

De-memorial-ization¹

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Bringing down the Stalin statue in Budapest was the most symbolic and most spectacular act of the 1956 Hungarian revolution. It is not by chance then that today any TV show, movie or photo album is unimaginable without visually recalling the phases of the destruction of the monument. Of course in those days many political statues were destroyed, or were “restructured” (most commonly by removing the red star), not only in the capital but many places in the country – an act, for which many people were sentenced for years of imprisonment. These actions and their retaliations go back to one common origin, to the fact that monuments are always connected to those actually in power, to propagandistic and legitimizing intensions.² These visual symbols were consciously created to remind people; so they were “sites of memory”.³ The attack on them demonstrated the denial of their message, so their destruction was a kind of ‘de-memorial-ization’.

Such attacks did not only happen during the days of the revolution, but also before and after it, and from the papers of the routinely involved political police we can tell they were not rare. In contrast with the scribblings, mutilations or bringing downs of 1956 – when for a while people could express their feelings freely – these happened secretly during the night, except for the public demonstrations of 1989, at the dusk of the regime. The regime did everything to make their traces disappear as soon as possible, to restore the harm done to official remembrance.

Most of the acts declared to be an “insult to the community” (usually it meant attacks on Soviet war memorials or graves of Soviet soldiers) or “political agitation via scribbling” are – for the most part – still unknown; and unlike the pictures taken in 1956 they did not become part of the visual remembrance connoted with the era. So in my essay I focus on those “de-memorial-izations” where not only

¹ The article was published as a chapter in the author’s book: *Titkok-képek-nyolcvanas évek*. [The Secret Pictures of the Eighties] Budapest 2011. 44–57. (English translation by János Kávássy).

² For further information on the subject see János Pótó’s work, *Az emlékeztetés helyei. Emlékművek és politika*. [Places of Remembrance. Monuments and Politics] Budapest 2003. See also K. Sinkó’s “A politika rítusai: emlékműállítás, szobordöntés” [The Rites of Politics: Erecting Monuments, Bringing Down Statues] in *A művészet katonái. Szocializmus és kultúra*, eds. P. György–H. Turai, Budapest 1992, 67–79, and T. Wehner’s study “Értékek és kordokumentumok elvesztése – avagy hogyan tűntessünk el egy szobrot?” [Losing Values and Documents – or how to have a statue disappeared?] *Új Forrás* (2008/10), 93–105.

³ So it is identical with Pierre Nora’s concept. See P. Nora, “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire,” *Representations* 26: Spring (1989), 7–24.

written but also visual documentations are available.

Most often these stories are about the more or less serious damage done to the memorials; cases, in which the perpetrators did not leave a direct political message behind. That is exactly what happened on 9 February 1980 in Baja, where – in the Déri Garden at 11.30pm – the patrol of the local police department found four Soviet graves brought down, eleven with stars bent down, and one with a torn off star.

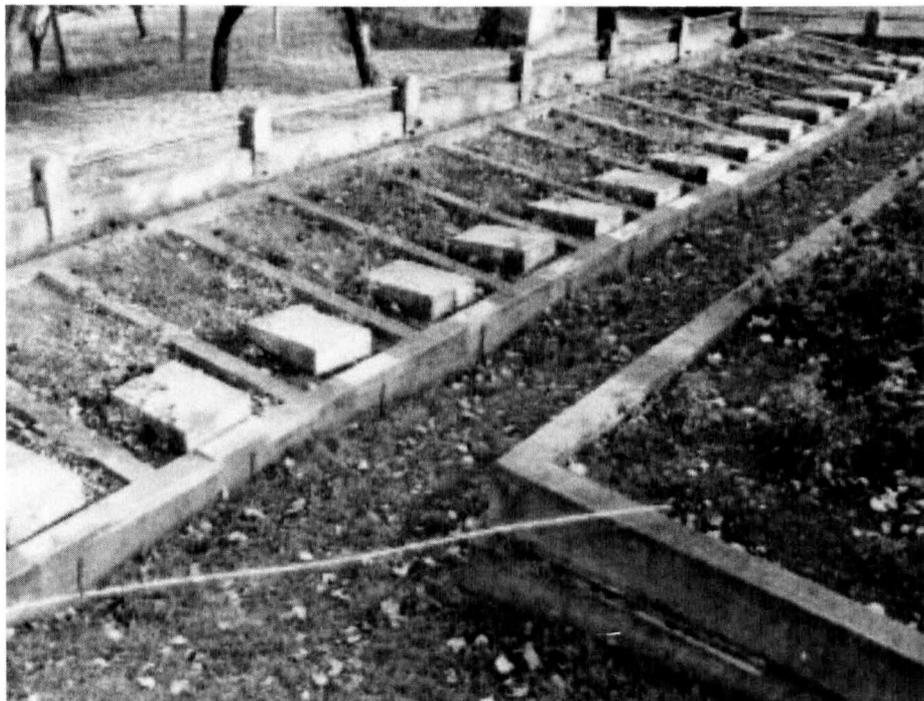


*Crime scene photos showing the Soviet graves, taken on 10 February 1980
– ÁBTL 3.1.5. O-17773*

The hunt after the perpetrators started on fresh traces, letting police dogs to follow their path for further reconstruction. Later informers sunk in the night life were mobilized, partly to identify the youngsters having fun in the streets that night, partly to map those “mob like groups” that had the potential of such an act. The county’s counter internal-reactionary department codenamed the investigation “Döntögetők” (“Topplers”) with which they were left in the dark for quite a while. Then on the night from 14 to 15 October other red stars were bended down at the same place, followed by another incident at end of the month. At this latter, however, some undertakers caught the perpetrators red handed in the cemetery. It turned out that the topplers of the stars were not from the night life of Baja, but were children of 8–10 years, whose age excluded penalty and further investigation as well.⁴

⁴ ÁBTL 3.1.5. O-17773. File codenamed “Döntögetők” [“Topplers”].

A similar incident took place on 23 September 1985 at the Kálvária hill in Miskolc. The state security was now again looking for those who brought down 27 Soviet graves among the drunkards and drug addicts of the neighbourhood. (In general "drug" in the era meant the use of industrial liquids and aerosols, such as paint thinner or bolt remover put into plastic bags and inhaled from there.) Although the authorities had their suspects, the delinquents could not be traced, and



The destroyed Soviet graves in Miskolc, 1985 - ÁBTL 3.1.4. I-9

not even the cover of a dictionary-sheet book with a name on it was any help.⁵ The given period's most intensive star shower came on 19 August 1987 in Pápa. In the Cemetery of the Heroic Soviet Soldier flowers were scattered, several graves were trampled on, 61 the head ornaments were removed, half of the red stars were thrown all around the neighbourhood or taken away. The county police of course did not treat the case as simple damaging and theft.

The gravity of the matter is shown by the fact that Division III/III launched both a public and an undercover investigation. In the reconnaissance part undercover tracking was instituted on several locations within the town that included half a dozen operative officers. The 13-days-long operation, however, did not fulfil its goals, and the informers were also helpless. The only valuable piece of information came from a counter-intelligence officer of the Soviet troops stationed in Pápa, who said that an ensign of the garrison witnessed the incident. He saw two men tearing off the red stars while a third man was watching out for them from the pa-

⁵ ÁBTL 3.1.4. I-9. File on the damaging done to the Soviet graves.



Soviet graves deprived of their red stars in Pápa, 1987
 - ÁBTL 3.1.5.O-19661

vement next to the cemetery. The ensign turned to this third person who in return put out a knife. The soldier who was from Ukraine could detect the gravity of the situation so he left, not only from the scene but soon – as his time of duty expired – from Hungary as well. The Soviet state security visited him in his home, asking for a detailed description and for identification with the help of photos. Due to this intervention back in Hungary three adult males were suspected. They were taken to the police, and were even taped during their custody, to find some hints from their chatter. Yet this operative technique (the so-called 3/e provision) did not produce evidence, so the authorities had no other choice but to end the classified investigation in December 1988.⁶

From such and similar incidents emerges a subgroup, in which the aim of the act was not only to damage the memorial but also to use it as a display for other tabooed memories. Out of these we start with a selection of cases in which – with no further explanation – the symbol of the Nazi swastika was used.

In 1986, a year after the already mentioned incident of the Kálvária hill in Miskolc there was another attack on the memory of the Soviet soldiers in Borsod County. In the cemetery of Putnok a swastika was carved into the surface of an obelisk. While searching the area crime scene inspectors found broken beer bottles, burnt Russian school language books, and even a rye loaf, but none of these led them to the perpetrators; and the investigation of the state security for the following two months was in vain too.

⁶ ÁBTL 3.1.5. O-19661. File codenamed "Duó" ["Duo"].



The obelisk in Putnok on 4 July 1986 – ÁBTL 3.1.4. I-10

Although it turned out from the questioning of witnesses that local youngsters were often out among the tombs to have fun, but their further identification was not made easier by such information like – for instance – the one came from the caretaker of the cemetery, who on several occasions saw “a boarder boy around 17, masking himself as ‘Zorro’, hiding his face behind a scarf and so frightening the passers-by.” The pieces of the schoolbook also led to a dead end, since a K-8 student of the local primary school said that he knew several children who hated Russian as a subject, “nearly half of all classes could be accounted among these”. The rye loaf also wasn’t much help either for the detectives of state security, as they came to know that it was laid there earlier by a Soviet tourist group for reasons of piety.

Solving the case was even hindered – actually not intently, but still – by the employee of the local council wording the report, as he wanted to act so carefully and cautiously that when discovering the damage done he (she?) made the other “defaced” pastry disappear. It reads in his testimony: “... I have gone to the cemetery and went up to Soviet Heroic Memorial. I saw on the front the lines of a swastika I saw [sic!]. I stood up on its pedestal to see if it was written or carved. I tried to erase it, but I could not, because these were deep scratched lines. I looked in front of me and noticed that on the pedestal between two flowers a loaf with 30cm diameter was placed. (All across the upward side of the loaf there was a nearly perfect swastika drawn with a c. 1 cm bald line. The loaf was brown, the white of the swastika could be seen from afar. It was pinched out, or made by a knife, so the



"Flag" with swastika in Tamási, 1988 – ÁBTL 3.1.5. O-19714

swastika was carved into it. Then I put it into my black (diplomat style) briefcase that was with me, I brought it into the town and threw into the waste container of the market, opposite the town hall. These containers are transported by the Kazincbarcikai Városgazdálkodási Vállalat (Kazincbarcika's Town Management Company). They empty them twice a week, as far as I know on Thursdays and Saturdays. However, before throwing the loaf into the container I broke into two, so that the swastika on it could not be seen. The loaf was very stale, I had to knock it to the edge of the container at least five times. Right after I put the loaf into my bag I went straight to the container and dropped the bread into it; I did not show it to anybody." Due to the unfortunate circumstances and the lack of viable information there was not much left to do, therefore the head of the county's state police closed the file.⁷

A great number of national socialist symbols appeared on 16 January 1988, on a Saturday morning in the town of Tamási. The target was now again the building of the local council, the police headquarter, and the Soviet memorial. On three locations 22 large swastikas were painted in red, four of them were on the Soviet statue (the place reminding to the liberating Soviet army). The sight was recorded on the photos of Tolna County's state police (but these on location photos did not remain), which in a few days launched an investigation, codenamed "Emlékmű" ("Memorial"). They mainly focused on such youngsters who – by contemporary terms – were "living unruly life", "members of Satanist and neo-Fascist groups",

⁷ ÁBTL 3.1.4. I-10. The file on the case of the damaging done to Soviet heroic statue.

“with hostile attitude” and had made “negative statements about society”. With time the circle of search was tightened. The authorities were looking for people belonging to the target group among the visitors of the Friday night disco in Dám Restaurant, checking mainly those who belonged to the so-called rockers. During the investigation more than 100 people were questioned, but the personae of the perpetrators could not be clarified. The investigation was nearly coming to a dead end when another “extraordinary incident” rose sentiments. Exactly a half year later to the day of the scribbling a flag full with swastikas was put on the flagpole in front of the Pioneer’s House; the flag itself was made of a white male shirt, deprived of its collar and sleeves, on which the forbidden symbol(-s) was painted in brown and red.

Not only the means of the act showed similarities to what had happened at the beginning of the year (1988), but also the fact that this was another night with party at the same restaurant. By all similarities the investigation came to a dead end. On 17 January 1989, detectives of the Szekszárd headquarters of state police came to the final conclusion that “during the time of the process there were no groups of youth in Tamási. Youngsters with markedly hostile attitudes could not be traced. The perpetrator of the incident was by in all probabilities acting alone or was a transient.”⁸

In Rákosliget since 1948 there was a limestone work by Megyeri Barna paying a tribute to the heroism of the Soviet soldiers, but at the beginning of April 1989 someone, having enough of its symbolical monotony, added the composition: painting a swastika to accompany the red star. As in other cases we can not know for sure whether this person was propagating his own convictions, or was calling attention to the relatedness of the two systems.⁹

Others, in contrast with the mentioned cases, left no such doubts they expressed textually their disapproval to the site of memory. At the end of summer 1981, on several occasions, texts with “rebellious content” appeared on the main square of Mátészalka. First on 26 August on the white marble table of the Lenin statue with clumsy large letters it was written: “Was an idijot”, to which the purple petals of the petunias of the flower-stand next to the pedestal were used. The detectives arriving to the scene, from the lack of any writing tool and from the “primitive nature of the act” (referring to the misspelling and clumsy outfit), concluded that it was not a dedicatedly political act but supposingly a spontaneous joke of the youngsters of the town.

The text was recorded on photographs and was removed right on the same day. Yet, two weeks later the unknown perpetrator was back in action, repeating his act identical to the previous one in all aspects. By using the natural paint of the petals he told the people of Mátészalka again that the immortal revolutionist “Was an idijot”.¹⁰ Even more, was it not enough, six days later emphasised his opinion this time targeting the building of the local party committee writing with the green leaves of the nearby bush on the pedestal: “Lenin is an idijot”. At last on 25 Sep-

⁸ ÁBTL 3.1.5. O-19714. File codenamed “Emlékmű” [“Memorial”].

⁹ ÁBTL 3.1.5. O-20057. File on cases of sedition via inscriptions and writings.

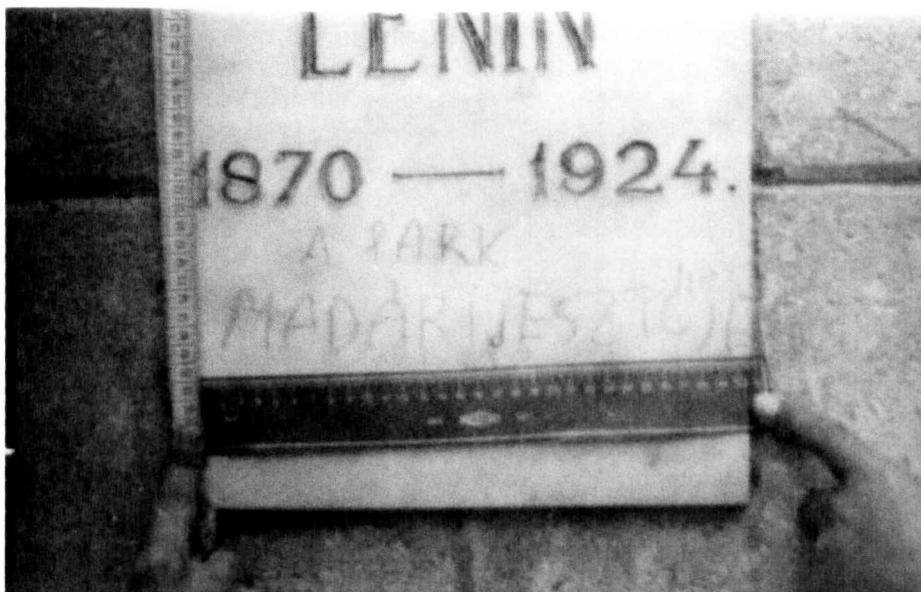
¹⁰ “Idijot” here refers to the Hungarian word “hülye” [stupid; idiot] misspelled as “hüje” (in Hungarian both “j” and “ly” have the same pronunciation).



The new symbol on the Soviet heroic monument in Budapest's 17th district, in Kasztelek András Street (present-day: Liget Street) – ÁBTL 3.1.5. O-20057



*The inscription on the Lenin statue in Mátészalka, 26 August 1981
– ÁBTL 3.1.5. O-18211*



The inscription recorded on 25 September 1981– ÁBTL 3.1.5. O-18211

tember 1981 he broke the monotony of the message when the critic of the people's great friend turned once more against the statue, writing with black pencil: "The scarecrow of the park".

The case was getting more and more uncomfortable for the investigators involved, and was even worsened by the fact that the row of scribbblings was not noticed by any of the guards of the (Hungarian) Workers' Militia's (WM) headquarters. Then in October 1981 reconnaissance was taken over by the Division III/III of Szabolcs-Szatmár County, because by that time it was supposed to be a "counter revolutionary" act. The usual public and undercover investigation, however, was ineffective. It was in vain to mobilize agents, to organise undercover tracking, to apply a so-called "operative trap" by the statue to catch the perpetrator red handed. The authorities even tried a little bit of provocation as on the eve of the anniversary of the 1956 revolution they wrote on the pedestal "Hail Lenin", but there was no reaction to it. The scribbler could not be allured, the re-contextualising of Lenin's memory was not repeated, neither on 23 October, nor on 7 November. The examination of the texts recorded on photocopies by handwriting experts could only detect that the inscriptions were originated by two persons, but their identity remained secret forever. There was not much left to do: on 1 July 1982 the failed investigation's files went to the archive.¹¹

¹¹ ÁBTL 3.1.5. O-18211. File codenamed "Grafikus" ["Graphic artist"]. For more on the subject see T. Takács' "Hüje volt ["Was an Idiot"]", *ArchivNet* (2004/3): http://www.archivnet.hu/old/rovat/cikk.phtml?cikk_kod=84 (Last downloaded on 25 Novem-



The liberation memorial of Sümegecsehi, 15 March 1989 – ÁBTL 3.1.4. I-26

In 1989 the anniversary of the 1848–49 revolution and war of independence did not pass without incidents in Zala County's Sümegecsehi. On 16 March a citizen's report alarmed the officer on duty of the Keszthely police department that on the eve of 14 of March someone painted a text reviling the communists on the village's liberation memorial. On the basalt artefact it was in yellow: "1848–49. Fuckin' Commies. Sending the message, you will be hanged". The local critic of the regime – underlining his action – tore off the red star from the top, which was found only the following month on a deserted estate with high grass.

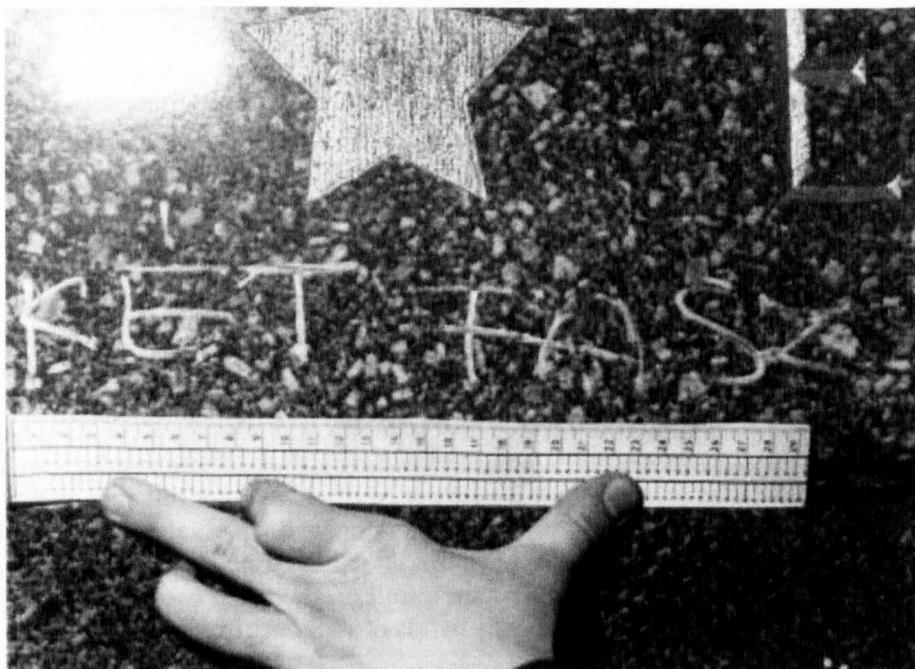
The first visit of the police officers sent to the area led – following the old wisdom that to inquire about the comings and goings of a place is best where they sell alcohol – to the pub. There it came to light that on the incriminated evening there was a huge debate ending up in physical violence, and in its heat one of the drunken guests was scowling at the party members. The investigators following this trace went to a man's flat, they searched the house, and among others they have found a can of yellow paint and a paint-spotted male shoe. These results were really tempting, not to mention that the owner of the shoe – conceivably as an act of escape – went abroad. However, the professionals of the National Police Headquarters perished these hopes. The chemical analysis did not prove that the paint on the confiscated items and the paint found on the scene were identical. The unknown perpetrator slipped out of the hands of state security.¹²

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¹² ÁBTL 3.1.4. I-26. File on an unknown perpetrator.



*The work of Segesdi György with the inscription on its pedestal in January 1989
ÁBTL 3.1.5. O-20057*



*The inscription "decorating" the granite pedestal ("Two pricks")
ÁBTL 3.1.5. O-20057*

Of course, 1989 freed de-memorial-ising intentions mainly where they had the most possible targets: in the capital. Plenty of Budapest cases have documentation, but only few have photographs. One of these odd one outs – beside the already mentioned incident of the swastika in Rákosliget – was the “renaming” of the Marx-Engels statue in Mari Jászai Square, which was there since 1971. On 9 January 1989 someone told his opinion quiet shortly to the passers-by.¹³

Practising the right to assembly became associated with the fact that de-memorial-ising were now happening in front of regime’s eyes (as these events were most often supervised by the operative officers of state security). As for the public protests of the regime change’s year two – maybe the two most active – organisations, György Krassó’s Hungarian October Party (HOP) hand in hand with the Hungarian Radical Party (HRP) turned against the memory of the Hungarian prominents of the international labour movement. It was the memory of Ferenc Münnich and the street named after him in Budapest’s 5th District that hurt them most. In July they had several actions (starting on the day of János Kádár’s burial on 14 July 1989), and on these occasions they painted or sealed over street signs with the name of the hated communist leader, restoring the original name (Nádor Street).

The cause of the repeated actions was the effort of the Public Land Maintenance Company to replace the signs with new ones time and time again. It became the ‘bonus happening’ of the re-namings to give a new meaning to the statue of the guard on the watch by the Culture House of the Ministry of Interior. Passer-bys now came to know that stone figure who was there “In defence of the people’s rule” (that was the official name of Szücs Ferenc’s work, made in 1950) was in fact “The traitor of the Homeland”.

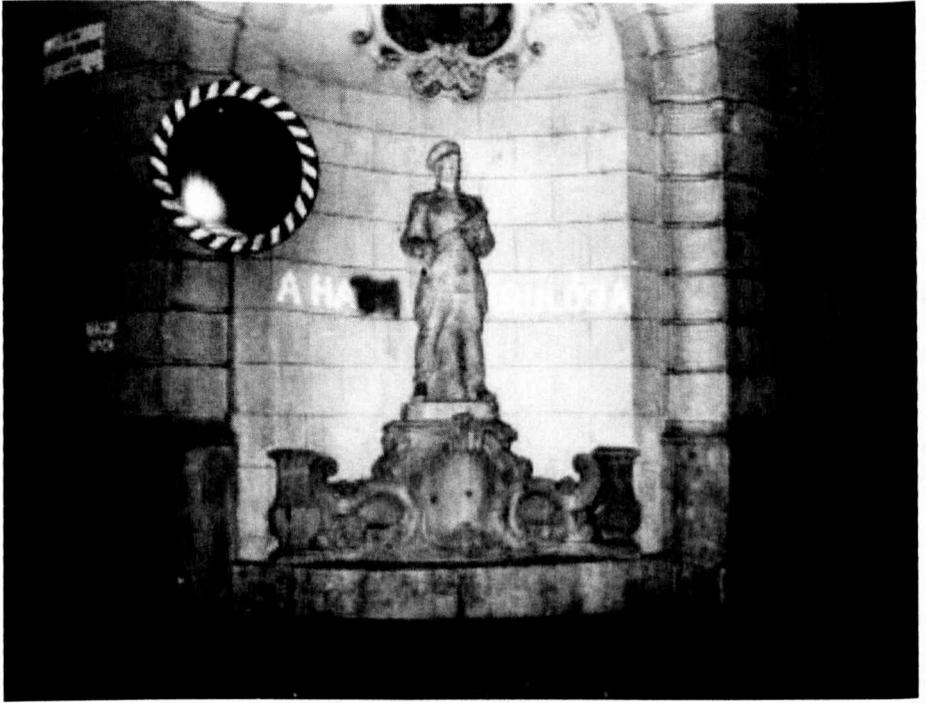
From one of the copies made by the police we can have an insight into the special atmosphere of the regime change’s period. On 26 July 1989 undercover police men patrolling the same area reported about the activists to their senior officer as follows: “At 18:58 they reached the corner of BP. 5th D. F. Münnich Str. and BP. 5th D. Zrínyi Str., then, led by dr. György Krassó, they marched up to the police man’s statue, and they asked comrade Zoltán Majoros p. cpt., who was there on duty, to let them paint next to ‘statue of the ÁVÓ’¹⁴ the inscription ‘The traitor of the Homeland’. Zoltán Majoros p. cpt. called their attention to the fact that painting on the wall would be damaging, asked them to give up on painting. Dr. György Krassó and his company acknowledged his warning, and so cancelled the painting, but dr. György Krassó made the remark: “there are 365 days in a year, it wont be watched for so long”. Then stuck the leaflet on the wall and continued towards Attila József Street.”¹⁵

The statue of the guard was not only not watched, but soon it was removed as all other memorials of the regime – they became the victims of a new remembrance-policy.

¹³ ÁBTL 3.1.5. O-20057. File on cases of sedition via inscriptions and writings.

¹⁴ The ÁVO (State Protection Department – SPD), later ÁVH (State Protection Authority – SPA) was the symbol of oppression during the communist regime.

¹⁵ ÁBTL 1.12.2. 9. d. 391/II-50/89. (BRFK) Protests, demonstrations, group actions.



The statue of the guard posted on the corner of Münnich Ferenc Street (which is now Nádor Street) and Zrínyi Street, following an action of opposition groups in July 1989 – ÁBTL 3.1.5. O-20057.