

Theses of the PhD dissertation

**The United States of America through the Eyes of the
Hungarian State Security, 1956-1989**

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A. Identifying the aims and the subject of the dissertation

This dissertation is an analysis of the Hungarian state security's image of the United States based on a number of textbooks that were used during the preparation of intelligence officers during the Cold War period. In "Travel Writing as a Substitute for American Studies in Hungary,"¹ Tibor Glant identifies three levels of discourse about the United States in the People's Republic of Hungary: the official rhetoric, what people said when they were able to speak freely, and the academia. It turns out, however, that there was another level of discourse about America, that of the Hungarian state security, where the various intelligence agencies were aiming to understand and interpret the opposing superpower and assess potential threats to the security of the regime. The main primary sources used in this dissertation are a series of textbooks that were in use during the preparation of intelligence officers for work against the United States, published by the Ministry of the Interior between 1965 and 1985. Today, these materials can be accessed in Budapest, in the ÁBTL ((Állambiztonsági Szolgálatok Történeti Levéltára, Historical Archives of the Hungarian State Security), which preserves documents produced by the state security organizations during the communist period in Hungary.

As the materials of MNVK-2, the military intelligence of the People's Republic of Hungary, are not available for researchers, this dissertation can only rely on the preparatory materials of the civilian arm of Hungarian intelligence. Following the model established by the Soviet Union, in Hungary and elsewhere in the Eastern bloc there was an institutional distinction between the military and the "civilian" intelligence agencies. Based on the GRU (Main Intelligence Directorate, the military intelligence of the Soviet Union) in the Soviet Union, the military agency was operating under the supervision of the Ministry of Defense or

¹ Tibor Glant, "Travel Writing as a Substitute for American Studies in Hungary," *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies*, 16.1-2 (2010): 171-184.

the Hungarian People's Army. This organization was smaller, less known, yet as significant as its civilian counterpart. As Zsuzsanna Borvendég demonstrates in *Az impexek kora*, in the final decades of the communist regime, MNVK-2 became instrumental in technical and economic intelligence, as well as the corrupt financial schemes that ensured the survival of the economic power of members of the communist elite after the end of communism in Hungary.² The civilian intelligence agencies, modeled after the KGB and its predecessor, the MGB, were first organized within the police, then they became an independent institution, the ÁVH (Államvédelmi Hatóság, State Security Authority), and finally, an institution (Office Division) within the Ministry of the Interior after 1956.³ During the period in question, Office Group III/I within the Ministry of the Interior was responsible for the civilian intelligence of the Hungarian People's Republic.

This dissertation examines how the image of the United States of America changed from the perspective of state security during the second half of the Cold War, based on the textbooks that were used to prepare the Hungarian intelligence officers of Office Group III/I who were going to work undercover against the United States. Throughout the whole communist period, the majority of Hungarian intelligence officers were working under official, diplomatic cover, as there were times when this was more or less the only contact that remained between the countries of the two blocs. The dissertation provides an analysis of the changes and consistencies in how various topics— American history, politics, economics, and American society, among others – were presented in the textbooks over the period, and how the content of the textbooks compares to the reports sent by the intelligence officers.

² Zsuzsanna Borvendég, *Az impexek kora – Külkereskedelmi fedéssel folytatott pénzkivonás a „népgazdaságból” a Kádár-rendszer idején az állambiztonsági iratok tükrében* [The Era of “Impexes” – The Withdrawal of Money from the “People’s Economy” Under the Cover of Foreign Trade During the Kádár Regime, as Reflected by Documents of the State Security] (Budapest, Nemzeti Emlékezet Bizottsága, 2017) 159-161.

³ Krisztián Ungváry, “Az állambiztonsági szervek intézménytörténeti struktúrájának vázlata,” [Historical overview of the structure of state security organizations] in *A Szakértői Bizottság jelentése 2007-2008*, ed. János Kenedi, accessed August 24, 2021, <http://mek.oszk.hu/08400/08450/>.

The aim of this dissertation is to take a look at these preparatory materials, analyze them, and find answers to the following questions: Was the depiction of the United States in the textbooks a genuine attempt to represent objective reality, or an ideologically distorted image that was closer to what was being presented to the contemporary public, manifest in communist propaganda? To what an extent was Hungarian-American rapprochement during *détente* mirrored by an increased interest in a more objective perception of the United States during the preparation of the intelligence officers? Could the image presented in these materials serve as the foundation for serious, effective intelligence work, or was it rather a form of ideological education?

B. An outline of the employed methods

In the dissertation, the Hungarian state security's image of the United States is presented through the comparative analysis of six preparatory textbooks (four longer and two shorter ones), and an examination of how they relate to the intelligence reports written by the officers that they had been presumably used to prepare. The books were all published by the Personnel and Training Department of Office Group III/I of the Ministry of the Interior. The four main textbooks, in the order of their publication, are: (1) ÁBTL-4.1. A-3005/2 *Az Amerikai Egyesült Államok /Általános ismertetés/*⁴ [The United States of America – General description] by an unknown, presumably Soviet author from 1965. (2) ÁBTL-4.1. A-3005/6 *Az Amerikai Egyesült Államok ügynöki-operatív helyzetének elemzése és az amerikaiak közötti beszerző munka néhány sajátossága*⁵ [Analysis of the agency-operative situation in the United States and certain characteristics of recruitment among the Americans], which is, in fact, two works published in

⁴ ÁBTL-4.1. A-3005/2 *Az Amerikai Egyesült Államok /Általános ismertetés/*

⁵ ÁBTL-4.1. A-3005/6 *Az Amerikai Egyesült Államok ügynöki-operatív helyzetének elemzése és az amerikaiak közötti beszerző munka néhány sajátossága.*

one volume from 1967, also by an unknown Soviet author (or authors). The second section starts on page 85, and the title is *A személyes és személytelen kapcsolattartás sajátosságai az USA viszonylatában* [The characteristics of personal and non-personal contact with regards to the USA]. The last two books were written by Hungarian authors, (3) ÁBTL-4.1. A-3000/40 *Hasznos ismeretek az Egyesült Államokról /Segédanyag a külföldi munkához való felkészítéshez*⁶ [Useful knowledge about the United States – Aid to preparation for working abroad] by István Pozsonyi from 1974, and (4) ÁBTL-4.1. A-3006/33 *Az Amerikai Egyesült Államok operatív helyzete* [The operative situation of the United States]⁷ by János Szecsődi from 1985. There are also two shorter materials that are relevant to the topics discussed in this dissertation. The first one was also written by István Pozsonyi in 1971, it is his report about his work as an intelligence officer in the U.S.: *Beszámoló a külföldi munkáról (Egyesült Államok)* [Report on work abroad [United States]].⁸ The second one is once again the work of an unknown author from 1973, translated from Russian, *Az amerikaiak nemzeti jellege* [National characteristics of the Americans].

Based on the close reading of the materials, the dissertation provides a comparative analysis of the presentation of American politics, economy, history, and society in the textbooks. Chapter 1 of the dissertation overviews the organizational history of Hungarian foreign intelligence during the Cold War and offers a presentation of what we know about the preparation of the intelligence officers, and Chapter 2 provides an introduction to the textbooks. Each of the following chapters discuss how a specific topic is present in the books and how they compare to each other. Chapter 3 analyzes the image of American history and the American political system, Chapter 4, 5 and 6 deal with the presentation of contemporary

⁶ ÁBTL-4.1. A-3000/40 István Pozsonyi, *Hasznos ismeretek az Egyesült Államokról /Segédanyag a külföldi munkához való felkészítéshez/*.

⁷ ÁBTL-4.1. A-3006/33 János Szecsődi, *Az Amerikai Egyesült Államok Operatív helyzete*.

⁸ ÁBTL-4.1. A-3000/1 István Pozsonyi, *Beszámoló a külföldi munkáról (Egyesült Államok)*.

American politics, the American economy, and American society and the American national character respectively. As the focuses of the preparatory materials are not exactly the same, not all of the topics appear in all the textbooks, especially when it comes to the two shorter ones, which are more specific. Chapter 7 evaluates the relevance of the preparatory materials for actual intelligence work by comparing them to a number of actual intelligence reports from the period written by officers who were presumably prepared using these materials.

C. The results of the dissertation

The aim of this dissertation is to analyze the Hungarian state security's image of the United States based on textbooks that were used during the preparation of intelligence officers from the second half of the 1960s to the 1980s. But for a number of reasons, the dissertation can only provide partial results. First of all, at the as of the completion of the dissertation, the materials of MNVK-2 are still classified, not available for researchers, which means that any attempt to describe the foreign intelligence of the People's Republic of Hungary is going to be incomplete. Another major issue is that we know precious little about how the textbooks were actually used during preparation. One possible way to get information about the preparation of intelligence officers and how the textbooks were used during their training would have been by way of conducting an interview with an officer who worked in the United States in the period. This could have greatly promoted our understanding of the real purpose and significance of these textbooks, but in eight years of research I have not been able to conduct such an interview. Another possible approach, which I had to choose by default in Chapter 7 is to analyze the content of at least some of the reports that were written by officers who were presumably prepared using these textbooks. In the future, an interview with a former intelligence officer or

a more thorough analysis of the vast quantity of intelligence reports available in the ÁBTL would definitely prove to be helpful in estimating the importance of the textbooks.

Every text is influenced by who the intended audience is, and these textbooks are no exception. In this case, the audience was intelligence officers who were going to work in the United States under diplomatic cover. This already defined their social status, as this meant that they belonged to the highest social circles, they were members of the “communist aristocracy.” Besides the traditional European sense of cultural superiority, this is another reason for the frequent disparaging comments about the “boorish” behavior of the average Americans or American culture and some of the personal characteristics of the American people. In addition, in the period, intelligence officers (and most diplomats) were almost exclusively men, which also influenced the texts. With regards to the questions of sexuality and gender, the textbooks reflect the prudery that was a common characteristic of the communist regimes, and any transgression of traditional sexual norms is considered to be a sign of the decadence of American society. Concerning the treatment of race, there are some differences between the Soviet and the Hungarian books. Given the demographic characteristics of Hungary, especially at the time, it can be assumed that the Hungarian officers had little or no previous contact with people of color (unlike in the Soviet Union). The Hungarian authors, especially Pozsonyi, seem to have been genuinely fascinated and impressed by the ethnic diversity of the United States and were shocked by the racism that characterized American society and everyday life. Of course, the presentation of American racism served an ideological purpose in these textbooks as well, but it is quite conceivable that the Hungarian writers were genuinely surprised by the treatment of Black people in post-Jim Crow America.

The language of the Soviet books is belligerent, combative, and ideologically charged, while Hungarian books, which were written later, during a more advanced stage of *détente*,

contain vocabulary that is considerably less hostile. But the basic assumptions of the textbooks and their evaluation of American society, economy, politics, as well as the characterization of the average American are often not that much different between the Hungarian books and their predecessors. They all stand on the basis of communist ideology, and even if the presentation is somewhat more nuanced in the later books, the underlying assumptions, and the conclusions that they draw are essentially the same. The textbooks can also be divided into two groups based on the topics that they cover. Of the four longer textbooks, two, *General Description* (1965) and *Useful Knowledge* (1974), contain general information, basic knowledge about the United States, while the other two books, *Agency-Operative Situation* (1967) and *Operative Situation* (1985), look at America from an operative perspective and focus on aspects and characteristics of the country that are more directly related to the work of intelligence officers. This suggests that the preparation about the United States had two distinct purposes: on the one hand, to provide a general overview of the country and, on the other hand, more specific preparation for the operative work in America by presenting the operative situation.

First, materials that were translated from Russian, originally written by the Soviet sister organizations, were used to prepare Hungarian intelligence officers. This was possible as the objectives of the agencies of the two countries were initially practically the same, and necessary, as there were no experienced Hungarian intelligence officers who would have been able to write such materials. Later, when the Hungarian intelligence organization already had officers with enough experience of working in the United States under cover, they could prepare materials that were more specifically tailored to the needs of the Hungarians. Also, in the international division of labor between the intelligence organizations of the Eastern bloc, Hungary did not play a primary role in spying on the United States. One significant exception was the Hungarian-American community, who were the most important target (and information source) of Hungarian intelligence. At the same time, they are barely mentioned, even in the Hungarian

textbooks. Evidently, something else was used to prepare the intelligence officers for working with the Hungarian-American community. Possibly, this preparation was conducted more personally, on a case-by-case basis.

With regards to the sources of the preparatory textbooks, we can see a lot of communist literature in the Soviet books: Marx, Lenin, minutes of the Congresses of the CPSU, and quotes from a number of Soviet or Russian writers. Excerpts from American politicians or intellectuals are often used to support a point. The Hungarian textbooks already use a number of English language sources, but they do so on a basic level. These books do not go beyond the level of a relatively well-informed newspaper reader either, they do not make use of the scholarly literature about the United States, which was already available in Hungary at the time that they were written.

Considering what is missing from the preparatory materials also contributes to our understanding of the preparation of the intelligence officers and the image of the United States. As mentioned earlier, the Hungarian-American community is conspicuously missing. The books also ignore many of the transformative changes that took place in American society in the period (except for the Black Civil Rights Movement). The authors also neglect or trivialize the various aspects of popular culture, in spite of its significance in the period. The economic and technological transformation that took place in America is mentioned in the textbooks, but it is not discussed in detail either. This might appear surprising, since gathering information about technology and the economy were among the main objectives of the intelligence agencies of the Eastern bloc during the Cold War. But this is consistent with Zsuzsanna Borvendég's findings about the operation of Hungarian foreign intelligence, as in *Az impexek kora*, she shows that in the People's Republic of Hungary, this was primarily the domain of the military intelligence agency, MNVK-2.

The textbooks and the material analyzed in Chapter 7 demonstrate that the task of the officers of Office Group III/I was primarily monitoring the activity of the Hungarian-American community, to establish contact with intellectuals, and possibly with government bureaucrats. They were mostly involved in collecting publicly available information and reported if they came across any information that had relevance for intelligence purposes during their work as diplomats. The aim of the textbooks was not a deep analysis of American life, but to provide cursory background knowledge about the United States that would enable the officers to get established in their new position quickly, and blend in, if needed. Another aim of the textbooks was ideological education. Even though the tone of the later Hungarian books is less belligerent and hostile, with minor differences (e.g. the acknowledgement of the American role in *détente*), they still convey the same ideological message.



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List of publications related to the dissertation

Foreign language international books (1)

1. **Balogh, M. G.:** The Road to the Hungarian-American Claims Settlement: Hungarian-American Relations after 1956 and the Claims Settlement of 1973 between Hungary and the United States of America. VDM Verlag Dr. Müller Aktiengesellschaft & Co., Saarbrücken, 64 p., 2009. ISBN: 9783639115291

Hungarian book chapters (2)

2. **Balogh, M. G.:** Az Amerikai Egyesült Államok a modern kapitalizmus fő országa. Az amerikai gazdaság bemutatása a magyar nemzetbiztonság felkészítő könyveiben.
In: Lehetőségek - dilemmák - kompromisszumok: Magyarország és a világ 1945 után / Andreides Gábor, M. Madarász Anita, Soós Viktor Attila, Szóts Zoltán, [s.n.], [s.l.], [1-8]"Közlésre elfogadva", 2022.
3. **Balogh, M. G.:** Az Egyesült Államok politikai rendszerének ábrázolása a magyar állambiztonság felkészítő könyveiben.
In: Magyarország nemzetközi kapcsolatai a hidegháború éveiben, [s.n.], [s.l.], [1-10]"Közlésre elfogadva", 2022.

Foreign language scientific articles in Hungarian journals (1)

4. **Balogh, M. G.:** Killing the Canard: Saint Stephen's Crown, Nixon, Budapest, and the Hungarian Lobby.
Hung. j. Eng. Am. stud. 24 (1), 165-190, 2018. ISSN: 1218-7364.





List of other publications

Foreign language scientific articles in Hungarian journals (5)

5. **Balogh, M. G.:** Interpretations of Reagan's Legacy: (Jeffrey L. Chidester and Paul Kengor, eds., Reagan's Legacy in a World Transformed).
Hung. j. Eng. Am. stud. 23 (2), 435-439, 2017. ISSN: 1218-7364.
6. **Balogh, M. G.:** Perforating the Perspective of Superpowers: Détente and Minor Powers: (Poul Villaume and Odd Arne Westad, eds., Perforating the Iron Curtain: European Détente, Transatlantic Relations, and the Cold War, 1965-1985).
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8. **Balogh, M. G.:** The Disintegration of the Eastern Bloc: Book review: Victor Sebestyén, Revolution 1989: The Fall of the Soviet Empire.
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9. **Balogh, M. G.:** 1956 in the American Mind: (Glant, Tibor: Remember Hungary 1956).
Eger J. Am. Stud. 12 (2), 633-639, 2010. ISSN: 1786-2337.

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