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Problems of Criticism of the Communist Poland's Security Service (SB) Files as Historical Sources

Problemy krytyki teczek SB jako źródeł historycznych¹

<https://doi.org/10.34766/fetr.v48i4.965>

Abstract: Despite the passage of 20 years since the opening of the archives of the former SB, historians have not developed crucial principles of criticism for dealing with SB files as historical sources. This oversight is conducive to the so-called playing with files, and consequently is inimical to both historical narrative and social stability at large. Among researchers and publicists, an affirmative attitude towards the SB files has been created, causing the need for critical scrutiny of the files themselves to be ignored.

Researchers habitually ignore the requirement to separate the theoretical-ideological and rhetorical layers of SB operational files. They also neglect to study the credibility of their authors.

Rafał Łatka's justification for the affirmative attitude to the SB files is here shown to be logically erroneous, and the affirmative attitude to the SB files is contrary to the rational concept of the historical source and to known examples of the files' lack of credibility.

Several ways of creating checklists of questions to examine the credibility of SB files are proposed here. Crucially, was the work of officers and their superiors in the field of interest to the researcher focused on efficiency or on the statistics of results? Further proposals suggest questions about the internal control of the case under investigation.

In particular, this article shows that it is not enough to state the fact of registration of a given person by SB as a collaborator as evidence of their collaboration; it is necessary to demonstrate specific cooperation. It also shows that the reliability of a note within the SB files decreases exponentially as a function of the number of intermediaries between it and the facts.

There is also a pressing need to ask about the intentions of the officers preparing reports, which could be related to their professional careers, the expectations of superiors, the need to demonstrate results, etc. There is also a need to investigate deviations of the examined case from the ideal instructional pattern.

Studies of the reliability of files also have an ethical aspect. Studies that may affect the reputation of the persons concerned should meet the highest methodological standards and be guided by the principle of *in dubio pro reo*.

Keywords: good reputation, critics, methodology of history, communist security service, credibility

Abstrakt: Mimo upływu 20 lat od otwarcia archiwów dawnej SB, historycy nie wypracowali zasad krytyki teczek SB jako źródeł historycznych, co sprzyja tzw. grze teczkami, a w konsekwencji destrukcji narracji historycznej i życia społecznego. Wśród badaczy i publicystów wytworzył się afirmacyjny stosunek do akt SB powodujący pomijanie ich krytyki.

Akta operacyjne SB jako źródła adresowane wymagają oddzielenia warstwy teoretyczno-ideologicznej i retorycznej przy pomocy odpowiednich kwestionariuszy pytań. Jako źródła pośrednie wymagają zbadania wiarygodności ich autorów przy pomocy innych kwestionariuszy pytań. Obydwa wymogi z reguły są pomijane przez badaczy.

¹ Artykuł w języku polskim dostępny jest na stronie:

<https://www.stowarzyszeniefidesetratio.pl/Presentations0/2021-4Szewc2.pdf>

Rafał Łatka podał uzasadnienie afirmacyjnego stosunku do akt SB. Wykazano, że uzasadnienie to jest logicznie błędne, a afirmacyjny stosunek do akt esbeckich jest sprzeczny z dynamiczną koncepcją źródła historycznego J. Topolskiego i z przykładami braku wiarygodności tych akt.

Zaproponowano kilka dróg tworzenia kwestionariuszy do badania wiarygodności autorów akt SB. Pytania muszą dotyczyć konkretnych autorów i wybranej dziedziny badań określonej przez badacza. Jako pierwsze zaproponowano pytanie: Czy praca funkcjonariuszy i ich przełożonych w interesującej badacza dziedzinie była nastawiona na efektywność czy na statystykę wyników? Kolejne propozycje sugerują pytania o wewnętrzną kontrolę badanej sprawy, która powinna być potwierdzona notatkami pokontrolnymi. Ich brak należy interpretować jako brak kontroli i zmniejszoną wiarygodność niekontrolowanych autorów.

Następne propozycje pytań dotyczą sytuacji, gdy stawia się źródłom pytania o czyjąś współpracę z SB. Uzasadniono, że nie wystarczy stwierdzenie faktu rejestracji danej osoby przez SB w charakterze współpracownika, bo trzeba wykazać konkretną współpracę. Trzeba też uwzględnić informacje pozaźródłowe i na przykład postawić pytanie: Czy usytuowanie badanej osoby pozwalało jej pozyskać przypisane jej przez SB informacje?

Uzasadniono prawidłowość, że wiarygodność notatki maleje w sposób wykładniczy w funkcji liczby pośredników pomiędzy nią a faktami.

Wskazano na potrzebę pytania o intencje funkcjonariuszy sporządzających notatki, które mogły być związane z karierą zawodową, oczekiwaniami przełożonych, potrzebą wykazania się rezultatami itp.

Wskazano też potrzebę zbadania odstępstw badanej sprawy od idealnego instrukcyjnego wzorca.

Badania wiarygodności teczek mają swój aspekt etyczny. Badania mogące zagrozić dobrej sławie osób, których one dotyczą, powinny spełniać najwyższe standardy metodologiczne, kierować się zasadą *in dubio pro reo* i w razie braku dostatecznego potwierdzenia hipotez powinny kończyć się konkluzją o braku podstaw do rozstrzygnięcia obciążającego te osoby.

Słowa kluczowe: dobra sława, krytyka, metodologia historii, SB, wiarygodność

Introduction

Every scientific activity is associated with criticism. It is necessary to criticize the data obtained in the practice of any given scientific discipline, to criticize the theories formulated in the discipline, and to critically evaluate its methods. Even within a purely formal science criticism is essential, although in such a context it is limited to checking the accuracy of proofs. Without the continuous presence and scrutiny of criticism, there is no science.

In the field of history, this means recognizing and critically evaluating sources, as well as scrutinising their interpretation and the conclusions drawn from this interpretation. Within contemporary discussions of the history of the Polish SB and its archives, this requirement for continued critical scrutiny of sources and their interpretation should form the centre of a methodological debate. Some historians have accused their colleagues of wanting to introduce „into scientific circulation even more new documents, miscellanea, contributions, without care of their critical analysis and workshop processing” in their use of SB sources (Suleja, 2008, p. 514). Others have also pointed out „failure to adhere to the standard rules adopted in the interpretation of historical sources (internal and external criticism, establishment of a list of questions, the use of contextual knowledge, including historiographical findings, etc.)” (Brzechczyn, 2014, s. 278).

Unfortunately, this practice has a destructive influence on interdisciplinary research, as illustrated by Hanna Karp’s, ScD, work on media control in the Polish People’s Republic,

which focuses on the editorial board of *Przegląd Katolicki* (2018). Prof. Ryszard Michalski, a historian and political scientist from the Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń, in reviewing her work, pointed out no methodological problems with her approach. H. Karp, despite consulting professional historians in the course of her work, cultivates a form of “scissors-and-paste history”² in her use of SB sources (Collingwood, 2014, pp. 257-258). Not being a historian, Karp effectively obtained the key SB files she needed from the Institute of National Remembrance (Polish: Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, IPN), became acquainted with their terminology and codes and somehow managed to read these files without a detailed critical appraisal of their context. She did not, however, raise any serious questions in her research regarding the credibility of their authors.³ Her narrative draws upon a literal and selective consideration of the SB materials she found. This narrative is further slightly modified by the interspersal of H. Karp’s own hypotheses throughout the text, which are generally unverified within the narrative and are instead treated as justified theses. H. Karp’s hypotheses about the SB’s attempts to set the editors of *Przegląd Katolicki* at variance with the authorities of the Church as well as other manipulations performed by the SB are interesting, but they ultimately remain only hypotheses, lacking any substantive verification within the text. In particular, Karp treats the hypothetical secret cooperation of three outstanding priests of the Archdiocese of Warsaw with the SB as simply factual and writes about it with an air of sensation, as though this unfounded speculation were an epochal discovery. Her conclusions, however, are as questionable as her methods of working with Secret Service sources.⁴ The blameworthy example of H. Karp’s book thus offers a lens, albeit an extreme and indeed almost caricatured one, into the problem of uncritical treatment of SB files as historical sources, a problem that also affects professional historians.

I have obtained a partial explanation for this situation from my conversations with other historians. It is clear from these conversations that the vast majority of Polish historians examining the files of the former SB are unaware of SB’s rules for conducting and recording operational work, which very often leads to errors both in establishing the facts and in the ensuing assessment of their utility as sources. Despite the passage of more than 20 years from the moment when historians began examining the SB files, very few publications have

² Collingwood defines with this expression a method of practicing history that was valid until the Middle Ages and consisted in arbitrarily combining historical evidence into one whole, without critical analysis. Then the sources rule over the historian, not the historian over the sources.

³ Whenever this text refers to the reliability of sources, it is always about the credibility of their authors, i.e. the so-called informants (cf. Topolski, 2016, p. 110).

⁴ Karp’s book, *Media totalitarne...* (2018), has other serious methodological deficiencies. There is no comparison of the SB sources with other sources, for example, the archive of *Przegląd Katolicki*. The author, uncritically referring to what she found in the SB files, does not notice any shortcomings of these files, e.g. internal contradictions. Karp is a competent media expert. I had the opportunity to get to know her very accurate expertise of the activities of a private television station. However, her study *Media totalitarne...* (Karp, 2018), is unsuccessful from the point of view of its methodology, and dubious methodology leads to dubious conclusions.

appeared that focus on the methodological challenges posed by these studies. One could even get the impression that historians studying the SB files do not have any methodological problems. Only in recent years have questions begun to be raised on the difficulties of interpreting SB sources. The lack of an established and reliable methodology on how to work with the SB sources has contributed to premature journalistic publications defaming key public figures from the period, often from the circle of the Catholic Church, who, without sufficient justification, were treated in these publications as collaborators of the SB. I am referring to such figures as Fr. Konrad Hejmo OP and Archbishop Stanisław Wielgus. In the case of Father Hejmo, the IPN prepared a report, the authors of which state that it does not solve this exceptionally complicated matter (Grajewski, Machcewicz, Żaryn, 2005, p. 65). In the case of Archbishop Wielgus, I have yet to discover a robust critical study of the SB files in question, and some media reports indicate no evidence of his actual cooperation with the SB, despite being registered as a so-called Secret Collaborator (Polish: Tajny Współpracownik, hereafter abbreviated TW) (cf. Cenckiewicz, 2015).

In both cases, we are dealing with a media or political game played out with the SB's files, although delving into the precise aims and parameters of this game falls beyond the scope of the present study. Both cases of media publications, due to the lack of criticism of the SB sources, validate this approach. Disregarding the need for a nuanced critical reading of these files, they wrongly suggest that simply finding the relevant SB documents is sufficient for revealing the truth.⁵ Promoting such beliefs is conducive to a further game with the SB files, moving what the Secret Security once wrote into a space where it is no longer subjected to professional criticism. In this new, de-professionalised space of interpretation the SB files instead contribute to the antagonisation of social groups, the dismantling of social life, and the discouragement of historical thinking. In this way, we become an ahistorical society with no origin. No journalism can replace historical research based on a reliable methodology, and publicists should refrain from hasty opinions until the relevant files of the SB are critically examined.

Włodzimierz Suleja and Krzysztof Brzechczyn point out the reasons for the above-mentioned methodological shortcomings in the scientific community of historians. "The massive introduction of sources once produced by the apparatus of repression into scientific circulation following the establishment of the IPN" (Brzechczyn, 2014, p. 277) gave rise to a disregard for methodological shortcomings in working with such sources. This was at least in part due to an "erroneous belief according to which the introduction of the sources made by the apparatus of repression of the People's Republic of Poland into circulation within the historiography is in and of itself enough to foment a historiographical revolution." (Brzechczyn, 2014, p. 278). Some have justified their actions in this field by overinterpreting the obvious statement that „the SB did not usually falsify their materials” (Suleja, 2008, p.

⁵ J. Topolski called such beliefs a myth of historical sources (cf. Topolski, 2016, pp. 111-112).

514), a point to which I will return later. Historians were subject to unprecedented social expectations, demanding that the historiographic community both show manifestations of social resistance in the Polish People's Republic, yet also expose the system of totalitarian dictatorship, and this was a key contributing factor in the relaxation of rules governing usage of SB sources. Even the Institute of National Remembrance, "which mass-produced scientific works in accordance with the calendar of consecutive year-round anniversaries of groundbreaking events in the history of the Polish People's Republic, was also unable to resist this social demand" (Brzechczyn, 2012, p. 75). Moreover, in some cases "the actions of researchers were undertaken [...] for the benefit of the political order, using random and partial findings in a utilitarian, ad hoc game for power" (Suleja, 2008, p. 514).

K. Brzechczyn indicates two main mechanisms responsible for the above-mentioned disregard for the rules of the professional historian's methods (cf. Brzechczyn, 2012, p. 73). The first consists of the fact that the research division of the Institute of National Remembrance from the beginning took the shape of an office, not a historical and historiographic school, where there would be a natural intergenerational transmission of experiences through teacher-student working relationships. Some historians has asserted in private conversations that in 1999, when the staff of the Institute of National Remembrance was being assembled, the research department was almost entirely made up of very junior personnel, very often at the beginning of their research careers. The subsequent actions of that department have indicated that they were not yet prepared to work with such sources as the files of the former communist Security Service, a formalized institution that used its own formalized language. The relative inexperience of the Institute of National Remembrance research team, combined with their desire to make rapid achievements in their investigations into the functioning of the communist secret service prompted an affirmative attitude towards the files of the SB, which turned out to be binding in the Institute of National Remembrance after some time, and which very naturally led to the methodological errors.

The second mechanism results from the novelty of the SB sources, for which the historical community lacks clear rules or heuristics to assist in their interpretation. The first mechanism perpetuates the second, because with no masters the principles for recognizing and criticizing these sources, as well as acceptable ways of interpreting them cannot be formulated. There is a need for masters who will formulate principles and then pass them on to students, who will in turn develop them. The lack of masters makes it impossible to work out heuristic rules of interpretation.

1. Recognition of the Operational Documents of the SB As Historical Sources

The methodology of Jerzy Topolski (1928-1998), who formulated the foundations of the Poznań school of historical methodology, remains the most common within

contemporary Polish historiography. Topolski adopted the Marxist conviction that at the center of history stands a man of action (Domańska, 2016, p. 15) and was considered a Marxist, although his methodological school combined elements of positivism and philosophy of the Lwów–Warsaw School. Topolski's underlying philosophical beliefs do not, however, compromise his historical methodology, which remains fundamentally reliable in contemporary Polish historiography. From the point of view of a general methodology of the sciences, it is impeccable, and I can only express admiration for the versatility of the mind of its creator. I take advantage of it in this study.

Historical research begins with the researcher's questions: What happened? Why did it happen? What regularities occurred in the course of historical development? These questions guide the search for information, i.e. the historical sources and the contextual knowledge. On this basis, answers are formulated. They, in turn, often lead to further questions, forming a kind of feedback loop.

The classification of sources divides them into direct and indirect. According to Brzechczyn, "direct sources should «directly» reflect the past reality, whereas indirect sources should do it through an informant" (2014, p. 268). This categorisation intersects with a further distinction between addressed and unaddressed sources. As Topolski puts it, „The criterion of the division in this case is the existence or non-existence of the author of the source (informant), who addresses their information to a recipient known to them (to a greater or lesser extent). This recipient can, of course, also be a more general sense of posterity." (2016, p. 115). Brzechczyn adds: „The intention of communicating information implies that addressed sources contain an element of persuasion that is addressed to the audience, whereas the source itself includes the interpretation of information that it carries" (2014, p. 269).

According to this classification, the operational files of the SB (for example agent denunciations) are indirect addressed sources (cf. Brzechczyn, 2014, p. 269). Their authors are SB informers or officers writing reports on information they have obtained. The addressees of such files are one or more officers or superiors of the officer drawing up the note or, in general, those who were to have access to it within the SB. Brzechczyn proposes to extend the classification of sources made by Topolski by the division into indirect sources addressed in either an unlimited or a limited manner (cf. 2012, p. 63). Sources addressed in an unlimited manner are, for example, publications from popular publishers or the press. The author, or the situation in which they act, may however limit the audience. Also, the source itself, due to perhaps a narrow specialization of its language or content, might only be understood by specialists, and as such only they can be its recipients. In this case, we are talking about sources that are addressed in a limited way. According to this extended classification, the SB operational files constitute indirect sources addressed in a limited manner.

A historian, beginning their work with a source, must read and decipher it on the basis of contextual knowledge external to the source (cf. Topolski, 2016, pp. 102-103). The fact that the source is addressed to a small group of people makes its language more hermetic and difficult to decode. In the case of SB documents, there is a specific terminological code that must be known before reading them (cf. Brzechczyn, 2014, p. 271). This presents fewer issues to modern historians as this issue is discussed extensively in Filip Musiał's *Podręcznik Bezpieki* (2015). However, the specificity of the indirect addressed sources is complex, and has been explained thoroughly in the work of Brzechczyn as follows: "[Their] narrative structure (...) is comprised of *informative, rhetoric, and ideological-theoretical* layers. The ideological-theoretical layer covers the interpretation and/or the explanation of facts presented by the source author. This narrative aspect controls the remaining rhetorical and informative layers as well. This control aims to select and hierarchize information carried by the historical source and adequately to apply rhetorical clues that are intended to convince a potential reader of the document to interpret the reality presented by the author (authors) of the source. This interpreter is the historian, who uses [checklist of questions,] knowledge obtained from other sources[, contextual knowledge] and various heuristic procedures to strip the source of the theoretical-ideological and rhetorical layers and obtains information regarding relevant historical facts." (Brzechczyn, 2014, pp. 269-270; 2012, pp. 62-63)

So far, I have not come across an attempt to formulate the above-mentioned checklist of questions to separate the rhetorical and theoretical-ideological layer in the case of the SB operational files treated as historical sources.

2. Credibility Assessment of the Authors of the SB Files

Apart from recognizing the source, decoding, and separating the persuasive layer (in the case of the addressed sources), with respect to indirect sources, both external and internal criticism is necessary. External criticism is a study of a source's authenticity, which in the case of the SB files does not pose any particular difficulties to historians, while internal criticism is a study of the author's credibility (called an informant in this particular historiographic methodology). This turns out to be much more difficult. Investigating the credibility of the informant requires the consideration of „whether he is telling the truth in a given case” (Topolski, 2016, p. 116). According to Topolski, we check the credibility of an informant by examining whether they are objective and whether they are a competent observer of their own reality. If so, all their verifiable information can be positively verified. Moreover, on the basis of our knowledge of the informant, we can examine whether „he wanted to, and could, tell the truth, that is, the truth as understood by the informant” (Topolski, 2016, p. 116). This would include, for example, whether the truth was in fact available to them due to their positioning in a given situation.

Such a separate examination of the author's credibility in each situation is troublesome. For example Rafał Łatka, ScD, a historian, takes the view that the credibility of the SB files is high. This position renders redundant the credibility test mentioned above. As Łatka puts it: „In the broadly defined public sphere the prevailing image is that the credibility of the documentation of the former apparatus of repression is very low, but it is a view not based on knowledge of this category of sources, being instead a journalistic judgment expressed most often by people who do not have elementary knowledge about the functioning of the apparatus of repression. The credibility of the communist security service files is high for many reasons. This is evidenced by the adopted system of work of the repressive apparatus focused on efficiency, control of the operational work of Security Service (i. e. both the SB and its predecessor the UB [Polish abbreviations]) officers by their superiors or, finally, the comparison of messages obtained from human intelligence sources with other sources of operational knowledge” (2016, p. 222). However, Łatka's assertions invite the following serious questions: on what basis can it be argued that in every situation operational work was focused on efficiency and control, and that in each case information was corroborated with other sources of operational knowledge? How do we know that each and every SB informant or officer did not distort the information provided? If this were the case, then SB informants and officers would have shown unprecedented morale and rectitude, and the SB could be considered an extremely reliable institution. Łatka commits a logical fallacy of division here, implicitly suggesting that the control system applied in the Security Service guaranteed that every case and every document was subject to it, and thus their files are all equally reliable. Crucially, what is true of the whole does not mean that the same can be said about all its elements (for example, the fact that the USA is a rich country does not mean that every individual American is rich).

Here is a simple example that refutes Łatka's view: historians agree that it would normally be futile to look in the SB files for evidence of crimes committed within the institution, so in this respect at the very least these files must be unreliable (cf. Leszczyński, 2006, p. 40-41; Bereszyński, 2012, p. 426). In general, these facts were omitted or distorted in the documents, praising the efficiency of the officers or euphemistically referring to them as „special operations”, without specifying what they consisted of (e.g. „... documentation X was copied as a result of special operations”). Many records of this kind can be found in daily reports to the Ministry of the Interior, where the term „special operation” could mean, for example, burglary.

Łatka (214), in the above-quoted text, places all sources on a single scale, between low and high credibility, in particular making the questionable decision to place all SB sources on the side of high credibility. However, as Brzechczyn points out, “opponents in the debate regarding the “low” or “high” reliability of the archival records of the apparatus of repression adopt several common assumptions. They implicitly assume that the reliability of

documents is a constant property of historical sources and this property is independent of the problem under discussion or the research questions posed. I contend that this assumption is unfounded" (ibidem, pp. 264-265) according to Jerzy Topolski's concept of the dynamic historical source. As such, the credibility of the documentation of the former repression apparatus is neither low nor high, but needs to be examined separately for each research question and problem under consideration.

Łatka (2016) published his above-quoted methodological article four years after the also quoted here article by Brzechczyn (2012; 2014), presenting his views on the reliability of the entire category of Secret Security sources in isolation from the multitude of questions we can ask them. This view is contrary to Topolski's methodology, as mentioned by Brzechczyn, because any given source (or the author of a source) may have many degrees of credibility depending on the questions we pose to it. A trustworthy scientist, when proclaiming their new methodological view, should refer to the achievements in this field so far and, if necessary, criticize them. Łatka's implicit questioning of the Topolskian dynamic concept of the historical source is in no way justified, even though Topolski's concept could be considered part of the methodological „primer" of a Polish historian.⁶

The above approach to SB documents propounded by Łatka can lead to reliable results only if the credibility of these files does not raise any significant doubts, as in, for example, the case of an examination of cooperation with the SB of the TW „Bolek"⁷, or when direct sources (legal documents about the SB and its internal orders, instructions, directives, etc.) are examined, which do not require a credibility test. The above methodology has no guarantee of success when examining files less compliant with the instructions of the Security Service, the reliability of which raises some doubts. I have not yet found any individual works by Łatka dealing with these types of SB operational files.⁸ However, if

⁶ "Within history, Topolski's methodological reflection is considered to be the foundation of the entire Polish post-war theory of historiography" (Malczewski, 2009, p. 89).

⁷ According to media reports, these files contained a handwritten commitment to cooperation (IPN, 2017), signed reports that were used operationally to repress the indicated persons (Zaranek, 2016; Kłeczek, 2017), there were receipts for receipt of remuneration (IPN, 2017), and at the same time the authenticity of TW „Bolek" signatures was confirmed by court experts (IPN, 2017a).

⁸ Together with F. Musiał, he wrote a book about the operational dialogue of the Security Service with Cardinal Henryk Gulbinowicz (Łatka, Musiał, 2020). Gulbinowicz was the highest hierarch in the Church with whom the SB conducted operational talks, so it can be expected that this matter was under the closely-supervised control of superiors, and therefore these files go beyond the usual standards of reliability. In this book, however, one does not uncritically accept everything that the officers write in the files. For example, officer Józef Maj describes the Cardinal as an „operational contact", which would mean cooperation with the SB. However, the book states that this was an overstatement by the officer in question, because „on the basis of the preserved source material, it should be clearly stated that Fr. Gulbinowicz was never a human intelligence source of SB" (Łatka, Musiał, 2020, p. 89). It was reported by F. Musiał on November 26, 2020 at the Janusz Kurtyka Educational Center „Przystanek Historia" of the Institute of National Remembrance in Warsaw, so it is possible that this is his own contribution to the book. In his statements to the media, R. Łatka attributed the cooperation with the Security Service to the Cardinal, which was very negatively assessed by the reviewers of the book: „Unfortunately, we are sadly forced to note that the rules of

someone wished to draw conclusions from such Secret Security sources, adhering to the affirmative methodology of R. Łatka, it would be advisable to dissuade them from it, because they would come to unreliable findings.

To test the credibility of a source, it is necessary to identify a surface layer in its information structure that is readable without any analysis and sign layer, i.e. an intentional message to the addressee. We must also identify and distinguish a symptom layer, which constitutes involuntary information about the author contained in the source. For example, the sign layer may be a deliberate attempt to convince the addressee that the author is in perfect control of the situation being reported, and the sign layer may involuntarily reveal the author's beliefs (cf. Brzechczyn, 2014, p. 266). The symptom layer gives information about the author, whilst the sign layer gives information about their intentions, so both can assist in testing the credibility of the author. Moreover, although these layers within a text do not speak directly about historical facts, they sometimes allow us to infer something about the facts of a given historical event or situation.

With this framework clearly established, we can now return to the common opinion that the „SB did not usually falsify their materials” (Suleja, 2008, p. 513). The SB as an institution and its operation were defined by legal and administrative acts, by regulations and instructions. In the documents constituting any institution, it would be implausible that we should find records of intentional fraud and falsification of internal documents. We will not find, for example, an order that the First Division has to mislead the Fourth Division of a given institution. If the secret services have been officially given the task of misleading a person, group or institution, this would not apply to their own organs. It is a banal truth that any institution, as an abstract legal entity, does not mislead itself. On the other hand, the individual employees of any institution may be interested in misleading their colleagues, for example by hiding their shortcomings or misconducts through fictitious reporting that magnifies their achievements, by bypassing control mechanisms, etc. Experience teaches us that such phenomena occur in every institution and it would be naive to think that the SB was somehow immune to this.

If SB materials were not destroyed, scientists could verify them and draw probable conclusions. One could finally verify or falsify the thesis that „the SB did not usually falsify their materials” (Suleja, 2008, p. 513). However, the analysis of the SB files indicates that before archiving the materials were „cleaned” and only a limited portion of the total documents produced can now be found in the current archives of the Institute of National Remembrance. We know little about the criteria according to which documents were selected in SB files before 1989 (cf. Koller, 2012, p. 334). It might be inferred that these were

impartiality and reliability were broken by one of the co-authors of the selection, Rafał Łatka, ScD. As a result of his media statements, the public space received extremely unfavourable opinions about the Cardinal, in the reviewed publication given in the form of hypotheses, there (in the mass media) spoken ex cathedra as proven truths” (Polak, Suleja, 2021, p. 335).

documents that were either not very important, or perhaps inconvenient for the SB officers. A key example is the programmatic destruction of the files of Group „D”, i.e. Division VI of Department IV of the Ministry of Internal Affairs (Operational Group for Special Disintegration Tasks) (cf. Lasota, 2003). This group did not keep operational records, destroying all documents immediately after completing the tasks commissioned directly by the director of the Department (Lasota, 2003, p. 32). One of its bosses was Grzegorz Piotrowski (Lasota, 2003, p. 38), who, after the murder of Fr. Jerzy Popiełuszko, was found guilty by the court and sentenced to 25 years imprisonment. The murders of priests associated with the democratic opposition in the Polish People’s Republic are also attributed to the activities of Group „D” and other units of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, most notably Sylwester Zych, Roman Kotlarz, Stefan Niedzielak, Stanisław Suchowolec, Antoni Kij, Stanisław Kowalczyk and Stanisław Palimąka. It is, however, very possible that this will never be proven due to the destruction of the relevant files (cf. Lasota, 2003, p. 28).

In light of this example, the thesis that the „SB did not, as a rule, falsify its materials” appears increasingly untenable. I believe that destroying materials not included in the destruction reports (cf. Koller, 2012, p. 334), along with creating new tables of contents and destroying old lists together with the omitted documents was a deliberate attempt to distort reality.

3. How Can We Create a Checklists of Questions for Testing the Reliability of File Authors?

The authors of the SB files were either informants who wrote notes themselves, which was recommended, or officers who were supposed to give faithful accounts on the reports of informants and information from other sources (cf. Musiał, 2015, pp. 153-154). By asking a specific question of such a source, we define the field within which we seek information. To test the credibility of an author is to answer questions about their statements and about themselves: are their statements in a given area true? Did they know the truth in the given field of study, and did they want to convey it? We must deduce our answers from the sources that we place in the crossfire of research questions.

To propose the first research questions, I will use the interesting premises from the above-mentioned erroneous reasoning of Łatka. However, departing from the problematic methodology that produced these errors, these premises should always be relativized to specific authors (SB informants or SB officers) and a specific field of research determined by the research questions posed to the sources. Only then can we examine whether these premises were met in a specific case.

1. Was the work of the officers and their superiors, in the field of interest to the researcher, focused on efficiency or on the statistical manifestation of the results?⁹ The answer to this question, as a rule, will be very difficult, because it requires knowledge of the attitudes of specific people and their statements, which are not consistently reflected in the documents. Therefore, one would have to search for witnesses, which in practice would be unrealistic. Experience shows that SB officers, even those positively verified, show great solidarity as a group and are unwilling to say anything that might damage their reputation or that of their former colleagues in the SB. We can generally assume with regard to the work of officers that whether the emphasis was placed on substantive or statistical results certainly depended on the preferences of their superior at the time and on trends within the service at that time. As a rule the SB's emphasis on substantive achievements hindered creative reporting, so in this case the authors of files were more inclined to tell the truth, and the data given by them are more reliable.

2. In the field of the researcher's interest, to what extent was the operational work of SB officers controlled by their superiors? As Musiał writes, „The general rule was that every operational activity should be properly documented” (2015, p. 79). Therefore, all control activities should also be recorded in the file. The records thus included control files from operational matters (cf. Musiał, 2015, pp. 81-82). For example, „the note from the control meeting should go to the personal file of the TW” (Musiał, 2015, p. 139). The post-control note should inform what type of control was imposed, who conducted it, and its result, so that the reader of the file could assess the reliability of the control process. If no post-control notes appear in the tested materials, it should be provisionally assumed that these controls were absent and the authors of the notes could write what they liked, i.e. both true and untrue statements. In such a situation the source doesn't provide certain knowledge.

3. Was it verified whether any of the information obtained from human intelligence sources conflicted with other sources of operational knowledge in the field of interest to the researcher? If someone has conducted a comparative analysis with other sources, for example, the so-called use of a parallel control with the help of another informant (Musiał, 2015, p. 140), then, for the reasons indicated in point 2, it should be documented together with the result of this control. In the case of compliance, it gives a strong argument for the credibility of the author of the source. If there is no post-inspection note, it should be tentatively assumed that the author could write as they saw fit, although it is not clear that this was so, i.e. the source does not provide us with certain information.

⁹ According to one of the historians, in the 80s, one of the SB directives provided that an officer conducting operational work must have twelve personal sources of information, creating pressure to obtain additional sources to meet this requirement. The actions of the officers in this case would be calculated not for efficiency, but to meet this specific administrative requirement. This would inevitably lead to considerable abuses in recording operational work.

People as the means of operational work were the basic working tool of the SB (cf. Musiał, 2015, p. 303). In connection with lustration, the files of the Security Service are often asked about the fact of conscious or unconscious cooperation of a given person with the SB. As Bereszyński notes, „In matters related to the acquisition and use of human intelligence sources it is also of great importance to carefully distinguish cases of actual and effective cooperation with the secret services of the Polish People’s Republic from various types of accidents of involuntary or forced entanglement in a certain type of relations with these services without actually acting on their behalf (sham cooperation, evasion of cooperation, etc.). Such situations require particularly careful and thorough recognition. In any event, far-reaching conclusions cannot be drawn on the basis of the mere fact of registration in one capacity or another” (2012, p. 434). It is therefore necessary to ask the files the following questions:¹⁰ Is there a commitment to cooperation? Are there any denunciations written by the person being examined? Did they perform operational tasks? Did they do any control work? Was the information attributed to it operationally relevant and was it used in operational activities? Could the person examined have had the information that they allegedly provided to the SB? I had the opportunity to personally see that in many notes made by an SB officer after alleged meetings with a person registered as e.g. TW, there is information that this person in no way could have or even obtain, because there was no one in their environment who would have such information.

Then one would have to ask: is there any other evidence of the person in question being associated with the SB? What are the deviations from the model course of the case (according to the instructions) in the case of this person and are these deviations properly explained?

Only by answering most of the questions formulated above can give a reasonable idea of whether there was cooperation and, if so, what kind of character it was.

The most important of the personal means of operational work were secret collaborators (TW), who, according to the instructions of the SB, should be controlled; this principle also applied to the officers handling them. Musiał lists the following forms of control for both source and handling officer: analysis of information obtained from a TW, generalization of independent characteristics of a TW, commissioning control tasks, experimental verification of hypotheses, conducting an operational experiment, conducting a control meeting, surveillance by another human intelligence source, surveillance of a TW by means of operational technology (e.g. control of correspondence) and polygraphic

¹⁰ Ideas for these questions can be drawn from Musiał (2015), especially from pages 89-159, which provides detailed information about the rules in force in the SB. We can use each such principle in the reasoning called “testing” according to the classification of reasoning by T. Czeżowski. For example, there was a rule: if there was an inspection, there must be a follow-up note. Therefore, we ask: are there post-inspection notes in the files? If so, then, based on the above principle, these notes with a certain probability confirm that controls were exerted on the reporting officer or informant. If not, there is no reason to believe that there were controls.

examination (lie detector) (2015, p. 137). Thus if one is examining the files of a secret collaborator, it is necessary to check whether there are post-inspection notes and to look at them. If there are and these controls do not raise doubts, it greatly increases the credibility of the authors. If there are no such notes, then one must determine the reason for their absence. It is clear that the notes of an uncontrolled informant or officer have much less credibility than those of a controlled one. Therefore, in order to assess the credibility of TW and their conducting officer, it is necessary to ask the files questions about all the above-mentioned forms of control. Only affirmative answers to such questions can offer a basis to argue for the credibility of the authors of the analyzed sources.

When assessing credibility, it is also necessary to ask about the chain of intermediaries between the facts and their recording in the SB files. The general theory of cognition indicates that each intermediary shapes information in their own way by the type of their cognitive attitude (cognition is always limited to some aspect), by their interpretation, their language, by intentionality in what they communicate further, etc. As such, the credibility of any given written note within the SB files declines exponentially as a function of the number of intermediaries.

This can be illustrated through the following simple model: let us define the credibility of the intermediary as the probability of their providing true and complete information. Let us also assume that we are dealing with relatively reliable intermediaries, each having a credibility of 70% (0.7 on a scale from 0 to 1). In an ideal situation for credibility, we have an SB informant who collects information from other sources and writes a note, i.e. between the note and the fact mentioned in it there are two intermediaries. Thus, the reliability of this chain of intermediaries is $0.7 \times 0.7 = 0.49$ (49%) (the probability of a conjunction of independent events being equal to the product of their probabilities). The situation is worse when the SB informant collects information from other sources and passes it on to the SB officer, who makes a note to the file. Then we have three intermediaries between each fact and the note, meaning that the credibility is $0.7 \times 0.7 \times 0.7 = 0.7^3 = 0.343$ (34.3%). This may mean, in the above example, that out of three pieces of information given in the SB note, one or two will be untrue and at the same time two other relevant information needed for an adequate assessment of the actual facts will be missing. This problem is well illustrated by the game of Chinese whispers, which many of us know from childhood.

One could argue that, within the current estimate, good training can significantly increase the credibility of the informant, and SB officers were well trained and they trained SB informants. Certainly, training can significantly increase the possibilities of recognizing operationally relevant information, but it does not guarantee the strengthening of the will to tell the truth. When an officer made a choice between writing the truth and embellishing it, in addition to the fear of control, they were certainly influenced by the system of remuneration and promotions, the current policy in this area, their personal situation and

aspirations, as well as the specific stage of their career. An important role was also played by the orders they might have received and the expectations placed upon them by their superiors. Thus to assess the credibility of an officer, it is necessary to get to know them and their professional situation as well as to know the system of promotions and remuneration. All this must be weighed alongside the documents created by the author we are interested in, asking the question: do these documents focus on substantive issues, or are they written more with superiors in mind, addressing their expectations? Certainly, there were functionaries who worked reliably for ideological reasons, but the experience of life in the Polish People's Republic shows that there were certainly not many of them, because in the society at large, ideological communists were a very rare phenomenon.

Indirect sources addressed in a limited way, such as the SB files, have their own persuasive layer. Even the most ideologically committed officer can be expected to have some aspirations of their own, desiring, for example, to be promoted, get into service abroad, earn more, or simply to show results. In a situation where their notes do not have proper substantive confirmation, it is worth looking for a possible explanation of their content in wanting to inform superiors that they might deserve a promotion, raise, award, bonus, departure for a foreign mission, etc. Such explanations, despite not constituting infallible logical proof, nonetheless make it possible to assess the probable reasons for an SB document to appear as it does within the file. In this way we may come to an interpretation of an officer's notes that is more likely than the literal one. As a rule, officers were skilled and knew the control mechanisms very well, and were at times able to evade them. However, the fact that SB officers could, and did, avoid control mechanisms requires a separate justification in each case.

Brzechczyn ((2014) gives an example of a plan to recruit human intelligence sources in Wrocław, in various circles (cf. *Ibidem*, pp. 273-274). As a rule, efforts were made to recruit at least two informants in each environment in order to compare their reports (cf. Musiał, 2015, p. 302). In some circles there was already an informant, so it was sufficient to get only one more in those cases. Using this example as a framework, we can conduct a thought experiment, wherein we imagine an officer who has difficulty in obtaining a second informant in a known environment, but conducts an operational dialogue with a figurehead who does not decide to cooperate. Let us also imagine that this officer is subject to very little control from their superiors. In this situation, it would be easy to attribute fictitious reports, similar to stories of the first informant, to the figurehead in question and thus artificially create in the reports the impression that a second informant had indeed been obtained. Such thought experiments allow us to create hypotheses as to the possible actions of an SB officer or informant (other than those described in the files), which must be falsified or verified on the basis of available sources. Such thought experiments can provide questions to ask sources that are helpful in assessing their credibility.

As a conclusion to the above considerations about the creation of checklists of questions when examining the credibility of the authors of the SB files, I would also like to highlight the value of SB instructions as an aid. It is crucial to ask questions of the files each time they are examined: how should the examined case proceed in an exemplary way according to the instructions?¹¹ What are the deviations from this pattern? And also, are these deviations reliably explained? This is particularly important in a situation where there are many intermediaries between the facts of a situation and the SB notes, when there are no signed or handwritten reports, or when, for example, there is no written commitment to cooperate with OZI (human intelligence source). If the deviations are not explained or the explanations are unconvincing, then the authors of the examined documents may well prove unreliable.

4. Ethical Dimensions of Examining the Reliability of the Files

In a situation unprecedented in the past – a multiplicity of views on historian’s ethos, Rafał Stobiecki (2013) said as follows: „It is difficult to imagine that, in the future, researchers of the past could function in isolation from any ethical norms, in an atmosphere of axiological and social chaos as well as environmental consent to practices that allow falsification of historical sources, interpret traces of the past in a completely arbitrary way or use historical knowledge to blackmail people still alive. In this situation, I would advocate a kind of ethical minimum applicable to us as people in general, and in the community of historians taking on additional meanings” (ibidem, p. 319).

In the era of lustration trials, the files of the SB are examined and asked about the fact of secret cooperation of people who have the right to good fame in a civilized state. This is guaranteed by the famous Article 212 of the Criminal Code, which, according to many journalists, should be amended or removed because it restricts freedom of speech. Even an accusation of cooperation with the SB is sufficient to destroy an individual’s reputation. Reputations can have immense value, being necessary in many cases for any public or social role. In the case of figures who make a significant contribution to our history, undermining their reputation questions the existing historical narrative and national memory. Sometimes this is inevitable, as in the case of TW „Bolek”, where the fact of his conscious cooperation with the SB is strongly supported by evidence (Zaranek, 2016; IPN, 2017, 2017a; Kłeczek, 2017). Nonetheless, being too eager to make accusations of cooperation with the SB has wide repercussions for our society. We have a duty to undertake criticism of the sources attesting to possible cooperation with the SB. Before a historian puts forward a thesis about the fact of someone’s cooperation with the SB, they should examine it through the lens of detailed research questions and achieve a high degree of certainty regarding their

¹¹ F. Musiał gave a bibliography of normative documents concerning SB (2015, pp. 373-375).

conclusions. If this certainty is lacking, then it should be assumed that there was nothing affecting the reputation of the person in question.

We live in a society founded on Roman law, where the principle of the presumption of innocence – *in dubio pro reo* – existed to avoid convicting innocent persons. When applied to the work of a historian, this principle would mean protection against unjust accusations undermining a person's good reputation. Thus, if a historian does not find sufficient confirmation of the fact, they should suspend their judgement. This practice should form part of Stobiecki's ethical minimum for historians. For example, the mere fact of registering as TW is insufficient (cf. Bereszyński, 2012, p. 434): other confirmations of real cooperation with the SB are needed, because TW could simply be pretending to cooperate. Such a person could, for example, seemingly agree to cooperate in order to obtain something that was the subject of blackmail (getting a passport, avoiding public embarrassment etc.). Such apparent cooperation could take the form of providing information generally known or data the individual in question was convinced the SB already possessed, etc. Officers could also be in the habit of using creative reporting to get promotions, pay rises, or other personal gain. This said, the principle of *in dubio pro reo* should also be applied to the officers, and any accusations levelled at an officer must also be well justified.

Contemporary Polish historians live in a political reality shaped by the legacies of 1989 and of the nineties. We know that the SB was part of the apparatus of violence of the totalitarian Polish People's Republic, which mainly served „the political enslavement and enforcement of social control over the whole society” (Brzechczyn, 2014, p. 272), and that SB officers usually undertook their work voluntarily. On the other hand, the public figures investigated by them were most often the victims of this apparatus of violence, and in particular of the officers serving it. As a rule, they were blackmailed into submission, being largely defenceless against the functionaries of the totalitarian state; life in a communist country delivered numerous opportunities for blackmail. In such cases, the situation was morally clear: the officer was a torturer, and the figurehead was a victim and remained as such when forced to cooperate. Now, 30 years after the dissolution of the SB, the situation in the Polish media has reversed. Former SB officers are free from stigma just as if they had been acquitted, while the human intelligence sources (Polish: osobowe źródła informacji, OZI), TW, etc. led by them, are deprived of their good name by the media. This situation is not without its shades of grey: if OZI, TW, etc., received remuneration from the SB for performing operational tasks or providing information, then they were to some degree on the side of this institution, but still subject to coercion or pressure. As such, each case must be assessed separately and on its own merits. Those wronged could hurt others, but we should nonetheless attempt to keep a sense of proportionality in our judgments. We are dealing with an injustice carried out within the contemporary news media. In this situation, is a historian not obliged to make contemporary people aware of who was the torturer and who

was the victim, perhaps sometimes a broken victim, but still person who has experienced harm at the hands of a totalitarian regime? Would it not be fair to scrutinise the blackmailers over the blackmailed? Such a sense of perspective is crucial not only for the fairness of historical assessments but, as I have shown above, also for the assessment of the credibility of the files that the blackmailers created.

Conclusion

After twenty years of methodological negligence in the criticism of the SB sources, it is high time to mark a turning point and begin to take seriously the creation of tools to assess the credibility of the SB files, and only then return to practising reliable historiography taking into account the documents of this institution. This task is difficult for many reasons. It requires researching the history of the Security Service, its internal policies (including promotions and remuneration), the evolution of its operational methods and an examination of the officers themselves, about whom we presently know little. When clear methodological requirements are set, we would expect to see a marked reduction in the number of ‘clear’ results produced by historians of this period. Far more often it will have to be humbly said that there are no credible sources to support one or another thesis. However, these more limited conclusions, whose credibility will be justifiable through high methodological requirements, will constitute a reliable basis for a historical narrative.

Such a shift crucially depends on historians themselves, who will need to assiduously test the credibility of SB files through the use of accurate checklists of questions that they will create. The author of this paper is a methodologist of the sciences in general, not a historian, and so does not provide the full answer to the question about the critique of the files set above, but indicates a possible direction for further inquiry and presents the ideas of creating checklists of questions for examining the SB files. As such, this work is addressed to historians and scientific institutions with a methodological bent able to carry forward and perhaps even solve the problems discussed here.

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