

A nighttime photograph of a busy street in Budapest, Hungary. On the left, a tall, vertical neon sign spells out 'PONTOSIDŐ' in orange letters. Below it, a smaller sign reads 'PONTOSIDŐ ÉRTÉKELÉSI SZOLGÁLAT'. In the foreground, a tram is visible on the tracks, and a crowd of people is walking. The background is filled with city lights, including a large 'MM' sign and various other neon advertisements. The overall atmosphere is that of a bustling urban environment at night.

# Chasing Out Carlos The Jackal

Hungary, International  
Terrorism and the Twilight  
of the Cold War

Dániel Farkas  
Adam LeBor

The logo of the Danube Institute, featuring a stylized white bridge or arch structure above the text.

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Image: The Liberation (Ferenciek) Square of Budapest  
at night in 1971. Source: Inkey Tibor / Fortepan



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## About the Authors



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# Chasing out Carlos the Jackal: Hungary, International Terrorism and the Twilight of the Cold War

## Dániel Farkas and Adam LeBor

### Abstract

Hungary served as a base for Carlos the Jackal, a Venezuelan-born international terrorist and an affiliate of Palestinian liberation organisations for six years, between 1979 and 1985. He arrived uninvited, but was nevertheless received with initial hospitality; he did not commit any crime against his host country specifically, but was still ejected unceremoniously in September 1985. It is a classic story of Soviet Bloc brinksmanship in the world of radical organisations that burgeoned during the Cold War, all above the heads of strictly controlled Eastern European societies. The People's Republic of Hungary was an especially welcoming destination due to the regime's strict adherence to Moscow's directives and reluctance to entertain any side deals, like turning terrorists over to Western authorities. Using newly unearthed documents from the archives of both the United Kingdom and Hungary, the authors aim to show how the story of the Jackal's arrival, of his stay and especially of his eventual ejection informs us about the trajectory of Hungary throughout the Cold War.

## Prologue: The Ambush

The Americans had managed to surprise Vencel Házi.

The veteran Hungarian diplomat had maneuvered around the world of Soviet Bloc diplomacy for decades, working on every facet of the foreign policy of the small Soviet Bloc vassal republic of Hungary. The central European country was chained to Moscow by the Warsaw Pact, the economic framework of the COMECON economic alliance and the latent threat of Soviet Intervention. Házi and others in the foreign ministry kept Moscow at bay, wooed Western investment to the eastern side of the Iron Curtain, and duly carried out Soviet orders to invest in and aid the Global South. His career spanned decades, from being an early ambassador to an Iraq ruled by reformist officers, through a longer ambassadorial posting in London, to landing the position of Deputy Foreign Minister and then, as his career was reaching its end, ambassador to the United States. Házi had lived through international crises over Berlin, Cuba, Vietnam, and the Middle East. Now, in the mild June of 1985, while the thaw of the Cold War was supposedly happening, he had his back against the wall in the State Department.

His interlocutor was Mark Palmer. The American diplomat, sixteen years Vencel's junior, was serving as Deputy Assistant Secretary under George Shultz's State Department. Palmer had a simple, but at the same time, confusing message. Two things were asked. Firstly, the U.S. wanted Hungary to stop selling "chemical weapons" to Iraq, which had been at war with Iran for five years amid horrific carnage. It was a clear warning, and a very sensitive one for Hungary. But it was clear, at least. The second was more mysterious.

"They [the Americans] are asking that we in Hungary pay more attention to terrorists coming from the Middle East," Házi informed the Hungarian Foreign Ministry. And that was it. "On my question, about which terrorist or terrorists he was talking about in his suggestion, Palmer said that he can't mention a name, but our internal services know them

and know about their entry."<sup>1</sup> As a threat, Palmer stated that "he has no intention of publicising these topics, but cannot offer a hundred percent guarantee against the leaking of relevant news".

All in all, Hungary was asked to side with the United States in a search for terrorists—and even be so kind as to accommodate the Americans and find out who they would like to expel the most.

Házi couldn't come up with an answer for days. Budapest was unusually calm and apparently unbothered, but as Hungarian ambassador, he needed an answer. Palmer's demand was the high-point of a long-running pressure campaign against Soviet bloc embassies by the Americans. First, rules were tightened: all Warsaw Pact embassy staff were asked to officially register all of their movements inside the United States with the State Department, because of espionage concerns.<sup>2</sup> Then, a suspected Hungarian spy was arrested in Georgia.<sup>3</sup> And now Házi had this riddle wrapped in a diplomatic demand.

After a couple of days of rumination, Házi was summoned again to the State Department. Palmer wanted to deliver a hint. He made it clear that he knew what the Hungarians' problem was—there were different armed groups and terrorists hosted in Hungary, and it was indeed confusing to pick the one the Americans were referring to. Palmer specified he did not care about "liberation groups" like the Namibian SWAPO. He wants people "like Carlos", better known as "Carlos the Jackal", the world's most high-profile international terrorist, then living in Budapest.<sup>4</sup> The story was complete: leaking the unknown location of such a terrorist star would have been a major news story. It was the one thing that Hungary, pursuing good Western relations, wanted to avoid. Házi relayed the message to Budapest. After around six years in Budapest, Carlos was ejected from Hungary on September 15, 1985, and it was made clear that he should never return.

<sup>1</sup> Foreign Ministry Papers pre-1990, HU-MNL-OL-XIX-J-1-j 1985, Box 31 USA papers, no. 003070 "Palmer csoportfőnök felvetése /veggyi fegyverek eladása és terroristák beengedése/" (Suggestions of department head Palmer /sale of chemical weapons and hosting of terrorists/

<sup>2</sup> Foreign Ministry Papers pre-1990, HU-MNL-OL-XIX-J-1-j 1985, Box 30, USA papers, no. 005640 "Amerikai non-paper mozgáskorlátozás bevezetéséről" (On the American non-paper mobility restrictions)

<sup>3</sup> HU-MNL-OL-XIX-J-1-j 1985 Box 30 USA papers, no. 002881/3 "Gilbert Ottó ügye" (The case of Ottó Gilbert)

<sup>4</sup> Foreign Ministry Papers pre-1990, HU-MNL-OL-XIX-J-1-j 1985, Box, 31 USA papers, no. 003070/1 "Palmer csoportfőnök felvetése /veggyi fegyverek eladása és terroristák beengedése/" (Suggestions of department head Palmer /sale of chemical weapons and hosting of terrorists/ [Despite having the same title, the document is not identical to the one referenced in Footnote 1]



Hungarian Border Guards at a customs office at the Czechoslovak border, 1971. Fortepan / Urbán Tamás



# A Hungarian Comfort Break

But who was Carlos, and what was he doing in Budapest at the time when, thanks to his activities, he became an item on a checklist of Hungarian-American diplomatic issues? His real name was Ilyich Ramirez Sánchez, named in part in honour of Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov, aka Lenin. He was born in October 1949 in Venezuela to an upper-middle-class Communist Party member and lawyer. He, his two brothers and mother moved to London at the age of sixteen where they lived the high life, thanks to Venezuela's oil revenues. In 1969 Carlos's father sent all three boys to Moscow to study. Carlos lasted two years before being expelled from university. In 1971 he travelled to Beirut and joined the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), a group led by the Palestinian radical Wadi Haddad. There he took the name "Carlos". After terrorist training across the Middle East, he committed his first terrorist act in London in December 1973, attempting to kill Joseph Sieff, the vice president of Britain's Zionist Federation. Sieff survived.

This was the year when Carlos gained his media name "the Jackal" after a Guardian correspondent spotted Forsyth's *Day of the Jackal* on a bookshelf in the apartment where he was supposed to have stayed earlier. A series of terrorist attacks soon followed: one at a Paris cafe, then two against El Al jets and personnel at Orly airport in Paris in January 1975. In June that same year, also in Paris, Carlos killed two French intelligence officers and a Lebanese informant.

In December 1975, Carlos gained even more notoriety by kidnapping OPEC ministers gathering in Vienna. Failing to kill the ministers as ordered by Haddad, he was expelled from the PFLP. He thus evaded participation in the PFLP's 1976 hijacking of an Air France plane that was diverted to Entebbe in Uganda. A daring Israeli rescue raid led to the killing of the PFLP terrorists. Two years later, Carlos founded his own armed group, the Organisation of Arab Armed Struggle, supported by East Germany's Stasi intelligence service and Libya's Muammar Gaddafi.<sup>5</sup> After being ejected from the core Palestinian circles, Carlos became a "terrorist for hire" for various Middle Eastern governments.

At the end of the 1970s, he chose Budapest as his main base.

The story of Carlos is a well-researched one. The Hungarian elements of his story are aptly summarised in the works of László Liskai, József Beke, and Gabriella Hegyes, who all worked with high-level access to firsthand sources and documentation from the Historical Archive of the Security Services (ÁBTL). Carlos's expulsion from Hungary was told already skilfully by László Liskai in his seminal 1992 book on the topic, *Carlos in the Shadow of the Iron Curtain*. In his telling, based on oral history interviews with the Hungarian security chief Lajos Nagy and others, he recounts two meetings of Palmer and Házi as well. First, on an unspecified date in 1985,<sup>6</sup> the Americans "asked for an explanation" about the presence of Carlos in Budapest. Then, on the second instance, in September 1985, Mark Palmer called a meeting with Házi, and after broadly discussing the problems of terrorism, made an impish off-the-cuff remark to the Hungarian ambassador that he hoped Carlos enjoyed himself in Hungary. After this, Carlos was ejected.

This original 1992 story, also recounted in John Follain's comprehensive 1998 book *Jackal*, can now be updated with new documents from Hungarian intelligence archives, published here for the first time.

Some factual differences are found: these new primary documents, recently discovered by the author of this paper in Hungarian foreign ministry papers in the Hungarian national archives, place the negotiations over Carlos' fate on May 30 and June 7, 1985, respectively. It is possible that a third meeting was called in September as specified by Liskai's sources.

However, there is a chance that the memory of the September meeting exists because it coincides with the date of Carlos' final expulsion from Hungary. This newly unearthed record suggests that the Americans pushed for this move months earlier, as a form of preemptive strike. Carlos was not even in Hungary in June when Házi had his conversa-

<sup>5</sup>britannica.com, Carlos the Jackal Venezuelan terrorist (accessed July 27 2025)

<sup>6</sup> László Liskai: *Carlos a vasfüggöny árnyékában* (Carlos in the Shadow of the Iron Curtain). CT Press, Budapest, 1992, p. 15.

<sup>7</sup> Liskai 1992, p. 152-153

<sup>8</sup> The National Archives FCO 178/2609

tions, but he arrived back unexpectedly by September. This preemptive American move also suggests that the U.S. had information about Carlos potentially moving back to Budapest. These new reports reveal original details on how the gathering of secret information helped decision-making and negotiations in the State Department, highlighted the nuances of diplomatic pressure and showed how Hungarians navigated Cold War superpower diplomacy in the specific case of Carlos.

Why was such a move important? Why was such a harsh demand leveled against a small vassal republic of Moscow? And how did it come that Hungary, an internationally less-active and less-aggressive Soviet Bloc state, hosted Carlos, the Jackal, in the first place? And why did the U.S. single him out among a variety of personalities and organisations? The story of the expulsion and its underlying bigger narrative—both Carlos' role and the Hungarian government hosting armed groups in the 1970s and 1980s—sheds light on the details of the careful dance of diplomacy and pressure games that led to the eventual thawing of the Cold War and the first steps of Hungary into the new world order.

Additionally, documents from the National Archives of the United Kingdom amend the narrative with nuance on the question of why Hungary needed to shelter these people. These Hungarian and British documents will now be the centre of the analysis alongside the brief background narrative of how Hungary navigated the world of international terrorism throughout the Cold War, and how Carlos' story is situated in this process.



## A Country Wide Shut

The Hungarian secret service operatives were fed up. They had spent a whole day installing listening devices and the wiring systems, tapping into telephone lines at the central dormitory of the international students in District XI of Budapest. Two rooms were wiretapped in the dorm in late spring 1973 by the agents of the Hungarian Ministry of the Interior, in cooperation with the leadership of the dorm that housed persons of interest. They were to find out only after the fact that the African students liked to chat with each other in “tribal languages” instead of English or French, and thus the wiretapping went nowhere. The wires were uninstalled after a year.<sup>9</sup>

It was a typical scene in 1970s Budapest. While the Iron Curtain divided Europe, foreigners from all over the world were pouring into Hungary. There were well-meaning, clever students from the Global South, such as the Africans with the wiretapped rooms, and their counterparts from the Middle East, Asia, and Latin America. They enjoyed fully-funded scholarships to study mostly STEM subjects and medicine as a form of developmental aid.

The Iron Curtain had divided Europe, but channels for the developing world were left open. These channels enjoyed the privilege of not getting heavily scrutinized - especially in a closed country where the systems to handle foreigners were not built up at all. This was well illustrated by the fact that the secret police were looking helplessly at the fact that the Africans spoke a variety of languages, and not only English. This unfamiliarity of Hungarian officialdom with handling a cosmopolitan community helped those who could cross the Curtain enjoy even more informal privileges than in an open society, even while they were constantly watched to the extent of Hungarian capabilities. And in this colourful, often easy-going community, sinister characters could easily manoeuvre as well, especially those as well-connected and protected as Carlos the Jackal.

But why did Carlos decide to hide in Hungary? The fact that he came to the Eastern Bloc is no surprise. The Soviet Union was a known supporter of anti-Western movements of every hue by the late 1970s.<sup>10</sup> It was not the boilerplate “enemy of my enemy is my friend” mechanism, however. The Soviets vetted their partners with a view of the perceived viability of their organisation, its alignment with the global strategy of the Soviet Union, and the cost-benefit analysis of the partnership.

While “progressive” anti-western Arab regimes were supported generally since the 1950s, the Palestine Liberation Organisation became a Soviet partner only by the early 1970s. During that decade the organisation opened representation offices across the Soviet Bloc, including one in Hungary in 1975. The Turkish smuggler and financier of terrorists, Ismail Oflu, ran his Turkey-Western Europe smuggling operation through Budapest, as revealed by the research of Balázs Orbán-Schwarzkopf.<sup>11</sup> Other parts of the world were affected as well.

Before 1975, the South Vietnamese National Liberation Front—the Viet Cong—received support from the Soviets. Their wounded were cared for in Eastern Bloc hospitals, and obviously, their weaponry was sourced from the Soviet bloc as well. By the late 1970s, South African liberation movements were on the rise as well with the fall of the Portuguese colonial empire. The Southwest African People’s Organisation (SWAPO) and others, in turn, received the same treatment in the Soviet Bloc. SWAPO fighters were cared for in Budapest, and grants were distributed among the members who sought higher education. Alongside these larger organisations, Carlos’s group was only a small one to accommodate.

By the time of this renaissance of armed groups behind the Iron Curtain, Hungary was already a known meeting point.

<sup>9</sup>Historical Archives of the Hungarian State Security, ÁBTL 3.2.1\_O-16473\_5

<sup>10</sup> Galia Golan: *The Soviet Union and the Palestinian Liberation Organization: an Uneasy Alliance*. 1980, Praeger Publishers, 13-14.

<sup>11</sup>Balázs Orbán-Schwarzkopf: *Szürkék és farkasok a vörös árnyékában*. [Greys and Wolves in the Shadow of the Red] Hamvas Institute, Budapest,

In 1949, thousands of left-wing youth thronged to Budapest in the Second World Festival of Youth and Students,<sup>12</sup> and enjoyed the late summer weather in the still-ruined city. In 1968, the Vietnamese NLF (informally, Viet Cong) embassy was stationed in the Hungarian capital, and two young American radicals, Bill Ayers and Bernardine Dohrn of the Students for a Democratic Society, travelled to rendezvous and coordinate with them there, recognising the importance of the location.<sup>13</sup>

In the early 1980s, IRA gunmen were fitted out with weaponry from the Hungarian secret services in Hungary. Alain Frilet, a French journalist and left-wing radical admitted in 2011 to a French court that in 1982, he was sent by the Northern Irish radicals to Budapest, where he was given a camper van full of unspecified weapons and escorted by Hungarian military to the Yugoslavian border<sup>14</sup>. Budapest was the meeting point in a struggle that supposedly connected American college students and jungle commandos, French and Irish radicals in the all-consuming fight against imperialism and capitalism.

This was the place where Carlos arrived in the summer of 1979. By then, he had been searching for a base for years, after being expelled from his original group, the PFLP, for disobedience during the OPEC hostage taking, where he refused to execute the Iranian and Saudi oil ministers as ordered by Wadi Haddad.<sup>15</sup> His reckless and flamboyant behaviour soon made him one of the more problematic characters among the armed groups hosted in Budapest. He flaunted huge amounts of cash and a handgun in the lobby of the Hotel Intercontinental.<sup>16</sup> Hungarians apparently were not too satisfied with their duty of housing Carlos, especially while the economy was in poor shape and they needed the favours of the West. They tried to bully him out of the country if nothing else worked.

It was a tried-and-true tactic of reluctant Eastern European states: the Stasi demonstratively followed Carlos around East Berlin earlier that year, to make clear to him that he was *persona non grata*, without engaging in open conflict.<sup>17</sup> The Hungarians staged a car chase with Western plates on their Western-made cars on August 29, 1979, the next time Carlos travelled back to Hungary, from Ferihegy airport to his hideout in Vend street in the Buda hills. Carlos was freaked out and lost his nerve. When he and his pursuers arrived there he stepped out of his taxi and riddled the chasing cars with bullets, only missing the Hungarian agents by sheer luck.<sup>18</sup>

Carlos then moved in with his West German friends from the same radicalised upper-class type that created the Red Army Faction, also known as the Baader-Meinhof group, after its most notorious members. Carlos' allies, however, were from a lesser-known organisation, the Revolutionary Cells (RZ). One of their members, Magdalena Kopp, became Carlos's lover, and later, his wife. They conducted their radical love affair here in Budapest, at the heart of the luxurious Rózsadomb (Rose Hill) area in Buda. Carlos switched from the Intercontinental to a much more spacious and private place, the villa at Vend street, renting directly from a member of the Internal Security of Hungary.<sup>19</sup> Carlos's base in Budapest quickly became very uncomfortable for Hungary, affecting its foreign relations, and not only because of the shoot-out in front of his house. Hungary was attractive for Carlos in the first place because it was much more integrated with the West than other Socialist countries. But this meant greater access to Hungary for Westerners. With more access came more opportunities to spot Carlos.

<sup>12</sup> See an interesting insight on the cosmopolitan atmosphere of the event at Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS) 1949, Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, vol. 5. <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1949v05/d514>

<sup>13</sup> "A Rag Blog Interview with Bernardine Dohrn" 2011.11.20 Billayers.org

<sup>14</sup> Orbán-Schwarzkopf Balázs: "Fegyver és drog a 80-as években. Szemelvények a - és kábítószerkereskedelemben, valamint a terrorizmus kutatható alambiztonsági irataiból" *Betekintő* 2017/4

<sup>15</sup> Liskai 1992, 20.

<sup>16</sup> Liskai 1992, 20.

<sup>17</sup> John Follain: *Jackal: The Complete Story of the Legendary Terrorist, Carlos the Jackal*. Arcade Publishing, New York, 1998.

<sup>18</sup> Liskai 1992, 36.

<sup>19</sup> "A titkosrendőr ötödik élete: Carlos, a Sakál bűntudója volt a Marton-féle szexbotrány szereplője" *Válasz Online* 2024.07.17

<sup>20</sup> See a fascinating photo collection about Cuban labour in Hungary at <https://transperiphery.com/Cubans-in-Hungary>

<sup>21</sup> 40 éves az "Interconti" (*The Interconti is 40 years old*) [https://fovarosi.blog.hu/2009/12/31/40\\_eves\\_az\\_interconti](https://fovarosi.blog.hu/2009/12/31/40_eves_az_interconti)

Budapest was semi-closed not only in the sense that, under state control, there were foreigners of different affiliations at any given time around the capital. There were unique places to serve them with special access. These spaces were not just the hospital to heal wounded African guerrillas, the university dorms for students, or workplaces for cheap Cuban labor.<sup>20</sup> Hungary wanted to take part not just in Soviet-style globalisation, but in a kind of Western globalisation as well. This meant opening the place for mass tourism, and the hard cash that it brought.

This logic meant, among others, bringing the Hotel Intercontinental to Budapest,<sup>21</sup> constructed as a haven of international capitalism in the heart of the capital, while the outskirts were populated with gray Socialist blocks of flats. This microcosm of cosmopolitanism was Carlos's first stop in Hungary. But this was also the approach that made the hard-currency nightlife boom. In selected bars, vendors accepted most kinds of Western currencies. Most of these sites were along the Grand Boulevard—the bars Nirvána, Savoy, Halló, Emke, Havanna<sup>22</sup>—while others were located in District V., the heart of downtown. Naturally, these sites were heavily watched by state security. Tourists were channeled into these places,<sup>23</sup> where prostitutes were available as well, oftentimes in the service of state security, as a kind of everyday honeypot strategy.<sup>24</sup> The state security even wiretapped some hotel rooms, like the failed dorm project.<sup>25</sup>

Carlos was going around the hard-currency bars one night when a West German tourist recognised him. He reported him to the West German authorities.<sup>26</sup> The West Germans

<sup>22</sup> Tamás Bezsenyi - Balázs Bölcskei: *A szocializmus bűnbarlangjai* (Crime Dens of Socialism), Kossuth Kiadó, 2020. See a rudimentary map of the locations at <https://www.google.com/maps/d/edit?mid=15IllMCLIfUkcYbbjDC4w2qojCc6ejm4&usp=sharing>

<sup>23</sup> See contemporary advertisements for nightlife for example at: *Pesti Műsor* 1979/11, March 14, p. 41.

<sup>24</sup> Bezsenyi - Bölcskei 2020, 162.

<sup>25</sup> Krisztián Ungváry: "Kik voltak az SZT-tisztek? Miről tudhatott Schmitt Pál?" (Who were SZT officers? What did Pál Schmitt know? *HVG* [https://hvg.hu/velemeney/20110311\\_ungvary\\_krisztian\\_szt](https://hvg.hu/velemeney/20110311_ungvary_krisztian_szt)

<sup>26</sup> quoted by Oliver Schröm: *A Sakál árnyékában* (Hungarian translation of the *Im Schatten des Schakals* by Gábor Sebes), Budapest, Kairosz Kiadó, 2007), 195-197

<sup>27</sup> Liszkai 1992, 59, 80





The Hotel Duna-Intercontinental in 1975  
(Fortépan / FÖFOTÓ)



# The Eminent Pupil of Socialism

got back to the Hungarians, signaling that they would be very uneasy if the Venezuelan terrorist stayed in the same city as the West German chancellor. Budapest needed to make a hard choice. They chose to explain the issue to Carlos and asked him to leave for the duration of Schmidt's visit. The terrorists needed to leave the Hungarians alone for a bit so the country could pursue its Western deals in peace, but Carlos had his room available back at Vend Street. Carlos thus left briefly for East Berlin on September 2, but was already back on the 25th.<sup>27</sup> According to the memoirs of his lover, Magdalena Kopp, Carlos was a bit too unsure about the stability of Hungary as his partner.

The choice of Hungary and the fact that Carlos could have stayed so long was not entirely random or just dictated by the perks of comfortable hotels and baths. It was informed by Hungary's dependable and Moscow-aligned international policies as well. Other members of the Soviet Bloc were not free from sudden twists and turns, which caused insecurity for terrorists. In 1978, West German Red Army Faction terrorists were in Bulgaria, alternating between sunbathing on the beaches of the Black Sea and plotting the downfall of capitalism, when their work-holiday was cut short. West German interior security agents showed up in the resort, the terrorists were arrested and quickly extradited to West Germany, where long prison sentences awaited them. For the Bulgarians, it was more important to stay on good terms with West Germany than keep the RAF happy.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, the Bulgarians allowed Carlos into the country, but denied him a stable base.<sup>29</sup> The Yugoslavs briefly detained Carlos while he was passing through the country.<sup>30</sup>

Even the Soviets kept a distance from Carlos. The KGB deemed him uncontrollable and wanted no direct contact

with him.<sup>31</sup> They accepted him being in the Eastern Bloc, as a gesture to his Middle Eastern sponsors—Baath-ruled Syria, mostly—but they drew the line there. Carlos, despite his fame, was not worth their time in the greater strategic game of the Cold War—especially as he already had his own terrorist nursery where he could be relocated and provided for. Hungary was an ideal candidate for this: a comparatively open and Western-oriented space, but one that very much needed to toe the Moscow line. For Budapest, hosting Carlos wasn't just about having the goodwill of the Communist world center. It was also about getting basic security for the Hungarian regime. If Carlos lived in Budapest, he was unlikely to organise attacks on Hungarian targets.

Contrary to popular beliefs, it was not the Soviets who insisted on the continued stationing of Soviet troops in Hungary, but the long-serving Communist leader János Kádár, who explicitly rejected a Soviet offer to withdraw troops in 1958.<sup>32</sup> Hungarian Communists needed Soviet armoured divisions to prop up their system against their own society until they could assuage them with slightly better standards of living. Thus, the Hungarians were not the ones to do anything on their own, but rather kept quite close to Moscow. This prevented such back-end deals like those the Bulgarians made with West Germany, and the Hungarians were not as strong-willed or independent-minded as the Romanians in opposing Soviet policy. Thus, Carlos enjoyed a special, privileged place in the international system while he was living comfortably in his villa on Vend Street.

The agents responsible for the surveillance of the terrorists claimed in a 1979 report to their superiors that Carlos “feels that he is the safest in Hungary”.<sup>33</sup> Carlos made some gestures as well as not to be seen as abusing the relationship: he wrote a letter to János Kádár directly, thanking him for

<sup>28</sup>John Smith, André Moncourt: *The Red Army Faction, A Documentary History, Volume 2: Dancing with Imperialism*, p. 11.

<sup>29</sup> John Follain: *Jackal. The Complete Story of the Legendary Terrorist, Carlos the Jackal*. Arcade Publishing, New York, 1998.

<sup>30</sup> Follain 1998, chapter 6

<sup>31</sup> Vasilii Mitrokhin - Christopher Andrew: *The World Was Going Our Way - The KGB and the Third World*. Basic Books, 2002, 193.

<sup>32</sup> Csaba Békés: *Hungary's Cold War*.

<sup>33</sup> Ágness Hankiss: “Carlos és csapata Budapesten 348 oldalas dokumentum-gyűjtemény a Lengyel Nemzeti Emlékezet Intézetéből” <https://www.hamvasintezet.hu/hankiss-agnes-carlos-es-csapata-budapesten-348-oldalas-dokumentum-gyujtemeny-a-lengyel-nemzeti-emlekezet-intezetebol/>

<sup>34</sup> John Follain: *Jackal. The Complete Story of the Legendary Terrorist, Carlos the Jackal*. Arcade Publishing, New York, 1998

<sup>35</sup> Liszkai 1992, 100. Follain provides direct quotes, while Liszkai apparently describes contents as recounted to him by János Rajna Jr., the son of the landlord of Carlos at Vend street.

<sup>36</sup> József Beke: “The system and forms of cooperation between the Hungarian and East German state security services in the Carlos case” *Belügyi Szemle* 2023/1, 23-35

his hospitality,<sup>34</sup> while also warning him about “some people at the police” pushing for his ejection from Hungary.<sup>35</sup> Despite the informal Hungarian pressure flaring up time from time, Carlos calculated Hungary's situation in the Soviet Bloc quite in line with current historical analyses of its situation.

Carlos quickly realised how useful this situation was to him. The Hungarians needed to toe the Soviet foreign policy line with no side deals, and this meant a guarantee for him regarding his security. It may also suggest his coordination with higher-level echelons of the Soviet government. Information about this element is quite sparse, given the closed nature of the Soviet security archives. We do know from the scholarship of József Beke, however, that the KGB's Budapest liaison officer monitored the information that the Hungarians gathered about Carlos, so the Soviets were well aware and in control of the situation.<sup>36</sup>

The Budapest base was not just for lying low, but for staging attacks as well. Carlos, while hiding in Budapest, used his base for direct attacks against Western targets, coordinating with Palestinians and West German radical left-wing terrorists. He never travelled from Hungary to conduct an operation, but organised the attacks and took the payments for them in Budapest. Carlos was not a man of meticulous campaigns, but rather a hired gun against targets of choice by others.

Thus, he was in Budapest when he organised the infamous Radio Free Europe attacks in February 1981. This was a bombing attempt against the Romanian department of the CIA-supported radio station, allegedly paid for by the Securitate, the feared Romanian secret service. Romanians left the responsibility of handling Carlos to their Hungarian comrades, but used the services of the Venezuelan gunman as they saw fit. The attack missed the Romanian department, but hit the Bulgarian offices of the RFE, causing substantial

damage to the building and seriously injuring four people.<sup>37</sup>

The harshest was still to come. In February 1982, Carlos received another job: to blow up a dissident Syrian newspaper office in Paris. As was customary, he sent others, this time his lover, Magdalena, and Bruno Bréguet, a French communist. They were captured in a chance encounter with security services.<sup>38</sup> Carlos was enraged and out for blood. A series of attacks followed against France and French institutions to put pressure on the government in Paris to let Magdalena go. On March 15, 1982, his accomplices bombed in quick succession the French cultural center in Beirut, the Paris-Toulouse train on March 29, the Air France office in Vienna on April 19 and a randomly chosen Paris street, Rue Marbeuf on April 22.<sup>39</sup> In those early months of 1982, Carlos had evolved from being a grudgingly accepted person in Budapest to an active threat to Western-Eastern relations, committing a series of terror attacks against a major Western partner of Hungary.

The full range of the reasons that Carlos could shelter so comfortably and so well in a country where he was totally unwanted is not clear. It shows the extent of the Soviet reach over Hungary and the fact that it was indeed a bedrock of Hungarian policy not to oppose the Soviets. And there was another level as well. Carlos had very strong state backing from several countries.

In February 1983, Carlos' accomplices committed a bombing attack against the French consulate in West Berlin. The explosives were stored in the Syrian embassy in West Berlin.<sup>40</sup> While Syrian support was clear, this is where new British diplomatic sources emphasise the depth of this support, shedding light on the importance of these terrorists in Syrian foreign policy and raising new questions about Syrian strategies vis-a-vis Europe in the 1980s. According to British diplomats working in the Vienna embassy in 1994, high-level Syrian support behind these people was so strong

<sup>37</sup> Richard Cummings: “RFE/RL Will Continue To Be Heard”: Carlos the Jackal and The Bombing of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, February 21, 1981 <https://about.rferl.org/article/rfe-rl-will-continue-to-be-heard-carlos-the-jackal-and-the-bombing-of-radio-free-europe-radio-liberty-february-21-1981/>

<sup>38</sup> Liskai 1992, p. 136

<sup>39</sup> Liskai 1992, p. 140.

<sup>40</sup> László Liskai: Carlos szerint a világ. Szemtől szemben a Sakállal. Robox Kft., Budapest, 2017, 221-223.

<sup>41</sup> Cable from the British Embassy in Vienna, The National Archives FCO 178/2609

<sup>42</sup> Beke 2023, 28.

<sup>43</sup> Beke 2023, 26.

<sup>44</sup> A discussion of the term at <https://coldwar.unc.edu/theme/renewed-cold-war-1980s/>

<sup>45</sup> János Honvári - Csaba Torda: Magyarország csatlakozása az IMF-hez és a Világbankhoz, 3. rész. (Hungary's Accession to the IMF and the World Bank, Part III) Archivnet 9/3, 2009



that even in that year, when the Austrian authorities arrested one of these diplomats, a certain “Summak”, on charges of terrorism, it was direct Syrian state pressure that managed to release him.<sup>41</sup>

The strong Syrian support aside, in the previous year, the Hungarians identified Gaddafi’s Libya as one of the main controllers of Carlos’ group in Budapest.<sup>42</sup> And, of course, the Yemeni connection should not be forgotten: this was the country whose passport Carlos first used when he travelled to Hungary.<sup>43</sup>

This level of involvement that is apparent retrospectively suggests that although there was a Soviet order to do so and an internationalist ideology behind it, Hungary also needed to deliver some favors to its Middle Eastern partners. It was not only Hungarian realism and internationalism fighting, but two different facets of “realism”: choosing the best partners, and delivering favors when possible. Of course, the stakes did not get lower over the course of this multi-sided game.

This also shows the explanation for the discrepancy of the narrative of the “renewed Cold War”<sup>44</sup> which supposedly raised international tensions after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, but at the same time, scholars such as Csaba Békés argue that the level of cooperation between Hungary and the West, in fact, became even more closer, with the entry of Hungary into the International Monetary Fund in 1982.<sup>45</sup> This is all in the backdrop of Carlos plotting in Hungary, supported by the Syrians and becoming more and more dangerous as time progressed. We can see that while the ever-closer integration and the renewed Cold War were present at the same time, the logic of the situation eventually forced a choice between confrontation and cooperation with the West.

# Chasing Out Carlos

Indeed, the renewed Cold War ended after a few years, according to standard narratives as well. And this is where we are circling back to our documents and the encounter at the State Department between Mark Palmer and Vence Házi, the Hungarian ambassador to the U.S. in June 1985. While the higher-level cooperation of the superpowers is dated only from several years later, this documentation of the expulsion of Carlos shows the Americans probing moves, testing the new limits, and the Hungarian/Soviet Bloc's willingness to become more understanding of Western requests. Mark Palmer himself, who delivered the news to Vence Házi, mentioned in his reminiscences compared to the 1979 nadir of US-Soviet relations: “we (the U.S.) were back into the process of trying to negotiate things and cooperate in various areas”.<sup>46</sup> The case of ejecting Carlos from Hungary was apparently a part of these slowly but consistently mellowing relations that predated the Gorbachev reformist era of the mid-1980s.

It is also very important to observe that Palmer very consistently did not push the Hungarians on all topics. He did not want a full foreign policy reverse and the ejection of all armed groups. It is very interesting to observe here that the silent game of the Cold War, where everybody is measuring what is allowed to the other and what is a red line, is getting out into the open in a very carefully circumscribed way. The Americans chased Carlos out of Hungary because of his participation in anti-Israeli terror groups since 1974, when the CIA made some (failed) arrangements to capture or kill the Venezuelan.<sup>47</sup>

Now they followed up on this topic in the field of diplomacy, but were also wary of endangering relations with Hungary, which was the most liberal and open state of the Eastern Bloc. Hungary had to tread warily as it negotiated a path between Moscow and the west. But the western powers also had to be careful not to ask for too much. Everything

had a fine-tuned scale. In 1984, Palmer already mentioned the Carlos issue to Házi in general terms, according to information passed to the internal security, but by our record we can see that in 1985, he pressed a bit harder, and openly asked for his expulsion.<sup>48</sup> It was a finely-calibrated diplomatic dance.

Mark Palmer pointedly named SWAPO, the Namibian guerilla movement, among the “allowed” movements, given that American support to SWAPO's enemies, the South Africans, was low-key and non-transparent. However, 1985 was also a period when Hungarian aid reached PLO terrorists, and Salvadoran guerrillas as well, who were hunted in the Central American jungles by U.S.-trained forces and AC-130 flying gunships of the US Air Force taking off from Panama. The American even took the gesture to name the PLO alongside SWAPO as an “accepted” group that Hungary understandably shelters. The American thus acknowledged that Hungary and the U.S. are actually on different sides of quite a hot war as well, and Palmer openly allowed for this fact. Consequently, he did not push all in: he instead wanted a relatively minor, symbolic move from the Hungarians with Carlos—one measure of small pressure behind the scenes, not dragging foreign policy fights out in the open, even if it was about international terrorism.

As we have seen in the case of the 1979 car chase, when Carlos opened fire in Budapest on Hungarian state security agents, it is probable that the Hungarians were even relieved by the U.S. pressure. They could show the Soviets that basing Carlos, a dangerous and uncontrollable terrorist, in Hungary was damaging Soviet Bloc interests in the Western world at a time when the Cold War was thawing. The Hungarians were also known to play both sides of the Cold War. While they shipped weaponry and trained guerillas for the anti-apartheid wars of South Africa, Hungarian tankers at least once stopped on the other side of the frontline,

<sup>46</sup> The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project Interview with Mark Palmer <https://www.adst.org/OH%20TOCs/Palmer,%20Mark.toc.pdf>

<sup>47</sup> Follain 1998, chapter 6

<sup>48</sup> József Beke - Gabriella Hegyes: “A terrorrelhárítás kezdetei Magyarországon - A C-79-es dosszié” [The beginnings of counterterrorism in Hungary - the C-79 dossier] *Terror & Elhárítás* 2015/1, 1-31. [https://epa.oszk.hu/02900/02932/00007/pdf/EPA02932\\_terror\\_elharitas\\_2015\\_1\\_01.pdf](https://epa.oszk.hu/02900/02932/00007/pdf/EPA02932_terror_elharitas_2015_1_01.pdf)

<sup>49</sup> Zsuzsanna Borvendég: Az impexek kora. Külkereskedelmi fedéssel folytatott pénzkivonás a „népgazdaságból” a Kádár-rendszer idején az állambiztonsági iratok tükrében. (Age of the “impexes”. Money extraction from the “economy of the people” with the cover of foreign commerce during the Kádár period in light of national security documents) Nemzeti Emlékezet Bizottsága, Budapest, 2017, 140.

<sup>50</sup> HU-MNL-OL-XIX-J-1-j-1985 series, Box 30, No. 003681.

apartheid South Africa, to sell sanctioned Iranian oil.<sup>49</sup> Hungary thus managed to break two international embargos: one against Iran, and the other against the recipient country South Africa, against which the sanctions were supported by both sides of the Cold War. Hungary was looking out for itself in the first place, and it meant circumventing classic Cold War alignments as well, when it was possible.

After the warnings issued through Vencel Házi, international events took center stage, which apparently contributed to the Jackal's expulsion. Days after the second conversation in which Palmer singled out Carlos as a problem for Hungarian-American relations, on June 14, 1985, Trans World Airlines No. 847 en route from Cairo to San Diego was hijacked by Hezbollah terrorists. A group of the passengers were kept as hostages up to June 30, when the Israeli government gave in and released 700 Shia prisoners as demanded. The well-publicised crisis captivated the world media, and U.S. officials stiffened.

Házi took note quickly. "After the closure of the hostage crisis (...), they [the USA] will request closer cooperation from the Socialist countries in the fight against terrorism, and will consider economic sanctions as well if we don't show proper readiness for cooperation," he messaged Budapest on June 22.<sup>50</sup> He did not reference the Carlos issue openly here so as to not be seen as pointing fingers at the state security service which was responsible for the Venezuelan. However, it is quite clear why Házi was detailing the American posture on terrorism. Carlos needed to go, and when the Venezuelan terrorist returned to Budapest in September from Syria, he was told to leave and never to return. He left the Hungarian capital on September 15, 1985 for good.<sup>51</sup>

It is also notable how the continued flight of Carlos from Hungary to Syria, to Sudan, and then his eventual capture in Khartoum on August 14, 1994 follows the trajectory of how the global unipolar moment took shape and, from a security perspective, how essential it was that the "rogue regimes" of the global South accepted Western norms for a couple of decades. After Budapest, Carlos landed in Damascus, but he was chased out when the Syrians sided with the U.S. in the Gulf War against the hated enemy, Iraq.<sup>52</sup> Sudan, in the end, simply sold Carlos as a gesture to the French. Carlos went to dependable Hungary to evade such cases as the RAF terrorists in 1978 in Bulgaria, but he could not outrun the global influence of the West, which chased him through the world, landing him in a French prison eventually in 1994.

This influence may have been the focal point that made possible his arrest as well, as declassified British sources reveal. The DGSE apparently told the Sudanese security services that "they now had nothing to gain from letting Carlos stay in Sudan; better for them to hand him over to the French".<sup>53</sup> They did so, eventually, making possible for a French team to make the arrest. The Sudanese, strongly disowned him, saying that hiding Carlos in Sudan was made possible by a "plot by an Arab country to give the impression that Sudan was a haven for terrorists".<sup>54</sup> The Stasi archives revealed evidence against him as well, and as for Budapest, not only did a Hungarian officer, József Varga, testify against Carlos,<sup>55</sup> but before his capture, the French received secret materials from the Hungarians as well on his activities, as revealed by British diplomatic conversations with a French judge on the case already in 1994.

<sup>51</sup>Liszkai 1992, 154.

<sup>52</sup>Schröm 2007, 259

<sup>53</sup>Telegram of Mark Runacres at the Khartoum Embassy of the United Kingdom to 'Mr. Rycroft' at the Foreign Office, London, 1994.08.25. The National Archives FCO 178/2609

<sup>54</sup>Telegram of J. P. Wilks at the Khartoum Embassy of the United Kingdom to Fergus Cochrane-Dyet at the Foreign Office, 1994.08.23., The National Archives FCO 178/2609

<sup>55</sup>Beke-Hegyes 2015, 27.

<sup>56</sup>Telegram of Michael Arthur at the Paris Embassy of the United Kingdom to Robert Flower, Security Co-Ordination Department of the Foreign Office, 1994.09.09. The National Archives FCO 178/2609. . Years later, the judge, Jean Louis Bruguière confirmed the existence of the Hungarian disclosure to László Liszkai as well. See the clip in the documentary The Jackal, the Rat, the Kádár and the Laci (English subtitles available) [https://youtu.be/RLjUMzcYAuY?si=fVYoN\\_hL38jMDL-J&t=2352](https://youtu.be/RLjUMzcYAuY?si=fVYoN_hL38jMDL-J&t=2352)

<sup>57</sup>Liszkai 1992, p. 156.

“There is photographic and documentary evidence, transcripts of bugged conversations, manuscript notes by Carlos, etc., and direct lines of instruction for Carlos from Damascus. Some of this was passed through the Stasi, and there was also a KGB link. Other governments were implicated too, e.g. Libya”,

the French judge detailed to his UK diplomatic interlocutor about the expansive nature of the material.<sup>56</sup>

This chase, which would push Carlos further away by international pressure that ended in Sudan started in Hungary as well in the first place. “They were blown away by the winds of change,”<sup>57</sup> observes László Liskai about the fate of Carlos and his group. It is indeed true: not only did the winds of the international thaw chase out Carlos and his comrades, but their expulsion was in fact among the first minor tremors in the grand epilogue that closed a tragic chapter in Central and Eastern European history.





The U.S. Embassy at Liberty Square, Budapest in early 1988. (Fortepan / National Archives)



## Epilogue: The Flight of the Aardvark

The desert night was lit up by the impact of the bombs. Anti-aircraft missiles were searching for their targets. It was April 14, 1986, and the U.S. was out for blood against international terrorism and its supporters. Nine days earlier, a bomb had blown up a disco in West Berlin, killing three people, including two American soldiers. Washington blamed the Libyan strongman Muammar Gaddafi, and on that night, retribution arrived in the Southern Mediterranean. A-7 bombers took off from carriers in the Gulf of Sirte, while bigger F-111 “Aardvark” bombers arrived from the United Kingdom. Altogether, U.S. planes dropped over sixty metric tons of munitions over Libyan airfields and military installations. Gaddafi’s air force was decimated. Dozens of military personnel were killed. A U.S. F-111 was hit by a Kub missile and crashed with all hands lost.

The Soviet Bloc would never miss an opportunity to take the side of the Third World, and this case was no exception, even if it was about international terrorism. On April 20, the *Népszava*, a daily newspaper of the Popular Front state organization, paraded voices to the “public opinion” denouncing the “aggression against Libya”. Supposedly, 6500 workers of the Borsod Chemical Works, the Popular Front Committee of Pécs, and insurance company workers at the sleepy northeastern town of Encs all telegraphed their official denunciations against the U.S. to the press.<sup>58</sup>

But this was just the customary theater for showing Hungary’s “internationalist credentials”. While the Hungarian media screeched, the U.S. knew that behind the curtains, the cogs were moving in its favor. Hungary had shown its cards in the game of geo-politics. It was retreating from the support of violent anti-imperialism, one terrorist at a time. Carlos was now exiled in Syria. He had left his Soviet Bloc hideout for good and was embarked on his multi-year flight from the long arm of Western justice.

The departure of the “celebrity terrorist” was a symbolic offering to Western integration, showing that Hungary would not oppose U.S. goals in this regard. The contrast with countries such as Libya, true state sponsors of terrorism, was sharp. Colonel Gaddafi had ordered and paid for PFLP’s OPEC operation in Vienna in 1975, ensuring Libya was included on the U.S. list of terrorist sponsors.<sup>59</sup> After pushing Carlos out of the Eastern Bloc, the U.S. continued its antiterrorist crusade, and Hungary from then on did little more than shout on the sidelines. By 1986, liberation movements and adventures with rogue regimes were on the way out from Eastern Europe’s foreign policy playbook, and the twilight of Hungary’s active phase in the Kremlin’s “global bid for power” approached.

<sup>58</sup> “Közvéleményünk elítéli a Líbia elleni agressziót” *Népszava* 1986.04.16

<sup>59</sup> Follain 1998, p. 219.

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