

The Building of a Socialist Community.
Social Relations in Czechoslovakia and Poland (1929-1989)
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Research Report

Research Topic

My stay at the OSA in Budapest has been a part of a larger research project preliminary called “The Building of a Socialist Community. Social Relations in Czechoslovakia and Poland (1929-1989)”. The aim of this project is to analyse social cohesion in Central and Eastern Europe under communist rule through the study of social relations. This research is based is on a comparative study of Poland and Czechoslovakia and encompass a broad chronological perspective (1929-1989).

The history of communism was for a long time focused on the power structures and the coercive mechanism. But the presence of an external constraint and an exercise of political violence alone don't explain the long stability of these regimes and the social inertia of these societies. I believe that other mechanisms were at work and this project is focused on the analysis of some of these mechanisms.

In the after-war period, the Soviet-type regimes in Central and Eastern Europe implemented a new model of interpersonal relations as a part of an alternative model of society distant from the capitalist one. To put it in another way, they meant to reinvent social relations. The study of social relations is therefore a necessary dimension of any study of communist regimes and their evolution.

Social relations, in the sense of my research, encompass any relationship between two or more individuals. Their core lies in the family; they extend to the neighbourhood, the work environment and the larger political communities. These relations are shaped by the rules, values and shared identities and they contribute to define the position of each individual in society. Therefore, they play a fundamental role in setting up a feeling of belonging to the community.

I believe that the study of how the individual connected to the others in communist regimes allows to better understand how he formed as human being in a social environment where personal

freedom was limited and where the development of the individual was strongly associated to the collective. At the same time, it's an opportunity to study how the common interest was defined and how the citizens' community was structured in regimes where the basic principles of democratic dialogue were not respected.

General impression

The main objective of my stay at the OSA was to explore the documents which could provide a better understanding of how interpersonal relations were formed in some specific social environments: the family, the neighbourhood, larger citizen's communities and the work. For this, the archives of the OSA are especially well documented. During my stay at the archives, I focused more particularly of the RFE/RL Background Research reports and the Situation Reports from both Polish and Czechoslovak Unit and on Information Items.

I was more particularly interested in different forms of citizen's interaction within the structures proposed by the regime such as local, district and regional administrations (National Committees), working brigades and large industrial companies, political parties and mass organisations. I was also interested in different manifestations of public opinion and the documents related to the moral. Last but not least, I was curious to see how the family relations evolved during the communist rule and the Information Items and the Situation Reports of the RFE are a precious source documenting intimately the interpersonal relations between the husband and wife and between the parents and the children during the period.

I found a numerous records concerning some big industrial companies (such as Skoda, CKD, Vítkovice, NHKG in Czechoslovakia, Nowa Huta Lenina or the Poznan shipyards in Poland). It allowed to examine everyday life in factories (collective contracts, life in brigades, strikes and different forms of labour discontent). The records concerning the popular justice courts gave me an inside into how various conflicts in the neighbourhood and in local communities were handled. In this regard, I discovered some complementary structures created by the regime in order to better supervise the individual, such as Kontrola społeczna (transformed later into NIK) in Poland. Family live and gender relations proved less broadly documented, reflecting probably the lesser coverage of these domains by the mass media at the time and testifying of the difficulty to explore the privacy.

Some documents proved deceiving, such as the letters and popular appeals (HU OSA 300-50-1, box 184-187). These funds were for a major part composed of simple lists of signatories of different petitions during the 1970s and 1980s with little interest for my research. The Confidential Reports on Poland (HU OSA 300-50-13) revealed also of unequal quality and of relatively little interest regarding to my subject. On this regards, I found the papers of the Polish Unit sometimes too much extensive

and thus more difficult to go through than the papers of the Czechoslovak Unit. The press reviews revealed remarkably rich and provided a detailed overview of various social issues related to my project: health and social services, relations at work and in the neighbourhood, political communication.

If the Subject Files did not provide such detailed insight into individual narratives and perceptions, the Information Item, disseminated through the files or collected in distant boxes, proved a remarkably useful source concerning various issues of everyday life: family, women, gender and generations, public opinion and criticism, etc. They provide an immediate point of view of insiders collected on the spot. The conditions of their recording and their unequal quality require handling it very carefully. The anti-establishment point of view and the distinct anticommunist feeling is largely dominant, the interview for the most part being made with the recent émigrés. But according to my research, it's a precious source depicting everyday life, a sort of anthropological or ethnological investigation with a thorough and passionate depiction of the immediate environment of the individual.

As my project encompasses a large chronological perspective, I had also an opportunity to see through the records in the archives the evolution of the documentation work at RFE. The coverage of social issues, the data collection and its classification seemed still in its infancy at the beginning of the 1950s, focused of repression and the anti-establishment feeling. But it improved considerably as time went by, enlarging its focus to social issues. By 1954, it found its standard point and little changed later, regarding the nomenclature and the organisation of the records. The recent flooding in Budapest unfortunately damaged one part of collections and made it inaccessible for researchers. The digitalisation prior to the flooding made it possible to save at least a part of the collections.

How my approach has changed

The collected data needs to be processed further to make statements. But based on what I have found during my stay I can draw some preliminary conclusions. The mass of available sources soon obliged me to restraint my original scope and to focus my research on certain subjects that were directly related to my research project: the factory, the neighbourhood, the political and mass organisations and the family.

The RFE organised a very impressive and surprisingly exhaustive press reviews covering the whole communist period, including press and radio mass media, from very local to international level (dailies, magazines, press agencies, etc.). I found that all the collected information available to researchers is unfortunately not enough put to good use. For the research projects focused on society and therefore fragmented such as mine, the OSA is an excellent opportunity to follow quite easily the evolution of public debate concerning different social issues theme per theme, and to put

your specific research object quite easily into a wider social context. The Subject Files offer a remarkably detailed overview with for the most of the period very carefully classified documents which save a lot of time during the research.

All this information proved extremely useful. But at the same time, the richness and diversity of this archival material did not allow to complete all the research within the prescribed limits of the Fellowship. A new venue will be organised shortly and the familiarity with the archives will henceforth permit to proceed more quickly. It will be more particularly focused of the dissidence and the 1970s-1980s.

Last but not least, during my stay at OSA, I met several researchers who work on similar issues as mine and we could exchange our points of view on our research. I would also like to thank to the OSA team for helping me to organize my stay and particularly to Katalin Gadoros for her kind assistance with the organisation of my stay and Robert Parnica for his valuable insights and recommendations with regard to the Polish and Czechoslovak collections at OSA.

OSA Files accessed during research

Poland

- HU OSA 300-50-11 Information Items: box 1 and 2
- HU OSA 300-50-13 RFE Confidential Reports on Poland: box 1, 2 and 6
- HU OSA 300-50-1: box 35, 63, 76, 77, 78, 137, 138, 139, 151, 180, 184, 185, 188, 191, 192, 193, 195

Czechoslovakia

- HU OSA 300-30-2 Old Code Subject Files I: box 1, 2, 3, 9, 10, 20, 42, 37, 47, 104, 120, 121, 135, 136, 209
- HU OSA 300-30-5 Old Code Subject Files IV: box 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 15, 16, 17, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34, 36, 37, 38
- HU OSA 300-30-9 New Code Subject Files: box 13, 15, 18, 24, 27, 56, 57, 58, 89, 100, 102, 103, 104, 107, 108, 109, 114, 116, 117, 118
- HU OSA 300-30-13: box 2 (1968)
- HU OSA 300-30-15 Collection of Documents Relating to the Czechoslovak Opposition and Protest Movement 1972-1992: box 27 and 27
- HU OSA 300-30-30 Miscellaneous Records of the Czechoslovak Unit: box
- HU OSA 300-30-13 Information Items: box 1 and 2

Files accessed online

- RFE Information Items concerning both Poland and Czechoslovakia

Number of Digital images taken

Poland: 7 730 images

Czechoslovakia: 31 616 images

Documents uploaded to Parallel Archive: still in progress