

A Brief History of the Evolution of the Hungarian Police Anti-Terror Units (1987–2010)

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This paper will attempt to cover the history and evolution of the Hungarian anti-terror capability and the evolution of the dedicated Hungarian police anti-terror units from 1987 up to 2010 from a historical perspective. By using interviews and memoirs of former unit members, contemporary manuals and media sources, and presenting the legal background, this paper will attempt to highlight the historical significance, the cultural heritage, and the tactical methodology behind the evolution of the Hungarian stance on terrorism and anti-terrorism from its most acute aspect, the boots on the ground and the operators behind the orders. This paper also includes a brief history and description on the different uniforms, equipment and weapon systems, highlighting the changes in tactical approaches, and varying opportunities in obtaining or developing more modern and advanced technology.

Keywords: *Komondor, history of terrorism, special police units, criminal activity, counterterrorism*

Terminology

Counterterrorism in general includes the whole spectrum of national and international measures against domestic and/or international terrorism, thus it is important to define terrorism itself, and search into its history.

Terrorism itself is difficult to define, as its different aspects could be highlighted by a plethora of organisations, departments, researchers and political actors, by their individual tasks, goals, methods, and other factors, in various different approaches. The other problem lies in the vastly diverse nature of the groups and individuals, categorised as terrorist organisations or terrorists. This problem could be easily explained by comparing the goals, methods and members of the radical Islamist Islamic State (ISIS), and the radical environmentalist movement Earth Liberation Front (ELF), and the nationalistic-Islamist Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), with the former Red Army Faction (RAF). This short list contains both nationalist,

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internationalist, religious and atheist individuals, fighting for, or against political forces, or even each other.

The visible confusion around the task of establishing a clear and universal terrorism concept could be traced in its professional literature too. A 2013 edition of the *Encyclopedia of Terrorism* edited by Peter Chalk, states:

“First, terrorism is a political activity. Whatever group we are talking about, the presence of underlying political objectives is a common characteristic.”²

On the contrary, Marie Helen-Maras in her book entitled *Theory and Practice of Terrorism* states:

“Terrorism is not political activism, and is not a freedom fight.”³

In addition to these two conflicting definitions there are more than 200 officially established definitions on the topic of what we are calling terrorism.⁴ This sheer number clearly demonstrates how difficult it is to reach a common stance on the topic itself. Thus, for the sake of the coherency of this paper, we must introduce a new, temporary definition, using the main common points found in the professional literature of the topic.

By this need we will address terrorism, as a political-social phenomenon, which is generated by individuals, or a group of individuals, who see violence as the most effective way of enforcing their will. This violence targets those non-combatants, and/or symbolic objects, or institutions, which, when under attack, could generate distress, panic and widespread outcry, thus inflicting pressure on those, who are opposing the ideologies of the terrorists. By this means the terrorists could achieve that their opposition would not do, or tolerate something which would be normally against their views.

It is important to clarify the meaning behind the title, and highlight some differences between police and military special forces, and their role in counterterrorism. First of all, military counterterrorism is, at least on a strategic level, an offensive capability. While soldiers of these special units could be used as a deterrent, and part of a defence system, their skills are best used offensively, behind enemy lines, inflicting proportionally larger damage and casualties amongst the enemy forces, than the size of the unit involved in the actions.

On the other hand, police special units are strategically defensive forces, capable of high-intensity raids for a limited period of time, on domestic soil, always responding to a threat or concluding an investigation by the use of special means. The main goal of a special police unit is to prevent, or de-escalate a potentially dangerous or unlawful situation, while upholding the law and order of a peacetime society.⁵

In this context, the largest difference is that a member of a police special unit always has to avoid the excessive use of force, especially the use of lethal force, while

² CHALK 2013: 10.

³ MARAS 2016: 31.

⁴ SERBAKOV 2019: 87.

⁵ PAP 2007: 87–88.

a soldier in the special forces, in wartime, is obliged to kill an enemy combatant. As the July 10th issue of the Hungarian newspaper called *Heves Megyei Hírlap* from 1995 words it:

“Domestic police commandos say that they are law enforcement officers and they are proud of it. Their reasoning is that a classic commando unit first and foremost undertakes military operations abroad, and their methods are lacking the protection of life. If a commando enters a building, they first throw in a hand grenade, and rush across the ruins. Officers of the police special forces are first calling in about their presence. Then they do everything in their power to subdue a criminal without causing serious injuries.”⁶

Short history of terrorism

History of terror attacks is a long and bloody tale. Generally it is a tool used by the weaker side of a conflict to reach political goals by violent means. One of the first sources mentioning this behaviour, and giving a vague picture of a terrorist organisation is from the ancient Roman historian, Josephus Flavius. His work entitled *The Jewish War* (De Bellum Iudaico) includes his first-hand account of the anti-Roman uprising between 67–70 BC in and around Jerusalem. In his work Flavius, a former Jewish rebel leader himself, introduces the reader to the zealots, a radical Jewish movement, waging a guerrilla war against the Romans.⁷

One of their highly dangerous, and secretive operatives were the sicarios (sicarii), whose Greek-influenced name simply translates as “men with knives”, or “assassins”. Flavius recalls their tactics as follows:

“In Jerusalem there emerged other types of evildoers, calling themselves the sicarios. They have carried out their murderous trade in broad daylight, in the middle of the city, especially using festivities, to blend in with the crowd, using hidden, small daggers, concealed in their garments, to stab their enemies. As their prey have fallen to the ground, these murderers would cry out for justice the loudest of all, using this deception, to avoid being caught. [...] day by day came murder after murder, making the fear higher, than the damage these deeds caused.”⁸

In the end, the last of the sicarii have been cornered by the Roman army at the fort of Massada, resulting in the mass suicide of these controversial fighters.⁹ Their method of knife attacks would survive the ancient times, as Empress Elisabeth, wife of Emperor Frantz Joseph, ruler of the Austro–Hungarian Empire, has been murdered by an Italian anarchist, Luigi Lucheni on the 10th of September 1898.¹⁰

⁶ Heves Megyei Hírlap 1995: 4.

⁷ FLAVIUS 1948: 495.

⁸ FLAVIUS 1948: 50.

⁹ FLAVIUS 1948: 429–430.

¹⁰ SCHRECK 2003: 2.

By the spread of anarchist and revolutionary movements, and by witnessing the more and more cruel ways of organised crime gangs, at end of the 19th century, slowly, new police forces have been established, aiming to counter these new types of crime by force if necessary.

The first model of these police special units would be the Reserve and Sharpshooter Unit of the Shanghai Municipal Police (RSU-SMP) established in 1925. Both capabilities would be used in the ethnically diverse and crowded city, ruled by different criminal gangs, and agitated by often-violent demonstrations, strikes and clashes. Thus, the unit had to deal with crowd and riot control and close-quarters-combat situations alike.

Special tactical situations require special tactical training, allowing the RSU-SMP members, to train in unarmed fight, martial arts, using and countering knife attacks, and developing a unique training method for small arms and pistol drills, practiced in a specially built and highly modular tactical building called the “Castle of Wonders”. This special training, incorporating the real life experiences acquired on the streets, gave the unit a city-wide fame and helped to develop future military and police forces around the world.¹¹

5th of September 1972. A new chapter in the history of terrorism. Armed Palestinian men broke into the Olympic Village in Munich, West Germany to capture and kill Israeli sportsmen in front of the eyes of the international media. Their mission has been a success, as the ill-equipped and ill-prepared local police forces were unable to de-escalate the situation. This tragic event bolstered the international efforts amidst the Cold War, by both sides, to establish specially trained military, or police units capable of dealing with the ever-growing threat of various terrorist groups. These special units have called themselves “anti-terror” or “counterterrorism” forces.¹²

Historical precursors – Special police units in Hungary after 1945

The lawless conditions after the end of the Second World War brought up the need for a specialised police unit in Hungary, as Budapest, the war-torn and ruined capital has become a growing and vibrant nest for lone bandits and armed groups of criminals. These criminals, some of them are former soldiers, with combat experience, had easy access to military grade weapons and explosives lying on the streets, and obtainable from the black market.

A prevalent criminal activity, shedding light on the financial state of the period, had been the so called “stripping”, when the victims were forced by pistols, rifles and submachine guns to undress on the streets, and let go only bare naked. Their clothes

¹¹ MACKAY 2007: 33–34.

¹² MARAS 2016: 42.

and personal belongings found their way into the ever-growing black market, as base of exchange for food, weapons and ammunition.

To stop these street bandits, in January 1946 the Budapest Police Department established the so-called “R-Group” or Raiding Group. The police force called them their own “fire brigade”,¹³ while the criminal underworld simply referred to them as “monsters of the night”.¹⁴

As police Colonel Andor Fóti remembered, their training came from the lessons learned on the streets, and from the urban combat experiences of the Soviet soldiers, reinforcing the “R-Group”.¹⁵ The contemporary media has covered the evolution of the “R-Group” as follows:

“The new R-Group would be the pride of any larger cities in the world. The group consists of the bravest, most dedicated, and most experienced detectives. Those, who have not been part of the Group yet, receive special training. The R-Group utilizes eight motorized vehicles, equipped with automatic weapons, radios, and bright searchlights. Every vehicle has ten policemen on board, and five motorbike police escort per trucks. These R-Groups are patrolling the city streets day and night, and in constant radio contact with the dispatch centre of the police department.”¹⁶

The unit mainly consisted of detectives, thus during daytime they have investigated the cases, leading to spectacular actions by night. This unique police unit, protecting the nights of Budapest has been the precursor to the modern special police units in Hungary.

Fight against domestic and international terrorism – Hungarian anti-terror units during the Cold War

In addition to the attack in Munich in 1972, a hostage situation in Balassagyarmat, Hungary has also helped to open the eyes of the Hungarian authorities to the urgent need of a special police anti-terror unit.¹⁷ The hostage situation started on the 7th of January 1973, when two sons of a border guard officer stole the service weapons of their father and occupied a high school dormitory, taking 20 students as hostages. The girls had to endure five days of psychological abuse, before the Hungarian state authorities could resolve the situation by the use of police marksmen, who shot and killed the older brother on site.¹⁸

In response to the events in Balassagyarmat, the Hungarian police leadership has decided about the establishment of the so-called action platoons, on the model of the Rapid Reaction Police Regiment, (from 1981: Revolutionary Rapid Reaction

¹³ FÓTI 1968: 16.

¹⁴ Magyar Rádió 1947: 8–9.

¹⁵ FÓTI 1968: 22.

¹⁶ Huszadik Század 1946.

¹⁷ SZÓRÁDI–FARAGÓ 2002: 178.

¹⁸ FINTA 2007.

Police Regiment) an elite police force, designed for riot control, disaster recovery, close protection and guard duties of high-value targets.¹⁹ These platoons, consisting of the best, hand-picked volunteer police officers of each battalion of the regiment, in a total number of 60–65 men, had access to the earliest form of special police training. They have served in this function in addition to the core mission of the unit, acting as a special police force if necessary, used by local police commanders demanding the services of the platoons.²⁰

As, in this time, there were no existing anti-terrorist training manuals in Hungary, the members of these action platoons had to use military-style training, and their own imagination and experiences, to accumulate some kind of a special police training system. This system heavily used the military long range recon training, unsuitable for police work, emphasising physical endurance and military discipline.²¹ As one of them underlined the outlines of the “action platoons”:

“The first platoons – which had been the best of the company – one could only enter with prior sport experiences after special evaluation. [...] We had close order drills, climbed rocks, had live firing exercises, and most importantly beat up each other frequently during training.”²²

The problem of this system lies in the interruption of special training by patrol and guard duties, which made the five week long anti-terrorist training period, interrupted by ten weeks of everyday police duties, unsuccessful. Members of the action platoons viewed this as a contra productive and dangerous practice, as they needed to switch between “normal” service and “special” service mind-sets, while losing the anti-terror capabilities obtained by hard work, and re-train themselves after each shift on the streets as a patrolman.²³

Action platoons were equipped with special camo coveralls in “oak leaf” camo pattern, obtained from the border guard, wearing Soviet and Hungarian-made helmets, and utilising Soviet ballistic vests, in limited quantities.²⁴ Some members of the unit tried to obtain pieces of equipment from hunters, and even Soviet soldiers, with various outcome.²⁵ Weapons of the unit consisted of Czechoslovakian Vz. 61 “Scorpion” machine pistols in 9 × 19 mm Parabellum, Hungarian Pa-63 pistols in 9 × 18 mm Makarov, AMD-65 assault rifles in 7.62 × 39 mm and Soviet Dragunov scoped rifles in 7.62 × 54R calibre.²⁶ These weapons and equipment has been designed for military use, with a limited to no use for police capabilities and in peacetime circumstances.

¹⁹ Ministry of the Interior 1972: 4.

²⁰ SZÓRÁDI-FARAGÓ 2002: 178–179.

²¹ Interview with László Kiss (22nd of November 2013).

²² SZÓRÁDI-FARAGÓ 2002: 190.

²³ Interview with László Kiss (22nd of November 2013); AMBRUS 2008: 160.

²⁴ Interview with László Kiss (22nd of November 2013).

²⁵ Interview with László Kiss (22nd of November 2013).

²⁶ SZÓRÁDI-FARAGÓ 2002: 191; Interview with László Kiss (22nd of November 2013).

Interesting, and worthy of the big screen is the tale how the Hungarian anti-terror units obtained a more suitable weapon for their tasks. Reconstructed by memoirs of former unit members, as early as 1986, the Hungarian anti-terror unit has received some Italian-made Beretta M12 submachine guns in 9 × 19 Parabellum. These weapons had their serial numbers grinded down. The weapons, according to the memoirs, came straight from the cache of Carlos “The Jackal”, an international terrorist, secured by the Hungarian secret services. As one of the officers remembered:

“[...] back in the day Carlos and his crew rested here after some of their attacks. [...] Surely, they needed weapons, which came into Hungary via airplanes. The big cache waited for weeks, at the Ferihegy airport, and in the meantime the secret services found a way to get rid of the group, then seized the weapons too. After that they have destroyed the serial numbers, and gave us the weapons for testing. We have shot some of those until they have fallen apart. It was in 1986, so the action platoons have signed for the pieces, and put those in the inventory too. Mine was number 012. It fired 9 mm ammo, found it to be powerful, and simple to use.”²⁷

Vehicles of the action platoons consisted of RAF-2203 “Latvija”²⁸ vans, IFA²⁹ trucks³⁰ and from 1974 a platoon of FUG D44³¹ amphibious reconnaissance vehicles, which has been upgraded to D-944 PSZH³² armoured personnel carriers in 1977.³³ These military-grade, amphibious vehicles were suitable for the protection of the officers, against small arms fire, while providing acceptable means of transportation for rapid deployment. Air capabilities consisted of Mil-Mi-2³⁴ helicopters of the police force, used for rappelling exercises.³⁵ In 1979, for the better co-ordination of the action platoons, an anti-terror subdivision had been established in the Revolutionary Rapid Reaction Police Regiment.³⁶

Up to 1987, this structure remained intact, with minor changes. The action platoons have conducted direct actions against armed and dangerous individuals and groups. One of these actions occurred on the 26th of July 1985, in Csordástanya, near Lake Balaton. In this situation a mentally unstable corrections officer barricaded himself with his service weapons, and 100 pieces of ammunitions. He established a firing position in a house, and fired precise shots towards the police patrol officers. The anti-terror unit, in co-operation with the Hungarian People’s Army, closed in on the building around 16:30, and in the constant gunfire of the perpetrator, jumped

²⁷ Interview with István Szórádi (18th of May 2021).

²⁸ Made in the Latvian Bus Factory (Rigas Autobusu Fabrika – RAF) and capable of transporting 12 people.

²⁹ Made in East Germany by the Industrieverband Fahrzeugbau – IFA.

³⁰ Interview with István Szórádi (28th of May 2021).

³¹ Felderítő Úszó Gépkocsi [Amphibian Reconnaissance Vehicle] Hungarian-made lightweight, armed and lightly armoured personnel carrier capable of carrying up to 7 soldiers.

³² Páncélozott Szállító Harcjármű [Armoured Transportation Combat Vehicle] Hungarian-made armed and armoured personnel carrier, able to transport up to 9 soldiers.

³³ FORRÓ 2011: 44.

³⁴ The Mil-Mi-2 helicopters (NATO code: Hoplite) are Polish-made light transport helicopters, capable of transporting up to 8 passengers.

³⁵ HEGEDŰS 2010: 54.

³⁶ AMBRUS 2008: 160.

out of their PSZH. The police officers used tear gas grenades before entering the house, where they found their target dead. The former corrections officer committed suicide.³⁷

The attempt of an unsuccessful assassination of the Ambassador of the Republic of Columbia, Enrique Parejo Gonzales on the 13rd of January 1987 in Budapest once more made it clear that international terrorism could and would target Hungary, too.³⁸ Thus, on the 1st of October 1987, a new unit was established, called the “Komondor” Anti-Terror Service. The name came from a Hungarian breed of dogs, known for its loyalty, endurance and bravery.³⁹ One of the founders of the unit recalled this event as follows:

“The Komondor Anti-Terror Service was established in October 1987 with a hundred specially trained policemen. I was one of them! Our mission was to liquidate domestic terrorist attacks, and apprehend violent perpetrators. On top of it, our unit was capable of providing other special capabilities too.”⁴⁰

Its first commander was Police Lieutenant Colonel Imre Gundinger, nicknamed by his men “Gundi”. An old-school police officer, starting his police career in 1952.⁴¹ One of his subordinates remembered him like this:

“I did not know him well, but he was the hardened soldier type, who rooted out any opposing views by start. Someone who made you stand at attention from a mile.”⁴²

Tasks of the “Komondor” Anti-Terror Service was:

- forced interruption of terrorist acts
- protection of national festivities and VIPs
- securing the deportation of foreign nationals
- escorting confiscated drugs
- special police assistance in criminal cases

The unit, consisting of 100–120 men, was divided into six Tactical Operational Units (TOU), with TOU I–V being combat ready, while TOU VI being the training element of the unit. Every TOU got an assault element, a sniper team and a K9/technical element.⁴³ The Bomb Squad of the Revolutionary Rapid Reaction Police Regiment was also incorporated into the unit.⁴⁴

The training of the unit has still been dominated by lack of information, replaced by improvisation. As one of them remembered:

³⁷ TÓTH 1995: 41.

³⁸ Kelet-Magyarország 1987: 4.

³⁹ SZÓRÁDI–FARAGÓ 2002: 211.

⁴⁰ SZÓRÁDI–FARAGÓ 2002: 213.

⁴¹ Interview with László Kiss (22nd of November 2013).

⁴² Interview with László Kiss (22nd of November 2013).

⁴³ SZÓRÁDI–FARAGÓ 2002: 216.

⁴⁴ HEGEDŰS 2010: 54.

“Training started with something bad happening in the world. Then we tried to replicate it, as if it would be in Hungary.”⁴⁵

These news came from the highly censored media, while there has been no appropriate manuals for a complex anti-terror training on the tactical level. Thus, it would not be rare to use contemporary magazine articles and action movies as inspiration. One of the officers remembers like this:

“The craft has been really embryonic. We have modelled tactical situations on a hand-drawn layout by using coins [...] pushed those around as if we were moving on a corridor. Not much like a 3D animation. Then we have picked ideas from movies [...] and tried them out. Many times we have held hands with danger. Sometimes for fun.”⁴⁶

The first widely publicised action of the “Komondor” Anti-Terror Service occurred in 1987, in Pestlőrinc, Hungary, where an armed gang of criminals had to be detained, as they were wanted for violent criminal activities, ranging from robbery to murder. One of the former members of the unit recalls the action as follows:

[...] the scene had been surrounded, the perpetrators [...] were called out to surrender. They refused to co-operate. Thus, it became necessary to enter by force, we smashed the door and the windows, and for the first time in Hungary, we deployed teargas and pyrotechnic devices. [...] These measures could not bring the targets to move out, they applied different protective devices, like wet rags and stockings. We had to go in, and without any use of lethal force, we were able to apprehend them.”⁴⁷

Another memorable action occurred on the 28th of November 1990 in Pusztaszabolcs, Hungary. There, an ex-convict had to be detained, after he armed himself and shot a cab driver with a hunting rifle. The target was hiding in the house of his father.⁴⁸

Members of TOU III arriving on scene, after brief reconnaissance, were ordered to intervene immediately, as it was possible that the perpetrator would take a hostage, or start a fire. During the raid two of the anti-terror officers were shot. As one of them recalls:

“It was not our decision, we had to go in [...] I was Number Two in the line. At the house, we broke in the lower part of a glass door, and swiftly slipped in. On the ground floor there was a kitchen, where an older man opened the door. The father of our target. [...] When I secured him on the floor, came in our Number Three, who started to guard him, and I proceeded inside, after our Number One. At this moment we were shot at.”⁴⁹

Another participant of the action remembers like this:

⁴⁵ Interview with László Kiss (22nd of November 2013).

⁴⁶ KISS s. a.

⁴⁷ AMBRUS 2008: 160.

⁴⁸ TÓTH 1995: 60.

⁴⁹ AMBRUS 2008: 104.

“The operation in Pusztaszabolcs was a mistake made by the observers and recon element, not our fault, yet we were sent in by chance. We were given the wrong layout plans. In reality there was a door instead of a wall, and instead of the door on the plans, there was nothing but walls. The perpetrator fired twice through a closed door, one hit in the hip, the other in the shoulder, where the bulletproof vest protects nothing.”⁵⁰

Though the armed gunman wounded their colleagues, the special police unit worked to apprehend the violent criminal unharmed. He was prepared for the arrival of the anti-terror unit, sleeping in daylight and being awake at night, all the time next to his loaded weapon. He fortified the house, making it harder for the police to storm it.⁵¹ After the incident, and their hospitalisation, both of the police officers continued their service in the unit.

The secretive special unit could not stay in the shadows for long. They became frequent front-page stories in magazines, appeared in the news, and even in some movies and film series, as extras. The media started to use exaggerated nicknames for the unit, like “super cops”, “elite commandos”, “Hungarian A team”, and the like. As one of them remembers:

“At this time we were pouring from even the taps. Television, radio, newspapers all trumpeting how cool guys we are. Finally, our little country has got an outstanding team. It meant a lot to be recognised.”⁵²

This media highlight called for a solution, thus a new, unofficial team was established for representations. They were simply called the “rep team”, tasked with directing and choreographing spectacular demonstrations for high-level leaders and civilians. A former officer of the unit recalls one of the most memorable demonstrations:

“Another demo that I am really fond of has been a very special event. It was organised for children [...] kids with disabilities. When the news came down about it, everyone wanted to be part of the team. [...] We did a gig, like never before. Gave it our best for these kids. Then we went over to them. I put my helmet on the head of one of them, someone gave his vest to another kid, then we put them in our cars, and cruised around and around. We have never been in the presence of such a happy and grateful audience. After an hour we were still playing hide and seek with them.”⁵³

In August 1990, a brutal crime shocked and divided the public opinion staining the positive picture of the “Komondor” Anti-Terror Service. Two members of the unit were charged with murder for profit, and found guilty. They were hired by a local businessman, to “persuade” his partner about signing a contract. The unfolding

⁵⁰ Interview with László Kiss (22nd of November 2013).

⁵¹ AMBRUS 2008: 103–104.

⁵² SZÓRÁDI–FARAGÓ 2002: 220.

⁵³ KISS s. a.

events ended in the death of the victim, whose body the two policemen tried to burn to cover up the evidences.⁵⁴

The two former officers were promptly apprehended, one of them sentenced to death, his life was saved by the abolition of death penalty. He said, his motivations came from his financial situation.⁵⁵

News of the murder shocked other members of the unit. The deeds of their former colleagues hurt their self-esteem as a professional law enforcement unit.⁵⁶ The scandal cost a lot both in professional circles, and in the eyes of the public. As one of the members of the unit stated:

“[...] from that moment on, we became filthy murderers, assassins, and criminals [...]”⁵⁷

The botched action in Pusztaszabolcs and the assassination scandal did enough damage to the reputation of the “Komondor” Anti-Terror Service to make the decision-makers uncomfortable about it. Fortunately their skills had been deemed useful, and after a strict transformation, in the first half of 1991⁵⁸ a new unit was established by the amalgamation of several counterterrorism experts under the name of Police Special Force (PSF).⁵⁹ As an official pamphlet stated:

“The reason of establishing the Force was the change of the situation regarding the degree of terrorism in Hungary. Hungary’s new political system brought about new viewpoint and juridical means in the fight against terrorism.”⁶⁰

New system, new crime – The Police Special Force

The new unit continues its mission, with a selected staff and re-evaluated personnel. The first and most important novelty is independence, and nationwide authority in cases of terrorism, and other special police capacities. The new commander of the unit is a former member of the Hungarian National Handball Team, the then 48 years old Police Colonel Ferenc Berkesi,⁶¹ known by his nickname only as “Papa” by his subordinates. His second-in-commands were the law graduate, former officer of the State Security Department, Colonel József Csatári, PhD and Lieutenant Colonel József Boda, the former Chief of Staff of a special long range reconnaissance battalion.⁶²

⁵⁴ VEZDA 1990: 37–42.

⁵⁵ Blikk 2009.

⁵⁶ VEZDA 1990: 57.

⁵⁷ SZÓRÁDI–FARAGÓ 2002: 220.

⁵⁸ Some sources claim that the exact date is the 31st of May 1991 (<http://girititamas.atw.hu/rksz/rksz.html>).

⁵⁹ Interview with Ferenc Berkesi (19th of February 2016).

⁶⁰ Zsaru Magazin 1996: 1.

⁶¹ BALOGH et al. 1993: 55.

⁶² BALOGH et al. 1993: 56–57.

The new unit started its operations with a reformed and re-screened cadre, achieving independence and nationwide jurisdiction. “Papa” tried to get the best men from around the armed forces he could get. One of them, a former long range recon soldier remembered his transfer to the police force:

“We agreed that I will start my training with them, but the army would not let me go. They rejected my transfer request three times on grounds of wrong spacing, or out of regulations font. During this time the PSF started its basic training and Papa was curious about my whereabouts. I told him that I was in Szolnok, at the firing range, and no one cares about my case. So Ferenc Berkesi, commander of the Police Special Force called the Minister of Defence, telling him that he wants Zsolt Kiss moved from Szolnok under his command. In three days I became a police officer.”⁶³

The renewed PSF faced new opportunities and new challenges at the same time. New criminal activities, organised crime, and the escalating Yugoslav Civil War on the southern border of Hungary frequently gave work for the police special forces. These events, combined with the advancement of technology asked for a new training method for the 100–110 strong unit.⁶⁴

Thus first of all, the commanders of the unit visited similar police special forces in Germany, then in France to exchange ideas and build co-operation. Both countries have greeted the Hungarian delegates with open arms and armouries. Members of the delegation found the methods and training of the French units more flexible and modular than the stricter German practice.⁶⁵

PSF had priority in terms of modernisation too, thus new weapons, protective equipment and even uniforms started to pour in. German, Israeli and even US-made weapons started to find their way into the unit, while new equipment, like the OMER-1 rappelling gear was used widely during descending from buildings or helicopters, using the old Mil Mi-2 as an aerial platform⁶⁶ while utilising the newly acquired McDonnell Douglas MD-500E light helicopters⁶⁷ for touch-down and low altitude insertion.⁶⁸ During this training the PSF co-operated heavily with the pilots and crew of the Air Command of the Rapid Reaction Police.⁶⁹

In addition to air transportability, the PSF also included a Bomb Squad, frequently stationed at the Ferihegy International Airport, Budapest, securing the flights of the Israeli El-Al company, and conducting routine luggage checks with specially trained police working dogs.⁷⁰

The PSF had the following tasks and responsibilities:

- countering the hijacking of aerial vehicles

⁶³ Interview with Zsolt Kiss (21st of February 2019).

⁶⁴ Interview with Ferenc Berkesi (19th of February 2016).

⁶⁵ Interview with Ferenc Berkesi (19th of February 2016).

⁶⁶ Ministry of the Interior 1994: 39, 66.

⁶⁷ US-made commercial light utility helicopter capable of carrying four policemen on its landing skids.

⁶⁸ Ministry of the Interior 1994: 73, 74.

⁶⁹ HEGEDŰS 2010: 55.

⁷⁰ HEGEDŰS 2010: 54.

- securing the deportation of foreign nationals
- de-escalation of hostage situations
- co-operation with military prosecution (apprehension of military and law enforcement personnel wanted for criminal activities)
- escorting confiscated drugs
- special police assistance in criminal cases and assisting secret services
- special security details (in co-operation with the Governmental Guards)
- close protection of VIPs⁷¹

The structure of the PSF changed minimally during its active years. Two main components were the tactical element and the operational support element. The tactical division had 4, then 5 TOUs with around 12 men in each, carrying out direct actions.⁷² The support element had a Training Centre, and a Finances Department planned the everyday life of the PSF, while the Secretariat and the Counterterrorism Coordination and Supervising Department worked on the big picture, providing a professional background.⁷³

During this period the civilian population of Hungary would see a new form of counterterrorism. Professional law enforcement experts, clad in black uniforms, wearing black ski masks and wielding western weapons hit their targets day and night. One of the former operators of the unit remembers the newly found fame as follows:

“The black uniforms we started to use from around 1992 were only seen in the movies before. So when we jumped out of cars on the street, and arrested our targets, it always became a large spectacle. Sometimes there was loud cheering, like during football matches. People waved to us, hanging out of windows of trams; they have just witnessed a special forces action, which, to them, has been a fantastic novelty.”⁷⁴

In addition to the positivity of the law abiding citizens, some of the criminals, apprehended by the unit saw their downfall as a defining event. Those, who had been caught by the PSF tried to gain respect from the fact that they were “important”, or “tough” enough to be escorted around by anti-terrorist guards. As one of the commanding officers of the unit noted:

“We have also experienced that even the criminals have highly respected us. It is a kind of prestige, honour that we have caught them. [...] Our level of appreciation is way higher than of an ordinary patrolman.”⁷⁵

From 1990 onwards, similar tactical units have been established countrywide, with the primary task of enclosing and securing the area of operations, and commencing intelligence gathering on the tactical situation. These small-sized units

⁷¹ Interview with Ferenc Berkesi (19th of February 2016).

⁷² AMBRUS 2008: 29.

⁷³ Zsaru Magazin 1996: 2–10.

⁷⁴ Interview with Zsolt Kiss (21st of February 2019).

⁷⁵ AMBRUS 2008: 41.

were trained and supervised by the PSF.⁷⁶ Training of these units have included the training of police snipers, as ideal tools of reconnaissance and rapid, yet precise action if necessary.⁷⁷

Until the end of the 1990s, PSF officers had a lot to do. A good example could be one of the contemporary notebooks of a member of the unit, which captured the number of operations conducted by the PSF in the year 1994. This notebook states and categorises 365 independent cases, when the capabilities of the unit was utilised.⁷⁸ The numbers are the following:

- 1 terrorism-related action
- 78 criminal investigation support (72 people detained)
- 7 public security actions
- 22 VIP close protection
- 77 Israeli events
- 62 convict escort details
- 52 deportation of foreign individuals
- 14 emergency services

From this list it is visible that the schedule of the PSF was crowded. Fortunately, not every officer had to be present at every operation, thus there was time for training, and self-development, which was a large part of the requirements in the unit, not only for those in combat roles, but also for members of the support element. This policy was enforced by the commander of the unit as a way of team-building and mutual understanding between different members and departments of the unit.⁷⁹ One of the unit members, coming from a military special forces unit remembered the training as follows:

“Basic training in the PSF was the most brutal in the country, I have ever seen. I am not sure what the SAS⁸⁰ or the Navy SEALs⁸¹ are capable of, but Hells Week⁸² for us lasted for six months. From Monday to Friday, you almost died three times a day, due to physical exhaustion. On top of it there were live fire exercises, rappelling, climbing, until our gloves and skin on our palms just tore off. After the first month I said, thank you very much, I am going back to the Long Range Recon Battalion in Szolnok for some rest. In this time I lived with my older brother [...] I told him that I am not made for this, I want to go back to the military special forces instead, as this police special unit is too much for me to handle. My brother has always been a very professional individual, so he agreed to help me train. From that day on we

⁷⁶ AMBRUS 2008: 30–31.

⁷⁷ Ministry of the Interior 1990: 28.

⁷⁸ Notebook of László Kiss from 1994 (in possession of the author).

⁷⁹ Interview with Ferenc Berkesi (19th of February 2016).

⁸⁰ Special Air Service: A regiment-sized special forces element of the British Army.

⁸¹ U.S. Navy Sea Air Land Teams: Special forces units of the United States Navy.

⁸² A week long pre-selection course for the SEAL training, used extensively by other military special forces units around the world.

have practiced tactical movements with toy guns in his flat, which was very useful. So when my shift at work was over, a second dose of training started at night. This helped to mentally secure the patterns of movements, and the way of thinking for a police special forces officer.”⁸³

Under new management – Counterterrorism Service of the Rapid Reaction Police Regiment

In 1994, a new commanding officer was appointed in the person of Colonel István Bökönyi, PhD who brought with himself a new system and structure.⁸⁴ In the following four years, the Police Special Force slowly integrated back into its mother department, until 1998, when the anti-terror capabilities once more became part of the structure of the Rapid Reaction Police (RRP).⁸⁵ Its new name is Counterterrorism Service (CTS).

CTS had in its ranks no more than 120 specially trained police officers, in a refurbished structure. The new structure concentrates on the tactical capabilities of the service, instead of its independent financial and training capacities, which transfer to the RRP as in the case of the Finances Department, or continue to work in a significantly smaller size than before like the Training Centre, becoming the Supervising and Training Subdivision.⁸⁶

Tactical capabilities represent four TOUs (call signs: A, B, C, D) with a separate Technical Surveillance and Engineer Unit, a Sniper Team and a K9 Unit, amalgamating the different specialised skillsets of the service.⁸⁷

This new unit had one of its most famous actions against the criminal and serial bank robber nicknamed the “Whisky Robber” on the 27th of October 1999, when the hiding place of the fugitive criminal was discovered.⁸⁸ Most of the actions and details of the unit remain highly secretive up to this day, but from the memoirs and contemporary news it is possible to put together the picture of a highly effective law enforcement tool, with years of combat experience under its belt. From the memoirs of former commanders it is visible that the greatest setback came from a complex financial and investigative deficit, which these specialists could see during international SWAT⁸⁹ competitions.⁹⁰

Another example of a highly exposed action of the unit happened on the 4th of May 2007. During this period, since 2004, the CTS had been part of the renewed

⁸³ Interview with Zsolt Kiss (21st of February 2019).

⁸⁴ Zsaru Magazin 1996: 1.

⁸⁵ HEGEDŰS 2010: 55.

⁸⁶ Structure and Roster of the Counterterrorism Service from 1998 (in possession of the author).

⁸⁷ Structure and Roster of the Counterterrorism Service from 1998 (in possession of the author).

⁸⁸ Origo 1999.

⁸⁹ Special Weapons and Tactics: an international umbrella term for police special forces.

⁹⁰ Interview with László Kiss (22nd of November 2013).

Directorate of Law Enforcement and Security Departments (LESD), the successor of the RRP, under the Directorate of Special Services. During the action, members of the special unit had to use their firearms to neutralise the armed bank robber, who had taken hostages inside a bank office. The circumstances are narrated through the memoir of Colonel István Lantos, operative director of the unit at the time:

“When we arrived on the scene, naturally it was our first intention to know if there are any demands, how many perpetrators are inside, and every similar circumstance giving us the ability to plan for different scenarios. [...] Every single plan had a guarantee that the perpetrator would be caught in the end, or in some form would be separated from the hostages. [...] When my men went in, I knew what they were up against, I knew what briefing they had, what orders they were given. [...] I was not prepared to hear them shooting in the building, it was a bit strange. [...] When I went in and saw the situation myself, I have relaxed. My men had no other choice but to fire, and they did.”⁹¹

Present days and a conclusion

The LESD–CTS was disbanded in 2008, and a new concept, rooted in the early 1990s about an independent, fully self-reliable, yet rapid-response-capable counterterrorism centre has been outlined. By issuing Government Decree 295/2010 (XII.22.) on the selection and detailed regulation of a counter terrorism organisation by legal means, the Counter Terrorism Centre (CTC) was established.⁹² Amalgamating several other special police and law enforcement units, and with a wider field of responsibilities, the CTC could be seen as the end of a decades-long evolution, in organisational terms. Training, research and information gathering remains just as important as in the beginning, in 1945, on the ruined streets of Budapest, when from the unheated, war-torn offices a small unit moved out night after night to fight crime with special weapons and tactics. From this small, but determined unit, a new, better-equipped team, the system of action platoons spawned. By combatting international terrorism, in spite of the lack of adequate training and tactical equipment, these policemen concentrated in the “Komondor” Anti-Terror Service, have pioneered the modern counterterrorism tactics in Hungary. The Police Special Force, with widespread popularity and firm financial and political support showed a right path in a changing world, which was continued by a less independent, Counterterrorism Service. With four major reorganisation during its history, the Hungarian counterterrorism capability has shown that it is a must to change with the changing tactics of the criminals and terrorists, and be there not just as a deterrent, but also as a force to reckon.

⁹¹ AMBRUS 2008: 36–37.

⁹² 295/2010. (XII. 22.) Korm. rendelet a terrorizmust elhárító szerv kijelöléséről és feladatai ellátásának részletes szabályairól (<https://net.jogtar.hu/jogszabaly?docid=a1000295.kor>).

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