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„Tito's stoutest spy”: Lazar Brankov in Hungary (1945–1956)

Let me start this paper with a quotation: *„Lazar Brankov was the resident of the official Yugoslav spy agency in Hungary. For more than four years he had steadily picked up secret data from László Rajk, (György) Pálffy and a whole number of other recruited Hungarian agents. It was Tito who directly ordered him for this activity. He was Tito's stoutest spy.”*¹ The above extract is from the indictment of the trial of László Rajk, at first minister of interior (1946-1948) and then foreign minister (1948-1949), held in the autumn of 1949. Even this short quotation sufficiently highlights the importance Lazar Brankov played in Rajk's show trial. However, I do not intend to reconstruct the trial itself.² Instead, my aim is to investigate his career in Hungary between 1945-1956. For this reason, I carried out intensive research at the Historical Archives of the Hungarian State Security where numerous files hold relevant information about Brankov.³ The daily reports of the Hungarian News Agency, especially for the period between 1945-1948, and Péter Bokor's interview with Brankov in 1989 also proved to be useful.⁴ My research on the political activities of Lazar Brankov is still in progress, therefore, further archival research can modify the conclusion of this paper.

The political career of Lazar Brankov reflected the main events, contradictions and changes of Yugoslav-Hungarian relations, which formulated within the framework of international and Soviet-Yugoslav relations. After WW2, the Soviet Union became the dominant power in Eastern Europe and Yugoslavia seemed to be Stalin's most faithful ally in the region. So it is understandable that the Hungarian leadership put special emphasis on improving relationships with its neighbour. As the conflict between the two super powers, namely the Soviet Union and the United States, escalated after 1947, Stalin wanted to secure its direct influence in Eastern Europe. Under these circumstances, there was no

¹ ZINNER (1989): 17.

² For the Rajk trial in Hungarian see: HAJDÚ (1992): 17-36. VARGA (2000): 11-25. KISZELY (2000): 151-214, HÓDOS (1990): 20-99, and later: HÓDOS (2005): 21-16.

³ Numerous documents of the rehearing and its preparations can be found at the Historical Archives of the State Security (Állambiztonsági Szolgálatok Történeti Levéltára, henceforward: ÁBTL): ÁBTL 2.1. I/1. (V-142673) – I/1-e. (V-142673/5). and *„Összefoglaló a Rajk László és társai ügyében őrizetbe vett, elítélt, internált és rehabilitált személyekről.”* I-III. Kötet (Summary on the people convicted, interned and rehabilitated in the case of László Rajk and his accomplices. Volumes I-III). ÁBTL 2.1. IX/6/1-3.

⁴ BOKOR (1989): 48-70.

further room for the independent, regional ambitions of the Yugoslav leadership. However, Stalin miscalculated the consequences and opened a new „*minor cold war front*” within his sphere of influence in 1948.

After 1945 the democratic Hungarian leadership with its relative freedom in foreign politics honestly tried to improve Hungary's relations with its southern neighbour. However, due to the escalation of the Soviet-Yugoslav conflict from the spring of 1948 onwards, the Hungarian-Yugoslav relations deteriorated dramatically. Hungary suspended its reparations, took part in the economic blockade and the intense propaganda warfare against Yugoslavia, and the number of incidents at the Yugoslav-Hungarian border increased dramatically. The strength of the Hungarian armed forces was raised and modernized, too.⁵ Rajk's trial was also part of the „war of nerves,” the ongoing propaganda warfare against Tito and the Yugoslav leadership. As a result, the relations between the two countries nearly annulled in the early 1950s. The small and gradual process of normalization in Yugoslav-Hungarian state and later party relations after Stalin's death (announced on 5 March 1953) was rendered more difficult by Rákosi's eminent role during the conflict. The re-examination of the Rajk trial and the reburial of László Rajk on 6 October 1956 was part of this process.⁶

Lazar Brankov's early years

Lazar Brankov was a Yugoslav Communist diplomat of Serbian origin who was born at Stari Bečej (now in Vojvodina, Serbia) on 17 July 1912. He enrolled in the University of Belgrade in 1931, where he studied law for four semesters, but he did not finish his studies due to financial reasons.⁷ It was at the university that he began to sympathize with Communist ideas, similarly to other students of the time, though, he might have first heard about leftist doctrines as a high school student. As a student, he became head of the Communist youth organization, SKOJ (*Savez komunističke omladine Jugoslavije*) – or at least the head of a branch of it – and the editor of its paper.⁸

After spending two years in the capital, Brankov returned to Stari Bečej, where he found employment as a clerk at the local council. He had been mobilized as a reserve officer right before Yugoslavia was attacked in 1941. His poorly equipped regiment was already in retreat when the German occupational forces destroyed it and captured the soldiers. Within a short time, he managed to escape and took refuge in Stari Bečej. Although the occupying Hungarian authorities captured him again because of his

⁵ For the Hungarian-Yugoslav relations in detail see: RIPP (1998): 45-50.

⁶ KISS-RIPP-VIDA (1995): Vol. I., 12-13.

⁷ BOKOR (1989): 48. and ÁBTL 2.1. I/109 (V-143403). 159.

⁸ BOKOR (1989): 48.

Communist pedigree, he was put on probation a few weeks later. According to his recollections, he joined the partisans and carried out illegal activities in Bačka but fled to Budapest in October 1941 after his niece had been arrested on account of sympathizing with the Communists. Brankov found refuge in the building of *Thökölyaneum* in Veres Pálné Street. The members of the Vojvodina section of the Yugoslav Communist Party also fled to the Hungarian capital in early 1942 where they reorganized its leadership, of which Brankov became a member. During the war, Brankov regularly travelled to Vojvodina and distributed leaflets, illegal newspapers and journals. He was appointed political commissar of the partisan units in Bačka and Baranja in 1943. As luck would have it, he was entrusted with management of the military administrative section of the Military Authority in Vojvodina led by Ivan Rukavina and was put in charge of administrative duties and public order, which he held until the dissolution of the military authority in February 1945.⁹

Although he often spoke about his wartime partisan record during his interrogations at the Department of Interrogation of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Hungary (Belügyminisztérium Vizsgálati Főosztálya), Brankov never mentioned his role in the atrocities following the Communist takeover in Vojvodina. As a matter of fact, he was a member of the summary court that, together with Pavle Gerenčević and Boris Klarić, passed nearly 150 sentences of death in Novi Sad. The sentences were carried out immediately. Brankov was also a member of the Bačka-Baranja Military Tribunal that sentenced twelve people to death on 29 December.¹⁰

After the dissolution of the military administration in Vojvodina, Brankov returned to Hungary on 10 March 1945, this time to Debrecen, among the first members of the Yugoslav mission accredited to the Allied Control Committee (ACC).¹¹ As it is well-known, because of their reparation claims, Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia were allowed to maintain a mission, or to be more precise, a subcommittee on reparation.¹² The Yugoslav authorities selected Brankov because of his Communist background, his partisan activities during the war, and his role in the military administration in Vojvodina. In fact, the Central Committee of the Yugoslav Communist Party had asked for someone who was familiar with the local circumstances in Vojvodina.¹³ Therefore, they chose Brankov.

⁹ ÁBTL 2.2. I/109. (V-143403). 29. and Bokor 1989, 49-51.

¹⁰ MÉSZÁROS (1994): 85. and 89.

¹¹ BOKOR (1989): 51 and Földesi 2002, 80. The records of the meetings of the ACC are available in print: FEITL (2003).

¹² The establishment of ACC in Hungary was ordained by the Agreement on Armistice between the Allied powers and Hungary (Moscow, 20 January 1945). Its text is available in Hungarian: ROMSICS (2000): 378-382.

¹³ ÁBTL 2.1. I/109 (V-143403). 30.

A Yugoslav diplomat in Hungary

As a member of the mission, Brankov first dealt with economic matters, reparations and Yugoslav possessions that were dragged off during the war. He served as secretary of the Yugoslav military mission until early 1947. He also dealt with cultural and press affairs and took part in tracing down war criminals.¹⁴ He got in touch with the democratic Hungarian leadership, among them prime minister Béla Miklós of Dálnok, defence minister János Vörös, minister of interior Ferenc Erdei. He became the leader of the Yugoslav mission in 1947. By that time, it had already moved to Budapest, where Brankov regularly attended nearly all important social and official events. For example, he was invited to the gala dinner that foreign minister János Gyöngyösi gave on the occasion of re-establishing Hungarian-Yugoslav diplomatic relations on 30 October 1946.¹⁵ It was Brankov who told Gyöngyösi on 12 December 1946 that the *„Belgrade government had received with delight the announcement on the appointment of Zoltán Szántó as Hungarian ambassador to Yugoslavia”*.¹⁶ Together with Sloven Smodlaka, counsellor of the Yugoslav embassy, he took part in the official ceremony in March 1947 in which the new Yugoslav ambassador to Hungary, Karlo Mrazović presented his credentials.¹⁷ He was also present when the agreement on reparations between Yugoslavia and Hungary was signed at the embassy on 17 April 1948.¹⁸ During Tito's visit in December 1947, Zoltán Tildy, president of the republic, decorated him with the *Order of the Republic, middle cross with the star* (Köztársasági Érdemrend középkeresztje a csillaggal).¹⁹

Brankov also attended many cultural events. He led the delegation of Yugoslav journalists to the prime minister's under-secretary of state Gyula Kállai in November 1945 and delivered a speech at the Yugoslav soirée in the building of the Hungarian parliament in the middle of March 1947. In his speech, he pointed out to the fact that the *„Yugoslav and Hungarian people did not properly know each other due to the oppressive governments”*, and admitted that *„the Hungarian people and the peoples of Yugoslavia had been victims of imperialist powers many times throughout their histories”*, but, using the language and ideology of the time, he was certain that *„if the Hungarian people positioned itself on the solid foundation of legal continuity that started with Kossuth and Petőfi, then, they would meet the peoples of Yugoslavia on the field*

¹⁴ ÁBTL 2.1. I/109 (V-143403). 30.

¹⁵ MTI. 31 October 1946. 39.

¹⁶ MTI 13 December 1946. 44.

¹⁷ MTI 22 March 1947. 29.

¹⁸ MTI 17 April 1948. 25.

¹⁹ MTI 7 December 1947. 24.

and the Hungarian people would find an ally in their fight for freedom, independence and democracy in the peoples of Yugoslavia".²⁰ Brankov expounded his views on the real dimensions of Yugoslav-Hungarian relations more frankly while giving a toast at the journalists' club in Szeged in February 1946: „*Yugoslavia had already settled with the past and opened a new page in the history of the Yugoslav and the Hungarian peoples. [...] Today it is an honour to be a friend of Yugoslavia: those who are friends of Yugoslavia, are the followers of freedom, democracy and progress.*”²¹

Brankov also established closer relations with Hungarian communists, among them László Rajk, after he had been appointed minister of interior on 20 March 1946. In the absence of Obrad Cicmil, Brankov was in charge of the Yugoslav military mission and worked as a liaison between the Yugoslav and the Hungarian ministries of interior. As a witness at the trial for re-opening Rajk's case on 24 November 1955 he emphasized that „*Yugoslavia was a member of ACC at that time and so, he was entitled to ask any kind of data from any Hungarian authorities*”.²² Based on archival sources, Brankov and Rajk undoubtedly talked about the visit of the Hungarian government to Yugoslavia, the visit of the delegation of Hungarian police forces to Belgrade in the autumn of 1947 led by Gábor Péter and Tito's visit to Hungary in December 1947.

Two typed copies of Brankov's draft support my argument. According to the one he wrote on 18 November 1947, Brankov sent information to Belgrade on the Hungarian reaction to the Hungarian government's visit to Yugoslavia, the illegal border crossings at the Hungarian-Yugoslav border and the espionage affairs of Frigyes Pisky-Schmidt and his accomplices,²³ among others. Brankov also informed Belgrade about the information he obtained from László Velics, Hungarian ambassador to the Holy See.²⁴ The second draft, written on 9 March 1948 is about a meeting between Rajk and Brankov where they dealt with Yugoslav-Hungarian cooperation. During the meeting, Brankov underlined that „*it is impossible (in Yugoslavia) that the minister of interior not to be informed of a domestic or foreign event with political significance*”. In replying to this critical remark, Rajk assured the Yugoslavs that „*the cooperation with comrade Rankovics will continue in the spirit of the Kelebia agreement.*” He also mentioned

²⁰ MTI Magyar Országos Tudósító (National Enquirer), 19 March 1947. 22-23.

²¹ The reception took place after the premier of Boszorkánytánc (Witch Dance) by Béla Balázs in Szeged. MTI. 18 February 1946. 13-14.

²² ÁBTL 2.1. I/4 (V-143415). 194.

²³ Pisky-Schmidt Frigyes was a Socialdemocrat journalist of Pesti Hírlap. From August 1942 he worked at the underground radio station Radio Hungarian Freedom. He became a fighter of resistance after the German troops had occupied Hungary and distributed leaflets and the newspaper *Szabadság* (Freedom). He was accused of espionage in the show trial against Károly Peyer and the Socialdemocrats. He emigrated in September 1947. He was sentenced to 10 years of hard labour on 16 February 1948 in absence. SIPOS (2008): 199.

²⁴ ÁBTL 2.1. I/109 (V-143403). 223.

that the political and economic police and the department of military polices (Katpol) would be merged without delay and put under direct surveillance of the minister of interior: „To be more precise, he (Rajk) thinks that the political, the economic, and the military police forces should be merged immediately and put under his direct control.” Rajk also proposed that he would send Gábor Péter to Belgrade in order to study the structure of the Yugoslav state security organs and asked Brankov to accompany him.²⁵

As it is well known, the meeting between the Yugoslav and Hungarian ministers of interior mentioned above took place during Tito's visit in Hungary in 1947 when the Yugoslav delegation, on their way home, stopped for hunting at the village. The meeting itself took place in a rail carriage and supposedly Brankov acted as an interpreter there, but the Hungarian ambassador to Yugoslavia Zoltán Szántó could not recollect whether Brankov had been in Kelebia.²⁶ The meeting is significant because the Hungarian authorities later wanted to use it as one of the most important pieces of evidence against Rajk in his show trial. Therefore, it is understandable, that during the review of Rajk's and other show trials, Brankov was exhaustively interrogated. His testimonies were quite inconsistent: he could not remember who took part in the hunting, or the circumstances of the meeting, or how long it lasted – according to Gábor Péter, it lasted for just a few minutes, while according to Brankov it lasted for at least 30-40 minutes or more than an hour. What we know for sure is that the two ministers dealt with the „counter-revolutionary” activities of the Catholic church in Hungary and agreed to further intensify the cooperation of the two ministries while the Yugoslav minister of interior Aleksandar Ranković criticized the Hungarians. Until they could find the right person, Brankov was put in charge of conducting correspondence between the two ministries.²⁷ During the review of Rajk's trial, it became evident that the meeting was not more than an exchange of views, which is quite common in diplomacy, therefore, it could not be a proof for an anti-state plot, regardless of the Yugoslavs' superior behaviour during the discussions.²⁸

Beyond personal contacts, Rajk also sent official letters to the Yugoslav leadership through Brankov, sometimes through his secretary, Ottó Tőkés. During one of his many interrogations in 1954, Brankov confessed that he learnt the names of the Hungarian delegation of the ministry of interior that way in early 1948.²⁹ It was also Tőkés who forwarded to Brankov the letter of Miltiades Porfirogenis, „minister of justice of the Greek government of

²⁵ ÁBTL 2.1. I/109 (V-143403). 331/26-28.

²⁶ ÁBTL 2.1. I/4 (V-142673). 360.

²⁷ ÁBTL 2.1. I/1 (V-142673). 350-353., ÁBTL 2.1. I/1-d (V-142673/4). 292., ÁBTL 2.1. I/109-a (V-143403/1). 106-108. and ÁBTL 2.1. I/4 (V-143415) 195.

²⁸ ÁBTL 2.1. I/1-a (V-142673/1). 57.

²⁹ ÁBTL 2.1. I/35-a (V-142706/1). 84.

people's liberation”, who happened to be in Budapest, in which he reported on the success of donations for Communist Greek guerillas.³⁰ One of Boarov's note on Brankov in 1954 also supports the content of the letter.³¹ Based on the daily reports of the Hungarian News Agency, this must have happened shortly after early December 1947 when Porfirogenis was present at the congress of the Hungarian trade unions.³² However, Brankov considered it so insignificant that he could not remember any detail of it: „I can remember that Tőkés brought a letter from Rajk in early 1948 to send it to the Greek (partisan) government through Yugoslavia. As far as I remember, the letter, which I did send to Belgrade, was about some kind of Greek matter.”³³ Still, during Rajk's trial a whole plot was based around it: it was written in German, Tőkés delivered it personally to Brankov in a closed envelope, Rajk himself reminded his secretary of its confidential matter.³⁴

Moreover, Tőkés had to play the role of handing over important state secrets to the Yugoslavs during the Rajk trial. Even the officers at the Department of State Defence (Államvédelmi Hatóság, ÁVH) realized that the letters were not sufficient enough to support Rajk's espionage. Ervin Faludi, interrogator of Ottó Tőkés frankly admitted it in August 1949: „This, in this way, is not interesting. This is not a piece of intelligence information, not a confidential state secret.”³⁵ Tibor Vajda, who also interrogated Tőkés, made it clear what kind of statement the authorities expected from Rajk's secretary: „Do not spin a yarn. I will tell you what Rajk [and his friends] were talking about. About confidential state secrets. Do you happen to know it now? About state secrets. Con-spi-ra-cy. Do you understand it now? Remember it well for once and for all and do not forget it.”³⁶

Back to Brankov, he seemingly climbed higher and higher on the ladder between 1945 and 1948. Even the deterioration of Soviet-Yugoslav and Hungarian-Yugoslav relations did not bring any immediate change in it. As a member of the Yugoslav embassy, Brankov must have known about the conflict quite early and he faithfully followed the official Yugoslav stand until autumn 1948. He was closely affected when, as part of the escalating anti-Yugoslav propaganda warfare, the Hungarian authorities attacked Živko Boarov, who was indebted for his post as press attaché at the embassy to Brankov.³⁷ Boarov shot Miloš Moić, correspondent to *Naše Novine*, the paper of the South Slavic minorities in Hungary, and a Yugoslav

³⁰ ÁBTL 2.1. I/35 (V-142706). 75.

³¹ ÁBTL 2.1. I/109 (V-143403). 109.

³² MTI Magyar Országos Tudósító, 5 December 1947. 21-22.

³³ ÁBTL 2.1. I/35-a (V-142706/1). 84.

³⁴ ÁBTL 2.1. I/35 (V-142706). 48-50. Tőkés suggested during his interrogation on 27 May 1954 that it was easier to write the letter in German as nobody could speak Greek at the Yugoslav embassy. ÁBTL 2.1. I/35-a (V-142706/1). 33-34.

³⁵ ÁBTL 2.1. I/35 (V-142706). 52.

³⁶ ÁBTL 2.1. I/35 (V-142706). 54.

³⁷ ÁBTL 2.1. I/110. (V-54381). 10.

citizen on 10 July 1948. The Hungarian authorities wanted to create a monstrous anti-Yugoslav trial, but because of the muddled story, they finally relinquished.³⁸ Brankov went to Belgrade on the same day (on 12 July 1948) when the Hungarian note urging Boarov's extradition was transmitted to the embassy and in his meeting with the Yugoslav minister of interior Aleksandar Ranković, he stood surety for Boarov – at least, according to his recollections.³⁹

The leader of the Yugoslav Communist political emigrants in Hungary (1948-1949)

After Boarov's case, the emigration of Brankov and six other members of the Yugoslav embassy in Budapest on 27 October 1948 provided another propaganda tool for Rákosi against Tito. Brankov later provided rather confused and inconsistent accounts on the circumstances of his emigration. In one of them, he emigrated on his own decision, in the other one, the Yugoslav minister of internal affairs Aleksandar Ranković ordered him to do so. For example, he mentioned at the Department of Interrogation on 1 September 1954 that he made his decision during the Fifth congress of the CPY (21-28 July 1948) and wrote a letter to the Central Committee of the Soviet Communist Party in August 1948 in which *„I condemned Tito's policies and stated that as a Communist I would be unconditionally disposable for the fight against Tito.”*⁴⁰ However, on 14 September Brankov wrote that he had emigrated on the order of Ranković, because for Yugoslavia *„the most important thing [was] to know the intention and plans of the Soviet Union towards Yugoslavia”*.⁴¹ One day earlier (on 13 September 1954) he wrote that the real purpose of his emigration was to organize a political group within the Hungarian Working People's Party (HWP) on the order of Ranković which would be faithful to the Yugoslavs and led by László Rajk. If Rajk did not voluntarily undertake the task, Brankov would have to raise suspicions against Rajk in the leadership of HWP.⁴² Brankov again elaborated on the circumstances of his emigration on 3 March 1955, according to which, he travelled to Belgrade to report on Boarov's case in the first days of October 1948. The Yugoslav minister of internal affairs Aleksandar Ranković found it *„extremely important”* to know the activities of the emigrants, and especially to know *“which way the IB (Inform Bureau, Cominform) guides the activities of the emigrants”*. Therefore Ranković found it necessary to

³⁸ For the Boarov case see: RIPP (1998): 54-57., RAINER (1998): 91-100. and GELLÉRT KIS (1987): 27-29.

³⁹ BOKOR (1989): 59-60.

⁴⁰ ÁBTL 2.1. I/109-a (V-143403/1). 224-225.

⁴¹ ÁBTL 2.1. I/109-a (V-143403/1). 275-276.

⁴² ÁBTL 2.1. I/109 (V-143403). 64.

„have such a person in the leadership of the emigration who is familiar with the activities of the emigrants” and „who can inform the Yugoslav government about it.” He regarded Brankov the most suitable person for this position, who dutifully accepted Ranković’s order. However, he became doubtful and decided to emigrate on his own free will. He justified it with the following argument: „if I had refused the order of RANKOVICS (capitals in the original, V. P.), I would have been arrested immediately but if I carried out of the instructions and got caught, a similar fate would await for me”.⁴³

Based on the archival records I have managed to consult, I am certain that Mátyás Rákosi, general secretary of HWP, invented the above scenario. It was also Rákosi who ordered Gábor Péter to let Brankov know in his first interrogation (it was Gábor Péter himself who first interrogated Brankov) that the „party has good knowledge of the above circumstances, therefore admit it.” Gábor Péter later confessed that Rákosi even urged Soviet lieutenant general Feodor Belkin to get a clear-cut confession from Brankov but Belkin „was not willing to carry out Rákosi’s demands.”⁴⁴

After they emigrated, Brankov and the other emigrants were accommodated at Szalonka Street which was a rather bleak area of the Buda mountains due to security reasons.⁴⁵ The Hungarian leadership grasped every opportunity of Brankov’s emigration to discredit the Yugoslav leadership and emphasize the improper nature of Tito’s policies. Brankov, who became the leader of the Yugoslav Communist political emigrants in Hungary, made speeches at mass rallies against Tito – including the congress of the Democratic Alliance of Southern Slavs in Hungary at Baja on 14 November 1948⁴⁶ –, wrote articles in the party daily *Szabad Nép* and in the paper of the emigrants, *Nova Borba*, gave interviews to the journal of the Hungarian-Yugoslav Society (*Déli Csillag*)⁴⁷ and the Hungarian Radio,⁴⁸ where he also worked as an adviser for the Serbian language programs.⁴⁹ From the many speeches, remarks and interviews, I would like to quote here the article published in *Déli Csillag* on 11 November 1948 in detail. In the interview, Brankov drew attention to the fact that „the Tito clique, after having betrayed the interests of the Yugoslav peoples, are destroying the comradely cooperation between Yugoslavia and Hungary and strive for hostility towards the neighbouring people’s democracies by flaring up the chauvinistic emotions in the Yugoslav peoples.” At the same time, „the Tito-clique are betraying the international workers’ movement and the mutual friendly cooperation of the

⁴³ ÁBTL 2.1. I/109-a (V-143403/1). 387.

⁴⁴ ÁBTL 2.1. VI/1 (V-150028). 254/a.

⁴⁵ GELLÉRT KIS (1987): 28.

⁴⁶ MTI. 14 November 1948. 21-22.

⁴⁷ MTI. 11 November 1948. 31.

⁴⁸ MTI. 8 November 1948. 21.

⁴⁹ ÁBTL 2.1. I/109-a (V-143403/1). 389.

peoples of Yugoslavia and Hungary, too.” Under these circumstances, „the activities of the Hungarian-Yugoslav Society will become highly significant and important. [...] These activities can only be carried out successfully if the Society continues to fight consistently against the treacherous policies of the Tito-clique and do everything to unveil these policies”.⁵⁰

As a Yugoslav secret agent

Nevertheless, Brankov's carrier broke into two in the summer of 1949 after he had been arrested in Moscow on 21 June 1949. According to the records of the Historical Archives of the Hungarian State Security, the authorities started to collect damning evidence against Brankov in the spring of 1949 at the latest. Moreover, they also planned to arrest him. According to Gábor Péter, Mihály Farkas „made a phone call from the Ministry of Home Defence to Soviet ambassador Pushkin and energetically asked for Brankov's arrest” in the early summer of 1949, but Pushkin avoided complying with Farkas' request.⁵¹ Even if he could not explain the reasons behind Brankov's arrest, the former major of the state security Iván Berán confessed during his interrogation in 1955 that „Gábor Péter ordered me in the spring of 1949 to arrest Brankov without delay when he was leaving a meeting – a meeting with Popivoda.” However, before the meeting ended, „Péter had phoned not to carry out the arrest.”⁵² As Pero Popivoda, leader of the Yugoslav political emigration in the Soviet Union visited Hungary in early June 1949,⁵³ it is obvious that he must have met Brankov that time.

Brankov visited the Soviet capital on the invitation of Popivoda.⁵⁴ In fact, he was invited there in part of a conspiracy. He was also interrogated there for the first time, first on 8 July, then on 16 July. In his confession, he perverted, exaggerated and embroidered events and built further false stories on them. He confessed that he was an agent of the Yugoslav state security (UDB) and one of his tasks was to organize a pro-Yugoslav coup d'état under Rajk's leadership. He provided a detailed testimony on the relationship of the Hungarian and Yugoslav ministers of internal affairs and provided „evidence” on the Kelebia meeting, where, according to his confession, Rajk and Ranković were talking to each other as „abettors of the Hungarian Working People's Party and the Hungarian people's democracy” and stated that the two ministers met again in the autumn of 1948.⁵⁵ Based on his false allegations, the Hungarian authorities could easily fabricate the

⁵⁰ MTI. 11 November 1948. 31.

⁵¹ ÁBTL 2.1. VI/1 (V-150028). 257.

⁵² ÁBTL 2.1. I/109 (V-143403). 272.

⁵³ MOL M-KS-276f-65/105. 6. e. 6.

⁵⁴ ÁBTL 2.1. I/109 (V-143403). 149.

⁵⁵ ÁBTL 2.1. I/109 (V-143403). 150-151.

story of a second „*conspirative*” meeting at a field-guard's shelter near Paks.

How is it possible that Brankov provided incriminating evidence against László Rajk? In my opinion, as a faithful Communist and leader of the Yugoslav political emigration in Hungary with influential contacts, Brankov must have been fully aware of the developments of the Soviet-Yugoslav conflict. Shortly before he was arrested, Pravda published a short article on 15 June 1949 about Rajk's arrest as „*an imperialist spy*”.⁵⁶ Relating to this, Brankov testified in the Highest Court of Justice on 24 November 1955 that he had learned from Gábor Péter as early as the beginning of 1948 that „*there would be an investigation against Rajk.*”⁵⁷ Based on my reading, Brankov must have been quick on the uptake and had a vivid fantasy. If necessary, he could invent an elaborated story to save himself. For example, in connection with the Hungarian and Yugoslav minister of internal affairs, he confessed the following on 3 November 1955: „*During my interrogations, the relationship between RAJK and RANKOVICS (capitals in the original, V. P.) also emerged. While I was talking about the official relations between RAJK and RANKOVICS, it occurred to me that it would be a good idea to connect RANKOVICS to RAJK – who had already been arrested as an imperialist agent – and prove that RANKOVICS and the other Yugoslav leaders were also imperialist agents, who, with RAJK's help, tried to organize a conspiracy in Hungary.*”⁵⁸

Brankov's interrogation continued after he had been transferred to Hungary on 19 July 1949. His interrogators were Gábor Péter, Pál Szarvas and Ernő Szűcs. According to one interrogation report of the Ministry of Internal Affairs on 19 October 1954, during the interrogations Brankov „*gave evidence against 31 UDB agents in total.*” (In other documents, this number rises to 33 or even 34.⁵⁹) Among others, against Ottó Horváth (Hönigsberg), police lieutenant-colonel, Sándor Cseresznyés, chief of the press department of the ministry of interior, József Rex, a diplomat, Tibor Rex, his brother and member of the Hungarian-Yugoslav Society, Mihály Ognjenovics, secretary of the Democratic Alliance of the South Slavs in Hungary, and Anton Rob, first secretary of the alliance. Based on his testimonies, twelve people were arrested. Even his interrogators had the uniform opinion that Brankov „*lies indiscriminately and, for example, it is enough to give the name and one or two important data of a completely unknown person [...] for him to provide detailed 'information' about the intelligence activities of the person in question for the UDB.*”⁶⁰

However, he could not compromise with his own conscience. During my research I found a note written on 26 July 1949 that stated that in a record of interrogation seven days earlier (19 July) Brankov „*did not accept, and*

⁵⁶ ÁBTL 2.1. I/109-a (V-143403/1). 114.

⁵⁷ ÁBTL 2.1. I/4 (V-143415). 279.

⁵⁸ ÁBTL 2.1. I/109-a (V-143403/1). 393-394.

⁵⁹ ÁBTL 2.1. I/109-a (V-143403/1) 81.

⁶⁰ ÁBTL 2.1. I/1-d (V-142673/4). 384-386.

therefore refused to sign the part that was enclosing details about the anti-state conspiracy.” Brankov also emphasized that the orders he received from Ranković had been anti-party in character at the most, but not anti-state. He also asked his interrogators about „his role in this case [Rajk's trial] and to what extent he will be a suspect, because he would sign his condemning confession against himself depending on that”.⁶¹ Moreover, Brankov tried to escape from one of the cottages in Buda that the ÁVH used for interrogations in the evening of 31 July 1949 but he did not succeed. In a hand-written note shortly before, he wrote the following: „I am totally unable to play the role that is imposed on me, because I have never been a traitor and never will be regardless of what they have done to me.” Then he jotted down in capital letters: „It is better to die than live in shame.” He also had something to say in connection with Rajk: „I will wait until Rajk's trial ends and I will surrender again and if I am a sinner, then, first and foremost, the Party should judge me and let the decision of the Party known to me.”⁶² In his farewell letter to his mother he also mentioned Rajk, but the photocopy made of the original note lacks the preceding and the following lines, so I was unable to reconstruct its context.⁶³

After he had unsuccessfully tried to escape, Gábor Péter had Brankov beaten and interrogated. According to Brankov, Péter roughly told him that „there is only one way out for me, namely, if I uphold my earlier confessions; otherwise I would get a death-sentence.” Péter also stressed that „Rajk, Szalai and Pálffy testified against me and if I do not confess, they would rather believe them and not me”.⁶⁴ After such physical violence and moral blackmailing, Brankov crushed, and recited mechanically the set speech at Rajk's open trial that started on 16 September 1949. Although Brankov expected a death-sentence, he was sentenced „only” to life-long imprisonment for leading a conspiracy to subvert the democratic order, for continuous intelligence activities and for being an abettor of Boarov's crime.⁶⁵

The years 1949-1956

Brankov was regularly interrogated while still in prison when the political climate eased after the spring of 1953 and sometimes he was used as a witness during the re-opening of the cases of László Sólyom, György Pálffy and András Szalai, each convicted in the Rajk trial. In my opinion, the authorities wanted Brankov to play a key role in the trial of Gábor Péter with whom he had an alleged espionage relationship with the code name „Dózsa”. Brankov was interrogated three times between 22 July and 12

⁶¹ ÁBTL 2.1. I/109 (V-143403). 331/16.

⁶² ÁBTL 2.1. I/109 (V-143403). 331/12.

⁶³ ÁBTL 2.1. I/109 (V-143403). 331/13.

⁶⁴ ÁBTL 2.1. I/109 (V-143403). 155-156.

⁶⁵ For the text of the verdict in Hungarian see: ZINNER (1989): 255. and BOKOR (1989): 68.

August 1953 as the preparations for the trial of Gábor Péter were under way but he doggedly repeated that he did not know anything, could not remember anything, or could not say anything for sure.⁶⁶ Regardless of this, Gábor Péter was sentenced on 24 December 1953. According to the reasons adduced, as leader of the ÁVH Gábor Péter „had an official connection with the UDB organs, attached to the Yugoslav embassy in Budapest. [...] He regularly gave them such state secrets about which his superiors had no knowledge.” He gave secret reports of the ÁVH about different Hungarian and Yugoslav delegations' visits to Belgrade and Budapest, notes on the internal situation and strictly confidential reports on party relations, among others. As part of his alleged espionage, he „gave Brankov a number of geological maps in the spring of 1948 about the oil field at Lispe.”⁶⁷ His sentence also stated that Brankov „used the code name 'Bogdán' referring to Gábor Péter in his reports to the UDB centre and regarded him as a good source of information”.⁶⁸

The above facts were supported by the alleged drafts of those reports that Brankov had sent to the UDB and which were found in his flat after he had been arrested.⁶⁹ In my opinion, the drafts raise some questions. For example, why Gábor Péter did not destroy the drafts that contained condemning evidence against himself? In the draft of 18 November 1947 that Brankov signed as „Dózsa”, he listed the materials he had got from „Bogdán”.⁷⁰ As the list was nearly corresponding to the one read out in the sentence of Gábor Péter's case, these accusations might have been based on Brankov's draft, or it is also possible that the ÁVH falsified the draft based on the planned sentence. It is also interesting why Brankov and Gábor Péter needed to conspire if the reasons of the judgement itself state that the two had an official relationship.

Brankov was more talkative during the rehearing of Rajk's case half a year later. The authorities interrogated him at least twenty times between 21 July 1954 and 18 February 1955. It is important to note here that even if we can not talk about recruitment and espionage in the conventional sense of the words (as opposed to the case of Ernő Szűcs and Anton Rob)⁷¹, it was natural that the members of the Communist parties thought it to be their „comradely duty” to provide the other fraternal parties and especially the Communist party of the Soviet Union with valuable information about their own countries.

⁶⁶ ÁBTL 2.1. I/109-a (V-143403/1). 418-426.

⁶⁷ Lispe, now in County Zala, close to the Hungarian-Croatian-Slovenian border. The oilfield was discovered in 1937.

⁶⁸ ÁBTL 2.1. VI/1 (V-150028). 146. Although Brankov was also summoned to testify as a witness, I have not found any documents indicating that he appeared before the court.

⁶⁹ ÁBTL 2.1. VI/1 (V-150028). 46. and 171. The photocopies and their translations: ÁBTL 2.1. I/109 (V-143703) 223-224. and 331/24-40.

⁷⁰ ÁBTL 2.1. I/109 (V-143703). 223.

⁷¹ HUSZÁR (2009): Document 1. 43. and SAJTI (2012) 286.

It is also important to understand that the political atmosphere of the time overshadowed not only the show trials but their rehearing, which predetermined the judges' decisions. It often made difficulties for Brankov, too. His interrogators often had to give him a clue about what kind of a testimony the party expected from him. For example, although Brankov denied the anti-state conspiracy, the meeting between Rajk and Ranković in Paks, and Rajk's past as a Yugoslav spy during the interrogations in August and September 1954, in his hand-written notes on 24 and 30 August 1954 he repeated the well-known accusations against Rajk, such as that *„the moral and political attitude [of Rajk] was completely the same as Tito's political stand.”* Brankov also disapprovingly mentioned that Ranković often referred to Rajk as *„the 'hero of the Spanish fights', and only fraternised with Rajk to help realize 'Tito's plan for a confederation.’* Brankov again stated that Ranković ordered Brankov and Yugoslav ambassador Karlo Mrazović three times from May 1948 to prepare for a secret meeting with Rajk. Brankov also thought it thought-provoking that *„László Rajk never made any negative remarks on the Soviet Union. [...] He could not do that, though, as I can not remember a single case when he was talking to me about the Soviet Union. This is very typical of a Communist.”* On the other hand, Brankov admitted that Rajk *„had an enduring character and was not at all coward”. Still, „looking back on past events, I think that Rajk was poisoned by Tito poison to a great extent.”*⁷²

The clue to this contradiction is to know that Brankov was still held in solitary confinement and was not allowed to meet other prisoners, receive visitors or be informed on the political changes. According to a note on 19 March 1956, he was susceptible to influence and during the interrogations *„he grabbed every opportunity to compromise the Yugoslav leaders”*. It was easy to get false testimonies from him and, similarly to his confessions in 1949, he again changed his testimonies day after day. Otherwise, he read a lot, especially books on history and geography and started to learn German, English and French. The long years in prison weakened his health. He was operated on with haemorrhoids in the autumn of 1954, and frostbites started to appear on his body.⁷³ His nephew, Branislav Živkov – who, according to one note, was one of the best spies of the ÁVH against the Yugoslavs⁷⁴ – tried to visit him regularly, but could only met his uncle after Brankov was released by a presidential pardon on 3 April 1956. He lived in Budapest for a few weeks but had to move to Győr, maybe because the authorities remained suspicious of him or did not want to cause harm to Tito's sensitivity by letting such a prominent figure to live in the capital. He got a furnished flat as a financial compensation and found employment at

⁷² ÁBTL 2.1. I/1-d (V-142673/4). 316-319.

⁷³ ÁBTL 2.1. I/1-d (V-142673/4). 332-333.

⁷⁴ ÁBTL 2.1. I/1-d (V-142673/4). 335.

the library of Győr-Sopron county. He was not allowed to participate in person in the reburial of László Rajk. After the revolution had been suppressed, he emigrated to Austria on 9 November 1956 and finally settled down in France. Although the ministry of internal affairs was considering a new trial in 1962, neither a new inquiry, nor a new trial took place.⁷⁵ He visited Hungary for the first time in 1987 on the invitation of György Aczél. For Brankov's request, the office of the prosecutor general provided him with a clean record.⁷⁶ Lazar Brankov died in France in early December 2011.

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⁷⁵ ÁBTL 2.1. I/109 (V-143403). 339.

⁷⁶ SOLT (1994): 239.

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