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# Door-to-door Agitation: Home as a Political Tool in the Stalinist Budapest (1948–1953)

## Agitace „od dveří ke dveřím“, Domov jako politický nástroj ve stalinistické Budapešti (1948–1953)

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### Abstract

This study focuses on the door-to-door agitation based on the ideology of the communist system. As the everyday practice of propaganda and mass mobilization, the agitators were appearing in the homes of families in Budapest regularly between 1948 and 1953. The documents of agitation uncover how the Hungarian communist party intended to mobilize the society to support the party-state and what was the social perceptions of this attempt. Since the home was considered female territory, the work of the local party organizations also offers insights into the role of women in the agitation campaigns.

### Keywords

agitation, Budapest, communism, gender, local party work

On the 14th of August 1955, two strangers visited the families in Kárpát Street in the District 13 of Budapest. It was the early morning of Sunday. According to their report submitted to the local party organization, they knocked on each door but only four families from eleven answered and let them into their apartment. As they wrote: “*The residents were at bed yet or in pajamas or untidy clothes expressing that they do not welcome the early visit.*”<sup>1</sup> The years after the 2nd World War – in addition to political, social, and economic changes – were the period when strangers appeared in family homes in Eastern Europe.<sup>2</sup> These aforementioned visitors represented the territorial organizations of the Hungarian Workers’ Party (Magyar Dolgozók Pártja/MDP)<sup>3</sup> and performed so-called door-to-door agitation. The purpose of this party work was to “enlighten”, educate and mobilize the residents, and obtain information about them at the same time. The communist party needed the families – as the smallest units of society – to support the program of socialism. The proper functioning of family homes was mediated through propaganda press, pamphlets, and public speeches.<sup>4</sup> In addition, they even deployed and extensively used the power of personal persuasion through family-visiting party work between 1948 and 1953.

Door-to-door agitation meant everyday political practice at the local level that resulted in the meeting of the lower-level party workers and the residents. The paper examines the agitation as a social and political process “from below”, thus linking to the history of everyday life. Recent historiography points out that local party organizations have to be taken into consideration not only as the executors of the central orders, rather their members and functionaries can be interpreted as “*genuine historical actors with their own motives and viewpoints*”.<sup>5</sup> Exploring the role of agitators also joins the swelling tide of historical works which reflect on how party members, state officials, local bureaucrats, and ordinary people mutually shaped the communist discourse in the course of continuous negotiations on an everyday basis.<sup>6</sup> This paper offers an analysis not only of the content

1 Budapest Főváros Levéltára, Budapest (= BFL) f. XXXV.108.c. District Committee 13 of the Hungarian Workers’ Party, Territorial party organizations (1948–1956), inv. no. 450. (-2) Reports of the agitators of Precinct 8/13 (14 August 1955).

2 For establishing the Soviet agitation network, see Kenez, Peter: *The Birth of the Propaganda State. Soviet Methods of Mass Mobilization, 1917–1929*. Cambridge 1985. Example for the mobilization campaign: Velikanova, Olga: *Mass Political Culture Under Stalinism*. Popular Discussion of the Soviet Constitution of 1936. London 2018, pp. 71–98.; Lebow, Katherine: *Unfinished Utopia. Nowa Huta, Stalinism, and Polish Society, 1949–56*. New York 2013, pp. 74–96.

3 The territorial or precinct party organizations were on the bottom level of the organization structure and functioned under the control of the district party committee. These organs gathered people whose workplace did not have party organizations or who were not employed for some reason. Their main task was the door-to-door agitation on the given political precinct of the district. Territorial party organizations became important during the big campaigns, especially during the elections because the goal was to achieve the entire population on these occasions.

4 Reid, Susan Emily: *Communist Comfort*. Socialist Modernism and the Making of Cosy Homes in the Khrushchev Era. *Gender & History* 21, 2009, pp. 465–498.

5 *Communist Parties Revisited*. Sociocultural Approaches to Party Rule in the Soviet Bloc, 1956–1991. Eds. R. Bergien et J. Gieseke. New York – Oxford 2018, p. 1.

6 Cf. *Perceptions of Society in Communist Europe*. Regime Archives and Popular Opinion. Ed. M. Blaive. London 2019; Horváth, Sándor: *Stalinism Reloaded*. Everyday Life in Stalin-City, Hungary. Bloomington 2017.

of agitation but also of its methodology and social perception, focusing on everyday practices of political participation, transferring of ideology and socialist values, and the social responses to this. In order to understand the role of ideology in everyday life, we have not to identify it as a set of dogmas created from above but explore how it works at the local level and how it is applied in individual actions.<sup>7</sup>

Door-to-door agitation shows political practices the citizens have encountered and for which they did not even have to leave their apartments, because the party came to their homes. Since the home is the venue of family life, the agitation encompassed the communist concept of privacy. In the first years of Soviet rule, the family was considered that will pass on the bourgeois values and obstruct social transformation. The state had to break through the private world of the family and make family life – and mainly parenting – serve the whole Soviet society.<sup>8</sup> The families became the institutions of the state and the women got a central role because they were considered the key figures of homes – according to the propaganda. The transformation of society also changed the roles, obligations, and opportunities of women who have developed different attitudes to these changes thus influencing the practical implementation of political will.<sup>9</sup>

I am seeking answers on how did ideology appear during the agitation. How has the private space turned into a tool of politics and how bringing politics into the mostly non-politicized places affected the homes? How did the home and its furnishings become a tool for agitators to produce the stories that propaganda demands? What were the social reactions to the emergence of agitators? The documents reveal how the party used door-to-door agitation to encourage and mobilize women to support the communist state and what communist and non-communist women responded to the party's expectations on their main terrain: at their homes. To answer these questions, I examine the documentation of the local party organizations of the emblematic working-class District 13 of Budapest. My statements are based on the reports written by the agitators on the door-to-door agitation, the summary of the reports made by the local party leadership, and the minutes of the party meetings of the party organizations of precincts of District 13.

However, these reports were not about what happened during door-to-door agitation but telling about the image the agitators wanted to display about themselves and the agitated residents, and how they used the possibilities of report writing to draw this image. The agitators strived to meet the requirements of vigilance, and have drawn a social vision that was consistent with the ideas of the propaganda. And, last but not least, the agitated subjects themselves may also have influenced the content of the reports written about them. This does not mean that these texts are useless because the unveiling of

7 Lebow, K.: *Unfinished*, pp. 4–7. See further about the communist values Galmarini, Maria: *The Right to Be Helped*. Deviance, Entitlement, and the Soviet Moral Order. Ithaca 2016, pp. 1–14.

8 Hoffmann, David L.: *Stalinist Values*. The Cultural Norms of Soviet Modernity (1917–1941). Ithaca – London 2003, pp. 184–185.

9 See Attwood, Lynne: *Creating New Soviet Women*. Women's Magazines as Engineers of Female Identity, 1922–53. New York 1999; Fidelis, Malgorzata: *Women, Communism, and Industrialization in Postwar Poland*. Cambridge 2010.

these very patterns will lead us to imaginations about the relationship between politics and private life and the ideal home. The statement that the secret agents documented their world as possible worlds in the state security reports is also true of the agitators' accounts, which recorded not the world of Hungary in the 1940 s/1950s but the worlds of agitators.<sup>10</sup> We can ask questions about these worlds.<sup>11</sup> First of all, we have to examine how party members were trained for agitation work, how did the agitation group function in the residential area of Budapest, and what did door-to-door agitation mean in practice. Then I proceed to what happened inside the walls and how agitators mapped the flats and the role of women in the context of door-to-door agitation.

## From the Local Party Center to the Apartments

The agitator network was part of the “gardening state” – the term is borrowed from Zygmunt Bauman – which aspired to change society, and its central task was to discipline the individuals and reshape their mindsets. According to the concept of Bauman, the modern state looks at the society it governs as a good gardener: plans, cultivates, cares for it, and, where necessary, eradicates weeds.<sup>12</sup> Political enlightenment and persuasion were more than forwarding the party's messages; it was about mediating a new set of norms to the society, as well.<sup>13</sup> Bringing politics and these norms into family homes was a part of this process. In order to agitators interpret the communist ideology to the society, they had to acquire the necessary political knowledge. According to a statistic made in the fall of 1949, 82.5 % of local organization functionaries did not participate in any kind of political education. From this point, the functionaries had to be trained in political seminars.<sup>14</sup>

Agitators – on the lowest level of the party hierarchy – attended two or three-week training. The curriculum consisted of the speeches of the party leaders, the declarations of the party, and the articles of brochures (*Agitator* or *Agitator's Booklets/Népnevelő füzetek*)<sup>15</sup> that were filled with content by propagandists and agitators. The articles include ideological, theoretical, and practical advice, as well. For instance, they suggested agitators ask people what had happened to them since the last meeting before turning to the current political issues. According to the assumption, friendly conversation brings

10 Takács Tibor: *Besúgók a besúgásról*. Ügynök-visszaemlékezések a Kádár-korszakból. Budapest 2013, pp. 28–29.

11 For the approach to the documents of the communist party, see Apor, Péter: *The Joy of Everyday Life*. Microhistory and the History of Everyday Life in the Socialist Dictatorships. *East Central Europe* 34, 2007, pp. 198–200.

12 For the adaptation of Bauman's theory see *Landscaping the Human Garden*. Twentieth-Century Population Management in a Comparative Framework. Ed. A. Weiner. Stanford 2003.

13 For the elements thereof, see Hoffmann, D. L.: *Stalinist*, pp. 57–87.

14 Magyar Nemzeti Levéltár Országos Levéltára, Budapest (= MNL OL) M-KS f. 276. 111. Hungarian Workers' Party, Central Leadership, National Education Department (1948–1950), inv. no. 8. Report on the training of lower and middle cadres (10 February 1950).

15 MNL OL M-KS f. 276. 111. inv. no. 8. Report on the education of the low and middle cadres (10 February 1950), p. 2.

people closer to the agitator and supported them to achieve the goals of agitation as well.<sup>16</sup>

Since door-to-door agitation was often targeting residents uninterested in politics – mainly non-employed housewives – it has approached the confirmation of political statements from the aspect of everyday life. The brochure *Agitátor* suggested the very common and ordinarily topics across that the agitators can political propaganda, for example, shopping, parenting, health care, and education. This is what the party workers’ “handbook” has called “*agitational small work*”. Furthermore, in the case of women, the non-directly political but emotional persuasion was concerned as more efficient.<sup>17</sup> Storytelling was another important tool of political training and making awareness of communist values. A given society, at a given time, knows stories as a “common property” through which the life of the individual and the community gains sense.<sup>18</sup> These stories had to be based on the agitators’ personal experiences about the juxtaposition of the miserable past, the peaceful and developing present, and the utopian communist future. The agitators had to interpret the processes taking place in their environment from the perspective of the prosperity of the community, the country, and the socialist block.<sup>19</sup>

By successfully absolving the training, the agitators started their work under the direction of the local party organs. Immediately before the door-to-door agitation, a briefing was held at the local party center where secretaries informed the agitators about the current topics or campaign goals on which they should explain during the conversations. For the easier processing of their reports, the agitprop department introduced a data sheet before the first single-party elections in 1949. One side of the Report on the agitator’s work form included fields to be filled with personal data (name, occupation, address). Additionally, the visited people were classified into three categories: “well-intentioned”, “neutral” or “hostile”. On the backside, the agitators had to elaborate their impressions on the statements and behavior of the agitated person using their own words.

Despite the instructions and guidelines, the local party leadership got a lot of critics from the Party Committee of District 13 because of the negligent organization of agitation. The apparatus did not always work following the headquarters’ expectations. Already the first step, the correct assignment of agitator couples was a task which they were unable to solve quite often. The reports are telling about tons of flats those the agitator couples missed visiting or visited repeatedly in one evening. Furthermore, they could not agree on specifying the date or frequency of agitation (mainly the agitation on Sundays caused disagreement as we can see later).

Furthermore, the local party organs did not manage to send the agitators to the same family constantly and documented their experiences regularly. Therefore, the reports

16 *Lássunk tisztán...* [Brochure] no. 3, August 1950, p. 20.

17 *Agitátor. Városi és üzemi Pártszervezetek agitátorai részére* [Brochure] 2, no. 3, 1947, p. 3.

18 Fitzpatrick, Sheila: *Everyday Stalinism. Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times. Soviet Russia in the 1930s.* New York 1999, pp. 7–10.

19 The Central Leadership Agitation and Propaganda Department collected these short stories from the party organs or directly the agitators then put them in the brochures. MNL OL M-KS f. 276. 89. Hungarian Workers’ Party, Central Leadership, Agitation and Propaganda Department (1950–1953), inv. no. 141.

showed only the record of one single visit instead of a representation of a series of conversations revealing the changes of the individual opinion and public mood. The lack of continuous documentation of the visits also limits understanding of the connection between agitators and agitated families through door-to-door agitation. The party secretaries noticed the same when they ascertained that most of the reports they received were not suitable for uncovering “*certain phenomena and snapshots of the political atmosphere beyond the general patterns*”.<sup>20</sup>

Not only the district committee was dissatisfied with the local party organs, but the latter criticized the work of agitators, too: “*On paper, there are 16 agitators registered, but this does not correspond to reality, as 1–2 comrades may be doing agitation work in the area. Meetings are held from time to time, but only a negligible number of these agitators appear.*”<sup>21</sup> We can find clues of the agitators’ resistance in the minutes of the meetings of the local party committees. The number of agitators was never enough and the fluctuation was very high because the party workers frequently left the groups. According to the statistics of the agitators in Budapest in 1953, only 5% of the agitators of the territorial party organizations had been working in the campaigns at least for two years.<sup>22</sup>

The party members were often not engaged and tried to get rid of the task or shortened the duration of the agitation. In Precinct 13/20, the agitators finished their tour very early, from which the party secretary concluded that they had shortened the persuasive and informative talks with families. Instead of self-criticism, the agitators argued that they could have gone on a hike instead of doing party work in the nice weather.<sup>23</sup> Additionally, the reluctant agitators referred to their work schedule, family problems, ill relatives, or lack of their political qualifications. The party had an answer to all excuses: sacrificing private life for the party will benefit families in the future, and party schools help to prepare for the party work.<sup>24</sup>

The fact that public mood was mostly influenced by housing and food supply did not make door-to-door agitation more attractive either. The residents were always dissatisfied with these circumstances and a torrent of complaints was showering down on the agitators almost every time. Two agitators escaped from one of the blocks of flats when they saw the women in the yard talking about the bread ration card introduced that day: “*Our agitators saw the situation as threatening, did not feel the important and honorable task of the agitation, simply turned around and reported that they had run away from the battlefield. They said did not feel strong enough [...] to discuss with the angry women what made the*

20 BFL f. XXXV.108.c. inv. no. 472. (-4) Report on the agitation in the Precinct 13/30 (9 April 1951), p. 1.

21 BFL f. XXXV.108.a.3. District Committee 13 of the Hungarian Workers’ Party, Leading bodies (1948–1956), inv. no. 138. Minutes of the Party Committee of District 13 on the investigation of the Precinct 13/5 (27 January 1950).

22 BFL f. XXXV.95.c. Budapest Committee of the Hungarian Workers’ Party, Agitation and Propaganda Department (1948–1955), inv. no. 80. The statistics about the agitators in Budapest (17 February 1953).

23 BFL f. XXXV.108.c. inv. no. 462. (-2) Report of agitator Pál L. on the Sunday agitation in the Precinct 13/20 (19 March 1951).

24 BFL f. XXXV.108. c. inv. no. 467. (-1) Minutes of the party member’s meeting of the Precinct 24/13 (27 June 1950).

*introduction of bread ration card necessary.*<sup>25</sup> The door-to-door agitation emerged a lot of social problems and the residents' complaints but the party workers or the secretaries seem not to get responses to their reports from the competent authorities. The image of a paternalistic, caring state created an absurd situation in which the state encouraged the reporting of needs but failed to meet them.<sup>26</sup>

Not every party worker wanted to demolish the walls of the private sphere. Even some otherwise politically active party members were reluctant in many cases to “intrude” into the homes of strangers. There were a few among the agitators who seemed to respect privacy and recognized that families were not always annoyed by the arrival of party workers for political reasons. A party secretary once asked the agitators not to spend hours at the families on Sunday, because “*if he were a housewife, he would not have an hour to chat around with strangers*.”<sup>27</sup> A deployed inspector considered this attitude very harmful and filed a complaint to the party committee of District 13 immediately about the functionary who was showing solidarity with the housewives.

According to the reports, the agitators and agitated people also tried to achieve that the party allows them to spend their only free Sunday doing housework: “*Generally, agitators were warmly welcomed, but they objected to holding agitation on Sundays. Everyone needs this one day, partly to run the household, to rest. Many are not at home. This is also the wish of agitators. They prefer to go on agitations on weekdays, they also want to take advantage of Sunday.*”<sup>28</sup> These examples demonstrate that the agitators were not such disciplined party workers of the local organs that the propaganda tried to portray them. One of the reasons for this was the venue of door-to-door agitation that influenced the discussion between the representatives of the party and the visited residents. Accordingly, those agitators, who were willing to enter private homes and sacrifice their only free Sunday, did not always agitate in the way expected by the party.

## Inside the Walls

The propaganda stated that communists were not allowed to have “two lives”: communists had to live as a communist not only in the party, at the factory but even at home, and beyond these: at others' homes, too.<sup>29</sup> The good agitator concentrated on political persuasion and increased the people's trust in the party in every situation. The representatives of the party had to demonstrate exemplary behavior within their families and their wider residential environment, as well. From their life, a great crowd of people had to learn the norms of communist morality. However, the Political Committee judged that the agitators behaved mostly not following the principles of the party at their

25 BFL f. XXXV.108.c. inv. no. 448. (-4) Report on the agitation of the Precinct 13/6 (24 April 1951), pp. 1–2.

26 Fulbrook, Mary: *The People's State*. East German Society from Hitler to Honecker. New Haven 2008, pp. 269–271.

27 BFL f. XXXV.108.c. inv. no. 443. (-3) Report on the agitation of the Precinct 13/1. [s.d.], p. 1.

28 BFL f. XXXV.108.c. inv. no. 443. (-4) Report on the agitation of the Precinct 8/13 (1 September 1954).

29 *Kommunisták magánélete* [Private life of communists]. Szabad Nép, 3. July 1949, p. 5.



homes. In private life, they were not agitators, only as long as they were assigned to this work.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, agitators' behavior was not always acceptable during the agitation, too. Ideology was sometimes defeated by the sympathy towards the residents' problems in the hardly controllable private spaces. As a precinct party secretary said: the agitators "*adopted the mood of those they visited, and for this reason, they were unable to perform their job effectively*".<sup>31</sup>

The agitators' attitude was influenced by the fact that they were the lower stratum of party workers who were in touch with ordinary people more directly than the party elite were. As a result, the socially sensitive party workers used door-to-door agitation to support needy families. They asked for housing allowances, public utilities, childcare, clothing, etc. in their reports. One of them was sent to the house in Keszkenő Street 39 in June of 1950. After her visit, she gave a completely "apolitical" report and did not strive to articulate the rhetoric of the party or put her account in an ideological framework. She did nothing only described that the 56 members of the 13 families living in the house only have access to a dilapidated street toilet. She asked for this to be investigated and "benevolently settled" as soon as possible.<sup>32</sup> Dealing with social problems was part of the conversation, this was the aforementioned "agitational small work" but meanwhile, agitators had to argue that the poor housing conditions are the heritage of the previous political system (this was the bourgeois past) and the party takes care of workers (this is the hopeful present) and will solve their problems (this will be the communist future).

In another document, the agitator had already used such keywords with which she increased the chances of solving the described problem: "*She was employed as a shop assistant and is currently eight months pregnant. Strikingly self-conscious worker. She is aware of the objectives of our democracy and looks to the future with great confidence. However, she complains that she lives in a windowless room (cabin, stroller garage) and cannot get an apartment. She will give birth next month.*"<sup>33</sup> The mention of the workplace of the woman turned the attention of the local party secretary to the fact that she held an important position. Since the woman was in contact with many people as a salesperson, it did matter what she thought about the communists and what she conveyed to customers. Her good opinion on the communist party was important because of the general dissatisfaction with the food supply. From such reports, we can conclude that the residents used the agitators to forward their complaints to the party authorities. On the other hand, the agitators sometimes took on this role, i.e. they conveyed the criticism of the residents to the local party organ by the reports. In order to increase the chances of resolving complaints, the writer of this report used communist language ("Speaking Bolshevik") hence did not

30 BFL f. XXXV.108.a. inv. no. 4/162. The declaration of the Political Committee on the agitation (18 December 1950).

31 BFL f. XXXV.108.c. inv. no. 471. (-9) Report on the agitators' meeting in the Precinct 13/29 (5 May 1950), p. 1.

32 BFL f. XXXV.108.b. District Committee XIII of the Hungarian Workers' Party. Apparatus (1948-1956), inv. no. 43. Report on the door-to-door agitation in Keszkenő Street 39. (24 June 1950), p. 1.

33 BFL f. XXXV.108.c. inv. no. 468. (-2) Report on the door-to-door agitation in the Precinct 13/26 (23 September 1951), p. 3.

forget to mention that the woman is a “self-conscious worker” who “looks to the future with great confidence”, i.e. she trusts the communist party.<sup>34</sup>

Contrary to these discussions, some residents did not willing to spend hours with the agitators. They solved the protection of their homes by simply not opening the door (as can be seen in the case of Kárpát Street quoted above) or pretending not to be at home. Sometimes a weird “hide-and-seek” started between the agitator couples patrolling the floors and the residents warning each other. In one of the “reactionary” buildings, the residents put signs on their doors saying “Be Right Back”, which the agitators considered dangerous and suspected of coordinated and organized action.<sup>35</sup>

The well-working party members wrote their reports and drew the appropriate political conclusions as the propaganda expected: “Agitators generally find that people living in their area are very politically uninformed. There were a lot of apartments where they said, ‘they are satisfied with everything’ and closed the door in front of them, they would not let them in.”<sup>36</sup> Others “were at home, they had dinner, we told that we were doing agitation, but they were afraid their dinner would get cold and almost exposed us. In our opinion, they showed with this behavior that they did not sympathize with us”.<sup>37</sup> The reports sometimes included stories that did not meet either the advocacy intentions of residents or the compliance efforts of agitators. We are not sure about the purpose of the man who was stark-naked when greeting the agitator couples: did he want to shock them; did humor or provocation stand behind the repeated cases; or should we think that the person in question was probably mentally unstable?<sup>38</sup>

According to Paul Betts, the limitations of the party’s “domination” over society are evidenced by the skills people have acquired in protecting their private spheres.<sup>39</sup> However, considering private life to be a resistance against the system would be oversimplified. This phenomenon Alf Lüdtke called stubbornness (*Eigensinn*) denotes that people wanted to live their everyday lives according to their own ideas that including not only political goals but also non-political motivations.<sup>40</sup> The functionary quoted earlier suggested this when he said that the housewives had not time to spend hours with the agitators on Sundays because of their domestic work. However, his comrade explained the housewives’ preoccupation with women’s anti-communist sentiments.

When the agitators were allowed to enter the apartment, the home became a quasi-political space because the citizens were forced to make statements before the representatives of the party. Agitators had to politicize the space by making people involved

34 Kotkin, Stephen F.: *Magnetic Mountain*. Stalinism as a Civilization. Berkeley 1997, 198–237.

35 BFL f. XXXV.108.c. inv. no. 467. (-2) Report on the door-to-door agitation in the Precinct 13/25 (April 1951).

36 BFL f. XXXV.108.c. inv. no. 456. (-1) Report of the agitators in the Precinct 13/14 (20 March 1949).

37 BFL f. XXXV.108.c. inv. no. 465. (-1) Report of the agitators in the Precinct 13/23 [s.d.], 1.

38 BFL f. XXXV.108.c. inv. no. 456. (-3) Report of the agitators in the Precinct 13/14 (29 January 1951), p. 2.

39 Betts, Paul: *Within Walls*. Private Life in the German Democratic Republic. Oxford 2012, pp. 48–50.

40 Lüdtke, Alf: *Ordinary People, Self-Energising, and Room for Manoeuvring*. Examples from 20th Century Europe. In: *Everyday Life in Mass Dictatorship. Collusion and Evasion*. Ed. A. Lüdtke. New York 2016, pp. 13–34.

in political discussions and asking them to express their (honest) opinion. One would think that the residents did not show any sign of aversion in this situation – due to fear or conformity. On the contrary, reports demonstrate the frequent expression of anti-regime opinions.<sup>41</sup> More precisely, the agitators reported such sentences in which complaints escalated into sharp criticisms. Related to the Soviet Union, people were implicitly or openly referring to the subordinate position of the country; the party “earned” its disapproval due to wages, public services, housing, and working circumstances. One of the agitated people, after refusing to sign the peace sheet, expressed his opinion.<sup>42</sup> According to the agitators’ account, he mentioned the norms are expecting workers to do more than they are capable to accomplish; the party is forcing its will on the people, and those who have individual convictions cannot prevail today. Meanwhile, everything in the country is “being Russianized”, he added.<sup>43</sup> The writers of the reports had to produce local versions of central propaganda. Since it was full of secret conspiracies against the party-state, the agitators had to write their own stories of the enemies living in the residential area, as well.

By standing on both sides of the agitation line, participants had to adapt to the new situation when the family homes temporarily turned into a political scene. The reports prove that door-to-door agitation was a more complex phenomenon than the encounter between agitators invading homes and residents defending them. On the one hand, the society’s advocacy efforts manifested as complaints in the reports, and on the other hand, the demands of propaganda created stories of hostile residents. Additionally, by giving the party’s delegates a glimpse into the family home, the agitation argument was enriched by further points of view. Certain elements of the home environment could become political messages or even “scapegoats”. The party workers’ task was to map the whole living space to collect information about “hostile” people and unmasked those who only pretended their loyalty.

## Mapping the Flats

The photograph of the communist daily paper Szabad Nép shows a man with his family around while he is positioning a picture of Stalin on the wall, to the place of a reproduction enclosed by an ornamental frame. According to the caption of the photo made in September 1950, we can see a working-class family moving into “the apartment of deported speculators”. The painting he intended to change was most likely left behind by the previous residents, just like the bourgeois-style furniture in the apartment. All attention of the family in the posed photo is directed at the new decorative element. Both adults and even the children are raising their eyes on the Soviet party leader, only the

41 In Poland female agitators also often met critics: Nowak, Basia A.: *Constant Conversations*. Agitators in the League of Women in Poland during the Stalinist Period. *Feminist Studies* 31, 2005, pp. 503–504. See further Velikanova O.: *Mass Political Culture*, pp. 78–92.

42 Collecting signatures was related to the peace campaign.

43 BFL f. XXXV.108.c. inv. no. 464. (-3) Report of the agitators in the Precinct 13/22 (16 April 1951).

youngest family member in the woman's arms is the exception: the baby is not looking at Stalin but stares into the photographer's camera instead.<sup>44</sup> The sets and characters of this scene filled with theatrical poses – which Svetlana Boym called a “totalitarian sitcom” – are reflected in the movies, photos, and paintings of the era.<sup>45</sup> This photo is the visual presentation of the ideal family home. Stalin and the socialist idea “moved” into the new home together with the working-class family that obtained their flat by the courtesy of the regime. Not only the photographer of the propaganda press but the agitators were seeking such traces of communist convincement injected into home furnishing, and occasionally they did find them. However, in other cases, just the opposite happened because residents with “hostile” emotions kept “hostile” objects in their homes – according to the agitators.

The socialist ideology believed that human behavior was determined by the environment. When creating the new socialist cities, the designers were driven by the ambition to shape and form the society of the cities together with the spaces created. Beyond the public spaces, they attributed educational impact to the material culture and interior furnishing of homes as well.<sup>46</sup> However, the 1940s and 1950s were not about improving the home design, but about the critical housing shortage and about eliminating the legacy of the pre-war housing miseries.<sup>47</sup> Campaigns like the one in the Soviet Union against middle-class kitsch or the one in the GDR against formalism and the legacy of Bauhaus have not evolved in Hungary.<sup>48</sup> Door-to-door agitation did not involve the examination or evaluation of furnishing or decoration either, however, getting to understand the residents was performed through the mapping of the accommodation as well. The elements of the material environment became political messages or evidence in the agitators' story-telling.

Among the positive remarks in the reports, the concept of “to dwell nicely” became a political category: “*They have a nice home and the way they live is fitting for satisfied workers.*”<sup>49</sup> However, the tidiness of houses on Szent László street – where former railway officers lived – did not improve but just worsened the assessment of the homes; the agitators ascribed this comfortable environment as bourgeois and individualist complacency. “*However, Precinct 13/5 is a very difficult area, mainly due to the part where mostly old-fashioned conservative railway men live who are resolutely committed to accumulation of objects, have very comfortable flats, and are unwilling to disrupt their conveniences because of*

44 Historical Photo Collection of the Hungarian National Museum, Budapest, neg. 1328, Szabad Nép, 23 September 1950, photographer: Tibor Bass.

45 We can see a similar scene in a painting by Aleksander Laktionov (Moving into a New Apartment, 1952). Boym, Svetlana: *Common Places. Mythologies of Everyday Life in Russia*. Cambridge 1995, pp. 5–8.

46 Crowley, David – Reid, Susan E.: *Socialist Spaces. Sites of Everyday Life in the Eastern Bloc*. Oxford – New York 2002, pp. 11–12.

47 Horváth, Sándor: *Planning Urbanisation in Hungary, 1945–1989*. *Hungarologische Beiträge* 11, 2005, pp. 75–92.

48 The domestic socialist lifestyle became a major topic of the debates between functionaries, architects, and interior designers in East Germany in the 1950s. Betts, Paul – Pence, Katherine: *Socialist Modern. East German Everyday Culture and Politics*. Ann Arbor 2008, pp. 102–104.

49 BFL f. XXXV.108.c. inv. no. 444. (-2) Report of the agitators in the Precinct 13/2 (29 June 1950), p. 2.

*participating in the community works. [...] People are very materialistic here. There are so many shiny copper pans in every household that they could even make an exhibition.*"<sup>50</sup> A comfortable and nicely equipped home demonstrated the bourgeoisie's love of objects in contrast to the puritanism of the communists. In this case, the comfort of the home embodied the opposite of the self-sacrificing work for the community, proving that the "old conservative people" wanted to feel good in their homes and not in the community.

According to the propaganda, decoration signified not only indifference but also "hostile" behavior, as well. The discovery of crucifixes and sacred images is the most common among these "unmasking" clues. Sometimes visitors arriving from the party found objects inconsistent with communist engagement not only in the homes of party members but even the propagandists or high party or state functionaries: "*He works in the Ministry (Department of Energy), he is a senior cadre. [...] The agitators noticed that the sacred gospel ordered for today was recorded on the desk calendar and that his wife did not come out of the room during the conversation. [...] According to the agitators, she deliberately did not want to come out directly. They asked to report this to a competent place. (Note: although they are not Catholic they still visit the Christian church.)*"<sup>51</sup> Although the man condemned the "reactionary" church, the religious text discovered in his apartment proved to be a stronger argument in the agitators' assessment. In their comment, the agitators summed it up: the public behavior was contrasted with their impressions in the home of the family. The senior cadre read the gospel and his wife was not interested in discussing political issues (that meant the man has not "enlightened" her yet). As a result, the home became a repository of identity hidden from the party in the world of propaganda.

Agitators have proven their effectiveness when the families they visit have been convincingly classified in one of the categories of the reports. They had to demonstrate that they could find out the real thoughts behind the spoken words and expressed emotions of the residents. Since even the best agitators were not mind-readers, they used their knowledge of the living space to support their assumptions. However, the residents' relationship with the private and public sphere was much more complicated than what we can read in the reporting sheet of the agitators. The mindset of the people could manifest in their everyday actions or objects, but it is not necessary to suspect political views behind these at all times.<sup>52</sup> A sacred image could mean religious fervor, but even the survival of a family tradition that the agitator qualified as "hostile". Entering the apartments, they looked around for objects that supported the categorization of the propaganda – or at least that is how they portrayed themselves in their accounts. Accordingly, those who did not care for the community collected shiny copper pots in their kitchen; and whose wives refused to speak to the agitators kept the gospel in his diary.

50 BFL f. XXXV.108.c. inv. no. 447. (-4) Report of the agitators in the Precinct 13/5 (8 February 1953), pp. 2-3. Compare this to the campaign in the Soviet Union against convenient, middle-class home furnishings: Boym, S.: *Common*, pp. 29-40.

51 BFL f. XXXV.108. c. inv. no. 456. (-3) Report on the door-to-door agitation in the Precinct 13/14 (1 July 1951), p. 3.

52 Kula, Marcin: *Poland: The Silence of Those Deprived of Voice*. In: *Popular Opinion in Totalitarian Regimes. Fascism, Nazism, Communism*. Ed. P. Corner. Oxford 2009, pp. 150-151.

Agitators often commented on the behavior of the female family members. Since homes appeared as the women's territory in political discourse, their agitation was the main task of the party workers.

## Difficulties with Women

The communist party paid extra attention to the wives of party members and party functionaries, and the female residents outside the party who could influence the public mood in an apartment block. The propagandists argued that improving political awareness among women is more effective by female agitators because women can better understand each other.<sup>53</sup> In the ideal family, the woman – representing the promoted type of propaganda – was performing productive labor, participating in the social/political life, was a member of the party, lived a moral private life, and raising her children following the socialist ideology. It was required for them to become “comrades” but in the meantime, they had to remain in their “traditional” roles of wives and mothers, as well.<sup>54</sup>

The agitation group was one of the tools to mobilize this social group: “72 people took part in the door-to-door agitation, of which 26 were male and 46 were female comrades. This figure proves that women in District 13 have recognized their position in democracy as a result of tireless agitation and have become aware of their prospects for future development.”<sup>55</sup> However, the mobilization of women meant a challenge for the MDP that assumed most women were much more interested in housekeeping and everyday problems than in the issues of politics. Besides, because of their lack of political consciousness, the enemy, mainly the Catholic Church, would more easily mislead them. Uninterested and religious women were a bad influence on their wider environment, as well. Furthermore, not only non-communist women but also female party members caused difficulties for the local party organs. The family life, the food supply, the private needs, and sometimes the practice of religious life resulted in conflicts at the political work.

The communists' ideal of the family included details of the pre-revolutionary patriarchal family model but this did not mean that family autonomy was accepted. Soviet ideologists were selecting elements from the conservative traditions to use these values for their modern mobilization purposes. The peaceful family life following communist consciousness and morals had to support the goals of the state.<sup>56</sup> The relationship between wife and husband was mostly the topic of the party meetings in those cases in which the men and women were not on the same level of “communist self-consciousness”.<sup>57</sup>

53 *Agitátor. Városi és üzemi Pártszervezetek agitátorai részére* [Brochure] 3, 1947, pp. 3–4.

54 This position changed after 1953. In parallel with the so-called destalinization campaign, propaganda increasingly promoted traditional female roles (childbearing, housekeeping), and the push for women's participation in public and political life was weakened. Horváth, S.: *Stalinism Reloaded*, pp. 177–178.

55 BFL f. XXXV.108.c. inv. no. 449. (-1) Report on the door-to-door agitation in the Precinct 13/7 (16 May 1949).

56 Hoffmann, D. L.: *Stalinist*, pp. 184–185.

57 The orderly marriage was also expected because of the demonstration of communist morality. In one of

Family-related norms were articulated in stories about wives who did not willing to do party work or even have a bad influence on their husbands. Disciplining family members was a minimum expectation to party members. According to party leadership, if someone can not convince their relatives at home, he will not be successful in party work either.<sup>58</sup> In Precinct 13/6, the agitprop secretary himself was in a difficult situation for not being able to get his wife to do social work. Because of this, he did not consider himself worthy of his function and offered to resign.<sup>59</sup>

One of the largest clashes related to the dissatisfaction that defined the public mood peaked around housing and food supply. Because of the traditional female responsibilities, mainly the women felt the gap between the propaganda and everyday experiences. Housing poverty was decisive in Budapest and especially in District 13 after the war. Many lived in uncomfortable apartments, barracks, sheds, empty business premises in the late-1940s (as we can see an example of the pregnant women above).<sup>60</sup> The party leadership of the Precinct 13/2 sent several letters to the district party committee urging them to open public shops.<sup>61</sup> The supply was stagnant, there were not enough shops and there were not enough essential food products, for instance, potatoes and fat in the shops. The agitators reported persistent dissatisfaction.<sup>62</sup> Nevertheless, women leading the household were banned from standing in line in front of the food store, which – according to the official explanation – was generated not by a shortage but by the enemy’s accumulation of goods and the spread of fake news about the war.

In this situation, the right communist behavior was embodied by Mrs. Bánkfalvi who was interviewed by the Szabad Nép. In the article titled *What is the situation in the food market?* housewives were consulted on temporary food shortage.<sup>63</sup> Mrs. Bánkfalvi said that she does not waste her time standing in line, but they do not still starve. She illustrated how abundant and cheap they eat by listing the family’s weekly menu. The agitators of the Precinct 13/2 reported that since the article was published, the women living in the house have been scolding Mrs. Bánkfalvi for “*why she lied so much*”.<sup>64</sup>

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the factory party organizations, it turned out that one party member had broken his marriage and fell in love with the wife of another party member. The party secretary hesitated to exclude the man because of this, but the author of the press article on this case – happened to be a woman – argued for the sanctity of marriage: “*we can also regulate emotions and we can and must control our emotional lives.*” Remete, Ibolya: *Megszerették egymást...* [They fell in love...] Szabad Nép, 2. September 1956, p. 2.

58 BFL f. XXXV.108.c. inv. no. 448. (-4) Report of the agitators in the Precinct 13/6 (24 April 1951).

59 BFL f. XXXV.108.c. inv. no. 448. (-1) Minutes on the party membership’s meeting in the Precinct 13/6 (30 November 1949).

60 BFL f. XXXV.108.c. inv. no. 459. Report on the agitation and party work in the Precinct 13/17 [s.n.], 1.

61 The lack and poor quality of bread appeared as a constant source of tension, but customers were not satisfied with other basic food items (meat, milk, eggs). The local supply crisis peaked between 1951 and 1953. Valuch, Tibor: *Magyar hétköznapok*. Fejezetek a mindennapi élet történetéből a második világháborútól az ezredfordulóig. Budapest 2013, pp. 139–141.

62 BFL f. XXXV.108.c. inv. no. 444. (-2) The letter of the party leadership of the Precinct 13/2 to the Agitation and Propaganda Department of the District 13 (24 September 1950), p. 3.

63 *Mi a helyzet az élelmiszerpiacon?* [What is the situation in the food market?] Szabad Nép, 29 July 1950, p. 7.

64 BFL f. XXXV.108.c. inv. no. 473. (-2) Report of an agitator in Precinct 13/2 (1 July 1950).

The agitators had to prove that those who are always complaining are not living such a bad life as they proclaim. On one occasion, two creative agitators rejected dissatisfaction caused by food shortage by counting how many homes in the whole block did not have meat on the dining table at lunch, and their conclusion was as follows: “*All out of the 16 residents had meat on their dining tables, except for one who had potato paprika with sausages.*”<sup>65</sup> However, sometimes women complaining about public services were reassured by female agitators who were struggling with similar difficulties. This was confirmed by the account of the agitator who visited a woman who worked also as a party worker: “*She also goes to agitate and comes with these like me, but they don’t believe her. Especially the women, they attack her because she says that it will be better but it is always worse and you can no longer get potatoes! She has firmly stated that she no longer believes that the situation will indeed get better here, in fact, everything will get worse and more expensive.*”<sup>66</sup> When the patience of women ran out – or they forgot about communist self-sacrifice, or perhaps their confidence in the party faltered – they found themselves in a difficult position. They had to convince the agitated persons of something they didn’t really believe in either.

Similarly, time management between party commitments and household obligations has become a common source of conflict. According to the propaganda, the enlightened woman had good effects on family life as well. Communist husbands appreciated those who were not stuck between the walls of the kitchen and with whom they could share the joys of life in the movement. The party let the women in the political arena but they demanded commitment and self-sacrifice in exchange. The party – and the collective and the communist goals – had to be more important than their personal needs and their private life. As Oleg Kharkhorkin explains, the concept of the socialist individual was determined by the idea of collectivism.<sup>67</sup> However, there was a difference between male and female individuals as communist subjects. The reproductive duties prevented women from completely meeting the expectations of the state. Instead of a vision of equality, a double burden features women’s life.<sup>68</sup>

Female agitators had to find the compatibility of domestic responsibilities not only with industrial employment but the party work, as well. One of the most basic hurdles in recruiting party workers was the reference to family and household tasks. “*She also complained that she has a husband and can’t wash or cook for him because if she goes home, it’s already 10–11 o’clock and there’s door-to-door agitation on Sundays and she has a lot of work.*”<sup>69</sup> However, there were such female party members who did not accept this, proving with

65 BFL f. XXXV.108.b. inv. no. 42. Report on the propagandist’ meeting in the Party Committee of District 13 (15 May 1950), p. 1.

66 BFL f. XXXV.108.c. inv. no. 462. (-2) Report on the door-to-door agitation in the Precinct 13/20 (7 August 1950), p. 1.

67 Kharkhorkin, Oleg: *The Collective and the Individual in Russia*. A Study of Practices. Berkeley – London 1999, pp. 190–212.

68 See women’s role in politics: Lapidus, Gail Warshofsky: *Women in Soviet Society*. Equality, Development, and Social Change. Los Angeles – London 1978, pp. 198–231.

69 BFL f. XXXV.108.a.3 inv. no. 138. Minutes of the Party Committee of District 13 on the investigation of the Precinct 13/5 (27 January 1950) p. 7.



their example that it is possible to take time to party work with a husband and children.<sup>70</sup> Some female party workers tried to arouse solidarity in their female superiors and turn to them with their complaints if they fell on deaf ears. The female leader of one of the agitator groups let women postpone the next week's agitation, citing their cleaning and other busy schedules. On another occasion, a pregnant woman asked the party secretary to acquit her from election agitation. However, her male superior did not accept her request and he said the woman *"just wants to find excuses and pull herself out of the agitation work because it's not a disease, it's a natural process"*.<sup>71</sup> Since the man did not understand her problem, the woman sent a letter to the Party Committee of District 13 to ask the intervention of a female comrade. Her request was indeed forwarded to a woman, the district's second secretary excused her from agitation work.

However, in families where women were engaged in the party and social work, sometimes even the husbands had to be disciplined in order to make them accept that their wives will spend less time at home and will have less time to cook and do chores. One of the party members expressed that his wife was not able to do party work and if the party leadership does not accept it take her party membership card back.<sup>72</sup> Another party functionary said to the agitators that it is not important his wife should be a party member. Moreover in his flat, the agitators glanced at a crucifix and sacred images on the wall. The decoration became an argument for his "hostile" attitude.<sup>73</sup>

Meanwhile, female agitators sought to influence the debate on women's responsibilities in their own interests. Two of them suggested husbands should take their part from housework: *"Women can not do voluntary and party work because of their preoccupation. They are waiting for their husbands to come home for dinner because the men are unhappy if they are not welcomed with a hot dinner. We said warming the dinner on gas is not a big deal, any husband can do it."*<sup>74</sup> The bravest female party workers suggested to the party leadership to start a cooking course for men to could take their share of the household chore.<sup>75</sup>

70 BFL f. XXXV.108.c. inv. no. 456. (-3) ó. e. Minutes of the party membership's meeting in the Precinct 13/14 (2 January 1951), p. 4. Female agitators were also accused by women outside the party of having dirty homes and were advised to clean their homes rather than roaming the streets. BFL f. XXXV.108.c. inv. no. 467. (-2) Report on the door-to-door agitation in the Precinct 13/25 (18 March 1951), p. 1.

71 BFL f. XXXV.108.b. inv. no. 104. Letters from the district's second secretary to Mrs. József S. (19 May 1953), p. 1 -2.

72 BFL f. XXXV.108. c. inv. no. 456. (-3) Minutes on the meeting of the party leadership in the Precinct 13/14 (16 January 1951), p. 2.

73 BFL f. XXXV.108. c. inv. no. 451. (-4) Report of agitators Mrs. Ferenc G. and Júlia H. on the door-to-door agitation in the Precinct 13/9 [s.d.].

74 BFL f. XXXV. 108. c. inv. no. 466. (-2) ó. e. Report of agitators Mrs. Vilmos S. and József B. on the door-to-door agitation in the Precinct 13/24 (1951), p. 1.

75 BFL XXXV.108. a. 34. Minutes on the party secretaries' meeting of District 13 (28 October 1948). The party's central paper also advocated that men take their share of the chores: *"a lot of the little worries of the household need to be taken off the woman's shoulders, they need to be freed from the thousands of problems of everyday life, men need to be helped. I have seen myself several times on the street that while women are cooking or sewing at home, men are going shopping."* *Így él a béke fővárosa* [This is how the capital of peace live]. Szabad Nép, 14. September 1949, p. 5.

Struggling with roles has created a lot of tension not only because of the clash of public and private life but of the women's inner feelings. Conflicts arose from the coexistence of religiosity and party membership. A young girl had to face the friction between what she heard at the party seminar and her inner convictions: *"Listen to the fact that you have now explained this scientifically, I believe it is so but during I am going down to the gate, it reminds me that good God beats me for believing this."*<sup>76</sup> Children participating in religious education caused also conflicts. Agitators had to convince parents – who were often female party members – this is very harmful to the development of youngsters. According to the leadership of Precinct 13/7, some of the husbands even did not know their wives were churchgoers.<sup>77</sup> Getting rid of the religious past in a community caused debates among women who knew each other very well and have criticized those party members whose change was too sharp. According to a report, there was an agitator who was striking the table with her fists when she saw a sacred image at someone's home, *"even though a window-sized Blessed Virgin Mary was hanging from the wall above their own bed not so long before"*.<sup>78</sup> In this way, the home and its objects became not only a tool for agitation of the residents but also served as an argument in the conflicts between the party members.

These accounts and conflicts demonstrate that women did not only passively adapt to the rules of the party. By examining the Polish women who worked in textile factories and coal mines, Malgorzata Fidelis highlights that not only the state institutions but the local communities and individuals participated in the debates on women's roles. According to her statement, women were not only defended themselves but were able to use the political aims for their interests and learned how to integrate their desires into political discourses.<sup>79</sup> Revealing the issues of private life in the party members' meetings was a tool for wives to enforce their – alleged or real – new rights. Some wives resorted to party leaderships for help, presenting their issues with their drunkard or slacker husbands as political matters. Women complained about their grievances at party members' meetings or during door-to-door agitation and tried to influence their family lives through the party.

A former party secretary of Precinct 13/19 wanted to force her husband – who left her previously – to move back to her in this way. She was crying when she explained to the agitators what the man – who was otherwise a good party member – has done: *"Now when the People's Democracy allowed them to live a human life, now when they finally worked things out, the husband left the woman, saying that he wants to live alone now. Please review the case as it has a bad influence on the neighborhood."*<sup>80</sup> It is not clear, however, whether the writer of the report considered the husband's act or the woman's reaction to be harmful. On the door-to-door agitation in Karmelita street – nearby the church of the banned Carmelita order – a man scolded the communists in front of the agitators. Moreover, he

76 Margit Sz., interview by Heléna Huhák, Budapest, 15 September 2016.

77 BFL f. XXXV.108.c. inv. no. 449. (-3) Minutes of the party leadership's meeting in the Precinct 13/7 (6 February 1951).

78 BFL f. XXXV.108.c. inv. no. 464. (-4) Note on the party work in the Precinct 13/18 (5 February 1952), p. 3.

79 Fidelis, M.: *Women*, p. 11.

80 BFL f. XXXV.108.c. inv. no. 461. (-4) Report of the agitators in the Precinct 13/19 (8 April 1951), p. 2.

was an alcoholic and always quarreled with his family members. His wife asked the agitators to separate him from the family.<sup>81</sup> Because of the fragmentary and incomplete nature of the agitation documentation, there are not any clues whether the case continued or not. However, these reports demonstrate female party members and party workers used the postwar transformation of their roles and their presence in public life to make their daily lives easier. During the door-to-door agitation, they sought to use the communist discourse to increase their advocacy capacity. In other words, they learned that if they spoke like communists, they could better achieve their goals. As a result, women's interpretations of their roles exerted an influence on local politics and the narratives that emerged about women in the party propaganda.

## Conclusion

Door-to-door agitation meant everyday political work on the local level and resulted in direct contact between rank-and-file party workers and ordinary people. The reports written by the agitators reveal not only the social image of propaganda but also how the visited families and the agitators used the agitation network to promote their personal interests. One part of the agitated residents made it clear their home is not the place where they intended to talk about the five-year plan or other political topics. They did not open the door, made excuses, or appeared naked at the door illustrating – in an extreme way – people behave at home differently than in public places. Others expressed their anti-regime opinions to the representatives of the party – according to the reports. We do not know how many of the visited people resisted the agitation or criticized the party. What is certain, the agitators had to demonstrate their vigilance and find the local “enemies” to meet the expectations of the party organs. Other residents used institutionalized “political enlightenment” to solve their everyday problems. When agitators approached people in their homes, the citizens attempted to voice their complaints, or in other words, indirectly shape the texts of the reports in order to get their problems forwarded to the authorities.

On the other hand, the agitators were not always such disciplined party workers who repeated the propaganda, searched bourgeois furniture and religious object. We can mention the socially sensitive party workers or that disillusioned woman who admitted that not only her agitated families but also she herself did not believe that the food will be cheaper in the future. The agitation work in the private spheres points out the limits of the propaganda. When ordinary people stood face-to-face with the party workers and talked about everyday issues in the venue of private life, the effect of the manipulation and promises of state propaganda decreased. The “totalitarian sitcom” was not perfect just like that photo in which the baby gazed at the camera instead of Stalin's picture.

Based on the agitators' reports, we cannot define the concept of private and public rather observe how it changed from situation to situation. Sometimes the agitators indi-

81 BFL f. XXXV.108.c. inv. no. 456. (-3) Report of the agitators in the Precinct 13/14 (21 January 1951), p. 2.

cated what they wanted to keep as their privacy, for instance, the free Sundays. In other cases, while the subjects of agitation informed the local party organ about their problems with their family life or marriage and asked help to solve them, they themselves made their private life public affairs. The shades of behavior were the most diverse in the case of women who tried to find the balance between their “old” and “new” roles. They were treated not as individuals but “*through their membership in the social group of women*”.<sup>82</sup> However, the local party work illustrates the differences in their attitudes. Door-to-door agitation reveals examples of how women used their new possibilities in the political arena. They endeavored to find the balance between the party obligations and the responsibilities at home, others tried to act according to their faith in the party and God. The most creative female party members recommended a cooking course for husbands to help themselves (saying this is necessary for them to get time for the party work). Meanwhile, they learned to use the communist language to express their interests and the door-to-door agitation created a communication channel to the party-state for them.

Not only in 1948/1949 but even in the further years, the leaders of the central agitation and propaganda department did not correct the operational shortcomings of the network (including the lack of cadres, high fluctuation, bureaucratic procedure, the low discipline and education level of agitators, and insufficient documentation of agitation). Instead, they tried to activate the agitator groups by repeatedly announcing campaigns. However, the mobilizing power of the agitation network declined after 1949. One reason for this was that everyday life became increasingly distanced from the propaganda and the agitators directly experienced this during their party work. They did not simply have insights into the daily lives of the citizens. For the most part, they had the same standard of living as the people they addressed. The difficulties of everyday life and the bureaucratic, administrative methods led to a decline in party work from 1951/1952.<sup>83</sup> The partial corrections after Stalin’s death – and later after the XX Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union – resulted in “self-criticism” by the central agitprop department but these processes took place following the former propaganda. According to the apparatus, the broad strata of society – among them the party workers – had become dissatisfied not because of the policy of the communist party but because the agitators had not explained the significance of the measures well. Instead of confronting the mistakes, the agitator groups weakened and the door-to-door agitation did not even restart after the 1956 revolution.

Political agitation on the level of everyday life required far more individual decision-making than one might think based on the documents created by the official propaganda organs. The apparatus and the rank-and-file party members were not a mass controlled from above. The study of the lowest layer of party membership raises several further questions for future research. To name just a few: what did it really mean to be a party member? What were the social consequences of the fact that a significant

82 Fodor, Éva: *Smiling Women and Fighting Men*. The Gender of the Communist Subject in State Socialist Hungary. *Gender and Society* 16, 2002, p. 260.

83 Koltai Gábor: *Akik a “párt” ellen vékeztek*. Pártfegyelmi eljárások Budapesten az MDP időszakában, 1948–1956. Budapest 2019, p. 254.

proportion of the adult population had a party membership card? What impact did party membership have on social stratification and the social distribution of resources? In order to answer these questions, much more attention needs to be paid to the membership of the party as its mass base. The micro-level analysis of the local organizations contributes to looking at the communist parties not as isolated or closed organizations rather as integral parts of the societies of the socialist states.

## Agitace „od dveří ke dveřím“, Domov jako politický nástroj ve stalinistické Budapešti (1948–1953)

Agitace „od dveří ke dveřím“, zavedená socialistickou diktaturou, vedla k tomu, že se agitátoři v letech 1948 až 1956 pravidelně objevovali v domácnostech. Maďarská strana pracujících pověřila stranické pracovníky, aby sledovali obyvatele a poskytovali jim „osvětu“. Pro komunistickou stranu se rodinné domy staly nejen místem, ale také nástrojem agitace. Prvním krokem k porozumění sociálním a politickým funkcím agitace „od dveří ke dveřím“ je znovu kontextualizovat tuto formu politické kampaně, tj. nechápat ji výhradně jako „útok na sféru soukromí“, v níž představitelé strany často nebyli vítáni. Agitační zprávy místních stranických organizací 13. budapeštského okrsku ukazují, jak se při agitaci „od dveří ke dveřím“ proměňoval koncept soukromé a veřejné sféry. Část obyvatel dávala jasně najevo, že jejich domov není místem, kde by hodlali hovořit o pětiletém plánu nebo jiných politických tématech. Za těmito zprávami navíc nestáli pouze disciplinovaní agitátoři, kteří propagandu slepě opakovali. Místní stranická činnost ilustruje rozdíl postojů v případech ženských agitátorek. Strana se domnívala, že loajalitu rodin lze získat mobilizací žen a vedením mužských členů strany k tomu, aby zvýšili politické povědomí svých manželek. Pro vztah mezi vůdci a členkami strany však byla charakteristická spíše dynamická interakce než jednosměrný vliv. Ženy – vyjadřující své názory – vyvolávaly reakci vedení strany. Tyto dokumenty poukazují na limity propagandy a nabízejí několik přechodných kategorií k pochopení role agitátorů a lidí, na něž bylo agitací působeno.



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