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Agricultural Decisions and Disagreements in Stalinist Hungary, 1948–1953

Abstract

The purpose of the study. The aim of this study is to explore the inner repression in the state and party apparatus regarding rural affairs, the emerging dissent among the cadres and the conflicts of Stalinist style collectivization related to agricultural decision-making and its implementation. The main research period is the height of party state terror when the symptoms of malfunction of planned economy surfaced more intensively between 1951 and mid-1953.

Applied methods. Qualitative analysis was conducted on archival sources, which consists of party organs' resolutions and documents as well as of reports, minutes and records of the Ministry of Agriculture in particular.

Outcomes. The party leadership's reaction to the challenges and crisis was constant purge, but even persecution of the "enemies" of the state had to be limited. The study highlights that the agricultural apparatus did not implement unreasonable plans without any resistance from 1948 up until mid-1953. It does mean that the communist agricultural policy cannot be seen as a straight line. On the one hand, the failing collectivization drive forced the top brass to reconsider policy; on the other hand, the growing dissatisfaction and disagreement could play a significant role in the process.

Keywords: collectivization, agricultural policy, nomenklatura, factionalism, dissent

Introduction

In 1948, the communist party officially announced the start of a Soviet style collectivization of agriculture in Hungary. The Stalinist leadership determined a hard path to accomplish the goals in the short term. The liquidation of the "kulaks" and full mass collectivization should have been achieved in the second phase of the process. To make progress, measures were taken, which aimed both to eliminate "kulak" farms and to create "socialist villages" and cities from the late 1940s and the early 1950s. The rapid pace of transformation caused disruption in agricultural production and consumption, especially when weather conditions turned completely disadvantageous in 1952.

Not everyone agreed to the conception of the Hungarian Stalinist elite. The agrarian politician Imre Nagy had a debate about economic policy from 1947 with Ernő Gerő, who was the main decision-maker among the communist leaders regarding economic affairs. Nagy expressed self-criticism at the end of the "discussions" in 1949. He implemented a "land reform" in 1945; with his help, the communist party successfully abolished large-agricultural estates and redistributed land to the small land tillers and agricultural workers. Despite complete agrarian reform could

not be realized, other cooperative idea was drafted until 1949. Meanwhile, the apparatus of the Ministry of Agriculture was purged in 1948, in the same year, central party organs were created to implement new agricultural policy.¹ In the following years, show trials were organized against the members of local administrations (councils), communist party leaders, including László Rajk, János Kádár and Ferenc Donáth, and against social democrats and the leaders of meat industry. Professors and students were persecuted at the Agricultural University's faculties (forest engineers and veterinaries).² It should also be mentioned that the Ministry of Agriculture and the agricultural administration at the local levels were reorganized as well. Regarding public administration, it was a significant change that the council system was introduced based on the Soviet pattern. The purges within the party and state apparatus and the fluctuation of cadres were constant. In 1950, the First Five-Year Plan started while there was a lack of trained agricultural engineers, agronomists and experts in the newly established cooperatives and state farms.

One of the most important questions is, were other opinions expressed or generated by the failed collectivization drive in the early 1950s? Had the members within the inner circle of the communist party discussions and debates on agricultural policy in the same period? Who had criticized, what and why? Why was the reaction of the party leaders limited in 1952 and in the first half of 1953? What did lead to corrections in agricultural policy before mid-1953?

Attempt of Collectivization during the First Five-Year Plan

Mátyás Rákosi, the general secretary of the Hungarian Workers' Party (Magyar Dolgozók Pártja, MDP) predicted in November 1948 at the meeting of the Central Committee of the MDP that the Hungarian agriculture will be almost fully collectivized within 3–4 years. According to the document which elaborated the agricultural aspects and tasks of the First Five-Year Plan, liquidation of "kulaks" and mass collectivization should have been started in the autumn of 1952, thus most of arable land should have been cultivated by the cooperatives by 1954. Gábor Magos, the husband of Judit Gimes, who was the daughter of Miklós Gimes, a journalist and a supporter of Imre Nagy during the Hungarian revolution and freedom fight in 1956, recalled later in an interview that a softer cooperative concept was drew up in 1948 and in 1949. Zoltán Vas, the Chairman of the National Planning Office and Imre Nagy facilitated the idea but it was dismissed by Gerő. The new functionaries in the Ministry of Agriculture and other state organs at the national level were members previously of the Győrffy College, which was an institute of the National Association of People's Colleges (Népi Kollégiumok Országos Szövetsége, NÉKOSZ), and also the National Association of Cooperatives (Szövetkezetek Országos Szövetsége, SZÖVOSZ) and the National Peasant Party (Nemzeti Parasztpárt, NPP). Some of these individuals were accused to be too friendly to private peasants and to try to prevent the success of collectivization efforts.

¹ Cseszka, É. (2012): 61, 122.

² Gyarmati, Gy. (1998): 1185–1186. Honvári, J. (2001): 91–106. Varsányi, E. (2015)

While Imre Nagy was partly sidelined, he taught agricultural economics at multiple universities, he remained member of the party's rural committee (Committee of Agricultural and Cooperative Policy) and of the agricultural policy working group of the party's central office which was responsible for ideological and theoretical questions. He was also the Head of the party's Department of Administration, he was Minister of Food Supply and State Procurement from December 1950 until November 1952.³ Meanwhile, he became member of the Political Committee in February 1951 again and delivered a speech at the II congress of the MDP.⁴ Not just his, but other central figures' personal network could be of interest.

The First Five-Year Plan's target numbers were increased multiple times, but the huge raise came in 1951. It was allegedly linked to Stalin's demands to prepare to fight a new world war.⁵ Additionally, there were supposedly debates between Zoltán Vas and Ernő Gerő on planning between 1950 and 1953, especially when Vas was dismissed as Chairman of the National Planning Office.⁶ The growing crisis was linked to the contradictions of the economic policy. Not everyone agreed to increase the plans. According to the recollections of Béla Tukacs, a colleague of the Ministry of Agriculture, who took part at the meetings of the so-called college, an advisory body of the ministry which consisted of the minister and experts of other state and party organs.⁷ Tukacs has given interview in the 1980s and claimed that he took part at the meeting in 1951 to discuss the agricultural plans for the next year.⁸ Many decades later, in 2012, when some parts of his experiences in agricultural policy from the 1950s were published, he claimed that it was the meeting in the autumn of 1950 to discuss the agricultural plans for 1951.⁹ In any case, he described the situation in the same way; the cadre of the party's central agricultural department, Ottó Sándi demanded with some others to raise agricultural plans. The irrational plans went through and became a resolution, but 1952 proved that central agricultural planning had massive shortcomings.

In addition, 1952 was the year to make decision on collectivization. Despite harsher measures and goals were visioned by May 1952, the Political Committee decided in July 1952 to slow down the pace of "socialist transformation of agriculture" and to postpone the phase of liquidation of the "kulaks". Some weeks earlier, on June 27–28, a Central Committee meeting took place at which state functionaries and particularly the Ministry of Agriculture were

³ Imre Nagy had as Head of the Department of Administration of the MDP no supervisor as usual for such positions. T. Varga, Gy. (2005): 13.

⁴ According to Zoltán Vas, then Chairman of the National Planning Office, Nagy became again the member of the Political Committee with the help of the Soviet ambassador Evgeny Kiselev. Vas, Z. (1990): 133.

⁵ Wettig, G. (2005): 635–650.

⁶ Vas, Z. (1990): 100, 108.

⁷ One of the functionaries of the party's Department of Agriculture and Cooperatives, Rezső Nyers, who became later a central figure of economic reforms, wrote to András Hegedüs a report on the next year's compulsory delivery system (1951/1952). According to Nyers, the quota plans were raised twice, twice and half as much and it caused tight planning which was in his opinion correct measure under the given circumstances. Although, he continued, it could have resulted disruption of production, the liquidation of "kulaks" and unrest among middle peasants and cooperative members. HU-MNL-OL-M-KS 276-93-319. ö. e. Nr. K/8/d//107/1951. Memo to comrade Hegedüs on the draft of the compulsory delivery system for 1951/1952, February 1, 1951, Rezső Nyers.

⁸ Pünkösti, A. (1987): 73.

⁹ Tukacs, B. (2012): 88–89. According to Tukacs, one of the presenters of the plans was Mihály Keresztes, the First Deputy Minister in the Ministry of Agriculture. He became first deputy in 1951 and he adjusted himself to hardliner agricultural politics. The above-mentioned meeting took place probably in 1951.

criticized because of “peasant romantic” ideas and attitude.¹⁰ People who were allegedly responsible for not fulfilling compulsory delivery quotas and agricultural plans were stamped as opportunists.

“At the same time, there are some party and leading state functionaries (in the Ministry of Agriculture and elsewhere) who want to “protect” the village against the working class, who want to ease public burden, which would either result a disproportionate amount of burden of socialist construction falling on the industrial working class and other workers, or – if we let it – the policy of socialist industrialization would have to be slowed down. That is why we have to take action against such opportunists, who undermine socialist industrialization and the worker-peasant alliance merely out of “peasant protection”. ”¹¹

State procurement derived partly from compulsory delivery of crops and agricultural products. The quotas were unfulfillable and because of this reason huge number of peasant households could not keep crop for own consumption and seed for the next sowing. In the autumn of 1952, preparations began to elaborate the next economic year’s delivery plans. The planners faced the main dilemma of the whole planning system: the lack of synchronization of crop production plans and compulsory delivery quota plans.¹² Furthermore, local conditions were not taken into consideration to set quotas for the peasantry. The issue was subject of discussions in the Ministry of State Procurement and for example at the meetings of the College of the Ministry of Agriculture. These two ministries accused each other and the National Planning Office vice versa because of errors of planning methods.¹³ In February 1953, the Chairman of the National Planning Office, Zoltán Vas has been dismissed. In the spring of 1953, a resolution came into effect regarding the operation of the colleges of the ministries, while it was planned to finish the draft on the regulation of operation and structure of the Ministry of Agriculture. It was not clarified completely if the Council of Ministers, its secretaries, its presidium and the deputy chairmen of the Council of Ministers had more authority over other party institutions.¹⁴ In 1952, the Committee of Agricultural and Cooperative Policy, as well as the People’s Economic Council, were abolished. It would also be interesting to analyze the dynamics of relations of the

¹⁰ The meeting of the Central Committee, June 27–28, 1952. Report of Márton Horváth on the Party’s enlightening work among the masses. Here a part of his speak on the worker-peasant alliance is cited.

¹¹ Horváth, M. (1952): 512.

¹² HU-MNL-OL-M-KS 276-93-379. ő. e. Nr. K/8/a/2739. Proposal to the National/State Economic Committee on the plan for 1953/1954 year’s compulsory delivery system, November 19, 1952.

¹³ HU-MNL-OL-XIX-A-2-v 51. ő. e. Secret, Nr. M. 156-1714/1953. Ministry of State Procurement, memo to supplement the report on the shortcomings of the synchronization of production and compulsory delivery plans, June 3, 1953, József Tisza. HU-MNL-OL-XIX-K-1-c 78. ő. e. Ministry of Agriculture, strictly confidential, Nr. 1932/1953. Error list on the Ministry of Agriculture’s approved plan for 1953, to the Department of Agriculture of the National Planning Office, January 14, 1953, Deputy Minister János Hont. On planning for the cooperatives see: HU-MNL-OL-XIX-K-1-c 35. ő. e. Protocol of the meeting of the College of the Ministry of Agriculture on February 13, 1953, and on April 10, 1953, especially on May 22, 1953. HU-MNL-OL-XIX-K-7-a 5. ő. e. Protocol of the meeting of the College of the Ministry of State Procurement on May 16, 1953.

Department of Planning, memo on the evaluation of the results of the individual plan targets and the final compulsory delivery plans. József Tisza was Deputy Head of the party’s Department of Agriculture from 1950 to 1952, then Deputy Head of the National Planning Office from August to November 1952. He became Minister of State Procurement on November 14, 1952, and held this position until July 6, 1954.

¹⁴ The presidium came into existence in November 1952 based on the Soviet pattern.

Council of Ministers and the Political Committee of the MDP related to decision-making processes.¹⁵

Reports were prepared on the synchronization of compulsory delivery plans and agricultural production plans by April and May 1953. At the beginning of June 1953, the Ministry of Agriculture and the Department of Agriculture of the party drafted a report on the work of the ministry for the Political Committee. It was admitted that the plans' targets were in many cases unfulfillable and unsynchronized. On the top of that it was also claimed that crop production plans and animal husbandry plans were mainly not fulfilled for years.¹⁶ These allegations marked a mindset change just before the Hungarian delegation went to Moscow in mid-June to face serious criticism from the Kremlin leadership. In addition, the clash between the Department of Agriculture of the party and the Ministry of Agriculture was probably not forgotten; Ottó Sándi prepared a memo on the planning department of the ministry by January 1953. According to this document, "enemies" were infiltrated the department, partly "kulaks" who sabotaged the socialist construction.¹⁷ Sándi and his colleagues suggested to replace and to check cadres in the planning department. After the announcement of the "new course" in July 1953, Imre Nagy's government started to look into the possibilities to simplify and decentralize agricultural planning.

Institutional Framework, Cadre Policy and Nomenklatura

There were numerous institutional changes, which were related to agricultural administration and control. The heads and staff of different departments and sub-departments were appointed by the nomenklatura.¹⁸ The nomenklatura meant a hierarchy, but it was not entirely the party elite. Both, structural and personnel changes served the main aim, namely the collectivization of agriculture. New ministries and departments were organized, while there was a huge fluctuation of cadres. The agricultural cooperatives, state farms and machine stations needed experts and agronomists, who had to be well educated in party ideology and discipline. It was challenging for the new regime to replace the old bureaucracy. The new apparatus became more bureaucratic. The "bourgeois" officials were also replaced with industrial workers and other blue-collar workers. The process was full of contradictions just like the economic policy of the party state. The main requirement in the party was reliability.¹⁹ Accountability had other dimensions in the Stalinist era, some people were criticized or had to make self-criticism.²⁰

¹⁵ See the Council of Ministers versus Politburo, state versus party power, Reds versus Experts relations as topic in the historiography regarding the Soviet Union.

¹⁶ HU-MNL-OL-XIX-A-2-v 51. ő. e. Report of the Agricultural Department of the Central Committee of the Hungarian Workers' Party and the Ministry of Agriculture on the work of the Ministry of Agriculture, early June, 1953.

¹⁷ HU-MNL-OL-M-KS 276-93-404. ő. e. Nr. K/8/b/994. Report on the review of the Department of Planning in the Ministry of Agriculture, January 20, 1953.

¹⁸ To appoint somebody the approval was needed from the party's Secretariat, Central Committee or the Organization Committee. The hierarchy was built in state organs as well. Huszár, T. (2005): 33, 37–41.

¹⁹ Checking the past of cadres was a serious task of the party. For instance, the Political Committee made a resolution on the check of cadre materials of leading cadres on March 5, 1953. HU-MNL-OL-M-KS 276-54-240. ő. e. Protocol of the Secretariat on April 22, 1953.

²⁰ See the origin and function of criticism and self-criticism under Stalinism: Erren, L. (2008) 93–133.

Some cadres were simply purged, based on “socialist legality”. Show trials were organized to get rid of politicians who were presumably against the general line, or simply rivals of the members of the Stalinist troika, the political top elite of the communist party. However, the subjects of huge show trials were loyally serving the party, just like László Rajk, Ferenc Donáth and János Kádár. Despite the party’s efforts there remained rational thinking people in the scientific institutions, universities, ministries and the party’s educational institutes, where ideological retraining took place.

Factionalism was simply banned in the party.²¹ Those people, who were thinking differently with or without party membership, could meet in ministerial bodies, in the Committee of Agricultural and Cooperative Policy, or in the working group for agricultural-ideological and theoretical questions. Various rumors were spread about alleged splits or conflicts in the party’s top leadership, which consisted of the above-mentioned troika, plus one person: Mátyás Rákosi, the general secretary, Ernő Gerő, responsible for economic policy, Mihály Farkas, quasi leader of the military and József Révai, the czar of cultural matters. Without factions in the leadership, there could be “factionalism” in the form of interest groups/lobbies. Theoretically, the party was led by the principle of “collective leadership”. The history of the Soviet Union shows that factions emerged for example in the 1920s and interest groups existed. These factions and groupings consisted of members of central party organs at the national or regional levels.²² Stalinism meant partly to annihilate the so-called rightist and leftist deviations in the party. Later, right deviation was much more exaggerated because it was linked to “revisionism” and “opportunism”. In the socialist bloc’s countries, Stalinism was the standard as political system from the second half of the 1940s, so the muscovite leadership purged the party to get rid of political rivals who were identified as national communists or moderate communists. Furthermore, not only an anti-Westerner and anti-capitalist, but also an anti-Zionist campaign caused shake-ups among the ranks of the communist parties. The party state’s status was not clarified well enough, because the communist countries in the region defined themselves as “people’s democracies”. It was a form of dictatorship of the proletariat according to party ideologists. Those communists, who were willing to put national interests in the foreground and to extend the transfer period from capitalism to socialism, could doubt the theoretical framework of “socialist construction”. After De-Stalinization started, the hardliner Stalinists were called dogmatist-sectarian deviators (described sometimes as clique or oligarchs in the historiography) from Leninism. Stalinism did not tolerate any real opposition.

The complexity of inner party personnel relationships had a deep impact on cadre politics, “factionalism” and forming of interest groups. The early stages of the process had effects on the post-Stalin succession struggles and power fights in the Kremlin; on which the foreign communist parties’ leadership changes were dependent. National communists who were symbol of rightist deviation in the eyes of Stalinists, represented a real danger to split from Moscow.²³ This was possibly a reason of Western Cold War efforts to explore and to draw attention to

²¹ In Soviet-Russia in 1921.

²² Hahn, W. (1982). Mawdsley, E. – White, S. (2000). Gorlizki, Y – Khlevniuk, O. (2004) 69–74. Harris, J. (2008). Fitzpatrick, Sh. (2015): 197–214. Gill, G. (2018): 55–144. Stotland, D. (2018).

²³ See the Yugoslavian case.

leadership conflicts and ruptures within the inner circles of the communist parties. This research topic makes also the analysis of personal networking relevant.

The functionaries in the Ministry of Agriculture and in other state and party organs responsible for rural affairs were under heavy pressure. Not just those cadres, who were members of the former National Peasant Party or national cooperative institutions, but even those, who were put in positions as party loyalists. The nomenklatura included a specific patron-client relationship between its members. Those people, who were appointed by the members of the troika, for instance Ernő Gerő, could develop opposing views by experiencing the effects of irrational policy. Two prominent agrarian politicians remained in high-politics during the first years of the Stalinist era: Ferenc Erdei, the Minister of Agriculture and Imre Nagy. According to some speculations, Nagy was one of the possible targets of the show trials in 1949. Nonetheless, Imre Nagy was not purged, on the contrary, his position strengthened in the government from the second half of 1952. Especially in agriculture, persecution and repression were necessary to find scapegoats for the failure of collectivization, at the same time, this process reached probably some limits during the deepening economic crisis. The Ministry of Agriculture is a very good example to illustrate this.

The party's central cadre department and its agricultural department had an insight into the ministry's cadre situation. On the other hand, the ministry's own cadre department had certain tasks regarding cadre policy.²⁴ In June 1950, a report on the work of the ministry revealed that there were three main waves of purges since 1948.²⁵ It was also added that the ministry did not become the main link of agricultural affairs and that the tasks were carried out under the party's direct operative control. In October 1950, a guideline for cadre work was circulated, which emphasized the importance of "vigilance" and gave the task to check the past of every cadre in the apparatus.²⁶ Shortly, a proposal has been drafted to improve staff work. In the next year, during the second congress of the Hungarian Workers' Party between February 25 and March 2, the Ministry of Agriculture was criticized among others because of shortcomings in rural party work. It should be borne in mind that the ultimate economic decision-making was in the hands of Ernő Gerő and Mátyás Rákosi.²⁷

Ferenc Erdei, who was the Minister of Agriculture, is considered as a controversial person in the historiography. On the one hand, he was one of the main implementers of the party's hardliner agricultural policy, on the other hand, he could counteract in his position the unrealistic demands. According to József Pál, who was the Head of the Department of Cooperatives in the ministry, Erdei could not be blamed for the pace and methods of

²⁴ On cadre work and policy in other country in the Eastern Bloc, see for example the Czechoslovakian case: Černá, M. (2011). In the party structure the cadre departments were abolished as part of cadre work decentralization in 1952. HU-MNL-OL-M-KS 276-53-95. ő. e. Protocol of the meeting of the Political Committee on March 20, 1952. Resolution of the Political Committee on March 20 on abolishment of cadre departments in the Hungarian Workers' Party and the decentralization of cadre work.

²⁵ HU-MNL-OL-M-KS XIX-K-1-c 25. ő. e. Protocol of the meeting of the College of the Ministry of Agriculture, June 30, 1950.

²⁶ HU-MNL-OL-M-KS XIX-K-1-c 26. ő. e. Protocol of the meeting of the College of the Ministry of Agriculture, October 6, 1950.

²⁷ It is highly hypothetical to assume that there was a latent rivalry between Gerő and Rákosi. See: Vas, Z. (1990): 122.

collectivization.²⁸ Tukacs mentioned in his recollections that Erdei had no intention to reject the increased plan targets probably in 1951. According to Imre Dimény, who worked in the ministry from 1951, Erdei doubted irrational production plans and resisted at the college meetings and confronted Ottó Sándi, the representative of the party's agricultural department.²⁹ A recollection from Vilmos Lázár, who was also a co-worker in the ministry, confirms that Erdei did not support open-heartedly the hardliner Stalinist agricultural policy and condemned anti-Leninist methods and forced collectivization.³⁰ Erdei could witness and experience the contradictions which were created by forced collectivization between 1948 and 1953.³¹

Many members of the so-called agrarian lobby/agrarian reformers of the Kádár-era were active in central state or/and in party organs during the Stalinist years. This group included János Keserű, Gábor Soós, János Hont, Rezső Nyers, József Pál, and other experts in agricultural planning and statistics as well. Many of them were young cadres who experienced the land reform as member of a NÉKOSZ college, the National Peasant Party or SZÖVOSZ. János Keserű mentioned in his memoir that while attending party college in 1950/1951, members of the seminars debated and condemned forced collectivization.³² It also seems important to note that András Hegedüs, who was serving Stalinist policies partly in the party's Department of Agriculture in the early 1950s, reached out to Nagy via numerous protégés and/or cadres.³³

On November 14, Imre Nagy became Deputy Chairman of the Council of Ministers (a Deputy Prime Minister), responsible for agricultural issues. The Presidium of the Council of Ministers was created, while the People's Economic Council, founded in 1949 and led by Gerő, was abolished at the same time.³⁴ Rákosi took over the government in August 1952, but the widening crisis could have an impact on that well, especially because parliamentary election was held in May next year.³⁵

Meanwhile the Stalinist leadership accused the Ministry of Agriculture and the National Planning Office of making economic missteps. A report stated in 1951 that the mistakes were made generally by the Cadre Department of the ministry, which allowed "enemies" to infiltrate the organization.³⁶ Another report claimed in March 1951 that István Hajdu, the Head of the Department of Animal Husbandry, took hostile measures against the "socialist transformation

²⁸ Pál, J. (1985): 83–88.

²⁹ Varga, Zs. (2017): 60–62.

³⁰ Lázár, V. (1976): 194–195.

³¹ Huszár, T. (2012): 332–338.

³² Keserű, J. (2007): 47–54.

³³ Timár, J. (2005): 114. Keserű, J. (2007): 45.

³⁴ According to Zoltán Vas, it was a result of Gerő's power. Vas, Z. (1990): 108. András Hegedüs assumed the contrary: it was the result of the intervention of Moscow to reduce Gerő's power regarding economic issues, furthermore, Imre Nagy has been appointed as a Deputy Chairman of the Council of Ministers with the help of Moscow, maybe to replace later with him Rákosi in the government. Hegedüs, A. (1988): 191. Rákosi was simultaneously general secretary and Prime Minister from August 1952. This Soviet pattern was followed in the countries of the Eastern Bloc. However, it was presumably Stalin's intention after the XIX congress of the communist party in the Soviet Union in October 1952 to separate these two positions. It would support the claim of Hegedüs.

³⁵ On the situation and crisis in 1952/1953 see: Gyarmati, Gy. (2011): 75–116. Gyarmati, Gy. (2020): 132–150. On the party state's perception of the effects of economic policy and reactions see: Baráth, M. (2018): 1–18.

³⁶ HU-MNL-OL-M-KS 276-55-169. ő. e. Protocol of the meeting of the Organization Committee on June 4, 1951.

of agriculture”. According to another report in March 1951, Gábor Soós, Head and later Deputy Head of the Department of Crop Production, allowed “hostile elements” to join the apparatus and did nothing against them. András Hegedüs did not support the proposal to dismiss him, because, in his opinion, Soós was one of the best agronomists.³⁷ Many other people were accused of making mistakes in 1951, for instance István Egri, Lajos Erlich as well as Gábor Magos and János Timár. These persons were just some of the main leading figures of the purges, who were heads or deputies of various departments. Based on a report in March 1952, approximately within one year, 28 functionaries were dismissed from the ministry, while 130 people from other levels of agricultural administration. The resolution of the Organization Committee called for more vigilance and for further removal of “hostile elements”.³⁸ At the end of 1951, 168 persons were listed as leading cadres in the Ministry of Agriculture, their social composition was as follows: 25,5% worker, 31% peasant and agricultural worker, 40,5% intellectual and other, 3% “kulak” and “big capitalist”.³⁹ In January 1952 the social composition of 528 persons in the ministry and other central organs was as follows: 32,3% worker, 14,8% peasant and agricultural worker, 52,6% intellectual and other, 0,4% “kulak”.⁴⁰

The party’s agricultural department stated in November 1952 that the ministry’s work was irresponsible and unplanned, there was no supervision and especially the Department of Cooperatives was uncontrolled. In the second half of 1952, 60 “hostile persons” were removed.⁴¹ According to a report of the ministry in December 1952, in the last months of 1952, 39 people were removed.⁴² In May 1952, five main departments had no chief, in many cases, the deputy head was the acting leader of the department.⁴³

It was partly the aftermath of the Central Committee’s meeting in June 1952 that the persecution continued in the state organs. Gerő spoke about the state of the economy and the next tasks at the meeting of the Central Committee on November 29, 1952. He vividly criticized the Ministry of Agriculture and other central institutions as well. It seems sure that there was already in progress or following his statements an investigation by state security services into the ministry’s dealings. Not so intensively, but the general secretary, Rákosi mentioned the ministry’s alleged errors in his speech in the parliament in December 1952. The next open criticism was expressed by Imre Nagy in February 1953 at a national meeting about the spring agricultural works.

³⁷ Interestingly, Hegedüs was rebuked from the party in May 1951 because he withheld information about his “social origin” (he had allegedly “kulak” family members). HU-MNL-OL-M-KS 276-54-145. ő. e. Protocol of the meeting of the Secretariat on May 23, 1951.

³⁸ HU-MNL-OL-M-KS 276-55-199. ő. e. Protocol of the meeting of the Organization Committee on March 24, 1952. Resolution of the Organization Committee on cadre work of the Ministry of Agriculture, May 16, 1952.

³⁹ HU-MNL-OL-M-KS 276-90-403. ő. e. Ministry of Agriculture, Staff Department, confidential, Nr. K/3/E/1/2/1951. Report on the statistical evaluation of leading cadres of the Ministry of Agriculture and related bodies, December 29, 1951, Péter Halász and Ferenc Erdei.

⁴⁰ HU-MNL-OL-M-KS 276-90-403. ő. e. Statistics on cadres in agriculture, January 1952.

⁴¹ HU-MNL-OL-M-KS 276-93-404. ő. e. Memo of the Department of Agriculture on the experiences in the Ministry of Agriculture, November 28, 1952.

⁴² HU-MNL-OL-M-KS 276-93-404. ő. e. Report of the Department of Agriculture on cadre work of the Ministry of Agriculture since the resolution of the Organization Committee on March 24, 1952. December 24, 1952. The ministry’s apparatus consisted of 833 persons at the end of 1952.

⁴³ HU-MNL-OL-M-KS 276-90-403. ő. e. Memo to comrade Kovács, memo on filled and vacant positions in the Ministry of Agriculture, Ministry of State Farms and Forestry and State Machine Stations, May 6, 1952.

In the autumn of 1952, more cadres were accused of wrongdoings, and for instance the acting Head of the Department of Land Policy, Sándor Podányi was dismissed. The First Deputy Minister, Mihály Keresztes wrote a letter to Mátyás Rákosi in mid-December 1952 about the situation in the ministry. The criticism focused on the minister and particular functionaries of the apparatus. According to Keresztes, the minister expressed self-criticism in the garage of the ministry long after the Central Committee's meeting in June. The first deputy doubted the meaning of college meetings because these were too lengthy and the resolutions were ambiguous. He ordered to have word-to-word college protocols, probably to gather evidence against certain people who opposed some measures during the debates.

Criticism was expressed against the department responsible for supervision and control and also the Secretariat which was led by Mihály Monojlovics. Keresztes criticized basically cadre situation when he stated that there were "lines"/different views in the ministry, which were mainly linked to people who were employed formerly by SZÖVOSZ, or who were members of the National Peasant Party and the Győrffy-College.⁴⁴ He insinuated that the personal circles of these institutions helped each other to get people in the ministry, who were partly peasant friendly or "hostile elements", "kulaks", "Zionists", or former members of the Hungarian fascist arrow party. The allegation could have been further basis of a deeper and more serious investigation. The ministry's party secretary penned a very similar letter in December as Keresztes did. After this intermezzo, Rákosi asked Imre Nagy to take further steps on this issue. Nagy wrote back to Rákosi and he promised measures but drew attention to the fact that the whole agriculture was in a very bad shape and the cadre situation in the party's agricultural department was also a reason for that.⁴⁵

Personal Networks and Developing Factions? Corrections at the Height of the Stalinist Era

It seems certain that there were people from SZÖVOSZ, the former National Peasant Party and Győrffy-college who had experiences and probably personal connections with each other in the Ministry of Agriculture. Some of them certainly doubted radical agricultural policy. Opposing forced collectivization and other measures was dangerous because open criticism could result serious punishments. Despite of this, Imre Nagy as Minister of State Procurement until mid-November 1952, made decisions which were de facto in the interests of the peasantry. The Committee of Agricultural and Cooperative Policy was abolished in January 1952, at the same time, András Hegedüs was appointed as member in the State Economic Committee.

Imre Nagy did not want to increase the number of penalties in the spring of 1952, therefore he prevented to issue such an order which was prepared by the staff of the Ministry of State

⁴⁴ Keresztes named many people, for instance: Mihály Monojlovics, István Somodi, István Kántor, Lajos Várad, József Pál, János Horváth, Béla Fazekas, Lajos Téglási, Gábor Soós, János Keserű, Pál Kristóf, István Bencsik, Gyula Nagy. Furthermore, László Gál, Ferenc Nyers, Sándor Horváth and Béla Tukacs. The party secretary accused for the worsening cadre situation the Head of the Cadre Department, Péter Halász.

⁴⁵ HU-MNL-OL-M-KS 276-65-296. ő. e. Memo of the party secretary on hostile activity in the Ministry of Agriculture, December 11, 1952. Memo of Mihály Keresztes, December 12, 1952. Memo of Mátyás Rákosi to Imre Nagy, December 26, 1952. Imre Nagy's letter to Mátyás Rákosi, December 31, 1952.

Procurement. In the autumn of 1952, just before he became Deputy Chairman of the Council of Ministers, he let the ministry to draft an order to the apparatus to stop violence and aggression against the peasantry.⁴⁶

“In some cases, the workers of the ministry, the representatives of the ministry, the departments responsible for compulsory delivery at the executive committees of the councils and companies behaved improperly in an aggressive way, and misused their office’s power and position. It happened several times that the workers of the apparatus of compulsory delivery obliged such farmers to fulfill deliveries, who already met their obligations, and – unlawfully – they were forced by threats to deliver crops that remained in their free possession. At the same time, it happened that some people were physically abused as well. Such a behavior undermines the authority of the state organs, endangers the peasant policy of our Party and Government and the tasks of compulsory delivery, and it violates the sense of justice among our peasants. All of them, who behave that way, or undertake such rude actions, must be held responsible and must be punished in an exemplary manner. [...] All of those workers must be punished and proceedings must be initiated against them, who either in their office or outside of their office, during their duty time, use rude voice, misuse their position and authority, or threat with the authority of the state and use the tools of intimidation. Disciplinary proceeding must be initiated and criminal charges must be filed against them in relation to the weight of the committed act. Criminal charges must be filed in all cases – besides the disciplinary proceedings – against those workers, who abuse anyone physically or organize physical abuses.”⁴⁷

Nagy delivered numerous speeches from the autumn of 1952:⁴⁸ on November 6 in the Hungarian State Opera in Budapest a commemorative speech on the occasion of the 35th anniversary of the Great October Socialist Revolution, at the meeting of the Central Committee on November 29, 1952, when Stalin died, he gave a speech on his memory in the parliament on March 9, 1953, thereafter an election speech in Kaposvár on May 1, 1953, and as a regular member at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences on May 26, 1953.⁴⁹ In the Office of the Council of Ministers, the coordinator of the Secretariat of the Agricultural Section was Nagy’s friend, György Pogácsás, who led the Agricultural Secretariat of the People’s Economic Council under Gerő until mid-November 1952.⁵⁰ Nagy was confirmed member of the State Economic

⁴⁶ HU-MNL-OL-XIX-K-7-c 1. ő. e. Memo and drafts of the instructions on criminal complaints regarding compulsory delivery, and for those who did not fulfill the plans and therefore their quotas were increased and compensation was imposed for the state, March and April, 1952. HU-MNL-OL-XIX-K-7-a 25. ő. e. The behavior of cadres in the field of compulsory delivery. Imre Nagy’s order on ceasing abuses regarding compulsory delivery, draft, November 10, 1952.

⁴⁷ HU-MNL-OL-XIX-K-7-a 25. ő. e. The behavior of cadres in the field of compulsory delivery. Imre Nagy’s order on ceasing abuses regarding compulsory delivery, draft, November 10, 1952.

⁴⁸ Furthermore, in the parliament on December 4, 1950, furthermore as a corresponding member of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences on December 13, 1950, and at the II congress of the MDP on March 2, 1951.

⁴⁹ As a corresponding member of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Nagy held a speech about the economic foundations of the cooperation between the workers and the peasantry. He planned from 1951 to publish an article related to the worker-peasant alliance, the working title changed more times until mid-1953. The article was probably not finished completely, but Nagy held his speech in May 1953 as a regular member at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences about some of the economic problems of the transition from capitalism to socialism in the people’s democratic countries. He presumably updated his article based on Stalin’s economic thoughts published in the autumn of 1952.

⁵⁰ There are numerous documents written by Pogácsás which are preserved among the files of the Secretariat. Among the protocols of the Council of Ministers a reply to Pogácsás sheds light on his mindset. By March 1953,

Committee in April 1953.⁵¹ It is questionable if there was a latent power struggle in the inner circle/ruling group or “factionalism” did start at some point with or without assistance of the Soviet leadership. Interestingly, Mihály Farkas was not Deputy Chairman of the Council of Ministers from November 1952. He supported Nagy’s idea regarding one issue in May 1953 at a meeting of the Secretariat of the MDP. Later, during the “new course”, Farkas was one of the Stalinists who joined Nagy, but when Stalinist restoration took place, he changed sides again.

The old apparatus could not be shaken up from one day to another when Nagy announced the “new course” as Prime Minister on July 4, 1953. The prelude was the Soviet elite’s harsh criticism when they ordered suddenly a Hungarian party delegation to Moscow in mid-June 1953.⁵² While a huge cadre checking took place, purges were still in progress. In April 1953, the Head of the Secretariat of the Ministry of Agriculture, Mihály Monojlovics was dismissed. According to the archival sources, everyone feared when their “own time” will come. The apparatus of compulsory delivery was also purged. The Deputy Minister of the Ministry of State Procurement, Imre Kovács wrote two memos on the reasons why civil discipline loosened regarding to the fulfillment of obligatory compulsory delivery. According to Kovács on May 30, 1953:

“Open or covert resistance to the enforcement of peasant obligations has a principled basis. This principled basis is the Narodnik attitude, peasant-romanticism, and the incorrect perception of the role and tasks of the producer cooperative that can still be found in certain leaders and staff members of party and state bodies.”⁵³

The party’s Department of Agriculture reported to the Central Committee on June 4, 1953 that József Pál, the Head of the Department of Cooperatives in the Ministry of Agriculture, and Pál Kristóf, the Head of the Department of Horticulture, will be removed by August 1, 1953.⁵⁴ According to an anonym letter, the party organization labelled the cadres with non-worker social background as “enemy” and created in the ministry an atmosphere which was described as terror.

What kind of change did the “new course” cause in agricultural cadre policy? Ferenc Erdei became the Minister of Justice in Nagy’s government, while the Stalinist protégé András Hegedüs, who led previously the Ministry of State Farms and Forests, was from July 4 the First Deputy Chairman of the Council of Ministers and the Minister of Agriculture. Erdei became

Pogácsás and others in the apparatus were criticizing state procurement methods, especially contractual production. HU-MNL-OL-XIX-A-83-a. Protocol Nr. 490. Page Nr. 325–326. Memo to György Pogácsás on the proposal to develop the activity of SZÖVOSZ regarding free acquisition of goods, March 31, 1953, Ágoston Bércecs.

⁵¹ HU-MNL-OL-M-KS 276-54-238. ő. e. Protocol of the meeting of the Secretariat on April 8, 1953. According to the economist István Friss, the State Economic Committee had to be abolished within a half or one year. Zoltán Vas claimed in his memoir that a Soviet delegation came to Hungary in the spring of 1953 to analyze the economic situation. Vas, Z. (1990): 114. In April an article was published by László Házy, which is considered as the first public sign of a shift to a political change. Házy, L. (1953)

⁵² Rákosi thought Nagy knew about the reason of the Kremlin invitation. Rákosi, M. (1997): 912–913.

⁵³ HU-MNL-OL-XIX-K-7-a 14. ő. e. Secret memo to comrade minister József Tisza on the reasons of loosened civil discipline, Deputy Minister Imre Kovács, May 30, 1953.

⁵⁴ HU-MNL-OL-M-KS 276-93-443. ő. e. Nr. K/8/b/254/1953. Report to the Central Committee, June 4, 1953, János Matolcsi.

again the Minister of Agriculture in the autumn of 1954, just before the Stalinist restoration was set in motion. If Erdei represented a softer approach in agricultural policy, then why did he not remain the Minister of Agriculture after July 4, 1953? Was it Nagy's choice, or was there behind this decision a compromise with the Stalinists? This is an important question, because many corrections and changes were initiated, which were dependent on the implementation in the long term.

József Pál was the Head of the Department of Cooperatives in the ministry at least until July 1953. In the end of the same year, the head was Antal Márczis, therefore Pál was removed probably in the second half of the 1953.⁵⁵ Márczis was previously one of the deputy ministers of agriculture. He was member of the so-called dogmatist group. Márczis remained the Head of the Department of Cooperatives until 1958, in the following two years he was deputy head of the same department. After the defeat of the hardliners in the ministry, Márczis went to the Agricultural University to study. After finishing it in 1964, he became president of a cooperative (Sári Fehér Akác). János Hont was Deputy Minister, then he became the Head of the Planning Department of the Ministry of Agriculture from August 15, 1953. János Keserű was the Head of the Professional Training Department. He became the director of the Mezőhegyes state farm in 1954. Mihály Keresztes was appointed as the Head of the Executive Committee of the Council in Pest County in August 1953. Ottó Sándi became the Deputy Head of the party's Department of Agriculture in 1954.

The agricultural administration started to look for solutions to the deepening economic problems and crisis from the second half of 1952. In this relation, a delegation was sent to Bulgaria to gather more experience of different methods on compulsory delivery. In Bulgaria already a new system was introduced which determined the compulsory delivery quotas for more years. Agricultural planning, taxation, investment and finances were in focus to change and to stabilize the situation.⁵⁶ Those, who would have taken a softer approach, could refer to Lenin's New Economic Policy (NEP) in Soviet Russia in the 1920s. The transition from capitalism to socialism posed a serious ideological and theoretical question in the people's democracies.⁵⁷

When the situation in agriculture deteriorated, the leadership had to ease policy and to make corrections. There were people in the administration who facilitated more "Leninist" approach and criticized certain methods, including "kulak" liquidations. Nagy even got a position to influence agricultural policy-making and to steer it in another way. Erdei was in a more vulnerable position as many others. Nagy enjoyed maybe Soviet support in the background. The administration's dogmatist "wing" was more organized, the later reformist "wing", or liberal communists were not in the same positions in the agricultural administration. There was no takeover in the Ministry of Agriculture or in the party's Department of Agriculture during the "new course". Moreover, Nagy could not simply purge opponents as the Stalinist did almost without hesitation when they could.⁵⁸ However, it should be noted that the Stalinists could not

⁵⁵ It is not certain that Pál Kristóf was removed from his position by August 1953 or later that year.

⁵⁶ Luka, D. (2021a): 61–74.

⁵⁷ On the NEP in Hungary see: Luka, D. (2021b): 528–539.

⁵⁸ The "new course" was ambiguous regarding De-Stalinization and "socialist legality": amnesty was provided but the perpetrators were not fully punished.

purge entirely the agricultural branch from one day to another between 1948 and 1953. On the other hand, it seems that it was not Nagy's intention to create deliberately a "faction" or an inner-party group. Indeed, those who sympathized with him and his government were not well connected during the "new course".

The Nagy government took a series of measures and released decrees to stimulate agricultural production in the first months of the "new course". Many corrections and changes were completed by his actions: introducing a three-year compulsory delivery system, reducing agricultural taxes and burdens, releasing arrears etc. Nagy was pragmatic and not pure political when he assembled agricultural experts and theorists in the autumn of 1953 to work out a development program and to clarify agricultural-ideological questions.⁵⁹ Then came more openly conflicting views and disagreements between the pro-Stalinists and supporters of the "new course" to the surface.⁶⁰ The State Economic Committee was abolished at the beginning of the "new course". The Presidium of the Council of Ministers had one meeting on June 30, 1953, but no more meeting took place until May 21, 1954. There was one proposal to create a coordinating inter party and governmental committee on economic issues, which would have been led by Ernő Gerő.⁶¹ The struggle to control economic policy had personal consequences in the long term. Later on, the reform ideas were formulated and went further than the NEP context or the "new course" itself. The "peasant friendly" approach turned into agrarian reformist policy.

Results and Conclusions

After the abolition of large agricultural estates and redistribution of land, there was a shift in communist economic policy at the beginning of the Cold War. Especially in agriculture, the contrast between ideology and implementation of theoretically moderate policy created serious contradictions. The laws and measures turned into radical acts in the countryside. This phenomenon was among others the result of accelerated industrialization and armament. Although forced collectivization had been temporarily paused, slowed down or abandoned in countries in the region: in Yugoslavia, in Romania and in Bulgaria as well. The main decision-makers did not take ultimate responsibility for their actions. In their cases, self-criticism was generally avoided with harsh rhetoric against others. They pointed at "inner enemies", "saboteurs", "opportunists", "rightist deviators", "kulaks", "fascists", "imperialists", "capitalist-bourgeois" elements or "Zionists". The agricultural-ideological pillars were not

⁵⁹ Members of the party's working group on agricultural-ideological question were also involved (for instance Pál Lőcsei, Tibor Simó, Imre Dégen, József Szabó, Lajos Fehér). HU-MNL-OL-M-KS 276-93-637. ő. e. Department of Agitation and Propaganda, proposal for the personnel composition of the working group on the questions of the worker-peasant alliance and the socialist transformation of agriculture, October 23, 1953. HU-MNL-OL-M-KS 276-55-216. ő. e. Protocol of the meeting of the Organization Committee on October 13, 1952. Personnel composition of the theoretical working groups.

⁶⁰ Romány, P. (2006): 99–108. Varga, Zs. (2014): 117–132. Varga, Zs. (2020): 160–178. Luka, D. (2023): 131–174.

⁶¹ HU-MNL-OL-XIX-A-2-ii 15. ő. e. Office of the Council of Ministers, Gerő's Secretariat, strictly confidential, Nr. g/3708/1953. Proposal to form a people's economic /party and governmental/ committee to coordinate economic questions, July 30, 1953, Prime Minister Imre Nagy.

clarified for the transition in the people's democracy. It could be the reason why it remained an important issue for Imre Nagy and others in rural journalism, education, policy and administration.

The communist party had main figures like Ferenc Erdei and Imre Nagy who were considered as agrarian politicians. The party put younger generations in party organs and governmental bodies to implement central decisions without delay and questions. The apparatus of the Ministry of Agriculture had experts and professional cadres, who had to follow the general line, but there was dissent regarding irrational plans and demands. Even if the party's Department of Agriculture and the Ministry of Agriculture did not oppose each other, there were serious disagreements and even debates between them. The "peasant friendly" approach could have led to harder response from the party. Those, who criticized agricultural policy, could be easily targeted, while there was a continuous purge. According to more analyses, the real hard Stalinist period of the era began in Hungary in 1951 and lasted until mid-1953. Numerous positions of various departments in the Ministry of Agriculture were vacant. While there were cadres who were not comfortable with the extreme effects of the measures taken by the administration, no real agricultural "faction"/group could be formed within the party between 1948 and 1953. The lack of personal connections and the regular internal conflicts caused uncertainty. Despite these conclusions the roots of agrarianism in the communist party can be traced back to the period of 1945 and 1953.

Central communist party members like Imre Nagy and the Soviets could play an important role during the deepening crisis. The ruling elite could fear an organized opposition, while they needed crisis managers at the same time. The softer agricultural policy meant a more gradual and voluntary transformation, which was supported by many functionaries. The party leadership criticized the work of the Ministry of Agriculture and the cadre situation more times. However, the contradiction was created by themselves. The decision to allow free market and trade of grain after the fulfillment of obligatory delivery quotas on December 1, 1951, was described officially as a NEP measure, and it was facilitated by Imre Nagy and Zoltán Vas as well. The quotas and taxes were raised, thus the process of forced collectivization continued. The conflicting points inside the apparatus consisted of "kulak" liquidation, state procurement methods (compulsory delivery, free acquisition of goods, contractual production), operation of the cooperatives, middle peasant policy, investment policy, agricultural planning and land consolidation methods.

More hundreds of people were purged in the agricultural administration between 1948 and 1953. The Stalinist cadre policy had long lasting effects, for instance loyal cadres were installed in many places who followed the Soviet dogmas after 1954 and even after 1956. Some documents do indicate that not only at the meetings of the colleges of various ministries, but also at the meetings of the Council of Ministers were disagreements between the members of state and party organs. The archival sources do prove that people disagreed on radicalism and it makes relevant to revisit the history of agricultural policy of the analyzed period in more details.

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