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The Soviet method of shifting responsibility  
Show trials of state defence leaders in the Soviet Union  
and their impact on the Gábor Péter case  
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## **Abstract**

By analysing the responsibility of the successive Soviet leaders of state defence, Genrikh Yagoda, Nikolai Ezhov and Lavrentiy Beria, their role in building Stalin's terror and the criminal trials against them, I want to answer the question of how Stalin's model of transfer of responsibility and the instructions from the Soviet leadership influenced the Gábor Péter case. My aim is to explore how the model of the Beria trial and Soviet influence shaped the concept of the Gábor Péter case, how it added new elements to it, and finally, why real elements were included in the prosecution's case. In my article, I would also like to shed light on how Mátyás Rákosi was able to use the method of shifting the blame in order to avoid his political downfall until 1956.

## **1. Introduction**

In my study, I would like to answer the question of how the politically motivated trials of Gábor Péter and his associates in the Soviet Union against the leaders of the state defence forces were validated and reflected in the criminal proceedings. In my research, I seek to explore how the concept of the trial of Gábor Péter and his associates has changed depending on historical events and the evolution of political relations. I also aim to answer the question of why Gábor Péter became a target, in a sense a 'scapegoat' for Rákosi, and what the reason was for the predominance of the conceptual elements in the former head of state defence's trial over the charges of his actual crimes.

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According to the Stalinist model, the party and the party leader were infallible. When the question of guilt did arise, someone or some social group was usually designated as the scapegoat to shift responsibility for the leader's crimes. Stalin, despite the countless murders he committed in the course of the crackdown on his political opponents, real or imagined, was never held accountable, as he always shifted the responsibility for these crimes to the current head of state defence: the murder of Sergei Kirov to Genrikh Yagoda, and the mass murder to establish a total dictatorship to Nikolai Ezhov. And Sergei Khrushchev, who came to power after Stalin's death, used the same method effectively at a time when he did not want to reveal the dead dictator's guilt to the public in order to avoid the question of his own responsibility. The Soviet leadership also ordered Mátyás Rákosi to follow this line and, when reviewing the conspiracy trials, to try to conceal his decisive role in them and to name "Gábor Péter and his gang" as the only responsible party.

In order to maintain this myth, they mobilised all their forces and used the whole range of propaganda, including speeches at Party meetings, articles in newspapers, newsreels, propaganda films, reminding us of Orwell's utopian novel 1984, whose characters also completely rewrote the past along Party lines.

My aim is to present Gábor Péter's role and personality from several angles, in a more objective and nuanced way, which does not seek to portray the former head of state security as the demonised embodiment of a political ideology, but rather to give a realistic picture of him, as far as possible, through source criticism and the comparison of documents and memoirs. It is an important fundamental right that people should be able to know their past, especially in areas where before the regime change only manipulative media products were allowed to appear, and as a result there are still many white spots. It is therefore important that the past is explored as accurately as possible, thus contributing to an objective historical picture.

By analysing the trials of Genrikh Yagoda and Nikolai Ezhov, I will try to explore how Stalin developed the model of transfer of responsibility that Nikita Khrushchev used in the Beria trial, and later, following his example and the orders of the Soviet leadership, Mátyás Rákosi, successfully applied in the Gábor Péter case until 1956. The judgments, investigative documents, memoirs, textbooks and articles on the trial, as well as Mátyás Rákosi's speeches on the propaganda campaign accompanying the case, helped me to understand and analyse the case. In applying the method of documentary analysis, I will endeavour to use and interpret original sources and to reflect on the literature already processed. Using both my legal and historical knowledge, I will try to draw conclusions that are supported by historical facts.

## **2. The first appearance of the shifting of responsibility method in the case of Genrikh Yagoda**

Genrikh Yagoda took over the post of Second Vice-Chairman of the OGPU from Vyacheslav Menzhinsky in September 1923, and was appointed First Vice-Chairman after Dzerzhinsky's death.<sup>1</sup> During this period, the housing of the huge number of political prisoners, which had swelled as a result of the Stalinist terror, was a major problem for the leadership. In order to solve this problem, the Politburo on 27 June 1929 confirmed the decision to 'use the labour of prisoners' in camps in remote areas of the country for colonisation and the extraction of natural resources.<sup>2</sup> Initially, there was talk of camps capable of accommodating 50 000 people. However, as the wave of terror intensified and arrests were made at the same time as the camps were being set up, the number of prisoners in the newly created camps suddenly increased, reaching 180 000 on 1 January 1930. For the OGPU leadership, the economic use of this large number of people was a

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<sup>1</sup> László Béládi-Tamás Krausz: *Biographies from the History of Bolshevism*, 2nd ed., ELTE ÁJK Államtud. and Political Science. Int. of Political and Political Science, Budapest, 1988., 245.

<sup>2</sup> *Specific stages in the development of the Stalinist system of forced labour (Rossiysky Gosudarstvennij Arhiv Sozocialno-Polityicheskoi Isztorii /RGASZPI/, f. 17. op. 3, doc. 746, p. 211)*

problem. Previously no plans had been made for such a large number of prisoners. In the early days, the perspective of the GULAG was not yet clear to its commanders.<sup>3</sup> Yagoda then came up with an unusual proposal, which contradicted the then widely held collectivist principles, according to which the individual was to be ruthlessly sacrificed 'for the good of the community' and which showed no mercy to those branded 'enemy'. On 12 April 1930, Yagoda, as deputy president of the OGPU, was a vocal critic of the camp system and proposed that it be replaced by settlements in remote areas of the country. Under his proposal, the prisoners would have been allowed to live with their families in such settlements, working in logging and other industrial plants. He proposed the creation of exile settlements, special villages. In his view, such a system would have been an appropriate way of ensuring that the exiles in these villages were attached to new land. He argued that it would be easier to reintegrate prisoners into society through meaningful work.<sup>4</sup> There is no telling how many people would have escaped death if Stalin had accepted Yagoda's unusually humane approach. However, the People's Commissar's proposal was considered nonsense and was immediately rejected, since Stalin's aim was primarily to exploit slave labour, where human life was a consumable commodity, and the expansion of the camps was chosen over Yagoda's naive plan. Yagoda was thus forced to carry out Stalin's order: to take the lead in organising the expansion of the camp system, which he considered inhumane and opposed. Forced labour, while retaining its importance in its traditional sectors, was by this time represented in almost all areas of the national economy. The year 1929 marked a turning point in the history of the camp system, as the need for more and more labour was growing in order to achieve the ambitious objectives of the First Five-Year Plan, which had begun a year earlier. The number of prisoners and the length of their sentences therefore increased rapidly. This included the construction of the notorious White Sea Canal, the Belomorkanal, which was completed in just twenty months, between September 1931 and April 1933, with 11 hours

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<sup>3</sup> Afanasev, N. A.: History of the Stalinsky GULAG in the 1920s, p. 27.

<sup>4</sup> Goszudarstvennij Arhiv Rosszijoszkaj Federacii, GA RF. F. R- 9479. Op. 1. doc. 3. l. 23-24. Document opublikovan vo 2-m tome nastorsego izdanija.

of rush work a day. In the early 1930s, the OGPU camp system expanded further. The supreme authorities were constantly making decisions on new construction sites and on points on the map of the country where the labour of the imprisoned was expected to be used. Thus, the Politburo issued a decision on 5 May 1930 on geological research for the construction of a canal from Lake Onyega to the White Sea, and on 23 February 1932 on the construction of the Far Eastern Railway.<sup>5</sup>

And on 27 October 1934, as a final act of the First Five-Year Plan, the Gulag, an organ of the NKVD (National People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs of the Federation), was established, the first office to unite the forced labour institutions and coordinate their operations.<sup>6</sup>

As a reward for his "services", Yagoda was appointed an alternate member of the party's Central Committee in 1930 and a full member in 1934. He gained real power in July 1934, after Menzhinsky's death. It was then that he became head of the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD), which took over the functions of the OGPU. Whether he played a role in the events surrounding the assassination of Sergei Kirov from the summer of that dramatic year onwards remains unclear and unexplored.<sup>7</sup> Historians have still not found conclusive evidence that this was a political assassination ordered by Stalin and engineered by the secret service, or that the gunman Nikolayev was a lone perpetrator, driven to his fatal act by his dismissal from his job and his bitterness over his wife's infidelity. In any case, the death of his supposed rival was in the dictator's interest, giving him the pretext to eliminate all his rivals, his political opponents, real or perceived, and to establish a total dictatorship.<sup>8</sup> However, Trotsky's supporters, Grigory Zinoviev and Lev

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<sup>5</sup> Zoltán Czéh: The Gulag as an Economic Phenomenon, *Eszmélet*, 1 January 1995. [http://www.eszmelet.hu/czeh\\_zoltan-a-gulag-mint-gazdasagi-jelenseg/](http://www.eszmelet.hu/czeh_zoltan-a-gulag-mint-gazdasagi-jelenseg/) (Last downloaded 20.05.20.2024)

<sup>6</sup> Uo.

<sup>7</sup> Béládi-Krausz, 1988, 245.

<sup>8</sup> Rayfield, Donald: Stalin and his henchmen - The tyrant and those who murdered him, Park Könyvkiadó, Budapest, 2011, 275-276.

Kamenev, who were considered Stalin's main enemies, were arrested on Stalin's orders and accused of having received orders to assassinate Kirov directly from Trotsky.<sup>9</sup>

The better-informed circles of the Party knew that Yagoda was only the nominal head of the NKVD, and that Stalin himself was its real boss. Therefore, when rumours began to circulate that the NKVD was involved in the assassination, more and more people began to suspect that Stalin had personally ordered the assassination. When the dictator finally learned of the rumours, it was too late to do anything to stop them spreading. Stalin saw only one way out: to admit openly that the Kirov assassination had been organised by the NKVD, and to hold Yagoda responsible.<sup>10</sup> It was here that the Stalinist model of blame shifting, which later served as a model for the Gábor Péter case, was first introduced.

Since, according to the old concept of the Kirov murder, the crime was organised by Zinoviev and Kamenev, and according to the new version, by Yagoda, then according to the elementary rules of logic, he is necessarily an accomplice of Zinoviev and Kamenev. Therefore, the peculiar logic of the constructed trial forced Stalin to combine these two incompatible versions and to invent an absurd legend: that Yagoda, who masterminded the preparation of the Zinoviev-Kamenev trial, was in fact their accomplice.<sup>11</sup>

But there was another reason for Yagoda's accusation besides the deflection of responsibility: already during the first Moscow trial in 1935, Stalin had reproached Yagoda for not taking a firm enough stand against Zinoviev and Kamenev. In August 1936, he reprimanded the NKVD chief for sparing Bukharin and Rikov in the preparation of the case.<sup>12</sup> Nikolayevsky wrote in his "Letter of an Old Bolshevik": *"Yagoda was removed from office because of a certain mild objection to the staging of the (Zinoviev-Kamenev) trial, which he learned only after the preparations had been made that the method of staging had been decided. He wanted the case to be discussed in the Politburo."* According to the archival

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<sup>9</sup> Butler, Rupert: *The Tools of Stalinist Terror - Cheka, OGPU, NKVD, KGB from 1917 to 1991*, Gabo Publishing House, Budapest, 2006, 64-65.

<sup>10</sup> Orlov, Alexander: *The secret history of Stalin's crimes*, Random House, New York, 1953, 251.

<sup>11</sup> Orlov, 1953, 250.

<sup>12</sup> Lecomte, Bernard: *KGB - History of the Soviet secret services*, Corvina Publishing, 2022, 54.

documents (published years later), when Yagoda received copies of the confessions of the growing list of defendants implicating Trotsky in the conspiracy, he wrote that these things were "*impossible*" and "*a lie*".<sup>13</sup> Stalin also learned that during the interrogations under Yagoda's direction, some NKVD officers were doing their job in a haphazard manner: for example, by asking questions in the right way, they offered suspects the opportunity to defend themselves against the charges. Yagoda and some of his senior staff were most likely supported in their conduct by certain members of the Politburo (e.g. Ordzhonokidze) who opposed Stalin's plans for a ruthless crackdown on the opposition. Stalin made it known that he would not tolerate any opposition and considered any leniency towards the 'enemy' unacceptable. On 25 September 1936, Stalin and Zhdanov sent a telegram to the Politburo from their leave in Sochi: "*We consider it absolutely necessary and urgent that Comrade Ezhov should put the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs in order. Yagoda has proved utterly powerless to unravel the Trotskyist-Zinovievist bloc. The OGPU is four years behind in this respect. All the leading party workers in the NKVD and the majority of the NKVD staff comment on this.*"<sup>14</sup>

In an angry letter, Stalin told Kaganovich, Molotov and several other members of the Politburo that he no longer trusted Yagoda and wanted to dismiss him: "*We consider it absolutely necessary and urgent to appoint Comrade Ezhov as People's Commissar for Internal Affairs. Yagoda has obviously proved incapable of exposing the Trotskyist-Zinovievist clique! The NKVD wasted four years on this case!*"<sup>15</sup> Yagoda was dismissed and replaced by Nikolai Ezhov, who far surpassed him in obedience and ruthlessness.

The deposed People's Commissar for Internal Affairs was already under severe political attack from Ezhov and Stalin at the February-March 1937 plenum. Here, Ezhov (on Stalin's orders) announced that under the previous regime the prisons where Trotskyists, Zinoviev's followers and right-wing deviants were held had very quickly been turned into

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<sup>13</sup> Knight, Amy: Who killed Kirov? Hill & Wang Pub, 2000, 250-251.

<sup>14</sup> Mikeln, Milos: Stalin, the life of a tyrant, White Raven Books, Budapest, 1988, p. 214.

<sup>15</sup> Lecomte, 2022, 54-55.



"holiday homes" – the prisoners were treated "liberally".<sup>16</sup> Ezhov expressed indignation that political prisoners had achieved their demands through hunger strikes, and that the NKVD leaders in Moscow were 'terribly afraid' of these hunger strikes.<sup>17</sup> In the light of the new Stalinist instructions, according to which the plenum began approving lists of "hardened criminals" sentenced to be shot on various dates on the first day of its work on 27 February 1937, a new attitude had to be adopted towards the popular forms of resistance of the imprisoned, including hunger strikes. Touching on the system in prisons, he asked, "*Where does such care for the enemy come from?*"<sup>18</sup>

Yagoda was given one of the most negative roles in the trial of Bukharin and his associates, embodying almost everything that the contemporary concept of "enemy of the people" implied: because he was conceived as a member of both the left-wing opposition (Trotskyist-Zinovievist group) and the "right-wing" Bukharin group, he acted as a link between the two, sabotaging the "fight with the enemy", and also spying for several states (including Nazi Germany). In a cartoon of the time, he is depicted in SS uniform, holding a hangman's axe and covered in blood up to his knees.

In addition to espionage and conspiracy against the state, Yagoda was accused of having his predecessor Menzhinsky and his best friend Gorky murdered, starting with doctors. Stalin sought to further antagonise public opinion against the arrested head of state security by stirring up hatred against him because of his truly extreme lifestyle (which was by no means unique among the Soviet elite). On 8 April 1937, Yagoda's apartment was searched. During this search, 22,997 roubles in cash, 1,229 bottles of wine, dozens of fur thongs and furs, over 100 rolls of English cloth, a large quantity of furs, three skinned swan skins, leopard skins, 70 women's silk stockings, 9 cameras, a Zeiss film projector, over 1,000 pieces of cutlery, 3,904 pornographic pictures and 115 rubber bands were confiscated. The NKVD spent 605,000 roubles a year on the mere upkeep of the People's

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<sup>16</sup> Voproszi istorii. 1994. No. 10. pp. 18-19.

<sup>17</sup> Voproszi istorii. 1994. No. 10. pp. 19-20.

<sup>18</sup> Uo.

Commissar's two country houses, his summer cottage and two apartments in Moscow. Another 140,000 roubles was the "allowance" for the large Yagoda family. Millions of roubles were spent to support prominent politicians and writers of the time, and on gifts to their mistresses, the cost of which was often paid for by the NKVD's economic department, on Yagoda's orders, from his own secret funds.<sup>19</sup>

During the investigation, Yagoda was in such a bad state physically and mentally that he was crying almost constantly and could hardly breathe. The former NKVD chief initially denied the absurd charges in the show trial, which began on 9 March 1938, but then a recess was ordered, after which Yagoda appeared to be subjected to beatings and torture. He read his confession from paper, apparently seeing the text for the first time. At this point he had already admitted all the fabrications as true, "confessing his sins". The former NKVD chief was finally sentenced to death on 13 March 1938.<sup>20</sup> In his famous work *The Gulag Archipelago*, Solzhenitsyn recalled the trial as follows. *Yagoda, confident and insistent, pleaded directly to Stalin for mercy: 'I appeal to you for mercy! I have built you two huge canals!' According to a witness, at this moment a match seemed to flare up behind the muslin curtain, and until it was finished, the outline of a pipe could be seen.*<sup>21</sup> There was no mercy. Genrikh Yagoda was executed by firing squad shortly after the trial. Yagoda's fate was soon shared by his wife, Ida Leonidovna Averbah.

### 3. Developing the method – The mass murderer Ezhov and the "innocent" Stalin

Yagoda was replaced as head of the NKVD by Nikolai Ezhov, who was later nicknamed the "bloody-handed dwarf" because of his short stature. Originally trained as a saboteur, the uneducated party member first came to the attention of the leadership in 1929 because of his tireless diligence and organisational skills.<sup>22</sup> This enabled him to make rapid

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<sup>19</sup> Miklós Kun: *Az ismeretlen Sztálin*, PolgArt Könyvkiadó, Budapest, 2002. pp. 251-252.

<sup>20</sup> Rayfield, 2011, pp. 313-316.

<sup>21</sup> Solzhenitsyn, Alexander: *The Gulag Archipelago*, Europa Book Publishing, 1993, p. 477.

<sup>22</sup> Lecomte, 2022, 56.

progress in his career. Initially, he served on some of the party's regional committees. By 1933 he was meeting regularly with Stalin, who put him in charge of the People's Commissariat for purges within the party. As a result, half a million people, one-eighth of the membership, had to leave the party.<sup>23</sup> After Menzhinsky's death on 10 May 1934, the NKVD was placed under the sole control of Yagoda. Stalin therefore saw the need to appoint his own trusted men to senior positions in the OGPU and NKVD. To this end, he increasingly preferred Ezhov to Yagoda, in whom he had less and less confidence, since the NKVD chief had good relations with the right-wing opposition.<sup>24</sup> On Stalin's initiative, it was decided to create a unified, all-union People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD), into which the OGPU was merged in July 1934.<sup>25</sup>

All this became clear after the assassination of the Leningrad party chief, Sergei Kirov, on 1 December 1934. According to one version of events, Ezhov was summoned to Stalin's office the morning after he arrived in Moscow on news of the assassination and spent much of the day there. The daily register of visitors to Stalin's office does not mention Ezhov. Yet, when Stalin left for Leningrad by special train late in the evening of the same day, Ezhov was among his escorts, and after arriving in Leningrad the next morning, he attended Stalin's interrogation of the assassin Nikolayev. Two days after the assassination, the Politburo approved a decree allowing for the conviction and summary execution of those accused of terrorism. During the purges of the following years, this law of 1 December 1934 was widely applied. Stalin put Ezhov in charge of supervising the investigation.<sup>26</sup>

His career thus rose steeply, and by early 1935 he was elected chairman of the Central Control Committee. He won Stalin's favour in particular by producing a study which became in part the ideological basis for the purges that followed. In it, he projected the

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<sup>23</sup> Rayfield, 2011, 328.

<sup>24</sup> Rayfield, 2011, 329.

<sup>25</sup> Jansen, Marc - Petrov, Nikita: Stalin's loyal executioner: People's commissar Nikolai Ezhov, 1895-1940, Hoover Institution Press, Stanford University, Stanford, California, 2002, 22.

<sup>26</sup> Jansen-Petrov, 2002, 23.

horror of violence and terrorism that he believed would inevitably ensue if the political opposition survived. Ezhov – presumably on Stalin’s orders – had already criticised the work of the state security organisation, because, in his view, its policy *was ‘not directed against organised counter-revolutionary organisations, but against isolated cases of anti-Soviet agitation, all kinds of abuse of office, hooliganism, public crime, etc.’*. He also criticised the special detention centres for political prisoners, which he said *“were more like forced labour camps than prisons... Prisoners could get in close contact with each other, discuss political events in the country, organise anti-Soviet activities for their organisations and maintain contact with the outside world.”*<sup>27</sup> Thanks to the above study, and his intrigues against the State Security organisation and its leader Yagoda, Stalin enjoyed his full confidence and made direct, secret reports to him. After he was assigned to control the NKVD, his interest turned increasingly to investigative work, interrogations and evidence procedures, in which he sometimes personally took part, witnessing extreme cruelty.<sup>28</sup>

Yagoda was replaced on 25 September 1936 and placed at the head of the People’s Commissariat for Postal Affairs. In January 1937, Stalin dismissed him from this post, and on 2 March he was forced to admit his responsibility for the NKVD’s failures before the Central Committee. Here, Ezhov hurled angry invectives at him, and Beria mocked him, calling the NKVD a ‘wool factory’.<sup>29</sup> On 18 March 1937, a month before his arrest, Ezhov launched a relentless smear campaign against Yagoda in a speech at the NKVD officers’ canteen. He made serious accusations against the leaders of the organisation, all of whom he said were dangerous counter-revolutionaries and even spies in the service of foreign states, with Yagoda at their head. Stalin accused them of sabotaging the investigations, deliberate intransigence and then treason precisely because he knew that after Kirov’s assassination, senior members of the state security services knew full well that all these accusations were trumped up and without any real basis.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Butler, 2006, 69.

<sup>28</sup> Lecomte, 2022, 56.

<sup>29</sup> Rayfield, 2011, 310-312.

<sup>30</sup> Lecomte, 2022, 56-57.

Ezhov's first task was to complete the work that Yagoda had reluctantly undertaken: to investigate the Zinoviev-Kamenev trial in such a way that all the suspects involved could be given the death penalty. To do this, he needed to purge the NKVD, during which ninety of the one hundred and ten state security officers who served under Yagoda were arrested and most of them executed. Stalin issued a decree authorising torture in 1937, and this method of interrogation was widely used throughout the Soviet Union.<sup>31</sup>

Terror spread from the NKVD and the party leadership to the population as a whole in the spring of 1937.<sup>32</sup> On Stalin's orders, Ezhov set up quotas, within which he prescribed for each district the quotas for the arrest and execution (73 000) of enemies of the people and the prison sentences to be imposed on them. Soon, after eighteen months, this target was exceeded nine times over.<sup>33</sup> The more effectively the NKVD carried out its inhuman tasks, the higher the quota was raised, until a kind of competition developed between the local organs of state defence to arrest, execute, imprison or exile kulaks, saboteurs, 'traitors', who were called enemies of the people, and nationalities considered dangerous, such as Poles, Volga Germans or Greeks.<sup>34</sup> The huge number of executions he ordered could already be carried out in the basements of the Lubyanka, but instead the massacres took place in a so-called 'slaughterhouse' in a courtyard near the Lubyanka.<sup>35</sup> On 27 May 1935, the NKVD leadership issued a secret decree setting up so-called "troikas", which were so-called "tribunals of summary conviction", three-member committees consisting of the local police chief, the NKVD chief and the party's first secretary, to whom this legislation gave full powers.<sup>36</sup>

The number of victims of the reign of terror can be seen in a few top secret documents for Nikita Khrushchev and key party leaders. These include a study on 'Reprisals during the period of the cult of personality', prepared by a commission set up after the XXII

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<sup>31</sup> Rayfield, 2011, 332-335.

<sup>32</sup> Lecomte, 2022, 57.

<sup>33</sup> Rayfield, 2011, 337.

<sup>34</sup> Lecomte, 2022, 57.

<sup>35</sup> Butler, 2006, 71.

<sup>36</sup> Lecomte, 2022, 57-58.

Congress of the USSR under the leadership of Nikolai Svernyik. If we compare these data with the statistical sources of the Gulag Directorate, the People's Commissariat for Justice and the courts, we obtain the following figure: in 1937-38, 1 575 000 people were arrested by the NKVD, 85.4% of whom were convicted, and 681 692 people, i.e. 51% of those convicted, were executed.<sup>37</sup>

The archival documents available, including the minutes of the Political Committee, Stalin's agenda, the list of Stalin's visitors to the Kremlin (his daily meetings with Ezhov), show that the mass murder committed during the period known as Ezhovtsin was the result of Stalin's decision and initiative, since they show that the tyrant regularly controlled and directed Ezhov's activities.<sup>38</sup> Stalin edited the most important documents, supervised the investigations and controlled the show trials.<sup>39</sup> At the end of 1938, Stalin, realising that his popularity was rapidly declining, that the party-state and economic apparatus was stagnating because of a shortage of cadres, and that his plan for a total dictatorship had been established and that he no longer needed Ezhov, decided to end the great terror and get rid of the bureaucrat. Stalin now applied the tried and tested method of shifting the blame for the Kirov assassination to Yagoda on a grand scale, and made the massacre appear in its entirety as if it were solely the fault of Ezhov and the NKVD under his command.<sup>40</sup> Ezhov was appointed People's Commissar for Water Transport in April 1938. He was able to retain his position at the head of the NKVD, but in practice the organisation was increasingly out of his hands. Later, Stalin claimed that Ezhov had drunkenly compiled the list of names of those to be executed, which he had been given to sign, and that many innocent people had been among the victims.<sup>41</sup> On 22 August, Stalin appointed Lavrentiy Beria, by then almost the first man in Georgia and head of the NKVD's State Security

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<sup>37</sup> Courtois, Stéphane - Werth, Nicolas - Panné, Jean-Louis - Bartosek, Karel - Margolin, Jean-Louis - Paczkowski, Andrzej: *The Black Book of Communism - Crime, Terror, Retribution*. Nagyvilág Publishing House, Budapest, 2001, 199.

<sup>38</sup> Courtois et al, 2001, 198-199.

<sup>39</sup> Jansen-Petrov, 2002, 207.

<sup>40</sup> Lecomte, 2022, 59-60.

<sup>41</sup> Janesen-Petrov, 2002, 210.

Directorate, as head of the NKVD's Transcaucasus. The reduction in terror was presented to the public as a restoration of the balance of power between the law-breaking NKVD and the law-abiding judiciary under Andrei Visinsky. In December 1938, Ezhov resigned and was forced to self-condemn his 'excesses' during a four-hour meeting with Stalin, Molotov and Voroshilov. But he was almost deaf to criticism, and blamed himself for doing too little in the face of 'lack of Bolshevik vigilance'.<sup>42</sup> Ezhov was arrested on 10 April 1939 and taken to a secret prison where he was tortured. However, like Gábor Péter's first criminal case within the Zionist trial, the former NKVD chief was not charged with the crimes he had actually committed, a mass murder during the reign of terror, but with espionage for the Polish and German secret services, conspiracy to overthrow the government, murder and, as homosexual relations were a crime in the Soviet Union at the time, 'sodomy'. During the investigation, he recanted his confession, but Beria promised him that if he took the blame, they would let him and his relatives live. At the trial on 3 February 1940, he confessed to all the crimes he had been charged with, except espionage and terrorism, and sodomy was no longer on the list of charges. After a half-hour sham trial, the court sentenced Ezhov to death and he was executed that night.<sup>43</sup>

#### **4. The impact of the rise and fall of Lavrentiy Beria on the Gábor Péter affair**

##### **4.1 Stalin's death, Beria's reforms**

The death of Stalin on 5 March 1953 marked a decisive turning point in the fate of the defendants in the Hungarian anti-Zionist trial, including Gábor Péter, which was initiated on the Soviet model and orders. The Soviet and Hungarian masterminds of the large-scale political case intended Péter to play the role of one of the main accused, the "leader of the state defence thread". During the succession struggle that followed the death of the

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<sup>42</sup> Rayfield, 2011, 367-368.

<sup>43</sup> Rayfield, 2011, 368-370.

Soviet dictator, power was in the hands of the Beria-Malenkov duo, who had temporarily formed an alliance. The two experienced politicians were aware of the public mood and understood that the only way to protect the system from collapse and the leadership from popular anger was to prevent it by radical reforms.<sup>44</sup>

Beria, who had previously played a key role in the running of the Stalinist dictatorship, announced a broad amnesty on 26 March 1953 and ordered a review of the concept trials. More than half a million people were released from the GULAGs and he initiated the restoration of peaceful relations between the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, including a plan to reunify Germany on the condition that it would become a neutral state. The 'new course' to be introduced here would have consisted in the separation of party and state and the 'rationalisation' of the economy.<sup>45</sup> On 1 April 1953 Beria also ordered the immediate release and rehabilitation of the suspects in the Moscow medical trial, branded as "white-coat murderers", and on 4 April<sup>46</sup> banned torture.<sup>47</sup>

#### **4.2. A new trend in Hungary, the review of the "Zionist trial"**

The new direction thus announced has also had an impact in Hungary. At the meeting of the delegations of the Soviet Union and the Hungarian People's Republic in Moscow on 12 June 1953, the easing of dictatorship, the introduction of a more humane and tolerant system, the "restoration of socialist legality" and a self-critical attitude were prescribed for the Hungarian party leadership. They called the government under Mátyás Rákosi to account for the lawlessness and the large number of innocent people who had been persecuted. Beria also named Mátyás Rákosi and Mihály Farkas as responsible for the

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<sup>44</sup> Miklós Kun: The fall of Berija. Beszélő Online, 1991, Vol. 3, No. 21 <http://beszelo.c3.hu/cikkek/berija-bukasa> (Last downloaded on 24.05.2024)

<sup>45</sup> Ákos Szilágyi: The Berija Dossier. 2000 Literary and Social Journal, 2002/1. 52.

<sup>46</sup> Memorandum by L. P. Beria to the Presidium of the USSRPSKR on the rehabilitation of persons accused in the case of so-called "harmful doctors", 1 April 1953, AP RF, f. 3, op. 58, d. 423, 5-7. Copy. Published by Ákos Szilágyi 2002. 55-57.

<sup>47</sup> GA RF, f. 9401, op.1, d. 1299, 246-247. Original copy. Published by Ákos SZILÁGYI 2002. 57-59.



violent and unlawful methods of the State Protection Authority, and the Hungarian dictator was forced to be self-critical.<sup>48</sup> At the Moscow meeting, the separation of the highest state and party functions was also on the agenda. Imre Nagy was proposed for the post of head of government by Beria, while Rákosi was only to be the leader of the MDP.<sup>49</sup>

On 27-28 June, the Hungarian participants of the meeting, Mátyás Rákosi, Imre Nagy, Ernő Gerő and András Hegedűs, reported in a self-critical tone on the events in Moscow at the plenum of the Central Executive Committee of the MDP. The papers and resolutions adopted at the meeting were kept secret, and the public only learned about their content and the new political direction from the parliamentary speech of Imre Nagy, the Prime Minister recently appointed by the Kremlin, on 4 July. Restoration of the rule of law was a key objective of the Prime Minister's programme speech.<sup>50</sup>

The reform measures introduced, including the rehabilitation of doctors accused of plotting to assassinate party and state leaders, had a decisive impact on the concept of the Gábor Péter case, and the Zionist line, the accusation of an international spy organisation, was forced to be abandoned. Beria ordered a review of the "Zionist trial" in Hungary and the setting up of a commission headed by Tyiskov.<sup>51</sup> Belkin, the "key witness", now had the opportunity to withdraw his confession against Péter under duress. On the orders of a Soviet "adviser" who had visited the former ÁVH chief in his prison, the handcuffs were removed, which he had to wear day and night from the time of his arrest on 2 January 1953 until then, according to his own account.<sup>52</sup> Thanks to Beria, Péter Gábor was thus spared the humiliation and suffering that Rajk and his fellow defendants had

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<sup>48</sup> Baráth Magdolna-Feitl István (eds.): The secret tapes of Rákosi's and Gerő's party investigations, 1962. Budapest, Napvilág Publishing House, Historical Archives of the State Security Services, 2013.

<sup>49</sup> Ákos Szilágyi: A terribly ordinary reformer - Pages from the Berija dossier. *Népszabadság*, 2002/10. 22-23.

<sup>50</sup> Baráth-Feitl 2013. 309-310.

<sup>51</sup> Rolf Müller: The Name of Violence: the life of Gábor Péter, the head of the ÁVH, Jaffa Kiadó, Budapest, 2017. 201-202.

<sup>52</sup> Koltay Gábor-Bródy Péter (eds.): Unburned documents. Szabad Tér Kiadó, Budapest, 1990. <http://www.rev.hu/sulinet45/szerviz/dokument/peter.htm> (Last accessed 20.05.20.20.2024).

previously endured during their trial, and probably also the end of his life on the gallows.

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From the summer of 1953 until the end of the year, most of the doctors and the leaders of the Jewish organisation were released, István Szirmai was also released without trial, and Zoltán Vas was reinstated in his party post. The accusations of Zionist conspiracy, collaboration with the Israeli spy organisation and the murder of Wallenberg disappeared, and the interrogations were instead centred on the person of I. G. Jacobson, the head of the Joint in Hungary. In the new indictment (December 1953), the official relationship between Benedek and Stöckler, controlled by the ÁVH, became a spy relationship in which state secrets were passed on to Jacobson. At their trial in March 1954, the espionage was classified as a breach of official secrecy, as the information disclosed was public knowledge at the time of the relationship and did not constitute state secrets. The court sentenced Benedek to two years' imprisonment and Stöckler to three years' imprisonment, the latter also for currency smuggling. However, they did not have to serve the sentence because all 18 were pardoned and released later that year. Among the high-ranking state security officers, Miklós Bauer, Dezső Lakatos, Tamás Mátrai, Alajos Réh, György Szendy, György Szöllősi, János Tihanyi and Sándor Zalai regained their freedom at the same time.<sup>54</sup>

#### **4.3. The fall of Beria, his trial and its impact on the Péter affair**

Based on research by historian Boris Starkov, Beria's plan to rehabilitate those convicted in the show trials was only prevented by his arrest and conviction on 26 June 1953.<sup>55</sup> This was done because the powerful head of state security and Interior Minister had been collecting compromising documents on Khrushchev and his other rivals since Stalin's

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<sup>53</sup> Müller 2017. 204.

<sup>54</sup> Müller 2017. 204.

<sup>55</sup> Baráth-Feitl 2013. 310. footnote 7

death.<sup>56</sup> The reason for Beria's removal by a coup was that his conspicuous activism and increased prominence had aroused strong fear among the other members of the political committee, especially the much experienced 'old hands' Voroshilov, Kaganovich and Molotov. They, along with Bulganyin, were easily convinced of the danger of the Beria-Malenkov alliance by Khrushchev, who was popular in the party's leading circles and as energetic as Beria, and who used their majority on the Political Committee to dismiss Malenkov as secretary of the Central Committee by a simple vote. Khrushchev then managed to drive a wedge between the members of the Duma Council through political intrigues.<sup>57</sup>

There is no direct information available on who was involved in the plan to eliminate Berija, nor on the consultation that preceded it. One of the few sources of evidence is the speech, or more precisely the draft of the speech, made by Georgy Malenkov, Chairman of the Council of Ministers, at the meeting of the Presidium on 26 June 1953.<sup>58</sup> The document gives us a rough idea of the basis on which the authors of the trumped-up case against Beria could base their accusations. The main charge against him was that the Ministry of the Interior, under his control, was trying to establish its monopoly "by rising above the party and the state". In the next part of his speech, he referred to the specific cases which he said proved Beria's anti-party and anti-state activities. In particular, he emphasised the "Hungarian question", in which he accused Beria of having interfered in Hungary's internal affairs without prior agreement with the party leadership by having Rákos removed and replacing him with Imre Nagy.<sup>59</sup>

The main charges in the trial against Berija and his associates included treason, conspiracy against the state, collaboration with foreign secret services and attempted seizure of power. In contrast, his real crimes in running the Stalinist terror apparatus, including his

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<sup>56</sup> Ákos Szilágyi: The Berija Dossier. 2000 Literary and Social Journal, 2002, Vol. 14, No. 1, pp. 46-69.

<sup>57</sup> When 1991.

<sup>58</sup> Chernovaja zapisz' vizstupleniya G. M. Malenkova na zasedanii Prezidiuma CK KPSzSz. 26 ijunya 1953 g. In Lavrentyij Berija. 1953. styenogramma ijul'szkogo plenuma CK KPSzSz i drugije dokumenti. Moszkva, 1999, 71-72.

<sup>59</sup> Sz. Zoltán Bíró: Kremlin Endgame. 2000 Literary and Social Journal, 2012, Vol. 24, No. 7-8, pp. 46-120.

role in the execution of the Katyn massacre, were not mentioned in the justification for the death sentence handed down on 23 December 1953.<sup>60</sup>

The prosecution of Beria, who had called for broad rehabilitation, was a temporary advantage for Rákosi, who hoped that it would put the representatives of the new line in the background in Moscow and allow him to avoid political trials.

In Hungary, the first step on the Kremlin's road to the consolidation of the rule of law was the decision of 15 July 1953 to set up the Supreme Prosecutor's Office and to draft the amnesty decree. At the same time, the Ministry of Justice was preparing a proposal to abolish and re-regulate the question of internment, deportation and police custody. At that time, however, there was no mention of the rehabilitation of those convicted in political trials.<sup>61</sup> Once the new policy had been launched, there was no turning back, and sooner or later Rákosi had to deal with the problem of those who had been unlawfully convicted in the show trials.<sup>62</sup> On the initiative of Imre Nagy, a review of Kállai's case was launched in the autumn of 1953.<sup>63</sup>

And István Kovács, First Secretary of Borsod County, secretly visited the Soviet ambassador on 9 August 1953 and told him about the atmosphere in the Central Command, which had developed because of Rákosi's paranoid suspicions. The cases of those who had been persecuted in the show trials became more and more widely known, and became more and more part of the public discourse.<sup>64</sup> Gábor Péter, unlike the other falsely defamed suspects in the planned fabricated Zionist trial, did not regain his freedom after Beria ordered the handcuffs he had been forced to wear day and night to be removed, the conditions of his detention were improved, his daily physical abuse, a

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<sup>60</sup> Sz. Bíró 2012. 46-120.

<sup>61</sup> Baráth-Feitl 2013. 310.

<sup>62</sup> Gyula Kállai: A belated prison diary. Kossuth Book Publishing House, Budapest, 1987, 153-170.

<sup>63</sup> Baráth-Feitl 2013. 311.

<sup>64</sup> Baráth-Feitl 2013.311.

According to his own account, was stopped<sup>65</sup>, and he was freed from the planned death sentence. The continued imprisonment of the former head of the dreaded ÁVH proved useful for Rákosi, as it was an ideal means of passing the buck and defusing social tension in an increasingly threatening climate for the dictator who had lost his authority.

After Beria's arrest, from the summer of 1953, the concept of the Péter and Co. case changed, with the accusation of international espionage now replacing the charge of international espionage organisation, which contained many real elements, including violence and brutality, plundering of public property, and the investigators of the case painted the fallen leaders of the ÁVH as "a band of thieves above the law" in accordance with the new direction of the investigation, only the element of spying for Yugoslavia remained from the basic concept.<sup>66</sup>

#### **4.4. The rationale behind the liability shift**

After the conclusion of the investigation in November 1953, the PB, following the comments of Rákosi, Mihály Farkas and Márton Horváth, commissioned the First Secretary, Imre Nagy and Ernő Gerő to write a document on the lessons to be learned from the case on the importance of party control of state security.<sup>67</sup> All this created for Rákosi the basic idea of the shifting of responsibility, which for a long time was an opportunity to escape. It was here that the accusation was first made that Rákosi was innocent of the show trials, that "Gábor Péter and his gang" were solely responsible, because "they deceived and misled the party in a gallant manner."<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Koltay-Bródy 1990.

<sup>66</sup> Müller 2017. 207.

<sup>67</sup> MNL OL M-KS 276. f. 53. cs. 146. er. e. Minutes of the meeting of the MDP Political Committee, 11 November 1953.

<sup>68</sup> Árpád Pünkösti: Escape from the Shadow of Rajk - Gábor Péter's efforts to cover his tracks. Forrás, 1999 (Vol. 31) No. 11, p. 65.

#### **4.5. The verdict at first instance: Péter, the "chief culprit"**

The trial of Gábor Péter and his associates began in December 1953, and after four days of closed hearings, on 24 December the court handed down its verdict in the case of the following defendants:

- 1., Lieutenant General Gábor Péter State Defence
- 2., Andor Csapó Lieutenant Colonel of State Protection
- 3., Dr. István Timár Head of Department, Ministry of Justice
- 4., Dr Gyula Décsi, former Minister of Justice
- 5., Dr. István Bálint, Doctor of Public Defence
- 6., Márton Károlyi Head of Department, Ministry of Foreign Affairs
- 7., József Kovács Major of State Protection
- 8., Gyula Princz, Lieutenant Colonel of the Prison Service
- 9., Tibor Vajda, Head of Department of the Statistical Office
- 10., Captain Antal Bánkuti, State Defence
- 11., Dr. Béla Janikovszky Head of Department, Ministry of Foreign Affairs
- 12., Tibor Érsek Head of Department, Ministry of Foreign Affairs
- 13., Captain Ferenc Vándor State Defence
- 14., János Komendó Major of State Protection
- 15., Ferenc Pataki Ferencné Captain of State Defence
- 16., Mrs Gábor Péter official
- 17., Mihály Szabolcsi Deputy CEO
- 18., Captain László Máj, State Defence

The Budapest Court Martial found Gábor Péter guilty of crimes against the people, infidelity, grievous bodily harm causing death, continuous abuse of official authority, facilitating escape abroad, and crimes against public property. The first defendant, a former head of state security, and Andor Csapó, the second defendant, were sentenced to life imprisonment, a ten-year ban from public office, total confiscation of property and demotion. The other defendants were sentenced to between one and a half and twelve years' imprisonment, between two and ten years' disqualification, loss of rank and confiscation of property. The sentences of several of them were reduced by half or a third by the fact that they were covered by the 1953 Decree-Law on Public Clemency.<sup>69</sup>

Rákosi, ignoring the new line, the criticism he had received in Moscow, and the self-critical statements and promises he had made in June, albeit under external pressure, continued to confront his crimes in the same spirit in which he had begun. The first and a later paragraph of the reasoning of the Péter judgment was drafted by him<sup>70</sup>: "*Gábor Péter and his associates, using the powers of their office, on the one hand, they established seriously illegal methods in the work of state protection, thereby deliberately distorting the criminal policy of the state in an anti-grass roots direction, misleading the Party and government bodies, massively violating the liberties of citizens, and on the other hand, they plundered and squandered social property on a massive scale for years in order to satisfy their immense personal needs. They also committed various other crimes, partly before liberation and partly since.*"<sup>71</sup>

In a section of the explanatory memorandum, several pages later, the intellectual author of the judgment again sought to confirm the former statement: '*one of the main obstacles to the establishment of socialist legality was the criminal activity of Gábor Péter and his associates... they misled the party and the government... they aroused hatred in some*

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<sup>69</sup> Judgment of the Budapest Military Court in the case of Gábor Péter and others, 24 December 1953. In Horváth-Solt-Szabó-Zanathy 1994. 345-354. (Original: HL Katf. 005/1954. pp. 0136-0138)

<sup>70</sup> Tibor Zinner: "The great political affair" - The Rajk-Brankov case. Volume II. Saxum Publishing House, Budapest, 2014, 392.

<sup>71</sup> Judgment of the Budapest Military Court in the case of Gábor Péter and others, 24 December 1953. In Horváth-Solt-Szabó-Zanathy 1994. 354-355. (Original: HL Katf. 005/1954. pp. 0136-0138)

*quarters... towards the State Protection Authority, one of the most important organs of violence of the proletarian dictatorship.'*<sup>72</sup>

The reasons for Péter's sentence were extremely lengthy, the longest of all his co-defendants. Among the usual elements of a trial by accusation – as a standard method of discrediting propaganda – he also had elements of 'cowardly behaviour' in his pre-1945 busts: in December 1935 he had given evidence out of fear and betrayed himself to an interrogator when he wrote this: In April 1940, he made a confession to Horthy's police, not only admitting his own actions but also betraying his wife. The next charge was that of malfeasance in office, in which the fabricated and the real elements were mixed. The elements of the accusation that Péter surrounded himself with "class aliens", careerists and people with a tainted past, that he was in contact with the American Márton Himler, that he was in contact with Yugoslav intelligence agents, including Lazar Brankov, convicted in the Rajk trial, and that he provided them with information under the alias "Bogdan", sought to support the earlier concept of him as a "spy" and "enemy of the people". The former head of state security was also listed for his real crimes: he used illegal methods at the head of the ÁVH, and issued orders forbidding physical violence, although hypocritically. Among the specific cases of crimes and acts of violence actually committed, the explanatory memorandum listed the workers arrested during the Csepel strike of 1947, the peasant boys arrested after the bombing of Lókút in 1950, the policeman who came into conflict with him in August of that year, and the police officer of 1952, the physical assault of an electrician arrested in the Opera House fire in 1952, and the torture with personal involvement of UDB agent László Bálint, arrested for kidnapping (the latter was proved only by the testimony of István Kovács, Péter's personal insurer). In addition, the explanatory memorandum mentioned arrests and internment without due cause. The development and application of the system of show trials was also blamed on Péter alone, without any mention of who was actually the intellectual author of this and who gave the orders. Among the offences specifically mentioned was the

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<sup>72</sup> Uo.



practice known as 'prison cleansing', whereby the head of the investigation department, on the orders of the head of the ÁVH, would sometimes reduce the number of prisoners by a quarter, with the result that even the guilty would be released. The verdict considered Péter's letting a "Horthist informer" go free in 1945 to be a serious omission, and he also released Imre Hetényi and Albert Geyer, who was classified as a Zionist capitalist. Among his truly reprehensible actions, he also listed the "smoothing over" of the family problems of his subordinate Béla Janikovszky, in which he ordered doctor István Bálint to have Janikovszky committed to a mental hospital in order to protect him from his wife's harassment.<sup>73</sup>

Among the elements of the new concept was that Péter neglected the operational networking, and also engaged in currency manipulation in cooperation with his direct subordinates, Ernő Szücs and Andor Csapó. As a result, nearly 400 "class aliens" were able to leave the country, leaving behind assets worth a total of HUF 18 million. Of this, three million forints were used to enrich the private assets of the "accomplices" and 15 million for the construction of a hospital. One of the elements of the original Zionist lawsuit that remains is that it was used to give more Jews the opportunity to emigrate. According to the indictment, the horrendous sums of money embezzled in this way were used, among other things, to buy a luxury villa with a swimming pool for the Péter family, to provide them with a standard of living, food and clothing well above the average of the time, to buy an elegant two-room apartment for the alleged mistress of the ÁVH leader, Ferenc Pataki, and to buy two houses and jewellery.<sup>74</sup>

#### **4.6. Silencing Rákosi's role in the appeal proceedings**

As the prosecutor and the defence appealed for an aggravation and mitigation respectively, the case was referred to the Military High Court of Appeal.

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<sup>73</sup> Müller 2017. 209-210.

<sup>74</sup> Müller 2017. 210-211.

On 12 January 1954, three days before the verdict of the second instance, Soviet Ambassador Yevgeny D. Kiselyov visited Prime Minister Imre Nagy to discuss the judicial decisions in the Beria and Péter cases. He made it clear to Kiselyov that, although he believed that Wolf was *"guilty of a series of crimes"*, Rákosi was as responsible as he was. Nagy also informed the Soviet ambassador that, before the days of Péter's trial, he had told his interrogators that *"among other things, the Rajk and Kádár cases were constructed by Rákosi himself"*.<sup>75</sup> Imre Nagy was aware that a relative of Rákosi (her niece's husband), Major General Dékán, had visited Péter in prison and had tried to put pressure on him in long conversations before the trial. The result was that the former head of state defence only accused himself, fundamentally changing his earlier testimony about orders and instructions from above. Following the verdict, he also made an incriminating statement against Mihály Farkas, according to which he had received instructions from him to violate the law.<sup>76</sup>

Nagy, having brought all this to Kiselyov's attention, also put his plan to remove Rákosi before him. However, he could not count on Ernő Gerő's support in this, as the Interior Minister feared that this might raise his own responsibility.<sup>77</sup>

In a closed trial before the Military High Court on 15 January 1954, Gábor Péter, in his last speech, pleaded guilty to the crime of "squandering the people's property" and admitted that he had ordered the beatings. He also admitted that he was responsible for the beating of the Szücs brothers to death, but denied that he was present at the time. He added that if he had been present, the case would have ended differently. He expressed his deep regret that he had "misled the party" and said in a tearful voice that he deserved the death penalty, but asked for mercy for his wife, Jolán Simon, who had *"always been tougher and better"* than him.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Zinner 2014. 393-394.

<sup>76</sup> Zinner 2014. 393.

<sup>77</sup> Baráth-Feitl 2013. 311-312.

<sup>78</sup> ÁBTL 2.1 VI/1. Transcript of the second instance trial of Gábor Péter and others, 15 January 1954.

The final judgement at the second instance upheld the sentences of Péter and Csapó, but reduced the sentence of Vándor from 12 to 11 years. It classified the offence charged as a criminal conspiracy committed by Péter, Csapó and Vándor, contrary to the first instance conviction.<sup>79</sup>

A month after the hearing of Imre Nagy, on 18 February 1954, Kiselyov had a meeting with Gerő at the embassy, who did not conceal from the Soviet ambassador that during the investigation of the Péter case *"certain illegal means were used in the first stage of the investigation, but of course this was nowhere near the extent to which they were used in Péter's time."*<sup>80</sup> Although he kept silent about his own responsibility, he did reveal the secrets of the Rajk-Brankov case to Kiselyov. He revealed that the meeting between the Hungarian and Yugoslav Interior Ministers in Paks was nothing more than a "fantastic fabrication" and that *"Rajk never admitted the crimes attributed to him until, on Rákosi's orders, the case was taken over by Szücs, who, together with Soviet General Belkin, personally interrogated Rajk, and under their guidance, under the influence of beatings and other physical coercion, Rajk signed this document."* Gerő also told the ambassador that he was convinced that *"Rajk and the people who were convicted in his trial, most of whom are now in prison, are absolutely innocent."* Gerő openly criticised Rákosi before Kiselyov for his morbidly suspicious nature: *"Rákosi has become a maniac who considers all people to be spies and provocateurs."*<sup>81</sup>

Only two months after the court decision, on the second page of the Szabad Nép of 13 March 1954, the country's population was informed of the final verdict by a short news item, which read: *The state security organs of the Hungarian People's Republic arrested Gábor Péter, former head of the State Security Authority, Gyula Décsi, former Minister of Justice, István Tímár, former head of the Ministry of Justice, and several of their associates for committing crimes against the state and the people. The investigation found that several of Gábor Péter and his associates had reached high office by concealing past crimes, abusing their official*

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<sup>79</sup> Judgment of the Military High Court in the case of Gábor Péter and others, 15 January 1954. In Horváth-Solt-Szabó-Zanathy 1994. 402-410.

<sup>80</sup> Zinner 2014. 394.

<sup>81</sup> Zinner 2014. 395.

*position and committing serious crimes against the state and the people."* He was also clear in his opinion about responsibility: *"It is undeniable that Rákosi and Farkas, but especially Rákosi, are largely responsible."*<sup>82</sup>

However, the information from Nagy and Gerő did not have the impact or the change that could have been achieved by using it.<sup>83</sup>

Unlike Imre Nagy, Gerő wanted to solve the problem of the Kádár trial review quietly and quickly after the Kállai case, without questioning Rákosi and his own responsibility, and asked the Political Committee to grant him the authority to order reviews on his own authority.<sup>84</sup> To this end, the PB gave its consent on 24 March to a review of the cases of János Kádár and his associates, former members of the March Front, and the generals Pálffy and Sólyom<sup>85</sup>, but the investigation was limited to the cases of leftist convicts and did not publicly raise the question of the responsibility of Rákosi and the narrower leadership circle. Gerő's and Nagy's hands were tied by the fact that only with the prior permission of the MDP KV PB could the Minister of Interior initiate reviews of convicts who had previously been members of the MDP KV or ministers.<sup>86</sup>

Gyula Kállai was released on 31 May, and on 22 July he was rehabilitated together with his colleagues, but was only readmitted to the party with a reprimand on the grounds that, although he was not a whistleblower, he had *"behaved in a cowardly and essentially treacherous manner"*. This was the beginning of a practice of rehabilitation which, despite the legal declaration of the innocence of the convicted, sought to discredit them in the eyes of the public by fabricating "compromising facts".<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Müller 2017. 212.

<sup>83</sup> Zinner 2014. 396.

<sup>84</sup> Memo from Ernő Gerő to Mátyás Rákosi, 19 March 1954 MNL MOL M-KS 288. f. 9/1962/51/b. ő. e.

<sup>85</sup> Baráth-Feitl 2013. 312.

<sup>86</sup> Zinner 2014. 397.

<sup>87</sup> Zinner 2014. 397.

#### 4.7. Gábor Péter, the "scapegoat"

The solution to the problem of responsibility for the lawsuits followed the solution offered by Gerő, and his concept was confirmed by the guidelines received from the leaders of the USSR Communist Party on 5 May, according to which *"mistakes must be corrected without destroying the authority of Comrade Rákosi, because this is the authority of the party. (...) These mistakes must be discussed in the same way as those committed by Gábor Péter."*<sup>88</sup>

Based on the principles formulated here, the so-called Rehabilitation Committee was formed on 19 May, consisting of Mátyás Rákosi, Imre Nagy and Ernő Gerő. The members of the committee were able to "advise" the review on contentious issues.<sup>89</sup>

In accordance with the guidelines, Péter's interrogators soon began to "brief" the convicted ÁVH leader and his cellmate Gyula Décsi on the preparation of the Rajk and Kádár trials, the methods used in the investigation, the reasons for the arrests, and – with the strict caveat that they should not try to shift the blame – how *they "misled the party in these cases"*.<sup>90</sup> Péter obeyed the orders for a long time, and in his testimony at the retrial of László Sólyom and his colleagues, he emphasised Rákosi's innocence in connection with the forced arrests: *"I firmly declare that the Party and the senior leaders had no knowledge that the detainees were signing the protocols even under the influence of the abuse within the authorities."*<sup>91</sup>

According to the surviving documents, however, on 5 October he rebelled and went on hunger strike to demand to be allowed to speak to his wife, Jolán Simon, who was released on 3 September, and also *"constantly tried to shift the blame on some of the party leaders"*, for which his confession was not even recorded. The public first learned about the rehabilitations and the question of responsibility for the show trials from the Free People

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<sup>88</sup> Minutes of the meeting between the members of the Presidium of the USSR Communist Party and the delegation of the Political Committee of the MDP, 5 May 1954.

<sup>89</sup> Baráth-Feitl 2013. 312-313.

<sup>90</sup> ÁBTL 2.1 I/1-b. Proposal to sign Gábor Péter and Gyula Décsi, 15 May 1954.

<sup>91</sup> ÁBTL 2.1 II/8. Minutes of the retrial of László Sólyom and others, 16-17 September 1954.

after the meeting of the MDP Central Executive Committee on 14 October 1954. In his speech, István Kovács, the first secretary of the capital, on the one hand, falsely claimed that the rehabilitation had been carried out in full, in respect of all the innocent convicts, and on the other hand, he laid the responsibility solely on Gábor Péter and his associates.

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Imre Nagy's article "After the Central Executive Committee Meeting", published in the Szabad Nép without prior consultation with the members of the Political Committee, caused concern in the leadership of the SZKP. In it he took a stand on the question of rehabilitation and promised that *"we will get our comrades who were innocently convicted out of prison and give them back to the party, to life, to work. The grave mistakes of the past must be and will be rectified in this area too. Those who are not guilty must be released. ... The Party and the collective leadership have and will have the strength to ensure that the sins of the past are never repeated."*<sup>93</sup> This article also served as a reference point for Rákosi's counter-attack at the end of the year, which ultimately led to Nagy's downfall. In his speech to the DISZ county secretaries on 17 December, he claimed that the sentences of 200 people had been reviewed, the sentences had been commuted, rehabilitation had been completed and the mistakes for which "the rogue leaders of the State Protection Authority had been punished had been made good, because they were, in his view, "enemies".<sup>94</sup>

On 14 April 1955, in accordance with the Soviet leadership's instructions, the MDP made a motion for Imre Nagy's dismissal, which resulted in the eclipse of the line called the "new phase" and also delayed the rehabilitation and the establishment of responsibility, which had been proceeding slowly. At the same time, the party leadership also decided the fate of Mihály Farkas, stating that *"in view of the fact that Comrade Nagy's wrong views had been*

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<sup>92</sup> Communists of Budapest for the decisions of the Central Executive. Meeting of the Budapest party activists. 2. 1954.

<sup>93</sup> Imre Nagy (1954) After the meeting of the Central Executive Committee. Szabad Nép, 12, no. 293, 1-2.

<sup>94</sup> Zinner 2014. 437.

*supported by Comrade Mihály Farkas for a long time", he was dismissed from the MDP CP and from the Secretariat.*<sup>95</sup>

The Soviet leadership did not deviate from its well-established method of avoiding responsibility: everything bad, all guilty deeds were always due to the "mine work of agents", and in this period the role of the actual Evil One was played by "Beria and his gang", so that the discussion of the guilt of Stalin and his circle was avoided. Nor were they distracted by the 'small contradiction' that it was Beria who had been pushing for the restoration of peaceful relations with Yugoslavia after Stalin's death, and that one of the charges against him was precisely his attempt to do so.<sup>96</sup> When the Soviet delegation led by Bulganyin visited Belgrade on 2 June, a declaration was made on cooperation and the normalisation of relations between the two states. Khrushchev then summoned the Hungarian and Czechoslovak heads of government to Bucharest.

On 2 June, on the proposal of Rákosi, the Political Committee decided to retry Gábor Péter and his associates, on the grounds that "*information had come to light which was not known until then*".<sup>97</sup> In his speech to his deputies in Csepel in August, the General Secretary, now free of Nagy and Wolf, the rivals who had threatened him, and having strengthened his position, named "Gábor Péter and his gang" as the sole cause of the deterioration in Hungarian-Yugoslav relations, following a tried and tested recipe, who, in his opinion, as agents of Beria and Abakumov in Hungary, "deceived the Party with their hostile, provocative activities" and "slandered the leaders of the Yugoslav people" with the Rajk trial, thus ingeniously avoiding naming new culprits.<sup>98</sup>

Rákosi thus sought to manipulate public opinion, as Moscow had instructed, in order to reinforce the false image that propaganda had created in people's minds of himself as an innocent leader, deceived by the corrupt ÁVH leader. The reason for shifting the blame

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<sup>95</sup> Zinner 2014. 457.

<sup>96</sup> Zinner 2014. 461.

<sup>97</sup> MNL OL M-KS 276. f. 53. cs. 234. he. e. Minutes of the MDP PB meeting of 2 June 1955

<sup>98</sup> Rákosi 1955. 1-2.

on Péter "and his gang" was not only Soviet ukase, but also his personal interest in this solution. After all, Rákosi found himself in a contradictory position after Khrushchev's new line was set. He was anxious to avoid openly admitting his responsibility for the Rajk trial and its legal consequences to Tito. On the one hand, he had been at the forefront of the hate campaign against the Yugoslav leader, branding him as an enemy, and on the other, he considered the 'unravelling of the conspiracy' to be his own achievement, proudly proclaiming it in his numerous political statements. The ÁVH, and especially its leader, Gábor Péter, offered him a kind of "counter-scapegoat", which would allow him to avoid public confession of his guilt and his political downfall until 1956.<sup>99</sup>

Peter cannot be considered a scapegoat in the literal sense of the word, since the biblical term means an innocent victim who pays for the sins of others, thereby cleansing them of their sins. In contrast, in modern societies, the purpose of scapegoating is to find and punish the scapegoat who is truly guilty, which in their view is justified. The scapegoat in this sense can be legally innocent or guilty, but it must fulfil a function: in the event of crisis or collective trauma, society needs to find the causes, often a simplified explanation to start afresh, to restore the broken order, rather than the real, very complex and complex system of causes.<sup>100</sup> The scapegoating that characterises modern societies is often accompanied by the application of the principle of collective guilt and the shifting of responsibility.

However, this path of escape soon became impassable for Rákosi, as Tito wrote a letter to the USSR Communist Party Central Committee on 29 June 1955, in which he identified the restoration of Hungarian-Yugoslav relations and the review of the Rajk-Brankov case as an urgent task to be solved.<sup>101</sup> As a result, the MDP CPB adopted a decision on 30 June that Rákosi could no longer conceal from public opinion his own responsibility for the deterioration of relations between the two states, blaming Péter and his associates. This

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<sup>99</sup> Gyarmati -Lengvári-Pók-Vonyó 2013. 429.

<sup>100</sup> Gyarmati -Lengvári-Pók-Vonyó 2013. 30.

<sup>101</sup> Zinner 2014. 463.



led to the acquittal of László Rajk and his co-defendants of the baseless charges in a closed trial held on 23-25 November 1955. However, shortly before the acquittal, Rákosi, at a meeting of the MDP CP held on 9-12 November, continued to blame Beria and Abakumov and his "men" in Hungary, Péter and his associates, for the creation of the concept that *"the Rajk trial, constructed by Beria, Abakumov and their Hungarian accomplices, Gábor Péter and his gang, played a major role in the hostility of Hungarian-Yugoslav relations."*<sup>102</sup> Rákosi maintained that Rajk had been compromised, stating that *"Gábor Péter used the fact that László Rajk had concealed the serious circumstances of his first arrest and that he had concealed the fact that he had escaped the Arrow Cross court of last resort with the help of his brother, the Arrow Cross state secretary. Gábor Péter and his associates used László Rajk's past mistakes to force Rajk and others to make false confessions, trampling underfoot socialist legality. Misleading the party and the government, they used the Rajk case to slander the leaders of the Yugoslav Communist Party and the Yugoslav state, in order to exacerbate relations with the Yugoslav People's Republic."*<sup>103</sup>

#### 4.8 "What is the truth?" – Exposing Stalin's crimes at the XXth Congress

However, the political situation changed rapidly with the XX Congress of the Soviet Communist Party, held from 14-25 February 1956, where the speech of N.S.Khrushchev exposing Stalin's crimes caused consternation. This resulted in the rehabilitation of Béla Kun, which was initiated in the Soviet Union without Rákosi's knowledge<sup>104</sup>, and a decision to review the case of the Social Democrats.<sup>105</sup> In the Eastern Bloc states, including Hungary, change soon began to take place as a result, and at the central leadership meeting on 12-13 March 1956 some of the speakers, especially János Kádár, were

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<sup>102</sup> Report of Dr. József Domokos, President of the Supreme Court, to the Secretariat of the MDP on the retrial of the Rajk case, 7 December 1955.

<sup>103</sup> Uo.

<sup>104</sup> István Feitl-M Márta Lázár-Gellériné Lázár-Sipos Levente (eds.): Rákosi Mátyás: Recollections 1940-1956, Volume 2. Napvilág Publishing House, Budapest, 1997, 995.

<sup>105</sup> Baráth-Feitl 2013. 314.

surprisingly critical, criticising the party leadership's policies and demanding the impeachment of Mihály Farkas<sup>106</sup>, i.e. the conviction of another "counter-sinner" instead of the real culprit, Mátyás Rákosi. A party investigation was launched against Farkas, but it soon became clear that public opinion was no longer satisfied with scapegoating and passing the buck, and that dealing with the moral crisis had become urgent, with more and more people waiting for an answer to the question of Rákosi's responsibility.

The Secretary General tried a counter-attack on 26 March in Eger, at the Heves County Party Activa. He argued that he believed that the enemy was constantly trying to exploit the Stalinist personality cult for its own benefit, and that it was therefore the party's duty to thwart these attempts. He referred to the rehabilitation as a *fait accompli* and continued to insist that the Rajk trial was "based on provocation".<sup>107</sup> At the 10 April meeting of the prefecture secretary, he largely blamed Beria and the Soviet adviser Belkin for the fabrication of the Rajk trial: *'But in essence, the Rajk trial became what it was because it was in the atmosphere of the time. Beria sent an adviser who turned the Rajk trial into an anti-Tito affair. ... We had no idea that Berija was doing this.'*<sup>108</sup> Presenting himself as a victim of deception, he tried to excuse himself by reducing his responsibility: *"But that I am responsible is clear. I had a hand in it. First of all, to be deceived, you need two people, one to be deceived. And I was convinced that what we were doing was right."*<sup>109</sup> Rákosi called on the audience to protect the authority of party leaders, and said that his talk of responsibility was a means for the "enemy" to confront the party with its leader. He used the subject of the investigation against Mihály Farkas to criticise his opponent Imre Nagy. This position was opposed mainly by János Kádár, who was sharply critical of Rákosi and made it clear that the first secretary must take responsibility for the show trials.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Baráth-Feitl 2013. 314-315.

<sup>107</sup> Comrade Rákosi Mátyás, speech at the Heves County Party activist meeting. Szabad Nép, 1956, Vol. 14, No. 89, No. 2.

<sup>108</sup> Baráth-Feitl 2013. 317.

<sup>109</sup> Uo.

<sup>110</sup> Baráth-Feitl 2013. 318.

Rákosi's defensive tactics were no longer supported by the Soviet leadership, so the reference to "Beria and his agent in Hungary, Gábor Péter" was no longer a useful tool for the First Secretary. He was thus forced to retreat and to exercise self-criticism at the Budapest Grand Action on 18 May, where he publicly acknowledged his responsibility for creating the cult of personality, although he considered himself guilty of the offences only to the extent that he had failed to control the state security services.<sup>111</sup> Rákosi also used the same plea to excuse himself in front of his former comrades who were released as a result of his rehabilitation: the only guilty party member was Gábor Péter, who had deceived and defrauded him and the party leadership.<sup>112</sup>

The tense situation in Hungary worried the Soviet government, so they sent Mikhail Suslov to Hungary, who still stood up for Rákosi in his meeting with the PB members on 8 June. His note shows that he wanted to seek the approval of the Soviet leadership for his plan to propose to the First Secretary to take control of the crisis situation and to propose himself to discuss the criminal case against Mihály Farkas at a meeting of the CC to be held before 10 July.<sup>113</sup>

By July, however, Khrushchev's government had fully backed away from Rákosi, fearing a repeat of the events of the Poznań workers' uprising in Hungary.<sup>114</sup> An unexpected event prevented the crisis management plan devised by Suslov from being implemented. At the beginning of July, Gábor Péter, who was serving a life sentence, wrote a surprisingly frank note entitled "*What is the truth?*", which he addressed to the MDP's investigating committee on 10 July and asked for it to be sent to the SNP. In it, he openly named Rákosi as the mastermind of the Rajk trial, who, through his constant instructions, had persuaded the ÁVH, through its head, to commit illegalities and use inhuman interrogation methods. Among Péter's complaints was that during his years in prison, his letters to Ernő Gerő and

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<sup>111</sup> Rákosi 1956. 1-3.

<sup>112</sup> Müller 2017. 217.

<sup>113</sup> Szereda, Vjacseszlav; Stikalin, Aleksandr (eds.): Missing pages from the history of 1956. Documents from the archives of the former USSR Communist Party. Móra Ferenc Publishers, Budapest, 1993, 21-24.

<sup>114</sup> Müller 2017. 217.

Soviet advisers were regularly prevented from reaching their destination. And when he was interrogated by an investigating committee in April-May 1956, he was forbidden to talk about Rákosi.<sup>115</sup> Since this fact-finding piece of writing also contributed to the Soviet leadership letting go of Rákosi's hand, historians have questioned whether Péter was instructed to write this revealing memo or whether he did it of his own free will. In analysing the writing, researchers have found that the former ÁVH leader put it down on paper in a very distraught state of mind and worked on it for days. His excitement was probably due to the fact that his then released wife, Jolán Simon, could inform him of the political changes in the outside world and feel that he could finally take satisfaction from Rákosi, who had almost put him in the same situation as Rajk.<sup>116</sup> He would also be motivated by the revelation of the real facts about his own role, as he now had the opportunity to shed the stigma of being the "chief culprit", the one person responsible for the wrongdoings.

István Kovács showed the letter to Andropov and described it as "undoubtedly inspired", but he remained silent about whether he had written it or not, and later denied any role he might have played in it.<sup>117</sup> Andropov did not disclose to Kovács that he had learned of the letter's existence days earlier through his internal affairs adviser Georgiy Avksenyevich Ishchenko, and that he had also obtained information that Péter had been prompted to write the note by information he had received during visits to his wife, which had given him hope.<sup>118</sup> István Kovács was at a loss as to what to do with the letter, as he was faced with the dilemma that if he made its contents public, Rákosi would have to leave power, which would be contrary to the Soviet instruction that the crisis should be resolved without overthrowing the first secretary and under his direction. If he concealed it, he would deceive the party leadership, and the leaking of the contents of the document would lead to a worsening of the crisis and an increase in discontent. He therefore

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<sup>115</sup> Koltay-Bródy 1990.

<sup>116</sup> Müller 2017. 218.

<sup>117</sup> J. P. Andropov's note of the conversation with István Kovács. 11 July 1956. In Morozova-Vida 1996. 90-91.

<sup>118</sup> Telegram of Andropov on his conversation with Ernő Gerő, 9 July 1956. In Baráth 2002. 318-324.

preferred to leave the decision to the Soviets. Andropov had no other option but to back out from behind the Hungarian dictator on the brink of collapse before the compromising information became public knowledge.<sup>119</sup>

Finally, at the meeting of the Central Executive Committee postponed to 18 July 1956, Mátyás Rákosi was relieved of his post of First Secretary due to his ill health, and Ernő Gerő was appointed in his place.<sup>120</sup> The case of Mihály Farkas was the fourth item on the agenda of the meeting. Farkas, on the advice of Mikoyan, was self-critical and publicly apologised to the two rehabilitated comrades present, János Kádár and Gyula Kállai. The participants in the meeting, however, did not believe in his sincerity, as the former Minister of Defence continued to try to portray the Rajk affair as a "provocation by Beria and his gang". For this reason, Farkas did not receive an apology, but for the time being he got away with expulsion from the party, and was only later prosecuted. The reason was that Gerő, in keeping with his promise to the Soviet leadership, considered the case closed by expelling Farkas and removing Rákosi.<sup>121</sup>

1956. On July 7, 1956, a summary report was prepared by Lajos Czinege, head of the Administrative Department of the Party Centre, and Károly Fekete, Deputy Minister of the Interior, on the role of the state security officers involved in the preparation of the major show trials, which detailed at length the inhuman interrogation methods used by the ÁVH, with the following introduction: "*In the years 1949-1953, physical and psychological torture of detainees became a common system, at first only on specific orders, and later an atmosphere developed in which even without orders, the investigators, guards, etc. and guards, tortured detainees. Thirty-one persons were named in the annex to the file, and eleven of them were still on the staff of the BM at the time.*"<sup>122</sup> However, it was not until several months later, on 5 October, the day before the reburial of László Rajk and his associates, that the

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<sup>119</sup> Baráth-Feitl 2013. 323-324.

<sup>120</sup> MNL OL M-KS 276. f. 52/35. he. e. Minutes of the meeting of the MDP Central Executive, 18 July 1956.

<sup>121</sup> Baráth-Feitl 2013. 324.

<sup>122</sup> MNL OL M-KS 276. f. 53. cs. 298. he. e. Report on the activities of state defence officers involved in the investigation of major political cases, 7 July 1956.

persons listed in the report were arrested, namely Vladimir Farkas, Ervin Faludi, György Szendy, György Szántó and Ferenc Toldi.

For months, Ernő Gerő was prevented from taking any further steps in the prosecution of Farkas and his associates, because he was hindered by his earlier promise to the Soviet party leadership not to prosecute Farkas. However, around 12 October, public opinion was already demanding the former defence minister's prosecution, and Gerő was forced to give in to pressure and Farkas was arrested on that day.<sup>123</sup>

Péter, like other former ÁVH officers, was questioned as a witness in several cases in the criminal case of Mihály Farkas. In his testimonies, he described in detail the system of party information and named Rákos and Farkas as the main persons responsible for the use of inhumane and illegal methods and the fabrication of the accusations in the show trials. He admitted that he had carried out the orders of the First Secretary "without reservation" because he had not had the courage to refuse them. He also denounced the cruel treatment meted out to him: that he had been kept in solitary confinement for 32 months, that he had been handcuffed around the wrists day and night for five months, that he had suffered severe ill-treatment which had resulted in two of his fingernails falling off, and that he had been beaten and had had a pillow stuffed in his mouth, During her hunger strike, she was so brutally artificially fed that her throat was almost pierced, and she was also sleep deprived, with the light in her whitewashed cell kept on day and night.<sup>124</sup> The veracity of Gábor Péter's torture is supported only by the testimony of Gyula Décsi, who says that they were treated "more cruelly *than any other treatment that had ever occurred before in the ÁVH*".<sup>125</sup> No archival sources have survived on the circumstances of Péter's detention and the ruthless treatment meted out to him. Emil Katona, a former prisoner, in his memoirs, repeatedly mentions the large-scale reconstruction works in Vác prison in the summer of 1954, during which four floors were cut off with a high brick wall

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<sup>123</sup> Magdolna Baráth (2001): Ernő Gerő and the politics of the "clean slate". Our Past, Vol. 46, No. 1, pp. 40-46.

<sup>124</sup> ÁBTL 2.1. VI/1. Minutes of the interrogation of Gábor Péter, 18 October 1956, Minutes of the interrogation of Gábor Péter, 19 October 1956.

<sup>125</sup> Pünkösti 1999. 72.

and a separate section was hidden to house Gábor Péter, Mihály Farkas and several former high-ranking ÁVH officers.<sup>126</sup>

#### **4.9. Retrial of Gábor Péter and others – prosecution for crimes actually committed**

In the new political situation that emerged after the revolution, Péter considered that he could expect a change in the judgement of their case, so he requested a retrial, which the Prosecutor General's Office ordered on 14 March 1957. In their pleadings, the former ÁVH leader and his fellow defendants referred to the coercive interrogation and the statements made against them during the main proceedings, which were the result of violence. These raised the possibility that some of the defendants could be acquitted of certain offences. The prosecutor's office believed that there might also be information that could be used to prove previously undisclosed crimes in the cases of Mihály Farkas, Vladimir Farkas and Ervin Faludi.<sup>127</sup>

A few days later, the prosecutor's office began questioning Gábor Péter and eight of his former co-defendants. During these days, from 12 to 16 March 1957, and then on 23 March, the Supreme Court of Justice held a closed hearing in the case of Mihály Farkas, who was sentenced to six years' imprisonment and deprived of certain of his rights for two years for the crime of "a number of false accusations which cannot be precisely determined". As his offences were committed before the promulgation of Decree-Law No. 11 of 1953 (Public Pardon), half of his prison term was subject to public pardon, so Farkas was only sentenced to three years' imprisonment.<sup>128</sup>

The disproportionately lenient sentence angered the party leadership, who also feared that it would reignite popular anger in the aftermath of the defeated revolution, and called for a succession of aggravations. As a result, the People's Court of Justice of the Supreme

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<sup>126</sup> Müller 2017. 220.

<sup>127</sup> Müller 2017. 221-222.

<sup>128</sup> Baráth-Feitl 2013. 372.

Court of Justice very soon, two weeks later, on 19 April, handed down a verdict that met expectations: Mihály Farkas was sentenced to 16 years' imprisonment for eight counts of false accusation leading to death, which was halved in the wake of the 1953 decree of clemency, without informing the public of the halving of the sentence.<sup>129</sup>

At the appeal trial in the case of Gábor Péter and his associates, which took place between 28 May and 15 June 1957, all the defendants proved their innocence. Although Péter admitted to abuses and excesses, he denied that abuse and torture were common practice at the ÁVH. In connection with the torture of Rajk and the beating to death of the Szücs brothers, he referred to Rákosi's orders, which he had only passed on to his subordinates. He also stressed that he had stopped Rajk's beating on his own initiative. According to his testimony, the torture was always ordered by Rákosi, and he rarely ordered physical abuse of his own volition. He also denied involvement in economic crimes and internment. In his last speech, he referred to his own merits as a member of the movement and to the role of the State Protection Authority in the eradication of the "remnants of fascism".<sup>130</sup>

On June 15, 1957, the Supreme Court of Justice, Dr. On 15 June 1957, the Council of the Supreme Court, headed by Dr. György Sömjén, a military judge, held Gábor Péter responsible for the crimes he had actually committed, and sentenced him to 14 years' imprisonment, 10 years' disqualification and demotion for the crimes of multiple false accusations, "abuse of official authority in an unquantifiable number of cases", two counts of grievous bodily harm causing death (the death of the Szücs brothers) and the crime of abuse of official authority committed in a continuing manner. However, the 1953 decree of clemency also applied to him and Farkas, so his sentence was halved in the same judgment.<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> Judgment in the criminal case of Mihály Farkas. *Népszabadság*, 25 April 1957, Vol. 2, No. 96, No. 8.

<sup>130</sup> Minutes of the closed hearing in the retrial of Gábor Péter and others, 15 June 1957. In Horváth 1994. 488-582.

<sup>131</sup> Judgment of the Supreme Court in the case of Gábor Péter and others, 15 June 1957. In Horváth 2014. 590-635.



Barely a year later, on 17 March 1958, Péter wrote a letter of complaint to the Minister of the Interior, Béla Biszku, requesting his release on the grounds of his seriously deteriorated health. Péter's plea was not immediately heard by the Minister of the Interior, who had to wait almost a year for his release, which finally took place on 10 January 1959.

## 5. Summary:

The idea of passing the buck to Genrikh Yagoda, the head of the NKVD, first occurred to Stalin after the Kirov assassination, as suspicions of the dictator's guilt were growing in a wider section of society. After his mass murderous crackdown on his perceived or real political opponents, who were labelled 'enemies of the people', he 'perfected' this method and made Ezhov solely responsible for this by deceiving public opinion. After Stalin's death, on Soviet orders, a review of the show trials began in Hungary, too, and peaceful relations with Yugoslavia were restored. For Rákosi, Gábor Péter, imprisoned for the Zionist affair, was an ideal instrument, a kind of "scapegoat", to shift the blame from himself to the failed ÁVH leader, as in the Beria affair, which for a long time had helped to conceal Stalin's guilt. Therefore, for a long time, Péter was not prosecuted for his real crimes, as the Soviets had ordered, but the concept of his trial was tailored to suit their political aims. Thus, Péter was no longer presented to the public as the leader of a "Zionist spy organisation", but as the leader of a violent gang of "robbers" who were in control of the state and plundered the people's property, and later as the person primarily responsible for the staging of the law-breaking trials, and as a criminal against the state and the people who was gallantly misleading the party and its leader. However, Khrushchev's speech at the XX Congress of the Soviet Communist Party in February 1956, exposing Stalin's crimes, meant that it was no longer an option for Rákosi to shift all responsibility for the show trials onto "Gábor Péter and his gang", but to accept the consequences of his crimes. Gábor Péter was finally sentenced for the crimes he had

actually committed, and the planned concept trial against him, modelled on the Berija case, did not take place. All this led me to conclude that Gábor was not a scapegoat in the literal sense of the word, in the original sense of the word, because he was not innocent at all. Nevertheless, he functioned as a means of deflecting responsibility for the dictator on the verge of collapse and the party state in crisis, and therefore the designation of Gábor as the main culprit is in line with the scapegoating of modern societies, in which the search for scapegoats is based on the assumption that the scapegoat found is indeed guilty and that his punishment is justified in the eyes of the scapegoat seekers. In times of crisis and collective trauma, societies need a simplified explanation of causes rather than the often very complex causal systems for which scapegoats are perfectly suited.

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