‘Philosophy of Treason’: Exile as Practice in the Transnational Trajectory of Spions

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Introduction

Musicology has traditionally privileged stable national traditions, institutional histories, and settled careers, often relegating migration, exile, and cultural mobility to the margins of musical history.[1] More recent scholarship, however, has increasingly explored exile and migration not simply in terms of displacement and loss, but as productive conditions that actively shape musical and cultural life.[2] This shift provides the point of departure for the present article, which extends this rethinking of exile in two directions.

The first question concerns the temporal logic through which exile is understood. Does the relative neglect of exile in musicology stem not only from methodological nationalism but also from a more fundamental teleological tendency? Musical lives are frequently understood retrospectively through their eventual destinations—return, settlement, recognition, or institutional success—so that exile itself becomes little more than a transitional period of hardship awaiting resolution. Such narratives risk emptying the time of exile of its own historical and existential significance. The second question concerns what happens when peripheral identity itself acquires symbolic value. As migrant and exilic musicians gain recognition within the global cultural economy, peripherality may itself be converted into symbolic capital.[3] Yet such conversion is neither automatic nor straightforward. What happens when artists seek recognition while simultaneously destabilizing the identities through which that recognition might become durable?

These questions are explored through the case of the Hungarian avant-garde punk group Spions, founded in Budapest in 1977. While their trajectory followed the material pathways of political migration—from censorship and surveillance in late socialist Hungary through France and eventually to Canada—their work resists narratives that render such movement intelligible primarily in terms of loss, adaptation, or creative renewal. Spions actively sought visibility and

[1] Florian Scheding, *Musical Journeys: Performing Migration in Twentieth-Century Music* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2019), 14.
[2] This renewed scholarly attention was also evident at the international conference *Music and Exile*, held at NOVA FCSH in Lisbon, 21–23 May 2026.
[3] Pierre Bourdieu, ‘The Forms of Capital’, in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. John G. Richardson (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1986), 241–58.

recognition, particularly after their arrival in Paris, while repeatedly destabilizing the identities through which such recognition might acquire continuity and symbolic value. Their trajectory thus foregrounds exile as a practice that unsettles the boundaries between political dissent, aesthetic experimentation, and existential transformation.

The group's co-founder, Gergely Molnár—who subsequently adopted and circulated through a series of names and personae, including Anton Ello in Budapest, Serguei Pravda and Gregor Davidow in Paris, and later 888, Aleph, and Helmut Spiel!—articulated the Spions project through a principle he called the 'Philosophy of Treason'. Molnár himself resisted treating treason as a doctrine or system:

> Treason (I prefer to use treason to betrayal, because it's less emotional) is not a philosophy but an attitude. It is a gene you got or not. One cannot become a traitor by practice or experience. It starts with the geo-political roots and must be instinctive. First you hate your origins and then the system. The sky is no limit. Traitors are aliens and enemies of the Earth. Universal refugees of the Pleiades.[4]

This formulation encapsulates a radical redefinition of exile. Within this conception, departure from Hungary formed part of an ongoing process of undoing that had begun before physical exile, directed towards identity, culture, nation, ideology, and even the self. Molnár's insistence that treason cannot be acquired 'by practice or experience' is important here: the practice examined in this article does not designate a process through which one becomes a traitor, but the ways in which this attitude was enacted across different domains. Exile, in this sense, involves a repeated disengagement from foundational attachments that accompanies geographical displacement without being reducible to it.

This article therefore approaches the 'philosophy of treason' as a conceptual and aesthetic principle through which exile becomes a practice of disidentification and ungrounding. Rather than interpreting Spions' trajectory through established categories of exile studies, we propose an analytical framework that unfolds across three interconnected configurations. In Budapest, exile appears as a form of subjective refusal, a process of internal disidentification from homeland, ideology, and cultural belonging that precedes physical departure. In this sense, exile may also be understood as a hermeneutic rupture, a break with inherited structures of meaning and self-identification. In Paris, the philosophy of treason assumes a more explicitly political and aesthetic form, articulated through the utopian and parodic construction of the Overnational Socialist Party and the EP *The Party* (1979). In Canada, questions of belief and symbolic meaning become increasingly prominent as practices emerging in Paris develop into projects such as the Atheist Church and the Temple of Nuclear Reincarnation, extending the

[4] Gergely Molnár, email correspondence with the authors (5 September 2025).

practice of treason to the structures through which belief and belonging are constituted.

These three configurations should not be understood as successive stages in a teleological development. Rather, Spions' transnational movement reveals changing articulations of a principle already present before physical exile, as subjective refusal, political détournement, and spiritual experimentation acquire different emphases in different contexts. Exile here functions not as a condition to be overcome or resolved, but as a medium through which identities, affiliations, and forms of artistic practice are repeatedly reconfigured. This perspective also situates Spions within a broader constellation of post-1970s avant-garde rock formations such as Throbbing Gristle and Laibach, which similarly blurred the boundaries between music, conceptual art, and performance and developed artistic practices through which ideological structures could be confronted and reworked.[5] Yet Molnár himself distinguished Spions from Laibach precisely in terms of its relation to place and displacement: 'unlike LAIBACH, we loathed and despised our native soil wherever it happened to be. We immigrated to assimilate and subvert.'[6] The distinction is revealing. For Spions, transnational movement was not simply a circumstance surrounding the artistic project but became implicated in the practice of treason itself. Changes of place repeatedly altered the conditions under which political, aesthetic, and personal affiliations could be constituted, while treason placed those affiliations and identifications at risk, making the instability of belonging itself part of the artistic project.

Such a stance resonates with a philosophical genealogy in which nihilism is understood not solely as a crisis of meaning but also as a condition of transformation. Molnár emphasized the radically instrumental dimension of this principle: 'first of all we were a capitalist enterprise. Communism and fascism were equal sources of our nihilist power.'[7] This understanding of nihilism can be situated within a philosophical trajectory extending from Nietzsche's critique of inherited values and Heidegger's questioning of metaphysical foundations to Vattimo's conception of 'weak thought'.[8] For Vattimo in particular, the dissolution of foundations need

[5] Simon Ford, *Wreckers of Civilisation: The Story of COUM Transmissions & Throbbing Gristle* (London: Black Dog Publishing, 1999); Alexei Monroe, *Interrogation Machine: Laibach and NSK* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005).
[6] Molnár, email correspondence.
[7] Molnár, email correspondence.
[8] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1968); Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche, Volume IV: Nihilism*, trans. Frank A. Capuzzi (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1982); Gianni Vattimo, *La fine della modernità* (Milano: Garzanti/Elefanti, 2019); Sangheon Lee, 'Punk Rock Nihilism: On the Usage of the Term', in *Being and Punk: Contemporary Approaches and Future Philosophizing About Punk*, ed. Edward Avery-Natale, Mike Dines and Grace Healy (Bristol: Intellect, forthcoming).

not culminate in the establishment of a new one; it opens instead onto an ongoing weakening of claims to stable and final truth. Spions' concept of treason can be read in relation to this trajectory, insofar as nihilism becomes a resource for repeatedly unsettling established identities, values, and forms of belonging.

This article pursues a dual aim, both historical and conceptual. Historically, Spions has received significant attention as a pioneering formation within the Hungarian underground and avant-garde of the late 1970s, both in Hungarian scholarship and in broader accounts of Eastern European punk and experimental art.[9] Far less attention, however, has been paid to the group's activities following its departure from Hungary, particularly to the continuities and transformations connecting Budapest, Paris, and Canada. Rather than treating these later activities as an afterlife of the Hungarian Spions, this article reconstructs their transnational trajectory across the divergent cultural landscapes of late socialist Hungary, post-1968 Western Europe, and North America. Conceptually, it uses this trajectory to rethink exile as an aesthetic, political, and existential practice. By foregrounding the philosophy of treason, it argues that Spions articulates a distinctive form of exilic avant-garde pop in which exile operates as a mode of practice rather than primarily as a theme or representation: a recurrent process of disidentification, reconfiguration, and provisional affiliation whose tensions are not necessarily resolved by geographical relocation or cultural recognition.

I. Budapest: Inner Exile and the Emergence of Treason

The emergence of Spions in late-1970s Budapest complicates narratives centred primarily on censorship and repression in state-socialist Central and Eastern Europe. While such factors undoubtedly shaped the group's earliest activities, what distinguishes Spions is the extent to which an inner form of exile—an internal severing from homeland, identity, and inherited structures of meaning—had already taken shape prior to physical departure. This section traces the articulation of the group's 'philosophy of treason' within Budapest's underground neo-avant-garde networks, in a cultural field structured by shifting thresholds between tolerance, surveillance, and prohibition. Within this field, inner exile emerged before physical exile and helped shape the terms in which departure itself would later be understood.

Hungary in the late 1970s constituted a structurally ambivalent cultural field. Under János

[9] József Havasréti, *Alternatív regiszterek: A kulturális ellenállás formái a magyar neoavantgárdban* (Budapest: Typotex, 2006); Zsolt K. Horváth, 'A gyűlölet múzeuma: Spions, 1977–1978', *Korall* 39 (2010); Anna Szemere, *Up from the Underground: The Culture of Rock Music in Postsocialist Hungary* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001); Tamás Szőnyei, *Az új hullám évtizede 2* (Budapest: Katalizátor Iroda, 1992).

Kádár's 'goulash socialism', limited consumerism and restricted access to Western cultural products coexisted with political surveillance, cultural policing, and institutional mechanisms of ideological control. This produced a zone of bounded permissiveness in which artistic experimentation could be tolerated so long as it remained within administratively negotiable limits.[10] At the same time, the gradual liberalization of travel and information exchange in late socialist Hungary contributed to a reconfiguration of the meaning of departure itself. As Anna Szemere has shown, the shift from 'defection' to 'emigration' weakened the ethical and political weight traditionally associated with leaving the country.[11] Rather than necessarily marking a definitive rupture, mobility could increasingly encompass temporary displacement and return, complicating the symbolic opposition between East and West. It is against this changing meaning of departure that Spions' own practice of exile becomes particularly significant. At a moment when physical departure was becoming less unequivocally charged as an act of political rupture, Spions located rupture at the level of identity, cultural belonging, and artistic practice.

Spions emerged from a neo-avant-garde milieu operating under increasingly restrictive cultural conditions following the ideological retrenchment of 1973. A number of artists withdrew from public activity or left Hungary, while experimental practices persisted in precarious, semi-tolerated spaces. Figures such as György Galántai, Péter Halász, and Tamás Szentjóby sustained networks of artistic experimentation largely outside official cultural institutions.[12] Gergely Molnár, active across experimental theatre, underground cinema, and literary networks, collaborated closely with László Najmányi, whose work contributed significantly to the group's visual and symbolic language. Spions consequently emerged less as a conventional musical group than as an extension of Budapest's neo-avant-garde experimentation into the domain of popular music. Music, performance, visual imagery, and political provocation were intertwined from the outset, making aesthetic experimentation increasingly difficult to separate from the transgression of the cultural and political boundaries within which such practices were tolerated.[13]

Even the group's name emerged through a process of linguistic displacement. Miklós Haraszti, a friend of Molnár at the time, recalls initially suggesting the English name 'Spies', which Molnár liked, before the group decided to Germanize it. Yet rather than adopting Spionen,

[10] László Kürti, 'Culture, Youth, and Musical Opposition in Hungary', in *Rocking the State: Rock Music and Politics in Eastern Europe and Russia*, ed. Sabrina Petra Ramet (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1994).
[11] Szemere, *Up from the Underground*, 79.
[12] Szőnyei, *Az új hullám évtizede 2*, 335.
[13] Havasréti, *Alternatív regiszterek*, 157–60.

the form Haraszti expected, they settled on ‘Spions’, leaving the name, as he recalls, in a state of ‘permanent confusion over its pronunciation’.[14] Molnár later described the name more programmatically as ‘a combination of cross-national espionage’, associating it with French, German, and English forms.[15] The two accounts differ in emphasis, but both situate the name between languages rather than within a single linguistic system. Its evocation of espionage also resonates with a position that would characterize the project more broadly: Spions was subject to observation and surveillance while simultaneously cultivating the position of an outsider who observed the cultural and political environment from which it sought to detach itself.[16]

Popular music offered a means of extending such practices beyond the relatively restricted circuits of the neo-avant-garde. Molnár’s lecture-performances on rock culture, including his well-known presentation on David Bowie, exemplified this intersection by treating rock itself as an object of intellectual and artistic engagement, while pointing towards the larger audiences accessible through popular music. Najmányi’s later account presents the turn towards rock as a more fundamental attempt to move beyond the established context of art. He contrasts Molnár’s and his own trajectory with that of Tibor Hajas, who likewise sought to escape the context of art but, in Najmányi’s view, remained within the elite-cultural world of galleries, museums, and their audiences—what he calls “the context that gives meaning.” Hajas’s trajectory therefore led towards a radicalisation of art, whereas Najmányi and Molnár saw in rock the most powerful realisation of the risk, danger, immediacy, and personal involvement they associated with “living art.”[17] Szőnyei describes this shift as the moment when an ‘intellectual conception infiltrated rock music and found its audience’.[18] Yet reaching a wider audience did not translate into a stable position within any single cultural constituency. Najmányi later recalled that rock audiences regarded Spions as excessively intellectual, while intellectuals rejected its humour, radicalism, and engagement with the popular culture they themselves disdained; hippies and political fellow-travellers denounced the group as fascist, while art historians refused to regard its activities as art.[19] Spions thus occupied an unstable position across these different cultural milieus even before its departure from Hungary.

The practices from which Spions emerged combined theatrical and discursive

[14] Miklós Haraszti, interviewed in *SZENNYHULLÁM #1: Magyar punkmozaik ’78–84*, Partizán, https://youtu.be/svc5ZjK-43o?si=n8MnKS14dV6UPbqB, 18:04–18:34 (accessed 26 September 2026; our translation from Hungarian).
[15] Molnár, email correspondence.
[16] László Najmányi, *SZENNYHULLÁM #1*, 18:34–18:45.
[17] László Najmányi, ‘SPIONS. Tizenötödik rész’, Balkon, no. 4 (2011), 21.
[18] Szőnyei, *Az új hullám évtizede 2*, 336 (our translation).
[19] László Najmányi, ‘SPIONS. Első rész’, Balkon, no. 1 (2010), 9–10.

experimentation with radically reduced musical materials. On 21 April 1977, at the Ganz-MÁVAG Cultural House in Budapest, Molnár presented a lecture-performance entitled 'Nectar from Strychnine: Rock Utopias in the Seventies'. Spoken discourse was accompanied by a two-chord guitar rendition of Lou Reed's 'Walk on the Wild Side', performed by Péter Hegedűs and György Kurtág Jr. Najmányi presents the event as a decisive change of course: Molnár—by then using the name Anton Ello—brought the *Rock And Roll High School* lecture series to a close with this live performance, in which, Najmányi recalled, a "timid, withdrawn" intellectual was transformed into "a genuine rock star of exceptional charisma."[20] As the project subsequently developed into Spions, Kurtág was no longer involved, while Tibor Zátonyi joined Hegedűs as a guitarist in the emerging group. Hegedűs, who at the time had little familiarity with popular music, approached this material as a composer fatigued by the complexity of contemporary art music. As he later recalled, its force lay precisely in its extreme economy: even highly reduced material could sustain an intensity comparable to that of complex avant-garde composition.[21] In this context, Spions' subsequent engagement with punk concerned its cultural and performative possibilities at least as much as its emerging musical language.

The Anna Frank Memorial Performance (15 January 1978, Egyetemi Színpad) marked a decisive moment in Spions' emergence as a public formation. Conceived as a composite lecture-performance, it combined musical fragments, spoken discourse, and theatrical actions, confronting its audience with imagery drawn from sexuality, the Holocaust, and political violence.[22] The resulting scandal brought Spions into increasingly direct conflict with the cultural and political boundaries within which neo-avant-garde experimentation had been tolerated. As László Najmányi later recalled, the critical issue was not provocation alone but Spions' turn towards rock as a mass medium through which they sought to reach a mass audience of young people—an ambition that, in his account, exceeded the limits of official tolerance.[23]

Spions articulated this turn towards rock through a series of programmatic statements that redefined the relation between performer, medium, and artistic work. As Molnár declared, Spions did not conceive of themselves as performers within the conventional framework of show business, but as agents of a process: 'not show business, but training […] not stars, but

[20] Najmányi, 'SPIONS. Tizenötödik rész', 21.
[21] Horváth, 'A Gyűlölet Múzeuma: Spions, 1977–1978', 127.
[22] Havasréti, *Alternatív regiszterek*, 157–60; Szőnyei, *Az új hullám évtizede 2*, 335–38.
[23] Najmányi, *SZENNYHULLÁM* #1, 28:52–29:08.

soldiers […] rock and roll is not their medium; they are the medium of rock and roll'.[24] In this formulation, rock ceases to function simply as a medium of individual expression; instead, the performers themselves become its medium, recast as agents of action, discipline, and transmission. Molnár extends this logic to the status of the work itself: Spions, he states, 'do not create works. What they produce perishes together with them […] Spions produces the past, not the future […] action is neither reproducible nor replicable'. Musical practice is thus detached from the production of lasting objects and conceived instead as an event whose existence depends upon its enactment. What remains after the event is not the work itself but, as Molnár puts it, 'nostalgia': a residue comparable to the afterlife of a historical event rather than the persistence of an aesthetic artefact.

It is here that Spions' practice enters into a particularly revealing tension with Vattimo's notion of 'monumentality'.[25] Vattimo distinguishes the monument from the artwork understood in the Hegelian sense as the harmonious realization of spiritual content in form. The monument is instead 'what endures in the form, already projected as such, of the death mask' (our translation): not the imprint of a full and immediate life, but a form constituted in view of its transmission. Precisely because it is destined to endure and to be transmitted, it already bears the mark of separation from living presence—what Vattimo describes as the trace of its 'radical alienation' and the stigma of its mortality. Monumentality thus names a form that survives not despite death, but through the anticipation of it. Spions shares with this account a rejection of the artwork as the transparent expression of a full and present subject, but departs from it at the point of transmission. Molnár's insistence that Spions 'do not create works' and that action is 'neither reproducible nor replicable' refuses precisely the stabilization of action into a form constituted for future transmission. If Vattimo's monument anticipates its own separation from life in order to endure as a trace, Spions insists instead on an event that perishes with those who enact it.

In this light, 'treason' acquires a more precise conceptual significance. It does not simply designate political betrayal, but places in question the structures through which continuity is secured as inheritance. If Vattimo's monument is a form constituted in view of its own transmission, Spions' treason resists the movement by which action becomes transmissible form and form becomes legacy. Treason is therefore anti-monumental not because it destroys the past, but because it unsettles its stabilization as inheritance. Exile, from this perspective,

[24] Szőnyei, *Az új hullám évtizede 2*, 336–7. All translations from Hungarian are ours.
[25] Vattimo, *La fine della modernità*, 84–94.

becomes not simply a separation imposed from without, but a practice through which continuity and belonging are repeatedly put at risk.

The clearest early articulation of this practice of disconnection appears in the lyrics of 'Total Czecho-Slovakia', which had been written during the Budapest period. They explicitly formulate the logic of treason underlying Spions' practice. The injunctions that structure the song—'Go out from your country / Go out from your religion'—do not describe displacement; they prescribe it.[26] The same logic extends from collective affiliation to the self itself: 'Be a traitor of yourself'. Treason thus emerges not merely as a metaphor for political defection, but as a programme of disconnection extending from country and religion to the subject's relation to itself. Edward Said describes exilic communities as spaces in which even 'the slightest deviation from the accepted group line is an act of the rankest treachery and disloyalty'.[27] Read against this account, Spions gives treason an almost inverse value: deviation from inherited forms of belonging becomes a condition of transformation. 'Treason remained your only true chance for change' presents the abandonment of inherited belonging as a possibility for change rather than primarily as loss.

The song also marks a significant linguistic shift. Unlike earlier performances, in which Hungarian predominated, its lyrics are written in English and delivered in a marked foreign accent, signalling a break with the language through which national belonging had previously been articulated. Following his departure from Hungary, Molnár would cease—and indeed refuse—to use his native language for nearly four decades. Language thus became another domain in which the logic of treason could operate: if it serves as a primary vehicle of cultural and historical transmission, its abandonment unsettles one of the structures through which belonging is reproduced.

This logic finds a visual counterpart in Spions' original emblem, developed during the Budapest period (Figure 1). At its centre, the Soviet abbreviation USSR is transformed into U-$$-R, inserting the dollar sign of Western capitalism into a communist designation. Behind it, three superimposed symbols—the Soviet red star, the Nazi swastika, and the Star of David—bring historically and ideologically antagonistic signs into the same visual field. Rather than resolving these heterogeneous signs into a coherent position, the emblem forces them into coexistence: the three symbols overlap and interfere with one another, while the dollar signs

[26] Spions, 'Total Czecho-Slovakia', on Russian Way of Life / Total Czecho-Slovakia, 7-inch single, Egg/Barclay, 1979.
[27] Edward W. Said, *Reflections on Exile: And Other Literary and Cultural Essays* (London: Granta Books, 2012), 178.

cut across the opposition between communist and capitalist systems. The emblem thus gives visual form to a practice already central to Spions: the destabilization of identification through the juxtaposition and contamination of incompatible symbolic systems.



Figure 1: Spions emblem designed by László Najmányi, Budapest, 1977.

By the time of their departure from Hungary, the central gestures associated with Spions' philosophy of treason were in place. Musical, performative, linguistic, and visual practices converged in treating identity as a site of rupture rather than continuity. By mid-1978, however, the precarious space Spions had occupied within the limits of late socialist cultural tolerance had become untenable, as opportunities to perform disappeared and surveillance and institutional pressure increasingly constrained the group's activities. Yet their departure should not be understood simply as the consequence of repression, or as the moment at which exile began. Physical displacement introduced new historical and cultural conditions into practices through which the attitude of treason had been enacted in Budapest. Paris would therefore constitute neither the resolution of exile nor a definitive break with the Budapest period, but another site in which the philosophy of treason would be enacted and reconfigured.

II. Paris: Exile as Political Programme

Spions' departure from Hungary did not initially point towards Paris as a destination. In early April 1978, shortly before leaving Hungary, Gergely Molnár and Péter Hegedűs travelled to Warsaw, where the Raincoats performed on 1 and 2 April in what was advertised as the first

punk rock concert in Poland.[28] According to later Hungarian accounts, Molnár and Hegedűs met members of the British group during this visit and were encouraged to relocate to London, where the Raincoats offered to help them arrange performances.[29] Molnár subsequently left Hungary for Berlin, where he was received by the dissident writer Miklós Haraszti, before continuing with László Najmányi to Paris; Hegedűs later joined them there.[30] The intended move to London was never realized. Paris was therefore not the predetermined destination of Spions' exile, but one of the contingent locations through which the project was reconfigured.

The move nevertheless placed practices articulated in Budapest within a radically different political and cultural environment. In Hungary, Spions had sought to extend neo-avant-garde experimentation into rock as a mass medium, bringing the group into conflict with the limits of official tolerance. In Paris, visibility operated according to a different logic. From the outset, Molnár—renamed Serguei Pravda—and his collaborators actively mobilized their East-European provenance as part of the project's public presentation, adopting the imagery of Soviet agents and political espionage rather than presenting themselves straightforwardly as dissident refugees. This strategy combined adaptation to the new cultural environment with an attempt to intervene within it—a logic Molnár would later summarize as 'We immigrated to assimilate and subvert.'[31] The Soviet and East-European identity from which Spions sought to detach itself could thus simultaneously become a resource through which the project attracted attention in the West. Molnár later recalled the rapid attention this generated after their arrival, including interviews with the French press.[32]

The strategy was accompanied by a brief but significant entry into French musical and artistic networks. Soon after their arrival, Spions performed at the Fourvière festival in Lyon in August 1978, held a week of daily public rehearsals at the Centre Pompidou in Beaubourg the following month, and appeared in the Trocadéro Gardens in October.[33] These activities nevertheless remained short-lived. Jean-Marie Salaün became an important intermediary in the project's subsequent development, helping to move it towards recording and connecting Molnár with figures in the Parisian music milieu. Later recollections also point to tensions between Salaün and Hegedűs, whose relationship with Molnár was itself deteriorating.[34] While

[28] Audrey Golden, *Shouting Out Loud: Lives of The Raincoats* (London: White Rabbit, 2025), 30.
[29] Gergely Molnár, text in the unpaginated booklet accompanying Mitzpah, *Lonesome Harvest: Re-enactment N°1 (Paris 1981)* (Pop Supérette, 2022).
[30] *SZENNYHULLÁM #1*, 39:45–40:10.
[31] Molnár, email correspondence.
[32] Molnár, in Mitzpah, *Lonesome Harvest*.
[33] Philippe Spiesser, recollection communicated to the authors, 23 September 2026. Spiesser played guitar with Spions for several months in Paris in 1978.
[34] Spiesser, recollection communicated to the authors.

it would be difficult to attribute the dissolution of the existing line-up to a single cause, Salaün's increasingly active role coincided with—and appears to have facilitated—the transition towards a different mode of production. It was also through Salaün that Molnár met Malcolm McLaren during the latter's visit to Paris in April 1979. Molnár described approaching the former Sex Pistols manager in order to 'sell him my project I believed a priceless merchandise'. He presented Spions as the basis for a 'next invasion, an overnational one', drawing upon what he called a 'rich image bank full of winning cards', including the claim to represent the 'first punk of the Warsaw Pact'.[35]

By the time of Spions' first single, however, the performing configuration carried over from Budapest had effectively dissolved. Hegedűs remained credited as the composer of both 'Russian Way of Life' and 'Total Czecho-Slovakia', but did not perform on the recording.[36] The session instead involved a new network of collaborators, including Salaün on guitar and, as producer, the British musician Robin Scott, whose project M achieved international success that year with 'Pop Muzik'.[37] The single thus provided Spions with its most tangible point of entry into the French record industry at precisely the moment when the project was moving away from a relatively stable performing group towards a more fluid constellation increasingly centred on Molnár.

The reconfiguration of the project was also audible on the aforementioned single. The 2009 compilation *Menekülj Végre* provides a useful point of comparison, bringing together Spions' Hungarian-period recordings and the two tracks of the 1979 Paris single.[38] The Hungarian-period recordings document a sparse instrumental configuration centred on voice and guitars, without a bass-and-drum rhythm section. By contrast, 'Russian Way of Life' and 'Total Czecho-Slovakia' feature a steady, unsyncopated backbeat and a firm, dry Moog bass line. Their formal organization is also more clearly differentiated, with verse, chorus, post-chorus, and interlude sections. In 'Total Czecho-Slovakia', for example, an instrumental passage separates the second and third verses. The single thus reflects both an expansion of the musical resources available to Spions in Paris and a closer engagement with contemporary pop-rock and New Wave conventions.

Yet these new resources did not simply normalize the Spions sound. The sonic palette

[35] Molnár, in Mitzpah, *Lonesome Harvest*.
[36] *SZENNYHULLÁM #1*, 41:31–41:38; Spions, 'Total Czecho-Slovakia'.
[37] Spions, 'Russian Way of Life' / 'Total Czecho-Slovakia'.
[38] Spions, Menekülj Végre, CD compilation, Port.hu Underground Katalógus, 1G Records (Hungary, 2009). The compilation also includes two recordings by Péter Hegedűs, under the name Peter Ogi, following his departure from Spions; *The Party* EP is not included. The credits for the Hungarian-period Spions recordings identify Gergely Molnár on vocals and Hegedűs and Tibor Zátonyi on guitars, with no bass or drums listed.

remains markedly austere, with dry, relatively unembellished instrumental timbres, while Molnár's vocal delivery is detached and melodically restricted. Its flattened contour works against the sense of dramatic progression afforded by the more differentiated formal structure. The recording therefore combines greater rhythmic and formal definition with a persistent restraint in performance. Rather than documenting a straightforward stylistic assimilation into New Wave, it shows how new musical and production resources were incorporated without effacing characteristics already evident in Spions' Budapest-period recordings.

The single's release was followed by substantial press coverage. On 28 May 1979, *Libération* presented Molnár, now appearing as Gregor Davidow, as 'l'espion musical'; two months later, *Canal* 29/30 devoted an extended feature to the project under the headings 'Espions', 'Espions art', and 'Espions rock'.[39] Political exile, espionage, Soviet imagery, and artistic persona were thus not merely themes represented by Spions but increasingly interconnected elements of its public presentation. Exile itself had become one of the symbolic resources through which visibility could be produced.

Spions actively participated in the production of this visibility. Molnár sought access to the cultural industries while mobilizing the ambiguities between political refugee, Soviet agent, punk musician, and avant-garde artist. The encounter with McLaren, the release of the single, and its subsequent media coverage reveal a recurrent movement between self-mythologization and external recognition. The question was increasingly not whether recognition should be sought, but whether such visibility could acquire continuity and be converted into more durable forms of cultural recognition.

This problem also concerned the identity through which recognition could accumulate. As Simon Frith has argued, popular performance depends upon the enactment of persona and the articulation of narrative identity, through which the singer becomes a figure recognizable to an audience.[40] David Bowie, a recurrent object of Molnár's reflection, provides a particularly relevant comparison. Simon Reynolds describes Bowie as 'always chasing the next edge, always moving on' and as a principal inspiration for post-punk's 'ethos of perpetual change'.[41] Yet Bowie's successive personae, however mutable, remained legible as transformations within the continuity of an established artistic career. Changes of name, image, and musical style could therefore be recognized by an already accumulated audience as successive manifestations of

[39] 'Grégor Davidow l'espion musical', *Libération*, 28 May 1979, 15; 'Espions / Espions art / Espions rock', *Canal 29/30*, July 1979.
[40] Simon Frith, *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 171.
[41] Simon Reynolds, *Rip It Up and Start Again: Postpunk 1978-1984* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), xxi.

the same artist. Spions likewise mobilized persona and reinvention, but without a comparable continuity of career, audience, or institutional recognition—thus under markedly less stable conditions.

Molnár had already adopted the name Anton Ello in Budapest and continued after his departure to circulate through different names and personae. Whereas in 1978 he appeared as Serguei Pravda in connection with Spions' early activities in France and its first single, by 1979 he had become Gregor Davidow, marking a shift away from the Russian-spy imagery. With The Party, this earlier strategy largely receded as the project was reconfigured around a different set of political, aesthetic, and organizational references. At the same time, Spions itself was being reconfigured from a performing group into an art project increasingly centred on Molnár and realized through shifting collaborations. Even as Najmányi continued to shape its visual and conceptual language, the public identity of Spions in Paris became increasingly associated with Molnár.

This reconfiguration became particularly apparent with *The Party (1979–1984)*, a four-track EP released in 1979 under the name Spions Inc. The designation 'Spions Inc.'—Spions Incorporation—suggests an organization or enterprise rather than simply a band. The recording brought together musicians from overlapping Parisian New Wave and experimental networks: alongside Molnár, credited as Gregor Davidow on vocals, the personnel included producer Jean-Marie Salaün; Claude Arto of Mathématiques Modernes; Artefact members Maurice G. Dantec, Jean Ternésien, Eric Ventinelli, and Marc L'Azou; and Hervé Zénouda of Stinky Toys.[42] In this sense, The Party can be understood less as the work of a newly constituted band than as one particular musical realization of the broader project now designated as Spions Inc.

The EP also provided the most elaborate musical formulation of the fictional Overnational Socialist Party (OSP), through which the philosophy of treason acquired an explicitly political articulation. Structured around a fictional five-year plan (1979–84), The Party appropriates the bureaucratic rhetoric of socialist planning while recombining it with Western advertising idioms, pop-cultural imagery, and quasi-religious and esoteric motifs. These heterogeneous registers coexist without being reconciled into a coherent ideological position. The term 'overnational' similarly displaces political identity from its conventional grounding in territory, ethnicity, history, or ideology, imagining instead a collectivity constituted through treason rather than inherited belonging. Exile thereby acquires an explicitly political dimension.

The opening track of the EP, 'Never Trust a Punk', turns this logic back upon punk itself.

[42] Spions Inc., *The Party (1979–1984)*, 12-inch EP, Dorian DOR 6002 (France, 1979).

Molnár traced the song directly to his encounter with McLaren in Paris in April 1979. According to his retrospective account, after their short-lived association had broken down, Molnár offered to write a song for McLaren: 'I made it the next acid night, entitled "Never Trust a Punk". But he did not like it.'[43] In another retrospective account, Molnár was more explicit about the reason for McLaren's refusal, recalling that he declined to record the song on 'ethical' grounds because he could not 'abandon the children [he] had raised'. Molnár's gloss was characteristically concise: 'Treason was not his cup of tea.'[44] Najmányi had already described the episode in explicitly programmatic terms in a 1997 interview. According to his account, Molnár urged McLaren, following the collapse of the Sex Pistols, to betray the position he had already established: 'All progress is based on betrayal: you betray your old self.' McLaren, Najmányi recalled, 'didn't dare to do that', believing instead that 'only slow evolutionary change could be made'.[45] Whatever the retrospective character of Najmányi's account, its formulation closely corresponds to the logic articulated elsewhere by Spions. Treason here entails placing even an established position—and the identity and recognition attached to it—at risk. 'Never Trust a Punk' consequently extends treason to punk itself: once a countercultural identity becomes established and recognizable, it too becomes available for betrayal.

Musically, *The Party* EP extends the expansion of recorded resources audible on the first single. Synthesizers, angular guitar figures, mechanized rhythmic patterns, and declamatory vocals produce a denser and more sharply articulated sound world. Compared with the relatively rudimentary backbeat of the single, the drumming is more differentiated, with tightly controlled, patterned fills that heighten the sense of urgency without introducing substantial rhythmic complexity. At the same time, the clearer rhythmic organization and New Wave production make the recording more immediately accessible even as its textual and conceptual framework becomes more elaborate. The result is an asymmetry between increasing musical accessibility and increasing conceptual density. Taken as a whole, The Party stages treason through the recombination of heterogeneous musical, ideological, and symbolic materials without resolving them into a stable political position.

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[43] Molnár, in Mitzpah, *Lonesome Harvest*.

[44] Gergely Molnár, responses to questions by Pierre Sojdrug, appended to Franco Onweb's interview with Hervé Zénouda, 'Mitzpah – Entretien avec Hervé Zénouda', 2022, https://www.mitzpah.fr/buzzonweb/ (accessed 26 September 2026; our translation from French).

[45] László Najmányi, interview by Róbert Barna, 'A rock and roll már nem fért bele (Najmányi László underground művész)', Magyar Narancs, 30 January 1997, https://magyarnarancs.hu/belpol/a_rock_and_roll_mar_nem_fert_bele_najmanyi_laszlo_underground_muvesz-63489 (accessed 26 September 2026; our translation from Hungarian).



Figure 2: Still images from the video for "Nevada Propaganda"

A further, ultimately unfinished collaboration emerged towards the end of Molnár's Paris period. In 1981, Molnár and Hervé Zénouda began working on material for a project that remained only in demo form at the time. More than four decades later, it re-emerged as *Lonesome Harvest: Re-enactment N°1 (Paris 1981)*, released under the name Mitzpah in 2022.[46] The name itself was proposed by Molnár during the project's revival. According to Zénouda, 'Mitzpah' was a portmanteau combining the Hebrew *mitzvah* ('good deed') and *chutzpah* ('audacity'), while also suggesting to him a play on the English word 'path'.[47] The adoption of a new name was consistent with Molnár's long-standing practice of renaming both himself and the projects through which he worked. This unusually long interruption and subsequent renaming connect the final phase of Molnár's activities in Paris with his later life in Canada, where he recorded his contribution to the eventual release. We return to the project at the end of the following section.

Spions' position within the Parisian cultural field nevertheless remained difficult to stabilize. The project intersected musically with emerging French New Wave and electronic networks, while its symbolic vocabulary drew simultaneously upon Cold War politics, capitalist imagery, avant-garde performance, and the conventions of popular culture. Its political fiction was itself articulated through the apparatus of the culture industry: recordings, performances, graphic images, and publicity provided the means through which the OSP

[46] Mitzpah, Lonesome Harvest: Re-enactment N°1 (Paris 1981) (Pop Supérette, 2022).
[47] Hervé Zénouda, interview by Franco Onweb, 'Mitzpah : Hervé Zénouda et Grégory Davidow, plus qu'un disque, une œuvre artistique', Buzz on Web, https://www.buzzonweb.com/Mitzpah-Herve-Zenouda-et-Gregory-Davidow-plus-qu-un-disque-une-oeuvre (accessed 26 September 2026; our translation from French).

acquired its provisional existence.

Paris thus transformed the conditions under which treason could operate. Spions actively sought audiences, media attention, recording opportunities, and access to the cultural industries, while repeatedly reworking the identities through which such recognition might acquire continuity. Through The Party and the OSP, exile could also be imagined collectively, without settling into a durable national, ideological, or artistic affiliation. The subsequent relocation to Canada would place this practice within another configuration, in which betrayal and detachment increasingly intersected with spiritual and ontological concerns.

III. Canada: Spiritual Exile and the Ontology of Treason

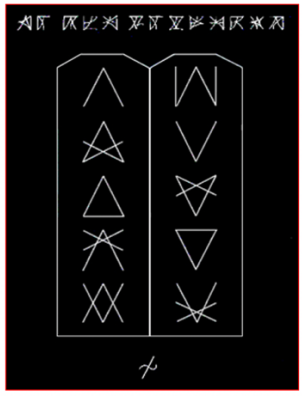
The move to Canada began in October 1980, when Najmányi left Paris for Toronto to prepare the ground for Spions. Molnár joined him approximately a year later, and after several years of attempting to continue the project there, relocated to Montréal in 1985.[48] As his work increasingly moved beyond the already unstable format of a rock group, questions of political and cultural belonging became intertwined with concerns surrounding belief, subjectivity, and ritual. The practice of treason was thereby extended towards a more fundamental question: whether any symbolic system could provide a stable ground for identity and belonging.

An important context for this development was Molnár's encounter with Chaos Magic, an occult practice that emerged in Britain in the late 1970s around figures including Peter J. Carroll and Ray Sherwin. Within Chaos Magic, belief could itself be treated instrumentally: symbolic systems might be adopted and abandoned according to their efficacy rather than accepted as permanent truths.[49] This conception resonated closely with the philosophy of treason, extending its logic from national, ideological, aesthetic, linguistic, and personal attachments to belief itself. What mattered was not adherence to a new system but the possibility of inhabiting symbolic systems provisionally, without allowing them to become permanent foundations.

These concerns found a particularly elaborate expression in The Atheist Church: The Temple of Nuclear Reincarnation, an experimental religious project developed through graphic systems, invented languages and scripts, texts, and ritualized performances (Figure 2).[50] Its name itself condenses several tensions central to the philosophy of treason. The paradoxical notion of an 'Atheist Church' appropriates ecclesiastical form while suspending its necessary

[48] Najmányi, interview by Barna; Mitzpah, *Lonesome Harvest*.
[49] Peter J. Carroll, *Liber Null and Psychonaut* (York Beach, ME: Red Wheel/Weiser, 1987), 72–5.
[50] Spions Inc., 'The Atheist Church: Temple of Nuclear Reincarnation', SPIONS The Atheist Church Pics, 2014, http://spionschurchpics.blogspot.com (accessed 26 September 2026); Zénouda, interview by Onweb.

connection to theological belief, whereas ‘Nuclear Reincarnation’ brings the technological and destructive imagery of the nuclear age into contact with the language of spiritual rebirth. Rather than cohering into a fixed doctrine, these practices constitute a repertoire of symbolic forms that could be combined and reconfigured. The project thereby gave institutional and performative form to the provisional relation to belief described above: religious forms could be inhabited and enacted without being stabilized as permanent foundations.



The ten commandments



The ten commandments

Figure 3. ‘The Ten Commandos’, from The Atheist Church: The Temple of Nuclear Reincarnation.

If the Overnational Socialist Party in Paris can be understood as a ‘party of traitors’, the Atheist Church might similarly be understood as a ‘cosmology of traitors’ extending treason from political affiliation to belief and the forms through which it is organized. The resulting symbolic practice unsettles distinctions between belief and disbelief, institution and its negation, and identity and its continual reconfiguration. In 1984, Molnár staged a related action in downtown Montréal. With one hand painted gold, he positioned himself outside a cathedral

and repeatedly uttered the mantra, ‘Save your Saviour—Redeem your Redeemer.’[51] The gesture reverses the conventional relation between saviour and saved, redeemer and redeemed: the believer is called upon to ‘save’ the figure from whom salvation would ordinarily be expected. The provisional treatment of belief thus becomes performative, enacted through the reversal of the roles on which religious authority depends.



Figure 4: “Save your savior”, performance, Montréal 1984

The multiplication of Molnár’s personae extended across the transnational trajectory traced above. Najmányi describes The Book of Reconstruction, an unpublished English-language work based on Molnár’s diary notes from 1979 to 1984, as an extensive reconstruction of the history of Spions.[52] The period covered by the manuscript coincides with several of the changes of name traced in this article, from Anton Ello through Sergei Pravda and Gregor Davidow; in Canada, this multiplication continued with personae including 888 and Aleph, and later Helmut Spiel!, the name Molnár continued to use until the end of his life. These were not simply successive pseudonyms replacing one another. Some disappeared and reappeared, while others remained associated with particular projects and contexts. Significantly, when Mitzpah was revived in 2022, Molnár again used the name Davidow, reconnecting the project with a persona associated with its earlier history. Personal identity thus became another field in which continuity could be interrupted and reactivated rather than simply maintained.

The 2022 revival of Mitzpah also provides a final instance of the tension between recognition and its stabilization traced throughout this article. Molnár recorded his vocals at home in Canada during the COVID-19 pandemic, with Zénouda directing the sessions remotely

[51] Spions Inc., SPIONS Nato Pics, 2014, https://spionsnatopics.blogspot.com (accessed 26 September 2026).
[52] Najmányi, ‘SPIONS. Első rész’, 9–10.

by Skype.[53] According to Zénouda, however, as media interest in the release developed, Molnár became increasingly resistant to its promotion and at times actively disrupted the process through which the project was being publicly presented.[54] [55] This resistance can be understood as reflecting a concern that the spiritual experience of 1981 might become reified through its subsequent representation and promotion. This interpretation is consistent with Molnár's earlier insistence that Spions 'do not create works' and that action is 'neither reproducible nor replicable'. Recognition was actively pursued, yet the conditions through which it might acquire continuity could themselves become objects of disruption. More than four decades after the Paris recordings, the revival of Mitzpah thus returned Spions to a tension already evident in Paris: between the pursuit of recognition and the repeated destabilization of the conditions through which recognition might endure.

Conclusion: Exile as a Practice of Unbelonging

Spions' movement across Budapest, Paris, and Canada shows exile operating simultaneously as historical displacement and as an aesthetic, political, and existential practice. Its forms changed with the cultural settings through which the project moved, but exile was never simply resolved by departure, settlement, or recognition. Across these different contexts, the philosophy of treason repeatedly placed inherited forms of belonging—national, ideological, linguistic, artistic, and eventually religious—under pressure. Exile, in this sense, was not simply what happened to the artist; it was also something produced through practices of disidentification, recombination, and provisional affiliation.

This perspective complicates accounts of musical exile centred primarily on displacement, loss, adaptation, and eventual settlement or return. Spions actively sought audiences, recording opportunities, media attention, and access to the institutions of popular culture, while drawing extensively upon the symbolic resources of rock and pop. Yet recognition did not necessarily lead to the consolidation of a stable artistic identity. Names and personae changed or reappeared; musical formations were assembled and dissolved; political and religious affiliations were adopted, inverted, and reconfigured. The central tension was therefore not between recognition and its refusal, but between its pursuit and the repeated destabilization of the conditions through which it might acquire continuity and accumulate as symbolic capital.

This returns us to the problem raised at the outset. Exile and peripherality can themselves

[53] Zénouda, interview by Buzzonweb.
[54] Molnar interview : https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IFXVVCSm5Ys
[55] Hervé Zénouda, email correspondence with one of the authors, 20 September 2026.

become resources of cultural recognition: displacement may be narrated, aestheticized, and incorporated into an artist's public identity. Spions demonstrates, however, that this conversion need not proceed towards stable consolidation. Nor does its transnational trajectory support a teleological account in which Budapest becomes the origin of an exile completed in Paris or Canada. Each relocation altered the conditions under which treason could be practised without resolving the displacements that preceded it. To understand exile as a practice of unbelonging is therefore to attend to the continuing production and disruption of belonging, rather than to read displacement retrospectively from the standpoint of arrival.[56]

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[56] While this article was in preparation, Gergely Molnár, then using the name Helmut Spiel!, died by suicide in Montréal on 29 June 2026. Péter Hegedűs had died in 2018 and László Najmányi in 2020.

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