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THOSE WHO SINNED AGAINST ‘THE PARTY’: PARTY DISCIPLINE PROCEDURES IN BUDAPEST IN THE 1948–1956 PERIOD

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The Topic and Objectives of the Doctoral Dissertation

The main objective of my dissertation is to shed new light on the representation of the state party period in public consciousness – a lifeless, cliché-ridden image dominated by the totalitarian narrative, focussing on the darkest parts of the socialist system. In order to do that, I believe we need a new approach on behalf of historiography, studying the system during its working and concentrating on the intentions of society and those in power. I wished to achieve this goal by carrying out basic research in social history, making the internal disciplinary mechanisms of Hungarian Workers’ Party (Magyar Dolgozók Pártja, MDP) the subject of my study. The choice of topic reflects, among other things, my intention to analyse the structure of the state party and its practical functioning through one of its specific segments – its disciplinary power over party members. Also, I wished to verify the exagerrated, but widely held claim (even by historians) that members carried out the commands of party leaders and lived their everyday life in a totally disciplined manner, with no individual will or choice.

In the doctoral dissertation I also wish to examine the system of moral norms and the behavioural code that the party expected from its members and wished to push on society as a whole. Inversely, this latter is possible to analyse through party discipline procedures – thus I shall try to answer the question what kind of behaviour or misdeed was considered 'conduct unworthy of a Communist', that is, the kind of image not to be conveyed to party members and non-party members alike. Using the term of microhistory 'exceptionally normal', I will look at the population of MDP-members through the ones stigmatised or excluded from the party – that is, the persons drawn under disciplinary procedures by the given basic organisational unit of the party. I shall also rely on the method of microhistory that examines a general question through a specific case or cases.

Analysing the system of discipline of the state party directed to its own members is a completely new direction in Hungarian historiography, but even looking up foreign publications in this topic only yielded two examples, one paper by Thomas Klein (Germany) and one by Edward T. Cohn (US). Naturally I couldn’t undertake carrying out the research for the whole of Hungary, or indeed, the whole of Budapest, so I decided to focus my research on one district of the capital – obviously playing a more central role compared with other locations – and my choice was District 8, Józsefváros, because of its exceptional social diversity, its increased importance among the party units of Budapest, and the rich inventory of sources at my disposal from this district. Thus the scope of my project includes the party
discipline procedures carried out by the District 8 Party Committee between 1948 and 1956. According to the statistical data of the party itself, about one third of the party members, cc. 300,000 to 340,000 people were members of the party unit of Budapest, with the second largest number of members living or working in District 8 – thus the scope of validity of my analysis might extend its geographical scope.

**Resources and Methodology**

My project being basic research, I largely restricted myself to exploring and processing archival documents. The most important resource that I founded my work on was the documentation of the Disciplinary Group of the Budapest Committee of MDP, kept in the Budapest City Archives. It was during the archival processing and exploration of this documentation that I compiled a database made up of 6114 party discipline procedures that contains statistical analyses relevant to the studying of this topic and that also makes it possible to take a 10% sample of the cases, for the analysis of individual cases according to the objectives of my dissertation. The database could only admit methodologically coherent data sets, so I didn’t include the documents that contained any kind of uncertainty. Apart from the disciplinary procedure documents, I also relied on the documentation of the District 8 and Budapest Party Committee’s leading body and party apparatus, while for the reconstruction of the disciplinary procedure itself, I mainly used the minutes of the meetings of the nationwide leading bodies of the party. Besides these, the memoirs of contemporaries were a significant help.

My approach was greatly influenced by the results and methods of Microhistory, *Alltagsgeschichte* and New Cultural History. Apart from these, I wished to apply Bernard Lepetit’s multiscopic approach by first presenting the regulating mechanisms of the disciplinary procedures of the party, and then how this got realised on a national, municipal and district level. After this, I shall outline the disciplinary practices of the District 8 party unit by analysing statistics on the nature of the disciplinary procedure and individual disciplinary cases. Among other things, I wished to examine who the party would penalise, for what alleged reasons, and what kind of actions or allegations could lead do one’s expulsion from the party. I also addressed the question whether there were differences among the treatment of individual party members. For this it might be helpful to compare the ’misdeeds’ that provoked the procedure and the punishments received: did all and sundry get the same penalty for the same wrongdoing?
The Structure and Findings of the Dissertation

Following the chapters on historiographic and methodological background, the first analytical section is dedicated to what the party leadership meant by discipline among the members, what were its expectations and what sort of organisational systems it created to achieve these goals. First I looked at the national and municipal levels of the party structure. After providing an overview of the MDP’s organisational history, I present its own set of regulations, the disciplinary apparatuses set up on the basis of rulings issued by national level leading bodies and its expected ’optimal’ working mechanisms, as well as the changes that occurred to this system over the years. I briefly outline the campaigns aiming at ’purifying the social composition’ of the party (i.e. membership revisions, the issuing of new membership cards for all members, and local-level reorganisations of party structure), which can be regarded as extraordinary party discipline procedures. Parallel with the analysis of the national level, I carried out the same analysis on a municipal and district level and I present how the leadership’s expectations in terms of disciplining the members were met in practice.

My research reveals that at the creation of the MDP itself, in 1948, the disciplinary apparatus was not automatically set up as well – it was as late as June 1950 that this issue was regulated. The years in between, 1948–50, were characterised by an unhappy state of affairs in terms of ’disciplinary work’. In this period party discipline issues were handled by cadre departments, but this strategy involved the centralising of membership cases. Initially this seemed to be practical from the Communist party’s perspective, but in 1949 it led to utter chaos in party discipline procedures. While the hand-picking of reliable cadres was understandably a priority, party discipline got neglected. The chaotic situation is best reflected by the fact that in June 1950 the party’s Political Committee had to put the issue of regulating the disciplinary procedure on the agenda of its meeting. Their ruling is a milestone: it is at this point that an official procedure, to be followed for years to come, was formulated, which spelled it out that cases were to be initiated on the lowest, basic unit level, to be sent on for approval to the district unit. The member involved in the procedure was granted the right of appeal, which could take the issue as high up as the national congress of the party. In the 1950–56 period the procedure got gradually more and more bureaucratic, with specially appointed ’discipline rapporteurs’ rather than the cadre departments dealing with these cases. The nature of the system was in a continuous state of change, with the scope of authority of
the lower level party units now curtailed, now widened. The most typical complaints heard from discipline rapporteurs at municipal and district level meetings concerned the case lag, the heterogenous disciplinary practices of different basic units, the high rate of expulsions and an insufficient knowledge of disciplinary punishments. These were characteristic throughout the years up to 1956, not exactly conveying the image of a system working with precision and rigid military discipline.

In the second half of the dissertation I examined how these theoretical and organisational basics were applied in actual practice, relying on a database of 6114 disciplinary cases. In the first chapter, after some critical remarks concerning party statistics, I present the membership numbers for the municipal and District 8 level, which give a clear indication of steadily dropping membership rates from 1952 onwards. After this I analyse the annual disciplinary case numbers, in lack of data for the national and municipal level using only the District 8 statistics. Looking at the database, we see a steady increase of disciplinary cases between 1948 and 1953, with a significant drop in 1954 and numbers increasing again in 1955, but with a clear tendency of overall decrease – the number of cases in 1956 was only half of that for 1955.

Drawing valid conclusions concerning the severity of the outcomes of the procedures is possible if we look at the punishments received and how these changed from year to year. One of the important findings of my analysis is the astounding number of expulsions: more party members were excluded in the given period (cc. 54%) than the total number of all other punishments received.

All this means that in the period in question in general, and in the 1952–53 period and the year 1955 in particular, with their expulsion rate of 60%, the disciplinary procedure system was strongly punitive in its nature. Looking at punishments reveals that while the central regulations list four levels of punishments, with one addition in 1954 (rebuke, reprehension, strict reprehension, expulsion and strict reprehension with a final warning), the District 8 disciplinary procedures involved much more, 14 punitive measures of increasing severity. This verifies the concerns formulated by other party organs described in the previous section concerning the disciplinary procedures of district units. The annual changes in the types of punishments received reflect the fact that not until the highest level party organs decided to regulate the disciplinary procedure in general were the ‘abuses of power’ put to an end. These abuses are partly shown by how the number of mild punishments (or even dropped cases) is almost equal to the number of expulsions, and partly by having recourse to irregular types of punishment. The increase of the severity of punishments, a trend that started in 1950
and continued steadily until 1953, might have some kind of correlation to the ruling of the political committee regulating the disciplinary procedure, but we should not disregard the political atmosphere becoming more and more oppressive.

This period saw a steady decrease in the number of standard punishments and fewer and fewer procedures ended with the dropping of charges. In 1954 a slight let-up started to become visible, but this trend turned in 1955, with strong repression becoming typical again – well demonstrated by the fact that the rate of expulsions reached over 60%. 1956 brought another change – a softening up, with formerly excluded members taken back to the party and an increasing number of members leaving the party by their own will. Looking at the number of disciplinary procedures and punishments by year corroborated my hypothesis that the changes and trends were linked to the turns of party history, earlier only found to correlate with milestone speeches and the promotions or demotions of important figures. Compared with the periods of political history, the data for 1949-50 show a degree of divergence in that the witch-hunt for the internal enemy within the party itself was in full swing, yet the number of mild punishments is rather high. The explanation for this probably lies in the fact that party disciplinary procedures were unregulated, and in the intention of the district level party committees to counteract the sometimes too severe actions of the basic party units.

The next chapter deals with the 384 basic party units involved in disciplinary procedures. Totalling the annual number of cases showed that their overwhelming majority occurred at the three largest industrial plants (MÁVAG, Ganz Vagon- és Gépgyár, Ruggyantaárugyár). However, the basic units were not necessarily overseen by the respective district committee all along, so I compared their annual case numbers with those of the basic party units. For the units with an outstanding number of cases I also looked at the number of members and calculated the ratio of these two, which yielded the number of party members per disciplinary case. This number I called the disciplinary index per party member, which is an indicator for the undisciplinedness of the individual basic units. At the head of this list we find for example some so-called local units – based on place of residence – as well as police, factory, institutional and university affiliated basic units. I also looked at the order of basic units by the number of cases that ended in expulsion. I assumed that the ones with more than 50% of expulsions adopted a more punitive approach, while with the ones below 50% I assumed that the district level party committee had a more educational attitude (e.g. Szikra). However, when the expulsion rate was over 60% (e.g. MÁVAG), that clearly indicated a punitive approach to the basic units in question.

By the joint analysis of these data it was possible to establish the order of the basic
units most 'harrassed' by the District 8 Party Committee. Here the local units described by the district committee as the basis of 'petit bourgeois' elements feature with an exceptionally high rate of disciplinary cases and expulsion rates – which shows their intention to 'purge' these units, not only through disciplinary procedures, but through other campaigns (issuing new membership cards, reorganising the local units) as well. All in all it can be said that in certain areas the district party committee was successful in meeting the goals it had set for itself – purging the party of those not suitable or worthy to be a member – which is best indicated by the indices for local basic party units. The high case numbers and expulsion rates found in committees of large industrial plants, on the other hand, can be seen to signal the failure of the disciplinary efforts of the district level committee, considering that apparently factory workers, heralded as the natural ally of the 'party of the working class', were subject to a significant number of disciplinary procedures.

The central topic of the last chapter of my dissertation is the analysis of the individual disciplinary procedures. By presenting specific social groups and individuals I wished to put the procedures in a more personal perspective – especially by describing the misdeeds in question. This allows us to gain insight into the everyday problems of those living in Józsefváros, as well as into the individual strategies people had recourse to in 'extreme' life situations such as a membership revision or a disciplinary procedure. First I present the details of how the party unit of second-hand dealers was eliminated following a membership revision. Then I describe the methodology of random sampling that yielded the 661 actual cases through which I wished to analyse the procedures. I analyse the sample by the age, family background, occupation, place of birth and residence. The analyses I carried out according to various compositions provided questions for further research, such as whether it is a result of prejudice or just the distorting effect of sampling that more disciplinary procedures were started against those not born in Budapest or not living in Józsefváros than those born in the capital and/or living in District 8.

In the next part of my dissertation the focus is on specific acts of misdemeanour that led to disciplinary action. I found 35 different types of offence, which I categorised into 10 groups as follows (in order of frequency): neglecting party duties and activities (142 cases), unparty-like behaviour (120), loss of membership card (115), political reasons (90), offences against property or economic offenses (72), breach of work discipline (27), immoral conduct (25), other crimes (13), corruption (6), and other (1). The data indicate that the most commonly penalised offences in District 8 were neglecting party duties, behaving in a way unworthy of a communist and the frequent loss of membership cards. These three main types
make up no fewer than 61.7% of all cases.

Studying the offenses by year showed that the most common of all, neglecting party duties, became ever more dominant from 1952 on, and in 1955 and ’56 made up almost half of all cases. All this indicates that (contrary to my expectations) the withdrawal of party members from duties and activities became a trend not in 1953 but as early as 1952. This, in turn, proves that this phenomenon can not be directly linked to Imre Nagy’s accession to power, but to other factors – the dismal economic performance of the country in 1952 and the steady decrease of the standards of living are likely candidates. All this, taken together with the decrease of party membership itself, can be interpreted as an indicator of the level of disappointment with the party. The data for the end of our period on the neglecting of party duties is so high indeed, that it reflects the wider trend (beyond our sample) that party members had gradually lost all interest in what the MDP was trying to say.

We can see a contrary trend concerning the offences related to unparty-like behaviour and political reasons. In the first few years of our period this type made up the overwhelming majority of cases, then their rate gradually decreased until 1952, showed minor fluctuations until 1955, after which they sank into obscurity. My hypothesis is that this shows that disciplinary procedures within the party were more ’purificatory’ in nature at the beginning of our period, with the intention of keeping in line those with politically unacceptable views, non-working class origin, religious affiliation, etc., and those behaving in non-communistlike ways. Every year within our period boasts several cases of offenses against property and economic offences. Between 1951 and 1953 they were especially numerous – another symptom of poor living standards. It is definitely a telltale indicator that every 9th of the offences found in District 8 were in some way or another related to economic offences.

Analysing the expulsion cases shows that the District 8 committee was heaviest on those neglecting party duties – these offences feature prominently among their disciplinary procedures and three quarters of these cases ended with expulsion. A much smaller proportion of cases were the consequence of offences against property, corruption and other criminal offences, but once disciplinary action was taken in such a case, it almost inevitably ended with expulsion. Political reasons also featured prominently among reasons for disciplinary action, with the proportion of expulsions similar to neglecting party duties – 75%. The district level party committee penalised these offences rather heavily. A completely different tendency can be seen with those who lost their membership cards or were prosecuted for unparty-like conduct: here a large number of cases were initiated but hardly one quarter of these ended with expulsion. Among those who breached party discipline, hardly anyone got excluded
from the party. In these cases the procedure clearly had a pedagogical purpose.

After analysing the offenses grouped into the above categories, I went on to study the individual types of offenses, with specific quotes from the case documentation to illustrate my points. By conclusion of the chapter on offenses it can be said that the MDP used the categories of enemies well known and widely used in political history, but passed rulings not only in political, but also economic and work-related issues, while it also scrutinised the private life of its members, for example when investigating cases of immoral conduct. The intention to penetrate each and every sphere of life is clearly visible. It was easy to identify the degree of strictness to go with the different types of offence, with political and economic offences, offences against property, corruption and other crimes often penalised with expulsion – but the neglect of party duties was also considered a major offence. In the case of other offences, on the other hand, we see disciplinary action being used more as a pedagogical tool. Studying these cases gave insight into the everyday life and interpersonal conflicts of the period and it also proves that not all party members were treated as equal during the disciplinary procedures (either) – the same offence often earned different punishments for different people.

In accordance with its goals, my dissertation has proved beyond doubt that the disciplinary mechanisms of the MDP were far from being a carefully planned and well-oiled system. 'Disciplinary work' was quite often chaotic in character and in the first years of our period it wasn’t even clear whose responsibility it should be, but the procedures were full of problems even after 1950. My paper also shows that the party members were not the obedient and disciplined crowd the contemporary descriptions would have us believe. The set of offences described in the documentation also reveals a wide range of – not always morally right – decisions taken by individuals, including the intention of leaving the party. The punitive-pedagogical attitude characterised by the party punishments received and the rate of expulsions gives insight into which social groups and offenses were most targeted by the disciplinary efforts of the District 8 Party Committee. Among these we find completely unsurprising examples, but also ones that embody the failure of these efforts.

Finally, the various expulsion rates have also shown that not all party members were treated equally and different people were given different penalties for the same offence – with the exception of some extreme cases.

I hope that due to the complex approach I adopted my dissertation has yielded significant conclusions and findings concerning the disciplinary strategies of the state party and the District 8 Party Committee and also the everyday tactics of party members. I hope I
have succeeded in providing a new perspective for the study of the socialist system in Hungary between 1948 and 1956, which will also stimulate further research.

My published articles and papers in relation with the topic of the thesis: