

**Lazar Brankov: the first leader of the Cominformist émigrés in Hungary and “Tito’s most determined agent.”
A life between two emigrations (1949–1956)**

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Abstract

Lazar Brankov (1912–2011) was an important Yugoslav communist diplomat in Budapest who emigrated in 1948 upon the outbreak of the Soviet–Yugoslav conflict and became the first leader of the community of Cominformist émigrés in Hungary. A year later, he became one of the leading defendants in the Rajk–Brankov trial and was sentenced to life in prison. He was released in 1956 when he emigrated from Hungary. This study focuses on the circumstances of his emigration, his activities as an émigré leader, the circumstances of his arrest, and his role in the Rajk–Brankov trial and in the review of the trial. The necessary research was carried out at the Historical Archives of the Hungarian State Security (Állambiztonsági Szolgálatok Történeti Levéltára) in Budapest, and author argues that – with a critical approach and by involving other archival sources – it is possible to reconstruct the most important events of Brankov’s life using documents created by state security organizations.

Keywords

Hungarian–Yugoslav relations, 1945–1956, Soviet–Yugoslav conflict, Yugoslav political émigrés in Hungary, Lazar Brankov

Lazar Brankov (Stari Bečej, 17 July 1912 – Paris, 3 December 2011) was a Yugoslav communist diplomat of Serbian origin. He began to sympathize with communist ideas while he was studying law at the University of Belgrade in the early 1930s (he didn't finish his studies) and he joined Tito's partisans during World War II. After the war, he was one of the leading members of the Yugoslav delegation accredited to the Allied Control Commission in Hungary. Brankov dealt with economic matters, cultural and press affairs, and Yugoslavia's claims for reparation. He also searched for war criminals. He served as the secretary of the Yugoslav Military Mission from 1946 to November 1947, and he became the first counsellor of the re-established Yugoslav Embassy in Budapest in late 1947. He had close connections with the leadership of the Hungarian Communist Party, which was in effect the Hungarian Working People's Party (HWPP or Magyar Dolgozók Pártja in the original Hungarian, aka the MDP). Because of the outbreak of the Soviet–Yugoslav conflict, Brankov emigrated in October 1948 and became the first leader of the community of Cominformist émigrés in Hungary. Brankov actively participated in anti-Titoist propaganda warfare against Yugoslavia. He was arrested on 21 June 1949 in Moscow, where he had arrived at the invitation of Soviet comrades, and he was sentenced on 24 September 1949 to life imprisonment in the Rajk trial, a communist show trial in Hungary, which also strengthened the anti-Titoist campaign in the Soviet Bloc. Brankov was released by presidential pardon in April 1956. After the October revolution of 1956, he emigrated to Austria and eventually settled in France.

A short bibliographic entry in an encyclopaedia would probably contain the aforementioned information about Lazar Brankov.

Although the name and political activities of this communist diplomat have largely been forgotten, Lazar Brankov was a well-known figure in the second half of the 1940s in Hungary. His name was prominent enough for Mátyás Rákosi, the secretary general of the HWPP, and his Soviet advisers to include him in the largest show trial in the country as one of the main organizers and promoters of the Yugoslav “anti-state conspiracy” against Hungary. Moreover, the propaganda of the time, which emphasized his importance, referred to the trial as the Rajk–Brankov trial.

The political career of Lazar Brankov reflected the main events, contradictions, and changes in Yugoslav–Hungarian relations. He was not only an actor of these bilateral processes, but his eventful career was also affected by the changes in the relationship between the two countries, which significantly and decisively influenced the development of his personal history on more than one occasion. Nonetheless, it would be impossible to mention every detail of his eventful life. Therefore, in this study, I am going to focus on two important periods of his life: the years 1948–1949, from his emigration until he was sentenced to prison, and the years 1953–1956, when a review of the show trials took place. In the first part, I am going

to deal with the circumstances of his emigration, and I argue that he emigrated as a result of his own convictions and that he did so with the full knowledge of Hungarian and Soviet leaders. Then, in the second part, I am going to focus on his role and political activities as the first leader of the Cominformist émigrés in Hungary. In the third and fourth parts I am going to provide the reader with an overview of the circumstances of Brankov's arrest and his role in the Rajk–Brankov trial. Here, I will briefly analyze the differences between the shorthand notes and the official records of the trial. In conclusion, I will focus on Brankov's role in the review process of the show trials. I will argue that Rákosi wanted Brankov to play a key role in another show trial in 1953, namely, in the trial of Gábor Péter, the former head of the State Protection Authority (Államvédelmi Hatóság, ÁVH). I would also like to ascertain whether Brankov was a Yugoslav secret agent in the 1940s. However, based on the archival sources, which often contradict each other, I cannot provide a clear answer to this question.

For this study, I did archival research at the Historical Archives of the Hungarian State Security (Állambiztonsági Szolgálatok Történeti Levéltára, Budapest) where the papers of the former state security organizations contain important information about Brankov's life and the review process for the Rajk–Brankov trial. (The trial documents were destroyed in the 1960s.) Due to the special character of these documents, I had to proceed with due caution and the requisite critical approach. It's well-known that the political trials of the 1940 and 1950s followed a preconceived course that had been determined by ideological and political xenophobia. In most cases, the confessions on which the trials were based were extracted from both the accused and witnesses through physical or moral coercion in favor of the Communist Party's interests, which may raise a question mark over the veracity of the statements contained therein. It was also common that prisoners held in investigative captivity had to rewrite their biographies countless times, adapting them to achieve the desired result. I would like to note here that the desired result was determined in advance, not only during the basic procedure, but also during the review of the trials. Hungarian historian and former director of the Historical Archives György Gyarmati draws attention to the fact that state security documents also reflected the expectations of senior members of the state security apparatus and the Communist Party rather than the reality. The content of the notes and reports was also determined by the expectations placed on the interrogators, and the finished version of the text itself underwent several transformations.¹ During my research, I also had to realize that the state protection authorities

1 GYARMATI, György: Nem mind arany, ami... A szocialista rendszer állambiztonsági iratainak történeti forrásértéke (It's not all gold that... The historical source value of the state security documents of the socialist system). In: MAJTÉNYI, György – SZABÓ, Gabriella (eds.): *Rendszerváltás és Kádár-korszak* (Regime Change and the Kádár Era). ÁBTL – Kossuth Kiadó, Budapest 2008, pp. 127–139; GYARMATI, György: Mire jók az állambiztonsági ügynökiratok és mire nem? (What are state security agency documents good for?). *Kommentár*, 2012, Vol. 7, Issue 6, pp. 64–78.

systematically destroyed a large number of documents in subsequent years. In the case of Brankov, a total of 966 pages and 113 film reels were destroyed between 1957 and 1966, including 58 pages of documents written in Russian.² Nonetheless, with Brankov's biography, I argue that – with a critical approach and using other archival sources, namely the records of the National Archives of Hungary (Magyar Nemzeti Levéltár Országos Levéltára, Budapest) and the Archive of Yugoslavia (Arhiv Jugoslavije, Belgrade) – it is possible to reconstruct the most important events of Brankov's life and the reasons and motivations behind his actions.

Brankov's emigration

One of the most important steps in Brankov's life took place on 25 October 1948 when he emigrated from the building of the Yugoslav Embassy in Budapest and joined the side of Josef Stalin and Mátyás Rákosi in the escalating Soviet–Yugoslav conflict.³ Six other diplomats and employees of the embassy followed suit on the same day, and two others did so the day after. Together with their wives and children, a total of 14 people from the embassy emigrated on those two days after being persuaded by Brankov to do so.⁴ Consequently, his decision can be viewed as the decisive step in the formation of an émigré community in Hungary.⁵

- 2 *Állambiztonsági Szolgálatok Történeti Levéltára* (Historical Archives of the Hungarian State Security, Budapest, Hungary) (ÁBTL), A volt Zárt Irattár levéltári anyaga (Archival Records of the former Closed Archives) (2.1.), IX/31. "Jelentések, javaslatok, jegyzőkönyvek az iratok megsemmisítése, meghagyása, rendezés ügyében. 'Rajk-ügy'" ("Reports, proposals, protocols regarding the destruction, disposal, and arrangement of documents. The 'Rajk case'"), p. 7, and p. 25; and *Ibid.*, IX/35. "Jelentések, javaslatok, jegyzőkönyvek az iratok megsemmisítése, meghagyása, rendezés ügyében. 'Rajk, SZDP, Sólyom, Kádár-ügy'" ("Reports, proposals, protocols regarding the destruction, disposal, and arrangement of documents. The 'Rajk, SDP, Sólyom and Kádár cases'"), p. 18 and p. 50.
- 3 For the life and political activities of Lazar Brankov in English see VUKMAN, Péter: A Yugoslav Diplomat in Hungary: Lazar Brankov (1945–1949). In: GAVRILOVIĆ, Vladan – BOŠKOV, Svetozar (eds.): *Vojvodanski prostor u kontekstu Evropske istorije*. Filozofski fakultet u Novom Sadu, Novi Sad 2014, pp. 513–524, and VUKMAN, Péter: Lazar Brankov and the Yugoslav Communist Emigrants in Hungary (1948–49). *Razprave in Gradivo. Treatise and Documents*, 2014, Vol. 73, Issue 1, pp. 67–85.
- 4 *Magyar Nemzeti Levéltár Országos Levéltára* (The National Archives of Hungary, Budapest, Hungary) (MNL OL), Magyar Dolgozók Pártja, Rákosi Mátyás titkári iratai (Hungarian Working People's Party, Papers of Secretary Mátyás Rákosi) M-KS 276. f. 68. cs., 67. ó. e., p. 21. Jelentés a jugoszláv menekültek helyzetéről. Budapest, 1948. december 16 (Report on the situation of Yugoslav émigrés. Budapest, 16 December 1948), p. 1. Two of the diplomats, namely press secretary Ozren Krstonošić and vice consul Branislav Doroslovački, had closer relations with Brankov. All three of them were born in Stari Bečej and owed their posts at the embassy to Brankov's personal intervention in early 1947. Also, it was Brankov who persuaded them to follow him into exile, where both took an active role in the anti-Titoist work of the émigré community. See VUKMAN, Péter: Négy óbectesi kommunista diplomata Magyarországon. Lazar Brankov, Živko Boarov, Branislav Doroslovački és Ozren Krstonošić politikai tevékenysége (Four communist diplomats in Hungary from Stari Bečej. The political activities of Lazar Brankov, Živko Boarov, Branislav Doroslovački and Ozren Krstonošić). *Bácsország*, 2011, Vol. 17, Issue 2, pp. 136–144.
- 5 For the history of the Cominformist political émigrés in Eastern Europe see DRAGIŠIĆ, Petar: Napred – List jugoslovenskih emigranata (pristalica Kominforma) u Bugarskoj (Napred – Yugoslav Cominformist émigré paper in Bulgaria). *Tokovi istorije*, 2005, Vol. 13, Issue 3–4, pp. 125–142; DRAGIŠIĆ, Petar: *Jugoslovensko-bugarski odnosi 1944–1949* (Yugoslav-Bulgarian relations, 1944–1949). INIS, Belgrade 2007, pp. 232–250; MITROVIĆ, Momčilo – SELINIĆ, Slobodan: *Jugoslovenska informbi-*

Moreover, his emigration was more than a simple desertion. It meant that Mátyás Rákosi got hold of a diplomat with a high standing and political calibre, whom he could use in the “fight” against Tito and the Yugoslav communist leadership. With his former political activities and reputation, Brankov could easily be displayed as the potential leader of an all-émigré organization or as a member, or even the head, of a Yugoslav government in exile. Moreover, by putting Brankov in the middle of a creative stage of anti-Titoist propaganda warfare, Rákosi could demonstrate the “deviancies of the Titoist system” to the Hungarian public.

Brankov's emigration was immediately widely publicized, and it sparked a whole series of exchanges of notes between Hungary and Yugoslavia.⁶ In connection with Brankov's emigration, the Hungarian Foreign Ministry expelled nine Yugoslav diplomats from Hungary.⁷ At the same time, the Yugoslav leadership tried to present Brankov's emigration as if it had been the consequence of fraudulence and a possible criminal investigation. According to articles published in *Borba* and *Politika*, Brankov left the building of the Yugoslav Embassy in the embassy's car with 30 thousand forints and 508 US dollars.⁸

roovska emigracija u istočnoevropskim zemljama, 1948–1964 (Yugoslav Cominformist emigration in Eastern European countries, 1948–1964). *Tokovi istorije*, 2009, Vol. 9, Issue 1–2, pp. 31–54; SELINIĆ, Slobodan: *Jugoslovensko-čehoslovački odnosi 1945–1955* (Yugoslav-Czechoslovak Relations, 1945–1955). INIS, Belgrade 2010, pp. 355–444; VOJTĚCHOVSKÝ, Ondřej: *Iz Praga protiv Tita! Jugoslovenska informbiroovska emigracija u Čehoslovačkoj* (From Prague against Tito! Yugoslav Cominformist emigration in Czechoslovakia). Srednja Europa, Zagreb 2016. For the ibeoovci émigrés in Hungary see VUKMAN, Péter “*Harcban Tito és Rankovičs klikkje ellen.*” *Jugoszláv politikai emigránsok Magyarországon (1948–1980)* (“In the fight against the clique of Tito and Ranković.” Yugoslav political émigrés in Hungary, 1948–1980). Állambiztonsági Szolgálatok Történeti Levéltára – Kronosz Kiadó, Budapest – Pécs 2017. In English: VUKMAN, Péter: *Political Activities of Ibeovci Emigrants in Hungary (1948–1953)*. *Tokovi istorije*, 2017, Vol. 25, Issue 3, pp. 35–58 and VUKMAN, Péter: *Social Composition and Everyday Life of Cominform Emigrants in Hungary (1948–1980)*. *Istorija 20. veka*, 2018, Vol. 37, Issue 1, pp. 133–146.

- 6 MNL OL, Külügyminisztérium, Általános iratok, Jugoszlávia (Foreign Ministry, General Papers, Yugoslavia) XIX-J-1-k-Jugoszlávia-1/a-0218/1948. (1.d.), Vas Zoltán Péter Szántó elvtársnak, 1948. november 1 (Zoltán Péter Vas to Comrade Szántó, 1 November 1948); Ibid., XIX-J-1-k-Jugoszlávia-3/i-0224/1948. (1.d.); 0269/1948, Szóbeli jegyzék, 1948. október 3 (valószínűleg: november 3) (Verbal note, 3 October 1948, more probably on 3 November 1948); Ibid., XIX-J-1-k-Jugoszlávia-3/i-0269/1948 (1.d.), Feljegyzés, Laza Brankov volt jugoszláv követségi tanácsos ügye, 1948. november 9 (Note on the case of former Yugoslav counsellor Laza Brankov, 9 November 1948); MNL OL, Külügyminisztérium, TÜK iratok, Jugoszlávia (Foreign Ministry, Secret Papers, Yugoslavia) XIX-J-1-j-Jugoszlávia-3/c-796/pol/res/1948. (3.d.). Szóbeli jegyzék, 1948. október 27 (Note verbale, 27 October 1948) and *White Book on Aggressive Activities by the Governments of the USSR, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Rumania, Bulgaria and Albania towards Yugoslavia*. Foreign Ministry of the Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia, Beograd 1951, p. 117, note 8.
- 7 The nine diplomats were: secretaries Vaso Jovanović, Djurica Jojkić and Dušan Devedžić; military attaché Alojz Žokalj; Stevan Sinanović, head of the Yugoslav delegation on reparations; deputy commercial attaché Mihajlo Ljubić; as well as employees Lazar Torbica, Ivan Berenja and Karel Gercelj. *White Book on Aggressive Activities by the Governments of the USSR, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Rumania, Bulgaria and Albania towards Yugoslavia*, p. 465, appendix 12.
- 8 MNL OL, Külügyminisztérium, Általános iratok, Jugoszlávia XIX-J-1-k-Jugoszlávia-3/i-022/1948 (1.d.), Feljegyzés, 1948. október 27 (Note, 27 October 1948); MNL OL, Külügyminisztérium, Belgrádi nagykövetség, Adminisztratív iratok (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Embassy of Belgrade, Administrative papers) XIX-J-4-b-15/b-1947-48. (3.d.), Sajtószemle, 1948. október 27 (News reports, 27 October 1948). The Yugoslav Foreign Ministry handed over their evidence on 10 November 1948. Counsellor

Brankov himself later provided rather confused and inconsistent accounts of the circumstances of his emigration. For example, in the review of the Rajk trial, he said to his interrogators on 1 September 1954 that he made his decision during the Fifth Congress of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia (CPY, official named Komunistička partija Jugoslavije, or the KPJ, in the original language), which was held from 21 to 28 July 1948, and wrote a letter to the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU, officially known as the All-Union Communist Party /Bolsheviks/, or Всесоюзная коммунистическая партия /большевиков/ in Russian) in August 1948 in which he *condemned Tito's policies and stated that, as a communist, I would be unconditionally available for the fight against Tito*.⁹ Brankov also mentioned here that he had emigrated at the behest of the Soviets: *In the middle of October 1948, the secretary of the Soviet Embassy in Budapest informed me about the decision. He first asked me about my intentions, whether I wish to emigrate or go back [to Yugoslavia]. I answered that it made no difference to me; they could use me in any way that would best serve the cause. He then said that, in accordance with the decision, I should emigrate*.¹⁰

However, two weeks later (on 14 September 1954), Brankov wrote that he had emigrated on the order of Aleksandar Ranković, the Yugoslav interior minister, because for Yugoslavia *the most important thing [was] to know the intentions and plans of the Soviet Union towards Yugoslavia*.¹¹ One day earlier, Brankov wrote that the real purpose of his emigration was to organize a political group within the HWPP, which would be faithful to the Yugoslavs, on the order of Ranković and led by László Rajk, the Hungarian interior minister. If Rajk did not voluntarily undertake the task, Brankov would have to raise suspicions about him in the leadership of the HWPP.¹²

Brankov again elaborated on the circumstances of his emigration on 3 March 1955. According to this version, Ranković informed him that *a very large group of émigrés is forming in the people's democracies*. He found it *extremely important* to know the activities of the émigrés, and especially to know *which way the I[nformation]B[ureau, resp. Cominform] was guiding the activities of the émigrés*. Therefore,

János Beck acknowledged that the evidence was true; therefore, the Hungarian authorities did not wish to revert to this case – see *MNL OL, Külügyminisztérium, TÜK iratok, Jugoszlávia XIX-J-1-j-Jugoszlávia-3/c-269/pol./1948* (3.d.). Beck János a belgrádi magyar követnek, 1948. december 3 (János Beck to Hungarian ambassador in Belgrade, 3 December 1948).

9 *ÁBTL*, 2.1., I/109-a. "Lazar Brankov és Zsivko Boarov" ("Lazar Brankov and Zsivko Boarov"), pp. 224–225. Brankov Lázár elítélt sajátkezü feljegyzése az emigrálásával kapcsolatban. Budapest, 1954. szeptember 1 (Handwritten note of convict Lazar Brankov on his emigration. Budapest, 1 September 1954), pp. 1–2.

10 Ibid.

11 *ÁBTL*, 2.1., I/109-a. "Lazar Brankov és Zsivko Boarov", pp. 275–276, Brankov Lazar elítélt sk. feljegyzése. Budapest, 1954. szeptember 14 (Handwritten note of convict Lazar Brankov. Budapest, 14 September 1954), pp. 2–3.

12 *ÁBTL*, 2.1., I/109. "Lazar Brankov", p. 64. Brankov Lázár elítélt sajátkezü feljegyzése. Budapest, 1954. szeptember 13 (Handwritten note of convict Lazar Brankov. Budapest, 13 September 1954), p. 1.

Ranković found it necessary to *have such a person in the leadership of the emigration who is familiar with the activities of the émigrés and who can inform the Yugoslav government about it*. He regarded Brankov as the most suitable person for this position, and Brankov dutifully accepted Ranković's order. However, he became uncertain and decided to emigrate of his own free will. He justified the move with the following argument: *If I had refused the order of RANKOVIĆ (capitals in the original – author's comment), I would have been arrested immediately but if I had carried out the instructions and got caught, a similar fate would have awaited me.*¹³

Based on the archival records, I am certain that Brankov emigrated as a result of his own convictions and with the full knowledge of the Hungarian and Soviet leaders. As a rare example from this period, an original note has survived in the Historical Archives; it was written by an agent of the ÁVH about his meeting with fellow émigré Ozren Krstonošić at a Budapest café on 7 November 1949. Krstonošić said that, before his emigration, Brankov had held *constant discussions with Mátyás Rákosi, János Kádár, Mihály Farkas and the other leading members of the HWPP, who supported them [the émigrés] to the utmost.*¹⁴ Moreover, Yugoslav archival sources also support my argument. An undated document, which was probably written in the middle of 1948 and summarized the political pressure on the South Slavic minorities in Hungary, briefly mentions a two-hour meeting between Rákosi and Brankov, during which the former tried to persuade Brankov to take the Cominform's side in the conflict.¹⁵

I am also certain that Rákosi, the chairman of HWPP, himself invented the Yugoslav scenario of Brankov's emigration. Besides the fact that Rákosi distinguished himself in the propaganda warfare against Yugoslavia, three other sources support my argument. During his interrogation (on 20 October 1956) Gábor Péter, the leader of Hungarian state security between 1945 and 1952, confessed that Rákosi urged Soviet Lieutenant General Fedor Belkin to get a clear-cut confession from Brankov but Belkin *was not willing to carry out Rákosi's demands*. Rákosi even phoned Péter wondering *why Belkin was reluctant to do this and why he did not want to accept this role.*¹⁶ An attachment to the detailed report that the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party (Magyar Szocialista Munkáspárt, MSZMP) sent to the Central Committee of the CPSU on 17 August 1962 on the infringements of the law during

13 ÁBTL, 2.1., I/109-a. "Lazar Brankov és Zsivko Boarov", p. 387. Jegyzőkönyv Brankov Lázár kihallgatásáról. Budapest, 1955. november 3 (Record of the interrogation of Lazar Brankov. Budapest, 3 November 1955), p. 13.

14 ÁBTL, 2.1. IV/27. "Krsztonosity Ozren", p. 74. Jelentés. Budapest, 1949. november 10 (Report. Budapest, 10 November 1949), p. 1.

15 Arhiv Jugoslavije (Archive of Yugoslavia, Belgrade, Serbia) (AJ), Međunarodna komisija, odnosi SKJ za stranim partijama, Mađarska (1945–1990) (International Commission, Relations of the LCY with other parties, Hungary, 1945–1990), F 507, CK SKJ, IX-75, I-28, Mađarska, O postupcima sa manjinskom organizacijom (Hungary, On the actions with the minority organizations), p. 4.

16 ÁBTL, 2.1., VI/1. "Péter Gábor és társai" ("Gábor Péter and his companions"), p. 254/a, Jegyzőkönyv Péter Gábor tanú folytatólagos kihallgatásáról. Budapest, 1956. október 20 (Records of the ongoing interrogation of witness Gábor Péter. Budapest, 20 October 1956), p. 2.

the “cult of personality” period in Hungary provides a second argument. This consisted of verbatim records of the original notes that Major General Mihail I. Belkin and state security Colonel Nikolai I. Makarov wrote in 1949. One of them stated the following: *In connection with Brankov's case, comrade Rákosi expounded the following concept. Brankov must say that he remained in Hungary and “broke away from” the Yugoslav government, not honestly, but on the order of Tito and Ranković, with the aim of deeply infiltrating and carrying out further intrigues in Hungary. Moreover, comrade Rákosi ordered the Hungarian interrogators to obtain [this kind of] confession from Brankov, according to which he has been an old police provocateur and personally participated in the preparation of a terrorist plot against Rákosi.*¹⁷ Thirdly, after Brankov had been arrested in Moscow on 21 June 1949, Rákosi urged the Soviets to send him back to Hungary. He sent the following telegram to Moscow on 10 July 1949: *I emphatically request that Brankov be immediately handed over to us because we badly need his confession.*¹⁸

The leader of the Cominformist émigrés in Hungary

The propaganda machines of the Soviet Union and its Eastern European satellites tried to use each emigration and desertion for their own benefit. Their aim was to discredit the Yugoslav system and to emphasize the incorrect nature and deviation of Tito's policies from the official Soviet line. After he had emigrated, Brankov immediately took an active part in the ongoing propaganda warfare against Yugoslavia. He made speeches against Tito at mass rallies, wrote articles in the party daily *Szabad Nép* and in the émigrés' paper published in Prague *Nova Borba*, and gave interviews to Radio Budapest. The Hungarian communist leadership also sent him to agitate among the South Slavic minorities and propagate the official Soviet standpoint concerning Tito and the Yugoslav policies.¹⁹

Apart from ritually recurrent propaganda interviews and speeches, Brankov played a more serious part in the anti-Yugoslav campaign and immediately set about the task of organizing the émigré community. After discussions he had had in Prague with the leaders of local émigrés, Brankov wrote a four-point working plan on 12 November 1948, in which he proposed relocating the headquarters of the émigrés' paper, *Nova Borba* from Prague to Budapest and establishing three

17 ÁBTL, 2.1., IX/1/1. Tájékoztató jelentés a Szovjetunió Kommunista Pártja Központi Bizottság részére a személyi kultusz idején elkövetett magyarországi törvénsértésekkel kapcsolatban. Budapest, 1962. augusztus 17 (Informational report for the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union regarding violations of the law in Hungary during the cult of personality. Budapest, 17 August 1962), p. 3, and pp. 22–23.

18 Cited by RAINER M., János: Távirat “Filippov” elvtársnak. Rákosi Mátyás üzenetei Sztálin titkárságának, 1949–1952 (Telegram to Comrade “Filippov”. The Messages of Mátyás Rákosi to Stalin's Secretariat, 1949–1952). In: LITVÁN, György (ed.): *Évkönyv. 1956-os Intézet*, Budapest 1998, p. 107.

19 VUKMAN, Péter: *“Harchban Tito és Rankovićs klikkje ellen.” Jugoszláv politikai emigránsok Magyarországon (1948–1980)*, pp. 51–54.

logistic bases for its more efficient distribution close to the Yugoslav–Hungarian border. He also suggested that the Democratic Alliance of Southern Slavs in Hungary (Magyarországi Délszlávok Demokratikus Szövetsége, MDDSZ) and its paper, *Naše novine*, should be more involved in anti-Titoist propaganda warfare, and that the Serbian language programme of Radio Budapest should be quadrupled and the standard of its programmes improved. His proposals were discussed, and the Secretariat of the HWPP accepted his argument on 24 November 1948.²⁰ The Political Committee accepted nearly all Brankov's suggestions the following day.²¹

Although Brankov believed that the South Slavic radio programmes had a high priority, his cooperation with the leaders of Radio Budapest was not smooth. In his memorandum to the Secretary of the HWPP on 12 January 1949, Brankov resented the fact that the émigrés had not been involved in the preparation of Serbo-Croat radio programmes, had been left out of the decision-making process, and had not been regularly consulted on the programmes being broadcast. Brankov also raised objections to the planned South Slavic radio programmes. Instead of rather varied and entertaining programmes, he suggested that articles and theoretical papers by the émigré press be read.²²

The everyday working relationship between the émigrés and the leaders of the radio did not improve. In late April, Brankov again protested that he was not sufficiently involved in the editorial work and that they did not broadcast programmes that had previously been agreed upon. He also argued that the weekly meetings of the editorial board were too short, the texts were not accurately translated into Serbian, and he resented the fact that not even one copy of the Yugoslav papers was available for the émigrés.²³ Having accepted Brankov's critical remarks, Rákosi ordered that Brankov must be given every opportunity to carry out his work – *under sufficient control*.²⁴

Besides the South Slavic radio programmes, another important method for propagating the Soviet standpoint was the illegal circulation of pamphlets, leaflets, and brochures on Yugoslav territory, including copies of the émigrés' papers. Brankov insisted that the émigrés establish connections with members of the Yugoslav Em-

20 MNL OL, Magyar Dolgozók Pártja, Rákosi Mátyás titkári iratai M-KS 276. f. 68. cs., 16. ő. e., pp. 54–57. A Magyar Dolgozók Pártja Központi Vezetőségének. Budapest, 1948. november 12 (To The Central Directorate of the Hungarian Working People's Party. Budapest, 12 November 1948), pp. 1–4.

21 MNL OL, Magyar Dolgozók Pártja, Politikai Bizottság (Hungarian Working People's Party, Political Committee) M-KS 276. f. 53. cs., 15. ő. e., MDP PB ülése, 1948. november 25 (Session of the PC of the HWPP, 25 November 1948) p. 3, and p. 18.

22 MNL OL, Magyar Dolgozók Pártja, Titkárság (Hungarian Working People's Party, Secretariat) M-KS 276. f. 54. cs., 30. ő. e., MDP Titkárság ülése, 1949. február 16 (Session of the Secretariat of the HWPP, 16 February 1949), pp. 29–30.

23 MNL OL, Magyar Dolgozók Pártja, Gerő Ernő titkári iratai (Hungarian Working People's Party, Papers of Secretary Ernő Gerő) M-KS 276. f. 66. cs. 35. ő. e., pp. 71–76. A Magyar Dolgozók Pártja Központi Bizottságának, Farkas Mihály elvtársnak. Budapest, 1949. április 29 (To the Central Committee of the Hungarian Working People's Party, to Mihály Farkas. Budapest, 29 April 1949), pp. 1–6.

24 Ibid., M-KS 276. f. 66. cs. 35. ő. e., p. 71. A Magyar Dolgozók Pártja Központi Bizottságának, Farkas Mihály elvtársnak. Budapest, 1949. április 29.

bassy in Budapest and Yugoslav citizens who were living in the Hungarian capital. He also insisted that they improve their activities and carry out more tasks among the South Slavic minorities, whom he regarded as outposts of Titoist propaganda.²⁵

Brankov also participated in important meetings with other “ibeovci” émigré leaders, such as Pero Popivoda, a major general in the Yugoslav Air Force at the time, wartime chief of staff of the Titoist partisans, and Radonja Golubović, a former Yugoslav ambassador to Romania. The main aim of these meetings was to synchronize the activities of the émigré leaders. Brankov had talks with Popivoda and Golubović in Bucharest from 15 January to 7 February 1949. During their discussions, the three émigré politicians analysed the situation of the émigré communities and passed a resolution on strengthening émigré organizations. They decided to establish some sort of action committee whose main task was to improve agitation and propaganda warfare, raise the quality of *Nova Borba*, and solve certain problems concerning the radio broadcasts.²⁶ As a result, the Secretariat of the HWPP appointed Brankov as a political adviser for the Serbo-Croat language of Radio Budapest’s South Slavic programmes. Only one, but rather important, condition was added: Brankov was obliged to hold preliminary discussions on theoretical topics with Mihály Farkas, the minister of national defence and a member of the Central Directorate and Political Committee of the HWPP.²⁷

Brankov apparently performed an increasing number of tasks, so his arrest as a “Titoist agent” came as a huge surprise. The Hungarian authorities had probably begun to plan his arrest as early as in the spring of 1949, but the Soviet cadres objected to it. Nonetheless, Brankov was arrested in the Soviet capital on 21 June 1949.²⁸ His role as an émigré leader came to an end at this point, although he had another, much more important role to perform in the Rajk–Brankov trial later that year.

Brankov’s arrest in Moscow

The circumstances of Brankov’s arrest are rather confusing. The Hungarian authorities had already started to collect damning evidence against him in the spring of 1949. Moreover, they also planned to arrest him. According to Gábor Péter, Mihály Farkas *made a phone call from the Ministry of Home Defence to Soviet ambassador Pushkin and energetically asked for Brankov’s arrest* in the early summer, but

25 MNL OL, Magyar Dolgozók Pártja, Titkárság M-KS 276. f. 54. cs., 30. ő. e., MDP Titkárság ülése, 1949. február 16 (Session of the Secretariat of the HWPP, 16 February 1949), pp. 31–32.

26 Ibid., pp. 25–27.

27 Ibid., p. 4.

28 ÁBTL, 2.1., I/109. “Lazar Brankov”, p. 149. Jegyzőkönyv Brankov Lázár kihallgatásáról. Budapest, 1955. január 29 (Record of the interrogation of Lazar Brankov, 29. January 1955), p. 2, and Ibid., “Lazar Brankov”, p. 272. Berán Iván tanú kihallgatási jegyzőkönyve. Budapest, 1955. október 20 (Record of the interrogation of witness Iván Berán. Budapest, 20. October 1955), p. 4.

Pushkin avoided complying with Farkas's request.²⁹ Moreover, Iván Berán, a former major of the ÁVH, confessed during his interrogation in 1955 that *Gábor Péter ordered me in the spring of 1949 to arrest Brankov without delay when he was leaving a meeting – a meeting with Popivoda*. However, before the meeting ended, *Péter had phoned not to carry out the arrest*.³⁰

Brankov was finally arrested in the Soviet capital on 21 June 1949 where he arrived on 19 May at the invitation of Pero Popivoda.³¹ In fact, Brankov was invited there as part of a conspiracy to arrest him. He was also interrogated there for the first time, on 8 July and then eight days later, on 16 July. He confessed that he was an agent of the Yugoslav State Security Administration (Uprava državne bezbednosti, UDB) and one of his main tasks was to organize a pro-Yugoslav coup d'état under Rajk's leadership. He also provided detailed testimony on the relationship between the Hungarian and Yugoslav interior ministers and gave "evidence" about the Kelebia³² meeting, where, according to his confession, Rajk and Ranković were talking to each other as *abettors of the Hungarian Working People's Party and the Hungarian people's democracy*.³³ The meeting of the two interior ministers did take place in December 1947, when the Yugoslav delegation was on its way back home from Budapest and stopped for hunting at Kelebia, a village close to the Hungarian–Yugoslav border. However, there is little information on what the discussions were really about. One and a half years later, in the Rajk trial, it served as one of the conclusive pieces of evidence in support of the allegations of conspiracy against the state. In all probability, Brankov participated as an interpreter.³⁴

How is it possible that Brankov immediately provided incriminating evidence against Rajk and other Hungarian diplomats, politicians, and party apparatchiks? As a faithful and influential communist with important contacts in the HWPP and among the leaders of the Cominformist émigrés, Brankov must have been fully aware of the developments of the Soviet–Yugoslav conflict and the choreography of Soviet-type political trials. Shortly before he was arrested, Moscow's *Pravda* had published a brief article on 15 June 1949 about Rajk's arrest as "an imperialist

29 *ÁBTL*, 2.1., VI/1. „Péter Gábor és társai”, p. 257. Jegyzőkönyv Péter Gábor folytatólagos kihallgatásáról. Budapest, 1956. október 22 (Record of the ongoing interrogation of Gábor Péter. Budapest, 22. October 1956), p. 3.

30 *ÁBTL*, 2.1., I/109. „Lazar Brankov”, p. 272. Berán Iván tanú kihallgatási jegyzőkönyve. Budapest, 1955. október 20, p. 4.

31 *ÁBTL*, 2.1., I/109. „Lazar Brankov,” p. 149. Jegyzőkönyv Brankov Lázár kihallgatásáról. Budapest, 1955. január 29, p. 2, and *Ibid.*, „Lazar Brankov”, p. 272. Berán Iván tanú kihallgatási jegyzőkönyve. Budapest, 1955. október 20, p. 4.

32 The meeting took place in Hungary. There are two villages with the same names: Kelebia in Hungary and Kelebija (also Kelebia in Hungarian) in Serbia, on the other side of the border.

33 *ÁBTL*, 2.1., I/1b. „Rajk László és társai” („László Rajk and his companions”), pp. 42–43. Jelentés Rajk László és társai ügyében. Budapest, 1954. október 19 (Report on the case of László Rajk and his companions. Budapest, 19 October 1954), pp. 18–19, and *ÁBTL*, 2.1., I/109. „Lazar Brankov”, pp. 150–151. Jegyzőkönyv Brankov Lázár kihallgatásáról. Budapest, 1955. január 29, pp. 3–4.

34 *ÁBTL*, 2.1. I/1b. „Rajk László és társai”, p. 43. Jelentés Rajk László és társai ügyében. Budapest, 1954. október 19, p. 19.

spy,”³⁵ and I am certain that Brankov had just enough time in the Soviet capital to read it.³⁶

Brankov's interrogation continued after he had been transferred to Hungary on 19 July 1949. He must have been quick on the uptake and had a vivid imagination and combinatorial ability. If necessary, he could invent a complete, elaborate story to save himself. For example, he confessed the following on 3 November 1955: *During my interrogations, the relationship between RAJK and RANKOVIĆ also emerged. While I was talking about the official relations between RAJK and RANKOVIĆ, it occurred to me that it would be a good idea to connect RANKOVIĆ to RAJK – who had already been arrested as an imperialist agent – and prove that RANKOVIĆ and the other Yugoslav leaders were also imperialist agents, who, with RAJK's help, tried to organize a conspiracy in Hungary.*³⁷

During the interrogations Brankov gave evidence against more than 30 alleged UDB agents³⁸ and 12 people were arrested based on his testimony. State defense Lieutenant Colonel Vladimir Farkas noted that *the most incriminating confessions come from Lazar Brankov*. Trivializing his own role (and not without some irony), Farkas held that the interrogators had the uniform opinion that Brankov *lies indiscriminately, and, for example, it is enough to give the name and one or two important pieces of data concerning a completely unknown person [...] for him to provide detailed “information” about the intelligence activities of the person in question for the UDB.*³⁹

However, Brankov could not compromise with his own conscience and refused to accept the charge that he had participated in an anti-state conspiracy. When he was interrogated on 19 July 1949, he refused to sign the part of his confession about the anti-state conspiracy and emphasized that the orders he received from Ranković might have been anti-party in character but not anti-state. He also asked his interrogators about *his role in this case and to what extent he would be a suspect because he would sign his condemning confession against himself depending on that.*⁴⁰

Moreover, Brankov tried to escape from one of the cottages in Buda, which the ÁVH used for interrogations on the evening of 31 July 1949 but he did not suc-

35 ÁBTL, 2.1., I/109-a. “Lazar Brankov és Zsivko Boarov”, p. 114. Jegyzőkönyv Brankov Lázár elítélt kihallgatásáról. Budapest, 1954. október 19 (Record of the interrogation of convict Lazar Brankov. Budapest, 19 October 1954), p. 1.

36 ÁBTL, 2.1., I/1b. “Rajk László és társai”, p. 63. Jelentés Rajk László és társai ügyének felülvizsgálatáról. Budapest, 1954. December 28 (Report on the review of the case of László Rajk and his companions. Budapest, 28 December 1954), p. 19.

37 ÁBTL, 2.1., I/109-a. “Lazar Brankov és Zsivko Boarov”, pp. 393–394. Jegyzőkönyv Brankov Lázár kihallgatásáról. Budapest, 1955. november 3, pp. 18–19.

38 ÁBTL, 2.1., I/109-a. “Lazar Brankov és Zsivko Boarov”, p. 81. Jelentés Brankov Lázár ügyében. Budapest, 1955. február 15 (Report on the case of Lazar Brankov. Budapest, 15 February 1955), p. 1.

39 ÁBTL, 2.1., I/1-d. “Rajk László és társai”, pp. 384–386. Kivonat Farkas Vladimir áv. alezredes 1954. június 24-i feljegyzéséből (Extract from a note by state security Lieutenant Colonel Vladimir Farkas dated 24 June 1954), pp. 1–3.

40 ÁBTL, 2.1., I/109. “Lazar Brankov”, p. 331/16. Brankovnak a szökési kísérlet előtt írt feljegyzése (Brankov's note before his escape attempt, undated), p. 5.

ceed.⁴¹ In a handwritten note he wrote the following: *I am totally unable to play the role that is imposed on me because I have never been a traitor and I never will be regardless of what they have done to me. [...] It is better to die than live in shame.* He also has something to say in connection with Rajk: *I will wait until Rajk's trial ends and I will surrender again and if I am a sinner, then, first and foremost, the Party should judge me and let the decision of the Party be known to me then.*⁴² In his farewell letter to his mother he also mentioned Rajk, but the photocopy of the original note lacks the preceding and following lines, so I was unable to reconstruct its context.⁴³

After he unsuccessfully tried to escape, Gábor Péter had Brankov beaten and then interrogated him personally. According to the Brankov's recollection, Péter looked him directly in the eye and told him that *there is only one solution for me, namely, that I uphold my earlier confessions; otherwise, I will get a death sentence.*⁴⁴ After such physical violence and moral blackmail, Brankov caved and provided damning evidence against Rajk.⁴⁵

The Rajk–Brankov trial

The trial itself started 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 by organizing 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 HWPP; 2) he wanted to quiet the possible Soviet concern and dissatisfaction about 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.⁴⁶ László Rajk was just the right person to “detect” 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 (in 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 legitimise the atmosphere of “permanent preparedness” and the curbs on individual and collective rights in Hungary.

41 SOLT, Pál (ed.): *Iratok az igazságszolgáltatás történetéhez* (Papers of the History of Jurisdiction), Vol. 1. Közgazdasági és Jogi Kiadó, Budapest 1992, pp. 250–251.

42 ÁBTL, 2.1., I/109. “Lazar Brankov”, p. 331/12. Brankovnak a szökési kísérlet előtt írt feljegyzése, p. 1.

43 Ibid., p. 331/13. Brankovnak a szökési kísérlet előtt írt feljegyzése, p. 2.

44 ÁBTL, 2.1., I/109. “Lazar Brankov”, pp. 155–156. Jegyzőkönyv Brankov Lázár kihallgatásáról. Budapest, 1955. január 27 (Record of the interrogation of Lazar Brankov. Budapest, 27 January 1955), pp. 2–3.

45 Ibid., p. 156. Jegyzőkönyv Brankov Lázár kihallgatásáról. Budapest, 1955. január 27, p. 3.

46 ZINNER, Tibor: „A nagy politikai affér”. *A Rajk–Brankov-ügy* (“The Great Political Affair”. The Rajk–Brankov Trial), Vol. 1. Saxum, Budapest 2013, p. 235.

Rákosi also needed to find a Yugoslav citizen of high standing and importance whose name was well known, even to ordinary Hungarians, and who could persuade them that the charges were not prefabricated but real. The ideal person was Lazar Brankov, who personally knew Rajk, even if they were not necessary on friendly terms. Brankov's role in the trial was evident to the contemporary audience, because the press reports, the speeches of leading politicians, and the indictment of the trial all emphasised his importance in this presumed anti-state conspiracy. Contemporary parlance referred to the case as the Rajk–Brankov trial.

Gyula Alapy, the president of the prosecutor's office, accused Brankov in the following three charges: 1) the crime of having been the leader of an organisation aiming to overthrow the democratic state order; 2) the crime of espionage, and 3) the crime of murder as an incitement to the murder of Miloš Mojić, a journalist at *Naše novine*, who was allegedly killed by Živko Boarov, a secretary at the Yugoslav Embassy.⁴⁷ According to the charges, Brankov was not only *the chief representative of the Yugoslav Minister of Home Affairs in Hungary* but also *the chief of the Yugoslav official espionage organisation in Hungary*. In this capacity *he continuously obtained secret data from László Rajk, [Lieutenant General and deputy minister of defence György] Pálffy and a number of other Hungarian spies organised as his agents. He got instructions for this activity directly from Tito. He was Tito's most determined agent.*⁴⁸ Moreover, Brankov instructed Živko Boarov to persuade Miloš Mojić to desist from supporting the Cominform resolution, and if he failed, Boarov should kill him on Brankov's order.⁴⁹

In his testimony during the trial, Brankov confessed that the Yugoslavs had started their spying activity in Hungary as early as 1945. In accordance with Rákosi's and the Soviets' expectations, he linked the Yugoslavs' activity to those of the "British imperialists." London's aim, like Brankov's, was to establish a Central-European federation that was anti-Soviet in character and led by the Yugoslavs.⁵⁰

Brankov also provided detailed information on the alleged topics of discussion at the Kelebia meeting and on the circumstances of his emigration. It was the Yugoslav interior minister who *gave me instructions to return to Budapest, to leave the Legation, to make a statement condemning Tito's policy, and to remain in Hungary as a political refugee.*⁵¹ On Ranković's order, Brankov had to win the confidence of the leadership of the HWPP and continue to keep in touch with Rajk and the other Hungarian "conspirators" and "Yugoslav agents". He also had to find compromising material about the HWPP and about the political émigrés.⁵²

47 *László Rajk and his accomplices before the People's Court*. Printing Press, Budapest 1949, p. 6.

48 *Ibid.*, pp. 18–19.

49 *Ibid.*, pp. 19–20. It is worth mentioning that the journalist Miloš Mojić was referred to as one of the leaders of the Yugoslavs in Hungary in the indictment. *Ibid.*, p. 19.

50 *Ibid.*, p. 104.

51 *Ibid.*, p. 136.

52 *Ibid.*, pp. 136–137.

Brankov's testimony was part of a set choreography; spontaneity had no, or just a minor, part in it. The texts of the testimonies were written in advance and the accused had to memorize them. Even the judge's questions and remarks were set, 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 World War II, 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 them 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 Ranković.*⁵³

The trial was broadcast in two instalments in the evening's main programme time on the radio, and the indictment, the text of the trial and the verdict were published in an official propaganda publication: *László Rajk and his accomplices before the People's Court* (the so-called *Blue Book*). However, a reader with a sufficiently good memory, could have easily noticed that what was written in the book was not always the same as the pre-recorded radio broadcasts. It was Tibor Hajdu who referred to the difference between the heard and the written version in his pioneering study,⁵⁴ and in relation to Rajk's testimony, Tibor Zinner examined in detail the original shorthand notes and their repeatedly corrected, typed transcripts.⁵⁵

In the case of Brankov (who could speak Hungarian and testified during the trial in that language), we can notice many stylistic corrections when comparing the documents, and we can also find quite a few differences in content. Reading the text of the original version, it becomes clear that Brankov stumbled several times in repeating the memorized text, mixed up some details, repeated what he had already confessed, or referred back to such details that had not yet been heard during the trial. These details were left out of the *Blue Book* as well as those parts where the presiding judge, Péter Jankó, practically put the words into Brankov's mouth. This indicates that Brankov was also human; he became tired and began to forget the memorized text. We can especially notice this in the parts discussing the meeting between Rajk and Ranković at Kelebia and their alleged conspiratorial meeting held in the hayward's hut at Paks. Here, several paragraphs of text were left out of the finalized version.⁵⁶

⁵³ Ibid., p. 117.

⁵⁴ HAJDU, Tibor: A Rajk-per háttere és frázisai (The Background and Phrases of the Rajk Trial). *Társadalmi Szemle*, 1992, Vol. 47, Issue 11, pp. 17–36.

⁵⁵ ZINNER, Tibor: A kék könyv a Rajk-Brankov-ügyről. Hazugságok és elhallgatások. *Kriminológiai Tanulmányok*, 2012, Vol. 49, Issue 1, pp. 193–210, and ZINNER, Tibor: "A nagy politikai affér". *A Rajk-Brankov-ügy*, Vol. 2. Saxum, Budapest 2014, pp. 91–282.

⁵⁶ MNL OL, Minisztertanács Tájékoztatási Hivatala, Rajk-per (Council of Ministers, Office of Information, the Rajk trial) XIX-A-24-b., Box 180, folder 9, p. 154, and 180 passim.

Two defining biographical elements of Brankov's life are almost completely missing from the printed text, too: what really motivated him to emigrate and his role in the death of Miloš Mojić. In connection with the former, Brankov mentioned that, after seeing the policies of Tito and the Yugoslav leadership as flawed, he contacted several members of the Central Committee of the HWPP. Before emigrating, he wanted to keep his family safe, and only wanted to visit Rákosi after they had arrived in Hungary, but this could not take place due to his arrest in Moscow.⁵⁷ He also excused himself at length regarding his role in Mojić's murder, almost confusing even the presiding judge.⁵⁸ All he admitted was that he knew about the murder.⁵⁹

In its verdict on 24 September 1949 the special council of the people's court found Brankov guilty of all the above-mentioned charges and sentenced him to life imprisonment.⁶⁰ Brankov took note of the sentence with relief, because he was certain that, like László Rajk, he too would be sentenced to death. He personally believed that the less severe sentence was because, as a foreign citizen, he could not be sentenced to death for treason.⁶¹

The trial itself fulfilled its 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 – altogether 368 in number, 106 of them in the Hungarian party daily, *Szabad Nép* – was with all certainty related to the trial.⁶² The trial served as the ideal pretext for the Soviet Union and its satellites to denounce their treaties of friendship with Yugoslavia. The Soviets denounced theirs on 28 September, four days after the verdict had been delivered. They were followed by Hungary and Poland on 30 September, Romania, and Bulgaria on 1 October, and finally Czechoslovakia on 4 October.⁶³

57 Ibid., pp. 202–203.

58 Ibid., A második tárgyalási nap jegyzőkönyve, 1949. szeptember 17 (Record on the second day of the trial, 17 September 1949), pp. 23–24.

59 MNL OL, Minisztertanács Tájékoztatási Hivatala, Rajk-per (Council of Ministers, Office of Information, the Rajk trial) XIX-A-24-b., Box 180, folder 9, p. 117.

60 László Rajk and his accomplices before the People's Court, pp. 303–304.

61 BOKOR, Péter: A harmadrendű vádlott. Párizsi beszélgetés Lazar Brankov egykori jugoszláv diplomátával (The Third Defendant. Conversation in Paris with Former Yugoslav Diplomat Lazar Brankov). *Valóság*, 1989, Vol. 32, Issue 9, p. 69.

62 *White Book on Aggressive Activities by the Governments of the USSR, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Rumania, Bulgaria and Albania towards Yugoslavia*, p. 479, appendix 22.

63 It is worth knowing that the treaty of friendship between Yugoslavia and Albania was denounced by the Yugoslavs on 12 November 1949. Ibid., pp. 164–173. At the same time, 74 Yugoslav diplomats were expelled from the Soviet Union and its Eastern European satellites, ten of them from Budapest. Eastern European satellites, ten of them from Budapest. Ibid., pp. 448–452, appendices 2–7, and pp. 457–471, appendices 9–15.

The years 1949–1956

Brankov was regularly interrogated while still in prison and especially after the process of de-Stalinisation had started. The process of de-Stalinisation involved reviewing the cases of those unjustly convicted in show trials, the displaced, and those interned without a court verdict. It also entailed rehabilitating those who had been innocently convicted based on false accusations within the framework of law-breaking procedures, and the punishment of those responsible for these acts. However, the review of the show trials and the closing of internment camps was linked to the internal power struggle of the HWPP and the struggle between the dogmatic Rákosi and the reformist Imre Nagy. The evolution of the power relations was basically influenced by personnel reshuffles within the Soviet leadership, too. Rákosi, understandably, was not at all that interested in uncovering the truth, or in holding the real perpetrators of the illegalities to account. When he could no longer avoid it, he wanted to place the responsibility on Gábor Péter (the “Hungarian Beria”), who had already been arrested in January 1953 in connection with the planned Hungarian Zionist trial. Neither was Moscow interested in the excessive weakening of Rákosi, who formally changed the position of general secretary to the position of first secretary in 1953, and it was only willing to support the reformists before the third congress of the HWPP (held in May 1954) with the constraint that *comrade Rákosi's authority should not be destroyed, because it is also the party's authority*.⁶⁴ Thus, the rehabilitation of political prisoners gained momentum only from May 1954. The leadership of the HWPP considered the process, which had been dragging on for three years at the time and was very damaging to the authority of the party leadership, closed in July 1956.⁶⁵

In my opinion, the authorities wanted Brankov to play a key role in the trial of Gábor Péter with whom he had an alleged espionage relationship with the code name “Dózsa”. Brankov was interrogated three times between 22 July and 12 August 1953 as the preparations for the trial were under way, but he doggedly repeated that he did not know anything, could not remember anything, or could not say

64 Cited by GYARMATI, György: *A Rákosi-korszak. Rendszerváltó fordulatok évtizede Magyarországon 1945–1956* (The Rákosi Era. A Decade of System-Changing Turns in Hungary, 1945–1956). Állambiztonsági Szolgálatok Történeti Levéltára – Rubicon, Budapest 2011, p. 348. For the process of rehabilitation, see BARÁTH, Magdolna: Az MDP vezetése és a rehabilitáció (1953–1956) (The Leadership of the HWPP and the Rehabilitation, 1953–1956). *Múltunk*, 1994, Vol. 6, Issue 4, pp. 40–97.

65 An up-to-date overview of the revision's contradictions BARÁTH, Magdolna: Felemás desztalinizáció. A törvénysértések lezárása és az állambiztonsági szervek átszervezése Magyarországon 1962-ben (Half-way de-Stalinization. The Closure of Law Violations and the Reorganization of State Security Agencies in Hungary in 1962). *Betekintő*, 2012, Vol. 6, Issue 3, pp. 1–14, and BARÁTH, Magdolna – FEITL, István (eds.): *Lehallgatott kihallgatások. Rákosi és Gerő pártvizsgálatának titkos hangszalagjai, 1962* (Wiretapped Interrogations. Secret Tapes of the Party Investigation on Rákosi and Gerő, 1962). Napvilág Kiadó – Állambiztonsági Szolgálatok Történeti Levéltára, Budapest 2013, pp. 309–350.

anything for sure.⁶⁶ According to the charges, Gábor Péter regularly provided Brankov and the UDB with highly classified information and state secrets. He forwarded secret reports of the ÁVH about different Hungarian and Yugoslav delegations' visits to Belgrade and Budapest, notes on the internal situation in Hungary, and strictly confidential reports on party relations, among other things. Péter's verdict also stated that Brankov used the code name "*Bogdán*" referring to Gábor Péter in his reports to the UDB centre and regarded him as a good source of information.⁶⁷

These facts were supported by the drafts of those reports that Brankov had sent to the UDB, and which were found in his flat after he had been arrested in 1949.⁶⁸ In my opinion, the drafts raise some questions. For example, why did Gábor Péter, who was the head of the ÁVH during the arrest, not destroy the drafts that contained damning evidence against himself? In the draft of 18 November 1947, which Brankov signed as "Dózsa", he listed the materials he had got from "Bogdán".⁶⁹ As the list was nearly corresponding to the one read out in the sentence of Gábor Péter, these accusations might have been based on Brankov's draft, or it might be even possible that the ÁVH falsified the draft to be useful during the trial supporting the prefabricated charges.⁷⁰

Brankov was much more talkative during the rehearing of Rajk's case half a year later. The authorities interrogated him at least twenty times between 21 July 1954 and 18 February 1955. It is important to understand that the political atmosphere of the time overshadowed not only the show trials but their review, too, which pre-determined the judges' decisions. It made difficulties for Brankov as well. His interrogators often had to give him a clue about what kind of testimony the party expected from him. For example, although Brankov denied the anti-state conspira-

66 *ÁBTL*, 2.1., I/109-a. "Lazar Brankov és Zsivko Boarov", pp. 418–426. Jegyzőkönyv Brankov Lázár kihallgatásáról. Budapest, 1953. augusztus 8, július 22, és augusztus 12 (Record of the interrogation of Lazar Brankov. Budapest, 8 August, 22 July, and 12 August 1953), pp. 1–4, pp. 1–2, and pp. 1–3.

67 *ÁBTL*, 2.1., VI/1. "Péter Gábor és társai", p. 146. Ítélet Péter Gábor és társai ügyében. Budapest, 1953. december 24 (Verdict on the case of Gábor Péter and his companions. Budapest, 24 December 1953), p. 11. Although Brankov was also summoned to testify as a witness, I have not found any documents indicating that he appeared before the court.

68 *ÁBTL*, 2.1., VI/1. "Péter Gábor és társai", p. 46. Vádirat Péter Gábor és társai ügyében. Budapest, 1953. december 11 (Indictment on the case of Gábor Péter and his companions. Budapest, 11. December 1953), p. 6, and *ÁBTL*, 2.1., VI/1. "Péter Gábor és társai", p. 171. Ítélet Péter Gábor és társai ügyében. Budapest, 1953. december 24, p. 36. The photocopies and their translations: *ÁBTL*, 2. 1., I/109. "Lazar Brankov", pp. 223–224, and pp. 331/24–40. Brankov leveleinek gépelt fordításai (Typed translations of Brankov's letters).

69 *ÁBTL*, 2.1., I/109. "Lazar Brankov", p. 223. Brankov leveleinek gépelt fordításai. Gábor Péter was sentenced to life imprisonment on 24 December 1953. Although a retrial was ordered on Rákosi's suggestion on 2 June 1955, the trial was not held until between 28 May and 15 July 1957 and Péter was sentenced to 14 years. He was released on 10 January 1959. For his trial see MÜLLER, Rolf: *Az erőszak neve: Péter Gábor. Az ÁVH vezetőjének élete* (The Name of the Violence: Gábor Péter. The Life of the Head of the ÁVH) Jaffa, Budapest 2017, pp. 184–224.

70 Tibor Zinner notes that, during their meeting in 2002, Brankov described the documents created between the autumn of 1947 and the spring of 1948 as forgeries. He too considers it thought-provoking why the documents in question were not used during the main proceedings of the Rajk trial. ZINNER, Tibor: *"A nagy politikai affér". A Rajk-Brankov-ügy*, Vol. 2, p. 226, and note 1127.

cy and Rajk's past as a Yugoslav spy during the interrogations in August and September 1954, in his handwritten notes on 24 and 30 August 1954 he repeated the well-known accusations against Rajk, such as that *the moral and political attitude [of Rajk] was completely the same as Tito's political stand*. Brankov again stated that Ranković ordered Brankov and Yugoslav ambassador Karlo Mrazović three times from May 1948 to prepare for a secret meeting with Rajk. Brankov also considered it thought-provoking that *László Rajk never made any negative remarks about the Soviet Union. [...] He could not do that, though, as I cannot remember a single case when he was talking to me about the Soviet Union. This is very typical of a communist*. It was an *undeniable fact* for Brankov that Rajk *had covered up* (underlined in the original – author's comment) *the importance of the Soviet Union and its leading role in the global fight against capitalism*. Moreover, *he not only concealed the fact that Yugoslavia, like every people's democracy, owes its freedom to the heroic fight of the Soviet Army, but also the fundamental truth that [Yugoslavia] can only secure this freedom if, in its fight against global capitalism, it remains devotedly and unconditionally on the side of the Soviet Union and even its minor wavering means the betrayal of the cause of communism*. On the other hand, Brankov admitted that *Rajk had an enduring character and was not at all a coward*. Nonetheless, looking back on past events, *I think that Rajk was poisoned by Tito poison to a great extent*.⁷¹

The clue to this contradiction is to know that Brankov was still held in solitary confinement and was not allowed to meet other prisoners, receive visitors, or be informed about the political changes. He was susceptible to influence and, like his confessions in 1949, he again changed his testimonies day after day, although he continued to consistently deny his involvement in the murder of Miloš Mojić.

After all this, one may ask the question whether Brankov was a Yugoslav agent. There can be no doubt that intelligence officers under diplomatic cover worked in the building of the Yugoslav Embassy in Budapest, just as in other foreign embassies. It is also true that, during the review of the Rajk trial, Brankov testified (in both September 1954 and November 1955) that he had been on the payroll at the UDB since his arrival in Hungary, and that, from 1947, as the chief resident of the Yugoslav state security service, he directed the activities of Yugoslav agents in the country. On the other hand, he denied that he had personally recruited anyone; he had only an indirect connection with the agent network.⁷²

During his interrogation on 1 September 1954, Brankov named more than thirty people who were acting as Yugoslav spies.⁷³ However, the above statements should

71 *ÁBTL*, 2.1., I/1-d. "Rajk László és társai", pp. 316–319. Brankov Lázár elitélt sk. feljegyzése. Budapest, 1954. augusztus 23 (Handwritten note of convict Lazar Brankov. Budapest, 23 August 1954), pp. 4–7.

72 *ÁBTL*, 2.1., I/109. "Lazar Brankov", pp. 48–49. Jegyzőkönyv Brankov Lázár elitélt kihallgatásáról. Budapest, 1954. szeptember 1 (Record of the interrogation of convict Lazar Brankov. Budapest, 1 September 1954), pp. 1–2, and *ÁBTL*, 2.1., I/109-a. "Lazar Brankov és Zsivko Boarov", p. 376, and pp. 382–383. Jegyzőkönyv Brankov Lázár kihallgatásáról. Budapest, 1955. november 3, p. 1, and pp. 7–8.

73 Among the alleged Yugoslav agents, Brankov mentioned the press secretary of the Interior Ministry Sándor Cseresznyés, József Rex, and Ferenc Gondi from the Foreign Ministry, police Lieutenant Col-

be treated with sufficient scepticism, as the court did not give credence to them during the review procedures either. Even those accused of acting as agents consistently denied their alleged espionage activities, and their confessions made in 1949 were retracted during the review. They explained that their previous false confessions had been given under severe physical and moral pressure. Of course, this does not mean that Brankov could not have been the UDB's resident-in-chief in Budapest, but it certainly means that those he listed as Yugoslav agents – or at least a significant part of them – were not employed by the Yugoslav intelligence services and the official communiqués, press releases, and topics of the bilateral meetings and discussions were distorted during the Rajk trial and framed as espionage.

It is important to note here that, even if we cannot talk about recruitment and espionage in the conventional sense of the words, it was natural that the members of the communist parties thought it to be their “comradely duty” to provide the other fraternal parties and especially the CPSU with valuable information on the domestic and foreign political situation as well as on economic measures and developments. Since it was not noticeable until the spring of 1948 that Stalin resented Tito, informing Yugoslavia gained importance only afterwards.⁷⁴

Brankov did indeed send telegrams signed “Dózsa” to Belgrade several times. During my archival research at Arhiv Jugoslavije, I found a total of sixteen such telegrams, all of which were dated from the period between 30 January and 9 September 1948. Brankov reported, among other things, on the dissolution of Catholic workers' unions and rural associations, on the pro-Yugoslav statements made at the demonstrations accompanying the founding congress of the HWPP, on the reports in the Hungarian press about the possible split in the CPY leadership, and on the anti-Yugoslav speeches of the Budapest medical congress.⁷⁵ These telegrams did not contain expressions or references indicating espionage; therefore, Brankov's nickname in the communist movement from World War II might have been re-evaluated after he had been arrested in 1949. The members of the CPY often used their nicknames preserved from the period of the partisan war (such as *Vlatko* for Vladimir Velebit or *Bevc* for Edvard Kardelj) even in official communication with each other. It is also true that, if Brankov was indeed employed by the UDB,

onel Ottó Horváth Hönigsberg and Colonel József Kajli from the state protection authority. A third of the alleged agents were members of or related to different Hungarian-Yugoslav organizations, e.g., Tibor Rex and József Hegedüs from the Hungarian-Yugoslav Society, but most of the alleged spies held leading positions at the Democratic Alliance of the South Slavs in Hungary. *ÁBTL*, 2.1., I/109. “Lazar Brankov”, pp. 48–57. Jegyzőkönyv Brankov Lázár elítélt kihallgatásáról. Budapest, 1954. szeptember 1, pp. 1–10.

74 In April 1946, it was Rákosi himself who notified Brankov that, together with two other members of the HCP, Rákosi would like to meet Tito in a “conspiratorial way” to inform the Yugoslav leader about his discussions with Stalin. *AJ*, Međunarodna komisija, odnosi SKJ za stranim parijama, Mađarska (1945–1990) F. 507, CK SKJ, IX-75, I-2. Telegram, 24. April 1946.

75 *Ibid.*, I-2. Beleska (Note), 30. January 1948; I-21. Telegram br. (broj, resp. No.) 207 and br. 208, 13. April 1948; I-23. Telegram br. 223, 20. April 1948; II-38. Telegram br. 24, 12. April 1948 and III-33. Telegram br. 311, 6. September 1948.

the relevant sources supporting his activities as a secret agent and resident-in-chief should be sought at the Archives of the Serbian Ministry of the Interior as the decisive documents may be located there. Unfortunately, archival research in the documents created by the former state security agencies is highly restricted for foreigners in Serbia. On the other hand, Russian historian Nikita Petrov indicates that Brankov was not only under the mandate of the UDB, but he also worked for the Soviet intelligence service, and he held 40 agents in Hungary at that time. This would also explain why the Soviets were reluctant to hand over Brankov to Rákosi and the ÁVH in the summer of 1949.⁷⁶

Brankov was released by a presidential pardon on 3 April 1956. Because of his muddled past as an UDB agent, a retrial was not recommended in his case. He lived in Budapest for a few weeks but had to move to Győr, a city in the northwestern part of the country, maybe because the authorities remained suspicious of him or did not want to cause harm to Tito's sensitivity by letting such a prominent figure live in the capital. He got a furnished flat as financial compensation and found employment at the library of Győr-Sopron County. He was not allowed to participate in person in the reburial of László Rajk. After the revolution had been suppressed, he emigrated to Austria on 9 November 1956 and finally settled down in France. Although the Interior Ministry was considering a new trial in 1962, neither a new inquiry, nor a new trial took place.⁷⁷ He visited Hungary for the first time afterwards in 1987. At Brankov's request, the office of the prosecutor-general provided him with a clean record.⁷⁸

Conclusions

Lazar Brankov, a leading Yugoslav communist diplomat in Budapest, emigrated in October 1948 and became the first leader of the Cominformist émigrés in Hungary. Although he later provided rather confused and inconsistent accounts of the circumstances of his emigration, archival sources suggest that he emigrated because of his own convictions and with the full knowledge of the Hungarian and Soviet leaders. It is highly probable that secretary-general of the HWPP, Mátyás Rákosi, himself "invented" the Yugoslav scenario of Brankov's emigration. As the leader of the émigrés' community, Brankov actively participated in anti-Titoist propaganda warfare and held important discussions determining the formulation of the émigrés'

76 For the Soviet sources, see BARÁTH, Magdolna: „Testvéri segítségnyújtás”. Szovjet tanácsadók és szakértők Magyarországon (‘‘Brotherly Assistance”. Soviet Advisers and Experts in Hungary). In: BARÁTH, Magdolna (ed.): *A Kreml árnyékában. Tanulmányok Magyarország és a Szovjetunió kapcsolatainak történetéhez, 1944–1990* (In the Shadow of the Kremlin. Studies on the History of Relations between Hungary and the Soviet Union, 1944–1990). Gondolat, Budapest 2014, p. 108.

77 ÁBTL, 2.1., I/109. ‘‘Lazar Brankov”, p. 335/45. Feljegyzés. Budapest, 1970. március 5 (Note. Budapest, 5 March 1970), p. 1.

78 SOLT, Pál (ed.): *Iratok az igazságszolgáltatás történetéhez 3* (Papers on the History of Jurisdiction, Vol. 3). Közgazdasági és Jogi Kiadó, Budapest 1994, p. 239.

rés' communities. Because of his importance, his arrest as a "Titoist agent" came as a huge surprise. Although the Hungarian authorities had probably begun to plan his arrest as early as in the spring of 1949, the Soviet cadres objected to it at first. During the interrogations, Brankov immediately provided incriminating evidence against Rajk and other Hungarian diplomats, politicians, and party apparatchiks. As a faithful and influential communist with important political contacts, he must have been fully aware of the developments in the Soviet-Yugoslav conflict. His importance resulted to his involvement in the Rajk-Brankov trial. His testimony was part of a set choreography, and the finalized, official version of the trial contains many differences to the original shorthand notes. The original records make it clear that Brankov stumbled several times in repeating the memorized text, mixed up some details, and repeated what he had already confessed. Two defining biographical elements of his life were completely left out of the finalized version: the motivations of his emigration and his involvement in the assassination of journalist Miloš Mojić. Brankov was regularly interrogated while in prison and during the process of de-Stalinisation. The authorities wanted him to play a key role in the trial of the leader of Hungarian state security, Gábor Péter. The authorities interrogated him at least 20 times in connection with the review of the Rajk trial. The political atmosphere of the time and the pre-determined results of the confessions again made difficulties for Brankov, who was held in solitary confinement and was not allowed to receive visitors or be informed about the political changes that were under way. The question whether Bankov was really a Yugoslav secret agent remains unanswered, though, and further research in the highly restricted papers of the Yugoslav Interior Ministry would be necessary.

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