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Politikai rendőrség a Rákosi-korszakban [Political Police in the Rákosi Era]. By Rolf Müller. Budapest: Jaffa, 2012. 240 pp.

Although the history of the political police in the 1950s remains a topic of intense interest, new archival findings struggle to find their way to the wider public and academic history books are seldom easily comprehensible, especially those that examine the organizational structures of governmental bodies. Belonging to the younger generation of Hungarian historians, *Rolf Müller* set out to write a volume regarding the political police in the Rákosi era summarizing the results of his research over the past 14 years on the history of the infamous organization. An employee of the Historical Archives of the Hungarian State Security, Müller has published several books and articles on the topic, though the present volume from the Jaffa Publishing House is designed and written in a youthful style to reach a wider audience. The challenge was complex: to publish a book about a contested era that is informal in style and has no footnotes in it, but at the same time remains authentic; and also to write the history of the political police precisely from the archival material they produced.

The author decided to choose well-known or interesting topics and episodes to serve as the main links for the structure: the problem of the exact name of the organization, the person of its notorious leader, Gábor Péter, and such *lieux de mémoire* as the Golden Team (the famous Hungarian football team in the 1950s featuring Ferenc Puskás), the White House (the notorious Interior Ministry building along the Danube in Budapest) and the dreaded black automobiles of the police. Throughout the book, Müller depicts the topic with flashes of frames, giving impressions rather than over-explaining. What is also detectable is the rich archival material that forms the background of the seemingly easy-going descriptions.

In the first part of the book the backdrop is depicted by listing the organizational transformations of the political police, and the reader is surprised to find that even the history of an organization can be both interesting and enjoyable. The genealogy traces back to (and even before) the end of the Second World War, as the author is firm in his opinion that “with respect to the political police, the Rákosi era started in January 1945”.

Having its origins in the political-police squads formed at the end of 1944 in the parts of Hungary controlled by the Soviet army, the Hungarian Communist Party exercised decisive influence from the very beginning over the political police,

which began its work in Budapest in the party's headquarters located on Kálmán Tisza Square (later renamed Republic Square, the location of the notoriously bloody events during the 1956 revolution). Ironically, when the squad arrived to Budapest under the leadership of András Tömpe following its formation in the city of Debrecen, it encountered at the Kálmán Tisza Square headquarters a rival organization under the command of Gábor Péter. Among the first prisoners arrested by the two branches of the political police were the underground leaders of the previously illegal communist party (e.g., Pál Demény and János Dobos), who had quite soon become uncomfortable for the Muscovite communist élite.

The chaotic situation was settled by May 1945, when two political security departments (*politikai rendészeti osztály*, or PRO) were established: one to operate in Budapest (headed by Péter); and the other outside the capital city with Tömpe as its leader.

Organizational transformations are portrayed in parallel with the most important political trials in the first part of the book. The two political security departments were merged into the State Protection Department (*Államvédelmi Osztály*, or ÁVO) in October 1946, a few months before launching the arrests in preparation for the first big political trial (that of the “Hungarian Fraternity”) used to suppress the Smallholder’s Party rivalling the communists. From then on, in the words of a political police leader, “the emphasis shifted from the past to the present”—from the sins of the past to unveiling alleged conspiracies against the “democratic state order.” In November 1948, the task of economic law-enforcement was likewise assigned to the political police, reorganized two months earlier as the State Protection Authority of the Ministry of the Interior (*belügyminisztérium államvédelmi hatósága*, or BM ÁVH). From then on a wave of political show-trials started against commercial companies, the most prominent being the MAORT (Hungarian–American Oil Company) trial. It was not until the beginning of the year 1950 that an independent State Security Authority (*államvédelmi hatóság*, or ÁVH) had been established by merging the former organization with the military border guards. One month later, in February 1950, the military-intelligence service was also attached to the State Protection Authority. Thus a quasi state-security ministry was formed that was directly subordinated to the Council of Ministers. The three years until Péter’s arrest at the beginning of 1953 signaled the height of the ÁVH’s power and one of the darkest periods for the Hungarian population, characterized by state terror and purges that affected even communists, the most well-known instance being the trial and execution of former communist minister László Rajk.

In February of the same year, military counter-intelligence was also integrated into the State Protection Authority, although ÁVH leader Béla Janikovszky, who had acted as Rajk's interrogator, was obliged to report to the minister of defense. With these transformations, the organization increased exponentially in number of personnel: the staff grew from about 500 members in 1946 to almost 2,000 in two years, while its successor, the BM ÁVH, worked just more than 5,000 personnel in January 1949, though rose to 9,000 employees by the end of the year. By adding the border guards and other sections that formerly belonged to the Ministry of Defense, the ÁVH gathered information about 1.2 million people, functioning with a staff of between 35,000 and 45,000. It sought to control all parts of public and everyday life and was especially active and effective in prominent areas, one of them being academic life for example, where the political police was actively involved in granting academic degrees. The author refers to a letter written in 1952 confirming that even doctoral or (the roughly equivalent) "candidate" degrees were awarded with the consent of not only the Administrative Department of the Communist Party Politburo and the ministry concerned, but with that of the ÁVH as well.

Similarly, special attention was turned to sports, especially to football, which was at its zenith in Hungary in the 1950s, and the author devotes a chapter to the ÁVH operations lurking behind the football achievements of the legendary Golden Team. If the advice of the ÁVH had been taken, six footballers out of the starting eleven would not have been allowed to play at the Helsinki Olympic Games in 1952, including team captain Ferenc Puskás, as the political police commented on the composition of sport teams travelling abroad as well. Furthermore, out of the entire 1952 Olympic team, almost fifty members were found problematic in the first round of examination. The criticized athletes then won five gold medals, one silver medal and one bronze medal of the forty-two Hungarian medals, thus contributing to Hungary's biggest success in the history of the Olympic Games.

Against the backdrop of this organizational structure, the main characters are portrayed in the next chapters with detailed biographies of the leaders and gray eminences. Starting with the protagonist, Gábor Péter, unfolding his life story from his birth in a distant region of Hungary as Benjamin Eisenberger at the beginning of the twentieth century, through the start of his career as a tailor's apprentice, finding his way to the communist movement and gaining a key position after 1945, until his spectacular fall and his sentence to life in prison following Stalin's death. Thus the outbreak of the 1956 revolution found Péter

in prison, right in the middle of an interrogation. After crushing the revolution, prison life continued for him unchanged, but in the years of the early Kádár era, Péter and his fellows sailed with the new political wind and his earlier sentence was mitigated to 14 years. Péter was then released in January 1959 and lived happily until his death in 1993, outliving Rákosi, Kádár and the communist régime itself. The techniques of the Péter-led organization, by which it was able to gain information on practically the entire society, are discussed in detail in the fourth part of the book.

The strength of the volume lies in the rich details and episodes that are collected in the third and the last parts. Here scenes from the functioning of the political police and the whole milieu of the 1950s are listed, with outstanding chapters about the contradictory attitude of the Rákosi régime towards the veterans of the 1919 Hungarian Soviet Republic, as well as the way leaders of the ÁVH, especially Péter, communicated with their superiors on slips of paper, and a remarkable section on the logistics of the political police, the real estate and car fleet that served to maintain the terror. Another positive feature is that the author maintains distance from his subject and from the archival material he uses, carefully considering the credibility of his sources.

Rolf Müller's book on this key area of Hungary's recent history represents a successful attempt to bridge the gap between academic and popular writing, conveying heavy content in a light package.

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