Europe Throws a Picnic: The Pan-European Picnic and the End of the Cold War
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Research Aim:

My proposed project for the fellowship period, Europe Throws a Picnic, is one part of a larger project on the peace movement during the Cold War. It is intended to be a graphic history and primary source collection aimed for use by undergraduate and graduate students studying East Central European history and the history of the Cold War. It uses the Pan-European Picnic, a 19 August 1989 peace demonstration and border opening on the frontier of Austria and Hungary, to explore the diverse history of political, economic, and social transition in the European socialist space starting in 1989. In so doing, it uses a lesser-known event in the history of post-socialist transition, but one that connects to an incident much more familiar to the non-specialist, namely the Mauerfall, to engage students in critical literacy and interpretation and help them build core disciplinary skills in history.

The Pan-European Picnic was planned by various actors including the Debrecen branch of the Hungarian Democratic Forum (MDF) for the summer of 1989. It was held a day before St. Stephen’s Day, a national holiday commemorating Hungary’s patron saint who converted the country to Christianity, thereby symbolically marking the country’s belonging in Europe. The event included a picnic in a field outside of Sopron, a city of great historical significance for Austrian and Hungarian historical and diplomatic relations, which would include speakers and
informal discussions related to a united Europe. The event would also be marked by a brief opening of the border between Austria and Hungary, commemorating the historical ties between the two countries and the ideal of a borderless Europe. During the event, several hundred citizens of the German Democratic Republic (GDR), many of whom had come to Hungary on vacation and then became refugees, broke through the border with the goal of making their way to West Germany. Today the picnic is best known as the first step in the fall of the Berlin Wall, but in addition to explaining this “breakthrough,” by placing the Picnic in its broader context, the event provides an opportunity to explore the interplay of the national and international, the West and the East, the symbolic and the social history of the end of socialism.

The graphic history of the picnic emphasizes three primary themes: the relationship between socialist countries and between the “East” and “West” during the socialist era and after; different conceptualizations of European identity and freedom; and the roles of both state and opposition actors in the events most closely associated with the end of the Cold War division of Europe. These interpretive themes provide a gateway into core debates in the historiography of post-socialist transition, primarily the role of civil society and the party-state in transition, which is a core aim of the graphic history series to which this book will contribute. They also help illuminate the political diversity of opposition parties and groups and the different futures they envisioned, and the changing relationship between post-socialist states and western European countries in the first (roughly) decade of transition. These themes are also designed to address some of the challenges
associated with teaching the end of the Cold War in Europe (especially in the United States): the diversity of experiences of socialism; the diversity of political goals among newly established or emerging political parties; and relationships among socialist states and between “Eastern” and “Western” Europe.

Research Materials Consulted

The graphic and pedagogical nature of the project required engaging sources with three different aims in mind: constructing a scientific narrative, including appropriate periodization, context, key actors and concepts; constructing a set of cohesive primary sources and supplementary materials (glossaries, maps, etc.) that help students build core historical thinking and analytical skills; and collecting a corpus of visual materials for reference for the graphic narrative.

A history of the Pan-European Picnic raises a number of core issues, including opposition politics, refugee rights and human rights, freedom of movement, economic problems, and conceptualizations of European and both Hungarian and German national identity. Furthermore, the demonstration included letters of support from persons involved in opposition activities in Poland and Romania, and the larger diplomatic context connected to opposition and asylum is important for properly positioning the event and understanding Hungary's—and Germany's—experience of regime change in both national and international perspective. Consequently, my original focus was on three primary collections: the Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Records, including situation reports and the
clippings collections; the International Helsinki Federation Records; and the Gábor Demszky collection, which includes samizdat materials and (Hungarian) State Security files.

Upon consultation with archival staff, I also reviewed materials from the Fekete Doboz Alapítvány Video Archive, which included both documentaries generally related to the regime change in Hungary, as well as hours of unedited footage taken during protests and reportage. These were beneficial for shoring up the visual and social historical dimension of the project, as footage included interviews with and comments from a number of different perspectives including persons from East Germany and Romania seeking asylum, Hungarian and foreign aid workers, and others. I also consulted the film collection of the Hungarian Ministry of the Interior, which included films related to the training of border guards and officials, photographic images of demonstrations by the non-state peace organization Dialogus a Békéért, and the OSA’s holdings of the magazine Nők Lapja.

In addition to these archival holdings, staff provided me with access to materials from their personal libraries and made recommendations of several digital collections including the 1989 collection of artifacts available through Europeana.eu and Historypin (which involved the OSA).

The holdings of the OSA and discussions with the staff have been instrumental in the further development of Europe Throws a Picnic and my larger research on the peace movement. The fellowship period also provided me with an opportunity to consider the themes and disciplinary skills (for students) that may be developed through this project and elements that such a book requires to make it as
effective as possible for students at a variety of stages in their academic careers. This included a consideration of possibly refocusing the project on another symbolic event: the reburial of Imre Nagy, although at this time, I have decided to continue to pursue the Picnic.

I would like to sincerely thank the staff of the archive for sharing their expertise and making my fellowship period extraordinarily productive. This includes my research mentor András Mink and Csaba Szilágyi, who provided invaluable guidance regarding digitized materials and collections. Judit Hegedűs and Robert Parnica were patient guides who helped me navigate the archives and also provided me with insights and suggestions that will be invaluable as I continue to develop this project. The recommendations and commentary of István Rév, Oksana Sarkisova, Zsuzsa Zádori, Nóra Ungar, have opened new avenues of theoretical and historical inquiry, and I am grateful for the assistance of Katalin Gadoros and Nóra Ungár, who helped me organize this visit.

List of Materials

**HU OSA 300-8-47** RFE/RL Research Institute, Publications Department, Situation Reports
   Boxes 23-27 on Hungary from 1979-1989

**HU OSA 318-0-5** International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights
   Country Files
   Boxes 9–11 Austria
   Boxes 47–49 Czechoslovakia
   Boxes 62 East Germany
   Boxes 68–71 Hungary
   Box 111 Romania

**HU-OSA-302** Gábor Demszky Personal Papers
   Sub-fond 2, Boxes 1 & 2 Hungarian State Security and Legal Files
HU OSA 305 Fekete Doboz Alapítvány Video Archive

Sub-fond 2 - Documentary films
305-0-2:1/1 Civil technikák. Fidesz
305-0-2:3/1 A 301-es parcella
305-0-2:5/1 Újmagyar síralom
305-0-2:8/1 Harangszó fél egykor
305-0-2:10/1 Két október
305-0-2:12/1 Duna-gate
305-0-2:14/1 Magyar változások

Sub-fond 3 - Unedited Video Materials
305-0-3:76/1 Interview with Ethnic Hungarian Refugees from Romania
305-0-3:76/2 Interview with a Hungarian Refugee Couple from Transylvania
305-0-3:77/2 Interview with an Ethnic Hungarian Refugee from Transylvania
305-0-3:841/1 or 305-0-3.1989-086_89-108 Refugees from East Germany, Opening the Austro-Hungarian Border
305-0-3:842/1 or 305-0-3.1989-087_89-109 Refugees from East Germany, Opening the Austro-Hungarian Border

HU OSA 394 Records of the Film Studio of the Hungarian Ministry of the Interior

394-0-1:7/1 If You Cross the Border / Ha átléped a határt
394-0-1:9/4 Law and Consience / Törvény és lelkiismeret
394-0-1:14/1 Border Violators / Határsértők
394-0-1:14/2 Organizing the Daily Duty of Border Guards / A határórs napi szolgálat megszervezése
394-0-1:14/5 The Technical Equipment of Border Control Points / A FEP technikai rendszere
394-0-1:15/1 Methods Used by Violators at Border Control Points / Határsértők által alkalmazott módszerek a FEP-eken
394-0-1:15/2 Violent Methods Used by Border Violators / Határsértési kísérletek erőszakos módszerekkel
394-0-1:15/3 Activities of the Border Guard Unit / A határőr őrs tevékenysége
394-0-1:15/4 Roundup at the Border / Razzia a határon
394-0-1:15/5 Border Guard on Duty / Az őrs határőrizeti ügyeletese szolgálatban
394-0-1:16/1 Activity of Border Guards in Search Groups / Határőrök tevékenysége zárócsoporthban és kutatócsoportban
394-0-1:16/3 1/2 Guarding of Narrow Borderline Territories / A keskeny határsávi területek őrzése I.
394-0-1:16/4 2/2 Guarding of narrow borderline territories / A keskeny határsávi területek őrzése II.
394-0-1:16/5 Investigating Border Incidents / Határesemények kivizsgálása

Nők Lapja Holdings (not catalogued)

Photos Related to Dialogus a Békeért (not catalogued)