary-historical. Taken as a whole, it can be stated that the book is rather scientific because author seems to avoid bookish written language. Finally, this work gives precisely accurate information about particular historical conditions, thus, how the relation of the Stasi and the Hungarian state security organ really were, respectively how exactly German secret agents operated within the Balaton brigade. All this increases the present value of this special history book.

