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Cominformist Emigrants in Hungary (1948–1953) Social Composition, Anti-Titoist Activities, Political Trials

As a consequence of the outbreak of the Soviet–Yugoslav conflict in 1948, Cominformist emigrant communities were established in the Soviet Union and in its Eastern European satellite states at the turn of 1948–1949.¹ Their community was organized in Hungary, too, and it served as a “tool” in the ongoing propaganda warfare against Josip Broz Tito and the leadership of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia (CPY). Unfortunately, it would be impossible for me to provide the reader with a detailed account of their everyday lives and political activities; therefore, I have reduced the scope of my attention to certain aspects of their history. In the first part of the paper, I am going to briefly summarize the number and social composition of these emigrants and their political activities. In the second and third part, I will put particular emphasis on two trials, or series of trials, which involved some of these emigrants. The first one is related to Lazar Brankov, the first leader of the emigrant community and the other is a series of trials that took place three years later, in 1952. Finally, in the last part of my paper, I will briefly deal with the processes of rehabilitations after 1953.

The number, social composition, and political activities of Cominformist emigrants in Hungary

Based on Hungarian archival sources, the number of the Cominformist emigrants in Hungary was much lower than the post-Yugoslav historiography had previously believed. During my archival research, I managed to identify 132 people by name, who belonged to this community for shorter or longer periods between 1948 and 1953. There

1 For the history of the Cominformist emigrants see: Banac, *With Stalin*, pp. 145–242.; Dragišić, *Napred*; Luburić, *Jugoslovenska informbirovska emigracija*; Mitrović–Selinić, *Jugoslovenska informbirovska emigracija*; Vukman, *Jugoslovenski politički emigranti*; Vukman, “*Harcban Tito és Rankovics klikkje ellen*”, and Vojtěhovsky, *Iz Praga protiv Tita*.

might be many reasons for this significant discrepancy. Most importantly, according to the terminology of the Hungarian Workers' Party (HWP) at the time, refugees were considered to be political emigrants only if they (1) asked for and were granted political asylum, (2) were officially affiliated with the Party and their own organization, and (3) lived in Budapest or in its vicinity. Moreover, there was never a single moment when all 132 political refugees belonged to the same community. The fluctuation was particularly high even in those periods when the total number of political emigrants increased. Their number stabilized around 75 after 1950.²

Nearly 90 per cent of the emigrants were men, most of them in their mid-twenties to early thirties. Approximately three-fifths of the emigrants were born between 1921–1930. The oldest among the emigrants was Dragutin Grujić – he was born in 1893, while Ilija Vrbica was only 15 years old when he crossed the Yugoslav–Hungarian border. The emigrants predominantly came from the neighbouring Yugoslav republics, though one or two asylum seekers also came from Macedonia, Montenegro or the Autonomous Province of Kosovo-Metohija. Some of the records suggest that apart from ideological motivation, kinship, personal and fraternal relations also played a part in their decision-making.³

As for the ethnic composition of the emigrants, it is clear that Serbs made up at least a relative majority (44–51 per cent of the emigrants). Most of them came from Belgrade and the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina, but they were also predominant among the refugees who were born in Croatia. It is almost certain that all ethnic Hungarians who were granted political asylum (10–14 people) came from Vojvodina, even if the majority of Vojvodinaers were also Serbs. As for their social composition, only vague remarks can be made. It is certain that most of them originated from lower social strata. The majority lived in the countryside or were first-generation town dwellers. Those with poor or middle peasant background were highly overrepresented while only a few came from intellectual or mercantile backgrounds.⁴

Serious hardship was a characteristic of their everyday lives. One of the most pressing tasks was to organize their daily activities, and provide shelter and employment for the new arrivals. Large differences appeared in their material and financial situations and housing conditions. While the so-called diplomatic group, the emigrant elite, lived in near luxury and received wages similar to those in the highest echelons of the Hungarian Party and state bureaucracy, other members of the community were almost regularly lacking materially and financially, and their accommodation was terrible. These problems were gradually solved by the mid-1950s. It is also true that these hardships affected not only the emigrants but the general public, as well. We can even say that the

2 Vukman, *Social Composition*, pp. 136–137.

3 *Ibid.*, pp. 137–138.

4 *Ibid.*, pp. 139–140.

financial and material situation of the emigrants was still at least at or above the level of ordinary Hungarians. For most emigrants the Hungarian language also presented a big problem, as they had little to no knowledge of it. This made it more difficult for them to find proper jobs and to become integrated into society. It is also true that learning was considered a high priority. For example, nearly 70 per cent of the actual community participated in higher education in the autumn semester of 1952.⁵

In the meantime, internal conflicts, real and imagined grievances and personal rivalries became commonplace in this rather closed community. An atmosphere of fear and mutual accusations became a striking feature of everyday living. Everybody became afraid and suspicious of others. Therefore, internal divisions and dissention, and personal, political or ideological conflicts had become permanent over the years in this community.

As for their political activities, their most important contribution to the “war against Tito” was their participation in the propaganda war through writing and distributing various printing materials and working at the South Slavic section of Radio Budapest. It must be noted that the anti-Titoist scandal-mongering was not reduced only to the activities of these emigrants, nor were they the ones who assumed a leading role. For Rákosi, they were important as a relatively cheap tool that was easy to use in order to keep the anti-Titoist public opinion alive without risking further escalation of the conflict. The broadcasting of radio programs and the writing of articles were also important because this could strengthen the morale and awareness of shared affinities among the emigrants themselves.

Before the publication of the emigrants’ own paper, *Za ljudsko zmago*, on 1 May 1951, we might consider *Naše novine*, the official periodical of the Democratic Alliance of the Southern Slavs in Hungary, as a quasi-emigrant paper. The topics related to minority issues in this paper also show that the emigrants had a role, although a minor one, in persuading the Serbian, Croatian and Slovenian minorities, and in strengthening their stance against Tito and in favour of the Hungarian leadership. As for *Za ljudsko zmago*, its editorial board had to cope with numerous difficulties from the very beginning. Some of these were material or financial, but a lack of qualified and professional working force and a constant rotation among the staff also resulted in serious problems. The editors, too, lacked the necessary skills and were inexperienced and lacking in talent.⁶

At the same time, the Hungarian State Protection Authority (ÁVH) kept the emigrants under constant surveillance. They were regularly interrogated – immediately after crossing the border, as a prerequisite for their inclusion into the emigrant community or in connection with internal personal conflicts, when a fellow emigrant was arrested (based on real or fabricated charges), or after a Yugoslav agent had been caught. Therefore,

5 Ibid., pp. 141–142.

6 Vukman, *Political activities*, pp. 46–47. For the political activities of the emigrants in more detail see pp. 42–47.

we can say that the emigrants were a useful source of information, especially in the early years of the Soviet–Yugoslav conflict. In the meantime, the ÁVH also recruited agents among the emigrants and used some of them in investigation missions on Yugoslav territory, but this practice was abandoned in the early 1950s. Others were used to spy on other emigrants. The ÁVH considered Lazar Brankov’s nephew their most useful agent, but it was Radovan Vrbica who probably served as an agent the longest. His last known post was in Sofia in 1982.⁷

In connection with the emigrants and the State Protection Authority, it is impossible not to take a closer look at the trials that greatly affected the life and morale of the community. The first was the Rajk trial in the autumn of 1949, in which Lazar Brankov, *de facto* head of the emigrants in Hungary, appeared as one of the leading defendants.

Lazar Brankov and the Rajk trial

The trial itself started in Budapest on 16 September 1949 and served as an excellent tool for Rákosi to raise the level of anti-Titoist propaganda warfare in the country. Rákosi had at least three parallel motives in mind to organize this monstrous, internationally publicized anti-Titoist trial: (1) with Rajk’s execution, Rákosi wanted to get rid of a popular and potential rival within the Hungarian Workers’ Party (HWP); (2) he wanted to quiet the possible Soviet concern about and dissatisfaction with himself and wished to make the Soviets forget his earlier pro-Tito stance; and (3) he hoped to take Tito’s position in the international communist movement.⁸ László Rajk was exactly the right person to target for the CPY leadership’s alleged conspiracy and spying activities against Hungary and the Soviet Union: He belonged to the closest circle of the local Hungarian communist leadership, held important positions as minister of internal, and later of foreign, affairs (1946–1948 and 1948–1949, respectively) and was a renowned figure of the Spanish civil war. Moreover, the “campaign of vigilance” that followed the trial helped to legitimate the atmosphere of “permanent preparedness” and the curbing of individual and collective rights in Hungary.

Rákosi also needed to find a Yugoslav citizen of high standing and importance whose name was well known even to ordinary Hungarians and whose charges would seem real and not fabricated. The ideal person was Lazar Brankov, first *de facto* leader of the Cominformist emigrants in Hungary who personally knew Rajk, even if they were not necessary on friendly terms. Brankov’s role in the trial was made evident for the contemporary audience as the press reports, the speeches of leading politicians, and the indictment at the trial all emphasised his importance in this presumed anti-state conspiracy. In reality, in contemporary parlance the trial was referred to as the Rajk *and* Brankov trial.

7 ÁBTL, 2.1. I/109-a. 335.; ÁBTL, 3.1.9. V-51967., and Vukman, *Political activities*, p. 50.

8 Zinner, *A nagy politikai affér*, Vol. I., p. 235.

Brankov was born in Stari Bečej in Vojvodina in 1912. He became involved in the illegal communist movement as a high-school student and fought as a partisan during the Second World War. He was often on the run and he sometimes hid in Budapest. He returned to Hungary on 10 March 1945 as a member of the Yugoslav mission to the Allied Control Committee. He dealt with cultural and press affairs, economic matters and reparations, as well as South Slavic minority issues – first as a member of the Yugoslav mission and later at different posts at the Yugoslav Embassy. He also took part in tracing down war criminals and had access to the highest Party and state circles. He emigrated on 25 October 1948 as chargé d'affaires of the Yugoslav Embassy in Budapest. He was a real “hot shot”, and Rákosi wanted to use him as much as possible in the anti-Titoist campaign in order to discredit Tito’s Yugoslavia and demonstrate its “deviations” to the Hungarian public. Therefore, Brankov immediately took an active part in the ongoing propaganda war and had an important role in organizing the emigrant community but he got the main role nearly a year later. It was that of one of the main defendants in the Rajk trial.⁹

Brankov and Rajk probably first met at the turn of 1945–1946, and their meetings became more frequent after the later had been appointed as minister of internal affairs (20 March 1946). Brankov served as a kind of liaison officer between the Ministry and the Yugoslav Embassy. He was allegedly present as an interpreter at the meeting of László Rajk and his Yugoslav counterpart, Aleksandar Ranković, at Kelebia in December 1947. After the Soviet–Yugoslav conflict started to escalate, the meetings between Rajk and Brankov became less frequent. After the Bucharest Resolution of the Cominform had been made public, they only met at official receptions. Their meetings and discussions acquired an important new and distorted meaning during the Rajk trial as they were used to confirm the charges of a seditious act. They were arrested nearly simultaneously. Brankov, who was arrested in Moscow on 29 June 1949, had just enough time to read the article in the Soviet party daily, *Pravda*, about Rajk’s arrest that took place on 15 June. Brankov’s arrest was based on fabricated charges of being a Titoist agent. He was first interrogated in the Soviet capital (8 and 16 July), and he almost immediately made a damning testimony against Rajk. As a faithful communist, he must have been fully aware of what kind of testimony his interrogators expected from him. Still, the circumstances of his arrest were rather vague. The Hungarian authorities had probably planned to arrest him in the spring of 1949 at the latest, but the Soviets objected to it first. He was transferred to Hungary at Rákosi’s behest on 19 July 1949. After he had tried to escape unsuccessfully, Brankov crushed under physical and mental torture, and so he mechanically recited a prepared speech at the trial.¹⁰

9 For Brankov’s political activities in English see: Vukman, *A Yugoslav diplomat*; Vukman, *Lazar Brankov*; and Vukman, *Political activities*, pp. 37–41.

10 For Rajk and Brankov see: Vukman, *Tito és Rankovics*, especially pp. 198–208.

For example, he “admitted” that the Yugoslavs started their spying activities right after their first military mission arrived in Hungary in 1945 as Tito expected “us to do a good job in Hungary [...] and it was important to organise a good intelligence service.”¹¹ All of this was based on a master plan suggested by the “British imperialists”, and the gist of the Yugoslav plot “was that Yugoslavia should become the central, leading state in the Balkans and in Central Europe, and that Yugoslavia should organise a Balkan and Central European bloc” which “would become an organisation of the bourgeois democratic Balkan republics with an orientation towards the West rather than towards the Soviet Union.”¹²

In reality, Brankov’s testimony was scripted; spontaneity had little to no part in it. The texts of the testimonies were written in advance and the defendants had to memorize them. Even the judge’s questions and remarks were scripted, their purpose was to create a semblance of spontaneous behaviour. For example, when Brankov started to recite a long list of members of the British and American missions in Yugoslavia during the Second World War, the chief judge asked him: “And you remember these so well? Because I see that so far you have not used your notes at all, and you also mentioned these many names entirely from memory.” Brankov replied without hesitation: “Yes. I remember then well because we had to know them by heart during the war, who they were, so that if we met them [...] we could give them all help on the orders of Rankovich”.¹³

Gyula Alapy, president of the prosecutor’s office accused Brankov on the following three charges: (1) “the crime of having once and continuously been the leader of an organisation aiming at the overthrow of the democratic state order”; (2) the crime of espionage and (3) the crime of murder as an incitement to commit murder of Miloš Mojić.¹⁴ Brankov pleaded guilty on the first two charges but refused to admit that he took part in the murder. According to the charges, Mojić, a journalist at the minority paper *Naše novine*, was murdered by Živko Boarov, a secretary at the Yugoslav Embassy, on Brankov’s order. But Brankov confessed only that he had previous knowledge of it, and he stood by this statement throughout the whole process.¹⁵ Finally, in its verdict on 24 September 1949, the special council of the people’s court found Brankov guilty of all charges and sentenced him to life imprisonment.¹⁶

The trial fulfilled its planned role in the Soviet-Yugoslav conflict and helped to intensify the pressure on Yugoslavia. The high number of anti-Titoist articles in Soviet and Eastern European papers in September – 368 in number altogether, 106 of them in the Hungarian party daily, *Szabad Nép* – was with all certainty a consequence of the

11 *László Rajk*, p. 106.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 123.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 117.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 6.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 139.

16 *Ibid.*, pp. 303–304.

trial.¹⁷ The situation had been rather tense since late summer. Tito and the Yugoslav leadership considered the Soviet note of 18 August 1949 as an ultimatum, and the number of border incidents was quite high in September and October.¹⁸ The Rajk trial served as the ideal pretext for the Soviet Union and its satellites to denounce their treaties of friendship with Yugoslavia. The Soviets denounced it on 28 September, four days after the verdict had been delivered, followed by Hungary and Poland on 30 September, Romania and Bulgaria on 1 October and, finally, Czechoslovakia on 4 October.¹⁹

The kidnapping of Dušan Vidović and its consequences

Three years later, in November 1952, another trial took place in Budapest that had some anti-Titoist propaganda value. Although emigrants did not take any direct part in it, the events that lead to this trial dramatically changed the lives of six other emigrants and their families. In mid-February 1952, Dušan Vidović disappeared. Vidović had been a military attaché at the Yugoslav embassy before he emigrated with Brankov in October 1948. The Hungarian authorities immediately suspected that, in reality, Vidović's emigration served as a cover and that he was working as an UDB agent in the country. The ÁVH was also certain that other emigrants helped him return to Yugoslavia. This assumption is understandable to a certain extent as a real espionage war had broken out between the two countries since 1949,²⁰ and the ÁVH rightly feared that the UDB was trying to infiltrate the emigrant community. It is also true that many emigrants had served in the Yugoslav secret services, state security agencies, or as officers at the armed forces before they emigrated. Otherwise, it would surely have been an embarrassing blunder for the Hungarian services to allow a real Yugoslav agent operating in the country for more than three years. We now know that Vidović was kidnapped by László Bálint and his unit.²¹

17 *White Book*, App. 22., p. 479.

18 A total of 52 border incidents took place in September and 64 in October 1949, 24 of them on the Yugoslav–Hungarian border. *Informbiro i Jugoslovenska (narodna) armija*, p. 214.

19 It is worth noting that the treaty of friendship between Yugoslavia and Albania was denounced by the Yugoslavs on 12 November. *White Book*, p. 164–173. At the same time, 74 Yugoslav diplomats were expelled from the Soviet Union and its Eastern European satellites, 10 of them from Budapest. *White Book*, App. 9–15. pp. 457–471. and *White Book*, App. 2–7., pp. 448–452., 2–7.

20 Based on the figures of the ÁVH, 91 Yugoslav agents were captured in 1950 and 66 in 1951. According to the Command of the Border Patrol Police, a total of 200 UDB agents were captured between 1951–1953. ÁBTL, A–2127/24., pp. 170–179.; ÁBTL, 3.2.5., O-8-014/4., p. 226., MNL OL, XIX-B-10., 1951., 18. doboz 349. ó. e., 1952., 17. doboz. 314. ó. e. and 1953. 15. doboz. 190. ó. e.

21 László Bálint had notorious criminal tendencies and had committed many petty crimes, even in the 1930s. He offered his services to the ÁVH in 1949, but after his offer was rejected, he emigrated to Yugoslavia and was recruited by the UDB. He illegally returned to Hungary on 29 January 1952. His mission was to kidnap the leading figures of the emigrant community one by one. He had to start with Dušan Vidović, who was decoyed from his working place, the Serbian Grammar School in Budapest on 16 February. He was kidnapped and the unit returned to Yugoslavia with him during the very same night. ÁBTL, 3.1.9., V–88800/1., pp. 9–11., 130. and ÁBTL, 3.1.9., V–88800/2., p. 113.

This was not the first time that the UDB had tried to kidnap or kill Cominformist emigrants from Hungary; and the ÁVH had known about this since June 1950 at the latest,²² but they did not consider this as a logical possibility this time. Rather, they arrested eight emigrants – Emil Ognjenović, Đorđe Burgijašev, Savo Novaković, Branislav Doroslovački, Ozren Krstonošić, Milutin Stevanović, Živorad Todorović and Albert Svetina – within a few weeks.²³ Ognjenović was the luckiest among them. He consistently denied the charges against him and admitted only that he and his wife provided false information in order to be admitted into the emigrant community. He was finally interned on 26 April 1952.²⁴ Burgijašev was not so lucky: He was so severely beaten during one of the interrogations in July, that he died of the injuries he sustained on 5 August.²⁵

It is also worth noting that the HWP and the ÁVH did not really trust the emigrants, especially the members of the so-called diplomatic group, i.e. those who defected from the building of the Yugoslav Embassy with Brankov. Doroslovački, Krstonošić and Stevanović belonged to this group. Stevanović and Krstonošić had also been under constant surveillance at least since autumn 1949; as for Krstonošić, the authorities were even thinking about recruiting him as an agent whose task would be to spy on his fellow emigrants.²⁶

Although the authorities seemed to have enough information on these six emigrants, the preparations for their trial lasted for nearly five months. They were first interrogated between 22 and 26 August and the trial was held in camera on 17 September and in the case of Novaković and Todorović on 24 September.²⁷

The most severe penalties were imposed upon Krstonošić and Doroslovački. Both were found guilty on charges of espionage, organizing and participating in subversive activities and of unauthorized possession of firearms. Krstonošić was also found guilty of neglecting the compulsory surrender of foreign currencies. Both of them were sentenced to 15 years in prison.²⁸ According to the verdict, both Doroslovački and Krstonošić were recruited by the UDB in 1947. Doroslovački's duty was to provide information on everyday lives and political activities of the members of South Slavic minorities in Hungary,²⁹ while Krstonošić had to collect information on the economic and political situation. They allegedly participated in the distribution of Titoist propaganda materials

22 ÁBTL, 3.2.5., O-8-014/3., 95.

23 ÁBTL, 2.1., IV/30-a., p. 26.; ÁBTL, 2.1., IV/46., p. 61.; ÁBTL, 2.1., IV/47., p. 4. and ÁBTL, 3.1.9., V-81346., p. 133.

24 ÁBTL, 3.1.9., V-81346., pp. 66., 69., 77-78. and 83.; ÁBTL, 3.1.9., V-81346., pp. 129. and 133.

25 MOL OL, M-KS 276. f., 65. cs., 105. ó. e., p. 28.; MNL OL, M-KS 276. f., 98. cs., 145. ó. e., pp. 9-10., and ÁBTL, 2.1., IX/36., p. 49.

26 ÁBTL, 2.1., IV/45. and ÁBTL, 2.1., IV/27., pp. 21-26., 74-76. and 86.

27 ÁBTL, 2.1., IV/47., pp. 24-29. and ÁBTL, 2.1., IV/30-a., p. 15.

28 ÁBTL, 2.1., IV/27-a., p. 10. and ÁBTL, 2.1., IV/9. (V-85138).

29 ÁBTL, 2.1., IV/9., pp. 13. and 13/2.

after the Bucharest resolution and defected on the order of Brankov so that they could continue their intelligence activities. They supposedly reported on their observations at Radio Budapest where they worked at the department for South Slavic radio programs.³⁰

In his last plea, Doroslovački, who might just have realized the seriousness of the charges and the harshness of the penalty, desperately tried to persuade the judges about his commitment to the world communist movement and his ideological purity: “I have been fighting for the cause of socialism since I was 14 years old. During the war I was arrested by the Horthy fascist police nine times. I was beaten so hard that I lost hearing in my left ear.”³¹ The same can be said about Krstonošić who emphasized in his last plea that “I have been working in [multiple ways] in the fight against Tito. I wrote a 60-page brochure against Tito.”³² I wrote articles in Hungarian and South Slavic newspapers. I participated at thirty rallies in South Slavic villages and unveiled Tito [e.g. Tito’s activities].”³³ All the same, they were unable to influence the verdict.

As for the other defendants, Svetina and Stevanović were sentenced to 10 years in prison for espionage activities and unauthorized possession of firearms,³⁴ Novaković and Todorović were sentenced to 5 years, the former for unauthorized possession of firearms, the later for attempting to cross the border illegally and for infringement against collective property.³⁵ In reality, that meant that he stole a cheap driving belt and wanted to settle down in Czechoslovakia, where he studied and worked between 1946–1948. As an ordinary factory worker, he had no role in the anti-Titoist propaganda warfare. With the exception of Novaković, the other five convicts appealed the verdict, but the court of appeals affirmed the previous verdicts by mid-November.³⁶

As the preparation for the trial were underway, László Bálint’s commando unit crossed the Yugoslav–Hungarian border once again. Their task was to capture Dušan Vidović and Gojko Trbović, two leading figures of the emigrant community. As they did not succeed, they instead trapped and kidnapped Boris Verstovšek on 11 September. On 24 September, the very same day that the judges were hearing the case of Savo Novaković and Živorad Todorović, the border patrol police ran up against Bálint’s unit in the vicinity of Szeged, not far from the Hungarian–Yugoslav border. A skirmish ensued and the commando members were captured.³⁷ The trial that took place between 15 and 17 November 1952 was also exploited in the anti-Titoist propaganda war. In

30 ÁBTL, 2.1., IV/9., pp. 14–15., 20.; ÁBTL, 2.1., IV/27., p. 370. and ÁBTL, 2.1., IV/27-b., p. 17.

31 ÁBTL, 2.1., IV/9., p. 19.

32 The brochure that Krstonošić mentioned was published in 1951 in Budapest: Krstonosic, *A Tito-klikk*.

33 ÁBTL, 2.1., IV/27-b., p. 20.

34 ÁBTL, 2.1., IV/45-a., p. 20. and ÁBTL, 2.1., IV/46., p. 20.

35 ÁBTL, 2.1., IV/30., p. 9. and ÁBTL, 2.1., IV/47., p. 29.

36 ÁBTL 2.1., IV/30-a., p. 15.; ÁBTL, 2.1., IV/47., p. 41.; ÁBTL, 2.1., IV/9., p. 59., ÁBTL, 2.1., IV/27-a, p. 16., and ÁBTL, 2.1., IV/45-a., p. 48. In the case of Svetina, the public prosecutor withdrew his appeal for the imposition of a stricter sentence during the appeal hearings. ÁBTL, 2.1., IV/46., p. 46.

37 ÁBTL, 3.1.9., V-88800/1., p. 11. and ÁBTL, 3.1.9., V-88800/2., p. 25.

a well-functioning state founded on the rule of law, the disappearance of Verstovšek and the capture of Bálint's commando unit would surely have meant a decisive turning point for the six emigrants. Still, the internal logic of the paranoid Rákosi system and the ongoing Soviet–Yugoslav conflict did not allow their release, even if the grounds for their arrest proved entirely false.

The arrests and trials profoundly affected everyday lives and living conditions of their relatives, as well. Five of the six convicted emigrants were married. If their wives were not local Hungarians, they were also expelled from the emigrant community. (If their wives were native Hungarians, they were never regarded as members of the community.) They were barely able to make ends meet, and sometimes had to send their children away to school. They only had slight information about what had happened with their husbands.³⁸ Paula Krstonošić even thought about returning to Yugoslavia: she tried to establish contact with the Yugoslav and American embassies in early 1953 and officially asked for repatriation on 27 July 1953, but the authorities rejected her request. She was recruited at the Yugoslav Embassy in October 1953. The Hungarian authorities suspected this and arrested her nearly a year later, on 28 September 1954.³⁹ The inquiry was finished in January 1955, but the ministry of internal affairs could not decide what to do: the review of her husband's trial had already started.⁴⁰

The process of rehabilitation

By that time, Stalin's death had already been announced (5 March 1953) and a slow and prolonged process of normalization between the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia had started. This meant a real challenge for the emigrants, both individually and collectively. As a gesture towards Tito, the Political Committee of the HWP decided on 14 October 1954 to stop their political activities and dissolve their organization. Their community lost its importance, and in the following years, fewer and fewer emigrants remained politically active. Those who did, formed many groups along their different political and ideological views and personal relations.

Stalin's death and the process of normalization opened the way for retrials of those political cases that started after 1948, and for the rehabilitation of the convicted, though this process continued well into the 1960s. It affected the lives of the convicted emigrants mentioned above, as well. Once again, Emil Ognjenović was the luckiest. The investigators admitted that there was no evidence against him, therefore, it would be impossible to bring him to trial. He was released from internment on 17 September 1953.⁴¹

38 ÁBTL, 2.1., IV/30., pp. 42–45.

39 ÁBTL, 2.1., VII/24., p. 8–9.

40 ÁBTL, 2.1., VII/24., p. 111.

41 ÁBTL, 3.1.9., V–81346., pp. 229. and 233.

The retrial in the case of the six emigrants took place a year and a half later, on 7 March 1955. Four of them were completely acquitted of the previous charges and were immediately released from custody. Krstonošić was found guilty only on the charge of neglecting the compulsory delivery of foreign currencies. He was sentenced to six months in prison, but this term was counted as served. Todorović was found guilty on the original charges, but his sentence was drastically reduced to six months which was also counted as served, though he was only completely rehabilitated in 1962. Both of them were released immediately. During the process of rehabilitation, all of them received a certain amount of material and financial compensation. They got some 40–60 thousand forints, a new flat and a two-week holiday. Their medical treatment was covered by the state. Svetina and Novaković were readmitted into the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party.⁴² Svetina found job as a lieutenant police commander and Stevanović became the editor-in-chief of the South Slavic minority paper, *Narodne novine* – both to the constant irritation of the Yugoslav authorities. Not all of them remained in Hungary, though. Todorović, who fought against the Soviet occupiers in the 1956 revolution, Krstonošić and Doroslovački returned to Yugoslavia between 1955 and 1958.⁴³

As for Brankov, he was released by a presidential pardon on 3 April 1956. While in prison, he was regularly interrogated and often used as a witness in other cases or for re-opening politically motivated show trials. He was notorious for changing his testimony according to the interrogators' wishes. The authorities might have wanted him to play a key role in the trial of Gábor Péter, leader of the State Protection Authority, with whom he had an alleged espionage relationship, but Brankov refused to provide any information that would confirm this accusation. He was held in solitary confinement during these years and was not allowed to meet other prisoners, receive visitors or be informed about the political changes. After his release, he was not allowed to stay in the capital and had to live in Győr in the north-western part of Hungary, where he worked as a librarian. After the suppression of the 1956 revolution, he emigrated to Austria and finally settled down in France, where he became a member of the French Communist Party.⁴⁴

To sum up briefly, Cominformist emigrants made up a small and closed community in Hungary, which faced many social difficulties and internal rivalries. Their most important contribution to the “war against Tito” was in the field of anti-Titoist propaganda warfare. They could not escape the paranoid atmosphere of the time, and some of them received long prison sentences in anti-Titoist trials. Two cases were of particular importance: the Rajk trial, in which Lazar Brankov received a life-long prison sentence,

42 Vukman, *Harcban Tito és Rankovics klikkje ellen*, pp. 195–198.

43 *Ibid.*, pp. 234–238.

44 *Ibid.*, pp. 187–194.

and a series of political trials of six emigrants in 1952. All of them were released from prison as part of the process of Yugoslav–Hungarian normalization after 1953. Although they were rehabilitated, not all of them remained in Hungary.

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Summary

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Cominformist Emigrants in Hungary (1948–1953) Social Composition, Anti-Titoist Activities, Political Trials

The Cominformist emigrants in Hungary made up a rather small and closed community. Based on Hungarian archival sources, their number was much lower than the post-Yugoslav historiography had previously believed. High fluctuation was a characteristic of this community, which also faced serious hardships in organizing everyday lives and activities of its members. In the meantime, internal conflicts, real and imagined grievances and personal rivalries made their lives even harder. Their most important contribution in the “war against Tito” was in the field of propaganda warfare: they participated in the work of the South Slavic section of Radio Budapest and had their own emigrant paper, *Za ljudsko zmago*. The Rajk trial and the sentencing of Lazar Brankov in 1949 provided an excellent propaganda tool for the Hungarian leadership. The other trial I placed particular emphasis on in my paper took place in 1952. It was related to the disappearance of certain important members of the emigrants’ community and showed the internal logic of the paranoid Rákosi system. Lazar Brankov and the other six convicted emigrants were released as part of the process of normalization, which started after Stalin’s death. Although they were rehabilitated, some of them left Hungary within a few years.