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The impact of the Balassagyarmat hostage-taking incident on the establishment of the special service branch of the Hungarian police

Socialist Workers' Party and our political leadership, condemn every form of terrorist activity, regardless of its message. [...] This concept is now also present in the legislation of the Hungarian People's Republic. For the first time the new Criminal Code, entering into force this year, classifies the definition of the act of terrorism and the unlawful seizure of an aircraft and the applicable sentences. These crimes are punishable by criminal law, regardless of the nationality of the offender and regardless of where they were committed. [...]"

Introduction

Terrorist-related attacks became more common during the 1960s, especially in Western Europe. Social and political movements of the time, such as the student protests, activism from far-left groups or the Arab and Palestinian national movements, served as an ideological basis thus sparked a wave of terrorist organizations like the Red Army Faction (RAF), the Red Brigades (Brigate Rosse), the Action directe or the Black September Organization. Military operations used to prevent and counter terrorist attacks have proven to be less effective in areas without an ongoing armed conflict. Furthermore, most states strictly regulated or even prohibited the deployment of their armies during peacetime within national borders. These two factors, namely the legal environment and the terrorist attacks in Europe, have led to the establishment of special police units, developed and trained to combat terrorism.

Until 1973, there was no special police unit in Hungary, which was responsible for preventing or countering terrorist acts and related crimes (for example hostage-takings, aircraft hijackings, bombings etc.). However, these acts were not classified as criminal offences up until 1978, in which year the *Act IV of 1978 on the Criminal Code* entered into force. The results of Hungary's fight against terrorism were reported by Major General Lajos Karasz, Deputy Minister of the Interior, in Prague in 1979 at a meeting of communist interior ministers: „The socialist countries, the communist and workers' parties of the world, including the Hungarian

Chronologically the first legal source I found during my research, in

connection with the special units of the Hungarian police, was *Order No. 586032/1947 of the Minister of the Interior on the regulation of the operation of the special forces*, which entered into force in 1947. However, it is clear from the legislative text that the tasks of the special police force were very similar to normal law enforcement duties, rather than having unique activities related to terrorism. Throughout the course of my research, I found no data or information on a demand of the leadership of the Hungarian police, regarding the establishment of a police unit that would have been trained to counter terrorist acts before 1973. A radical change of this approach was induced by the hostage-taking incident in the town of Balassagyarmat.

The hostage-taking incident in the town of Balassagyarmat

In late 1972 András Pintye (19), and his brother, László Pintye (17), both residents of the town of Balassagyarmat, decided to leave Hungary in order to settle abroad. However, given the fact that their father was a border guard officer, according to the rules and practice of the era, they had no chance of obtaining a passport and ultimately defecting from Hungary. Instead, they started to plan their fleeing from the country. The older brother came up with the idea of putting the Hungarian authorities under pressure in order to allow them to leave the country by taking hostages. The brothers also involved three other local

young men in their plan. However, they found the idea too risky and therefore did not take an active role in the action. The authorities pressed charges against the three later, since they did not report these plans to the police.

On January 7, 1973, András Pintye stole the keys to his father's office safe. He went into the barracks of the Balassagyarmat border guard, and told the officer on duty that he needed to pick up a book from his father's office. The officer on duty let him into the office, where he took out his father's AMD-65 assault rifle with the addition of 80 bullets and a 9-millimeter PA-63 semi-automatic service pistol with the addition of 9 bullets from the safe. He hid the weapons and ammunition under his coat and walked out of the barrack.

Around 10 P.M. that night, the two brothers broke into the 14th room on the first floor of the main building of the Geisler Eta girls' college in Balassagyarmat, where they took 16 girls hostage. Demands were made in exchange for the release of the girls. The brothers' following claims were described on a piece of paper by one of the female hostages:

- 6 pistols with two magazines each with additional ammunition,
- a bus – whose windows can be covered up with curtains – with two drivers,
- 6 submachine guns with two magazines each, 30 hand grenades and 1 radio transceiver,
- and later on, a helicopter and cash in U.S. dollars.

The hostage takers emphasized several times that if the authorities did not meet their demands, they would start executing the girls. However, they had no plans on how to present their demands to the authorities. Meanwhile, the girls asked the hostage takers to let them go to the toilet, which the brothers eventually agreed to. The girls took the opportunity to attempt an escape from the building, which one of them succeeded at. She finally reported the incident to the police. The first arriving patrol officers broke into the dormitory room and ordered the gunmen to surrender, but instead the older brother shot at the policemen and barricaded the room door with bunk beds. The authorities then closed off the dormitory building and its neighbourhood. After reinforcements arrived from the Internal Security Troops of the Ministry of the Interior, the town of Balassagyarmat was also completely closed off. This was necessary because, although the authorities ordered a complete news-ban, the incident came to light and worried relatives of the hostages set out for the town to put pressure on the police.

Since the Hungarian authorities were completely unprepared for a crisis of this magnitude, they had to improvise on the site. First, the parents of the hostage takers were taken to the dormitory room to try to impress their children. However, this method

proved to be completely ineffective, and even led to an opposite effect, – in the form of increased aggression in the case of the older brother – so another „negotiator” was brought to the scene. The police chose Dr. István Samu, the chief physician of the hospital of Balassagyarmat, who had known the boys personally for some time. He negotiated with the hostage takers for several days and even managed to calm the older brother down multiple times. However, he could not get them to surrender. The local police captain, Ferenc Szücs, also tried to negotiate, which also proved to be unsuccessful. There were two clear ideas and goals for the police: on the one hand, to temporize as much as possible thus exhausting the hostage takers, and on the other hand, to protect the lives of the girls at all costs.

As I mentioned, at the time there were no specially trained units within the Hungarian police that would have been able to deal with such incidents. An applicable tactical procedure was also non-existent, so the situation was handled on an ad-hoc basis. The Internal Security Troops of the Ministry of the Interior were ordered to deal with the situation. Their members replaced local police officers in front of the dorm room, as well as around the building of the college. Police officers equipped with sniper rifles were positioned into the building of the town-hall and also on its rooftop, opposite the girls' college. In their case, I deliberately do not use the term sniper, as – although they provided excellent shooting performance even before this operation – they were normal police officers, who had not received any special training before. The same was true for the police officers lined up in front of the dorm room. Apart from their normal police training, they received no specific tactical procedural drill on how to enter a room during a hostage situation, how to eliminate the suspects and how to secure the hostages.

On the morning of Thursday, January 11, hostage-takers became increasingly nervous about the authorities just temporizing without fulfilling their demands. Making matters worse, the negotiating chief physician was unable to reassure the older brother, who eventually fired his machine gun at the adjacent building. The bullets hit just a few inches from the police officers who were taking position there. After the shots, he shouted that this was the last warning and next time, he would execute the girls. At that point it became clear to the officers in charge of the operation that the negotiation attempts have failed, so they decided to eliminate the suspects. Permission was granted that if any of the hostage takers, especially András Pintye, who was considered more dangerous, provided a clear target, police officers equipped with sniper rifles could fire at them. On Friday, January 12, at noon, András Pintye appeared for a few seconds in the window of the dormitory room. Police at the roof of the

neighbouring building noticed this and fired shots at him from three different weapons and positions. As a result, the older hostage taker fell to the ground fatally wounded. At the same time, from the raised platform of a truck parked under the window of the dormitory room and simultaneously from the hallway in front of the room – after the hostages had moved the barricades from the door – the members of the Internal Security Troops broke in and captured the younger hostage taker, László Pintye. All of the hostages were evacuated safely.

Following the successful operation, the authorities launched a series of investigations. These focused mainly on the circumstances of the hostage situation, for example on how the brothers were able to obtain weapons, who knew about their plans and how they were not reported to the police. On the other hand, law enforcement professionals analysed the work and situation-handling of the authorities and the successful elimination. In order to deal with the identified shortcomings, an action plan was developed and criminal proceedings were initiated. Although the hostage-taking was called a terrorist act, this offence was not included in the Hungarian criminal code back in 1973. Therefore, 17-year-old László Pintye was accused of attempted homicide against a public official and against one than more person, attempted illegal border crossing by unlawfully taking an aircraft, misuse of a firearm and violation of personal freedom against one than more person. The court eventually found him guilty of all charges and sentenced him to a maximum of 15 years in prison.

The establishment of the action platoons of the Hungarian police

The Balassagyarmat case also highlighted that there is a real risk of terrorist acts and similar hostage situations in Hungary as well. It has become necessary to set up and train a special police force with the capability of managing and dealing with similar situations. In the meantime, the Internal Security Troops of the Ministry of the Interior were abolished. Within its successor organization, in the Revolutionary Police Regiment, the so-called action platoons were established without a major organizational change. The newly set up system was structured as follows: every first platoon of each company was designated to this specific duty. In the beginning, these special units were exclusively set up in Budapest, only at a later phase was a platoon designated for this task in the town of Miskolc as well. Members of these platoons, in addition to their regular training schedule, also received special trainings with an

extended training period. In additional courses, they were taught self-defence methods, special shooting and special tactical procedures necessary for their missions. At first, the training programme was not standardised at all. Another problem was the lack of experts in the field. However, some specialists from the units of the Hungarian People's Army, mainly from its cavalry divisions, were asked to join to the Revolutionary Police Regiment.

The structure of the action platoons was set up as follows: each platoon was composed of 16 members. This consisted of 1 platoon commander (primarily an officer), 1 deputy commander, 4 snipers, 6 tactical operators and 4 technical specialist warrant officers. In 1985, the Miskolc action platoon was abolished, since it was unnecessary to maintain it, because the action platoons stationed in Budapest could reach any given part of the country within a 3-hour drive from the capital city at any given time.

The establishment and tasks of the Action Subdivision

As I mentioned, the members of the action platoons were initially trained under a non-uniformed programme schedule. Accordingly, the selection system was not standardized either. The so-called Action Subdivision was established in 1979, in order to standardize the activities, training and selection system of the action platoons. The main task of this unit was to train and professionally supervise the action platoons and to coordinate the apprehension of dangerous armed criminals. From that point on, the training and service schemes were built up as follows: every action platoon was on a regular public service duty for 10 weeks, similar to the normal police platoons within the Revolutionary Police Regiment. This highlights the fact that, even though they were specially trained and equipped units, at the same time, they also performed regular public security tasks. During the 10-week period, additional 4-hour training sessions were included on a weekly basis, in order to practice building clearing scenarios, or to train firearms to maintain skills on the long-term. This was followed by a 5-week phase, under the direction and supervision of the Action Subdivision, in which the platoon members acquired the special skills they needed during their missions, following a training plan. Particular focus was put on the practice of apprehending dangerous and armed suspects, specialized firearm handling and shooting skills, pyrotechnic training, rappelling from helicopters and buildings, melee training, fitness training, building clearing tactics, and theoretical – focusing on the tactics and methods of terrorist groups – and psychological training. Improvisation was common during

training, since up-to-date tactics were only available to the drill instructors to a limited extent. They often had to invent, test, and improve new methods during the training sessions. Background documents and materials for the theoretical training were also procured from abroad with the help of other special units of the Ministry of the Interior, mostly by the intelligence agency. In some cases – mainly during the analysis of terrorist tactics – foreign TV news and reports were used as educational materials and were incorporated into the training programme.

Legislation governing the operation of the special service branch of the Hungarian police

In the following chapter, I would like to introduce the era specific legal regulations of the operation of the special service branch of the Hungarian police. As I mentioned before, during my research, I did not find any specific directive or order on the establishment of the action platoons. They were set up from the pre-existing law enforcement body, without any additional organizational change. However, after researching archival records and materials, it is clear that orders and decrees existed, which regulated the operation of the special units of the police. I would like to briefly introduce the most relevant ones.

The norm that regulated the operation of the special service branch of the police was *Order No. 28/1982 of the Minister of the Interior of the Hungarian People's Republic on tasks related to the prevention, detection and response to terrorist acts*. At the same time, the order stated that the territorially competent police headquarters are responsible to begin and maintain the primary police operation in case of terrorist acts on national level, and for the preventive and counter police activities in case of terrorist acts on a local level. If the local forces prove to be insufficient to carry out such a task due to a lack of training or equipment, then the action platoons of the Revolutionary Police Regiment, or even the units of the Hungarian People's Army or the Workers' Militia, must be deployed for the task. Following that, *Decree No. 18/1982 of the Deputy Minister of the Interior of the Hungarian People's Re-*

public on the execution of Order No. 28/1982 entered into force. The implementing decree regulated the role of different police divisions in the prevention and the countering of terrorist acts. The decree also regulated how to request the deployment of the action platoons of the Revolutionary Police Regiment during a terrorist act, and the establishment of a tactical command unit. Finally, the decree also laid down the general rules for commanding and reporting in such cases. Interestingly, according to my information, it was the very first time in Hungary that a legislative text included that methods must be added to the training schedule of the action platoons for the stopping and clearing of vehicles, and also methods for the recovery of nuclear or radioactive materials.

Summary

As in many European countries, an unprecedented violent crime in Hungary, namely the hostage-taking incident in Balassagyarmat, induced the decision that the Hungarian police should have specially trained units. Although the operation was successfully completed overall, police and political leadership recognized that an organizational reform was inevitable. However, the solution had its unique country specific characteristics: instead of creating an independent police unit with a well-defined system of tasks, responsibilities and powers, special action platoons were established within an existing police force, in the organizational framework of the Revolutionary Police Regiment. These action platoons, in addition to their normal police activities, undertook – not always voluntarily – special training. Although in the beginning the initial steps, training methods and tactical procedures were sometimes characterized by instinct rather than conscious professional experience, the specialists of that time successfully laid the foundations of the Hungarian special police service branch. The establishment of the Action Subdivision proved to be the first major step in the standardisation process, – for example on tactical procedures and trainings – which are crucial elements for the successful operation of a law enforcement body. In my study, I also showcased that the Hungarian legislation laid down the necessary legal background, albeit with some delay, for the operation of Hungarian special police branch.