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## **Research Report**

### **Open Society Archives Visegrad Scholarship, May-July 2013**

“In the shadow of the war: public perception of post-war Hungary, communism and the national self through the lens of rumors circulating during and before the 1956 uprising.”

#### **Research topic**

The objective of my research at OSA was to investigate the urban legends, rumors and myths that emerged in the Hungarian public discourse after 1945 and especially during the 1956 uprising. More specifically, I intended to investigate rumors that can be linked to the experience of war or to interpretative schemes, whether officially sanctioned or unofficial, by which this experience has been narrated.

My interest in rumors that relate to World War Two is motivated by a desire to explore a relatively under-researched aspect of Hungary's postwar history and thus to add a new perspective to the discussion on popular sentiments during this period. Introducing the problem of war experience into this discussion, I believe, can unearth a number of phenomena that remained hidden so far, or provide alternative explanations for historical problems that have already been subject to academic inquiry. My research is thus informed by the conviction that a reexamination of the period reaching from 1945 to the 1956 uprising from the point of view of what it reveals about Hungarian society's coming to terms with the war and its legacy (an approach that, with the exception of the problem of anti-Semitism, has not yet marked scholarly investigations), offers a new interpretative framework that contributes to the better understanding of Hungary's post-war history, whose discussion has so far been dominated by the narrative of communist rule and Soviet occupation (that is, by an approach that tends to interpret the history of public action and public thinking predominantly in the context of and in relation to the communist seizure and practice of power).

As with any collective form of consciousness, public thinking is not only a very elusive target but also very multifaceted. Rumors in this respect offer a particularly valuable body of sources. They can help to get a better sense of some of the key notions that informed the peoples' self-identity, their perception of the 'others' and the narratives by which they made sense of the world around them. Yet rather than reading them as being representative of public opinion as such, although in some cases this cannot be excluded, my primary interest in them is less ambitious: I consider them as a way to reconstruct the various meanings that were available to the people to understand and articulate their perception of current events and developments and to at least map some of the 'panels' that served as building blocks to articulate the collective mindset.

My research at OSA has focused on two particular sets of rumors. The first group included the rumors about the imminence of war between the West and the Soviet Union, usually linked to the wishful belief that such a confrontation would bring an end to communist rule and Soviet occupation. Although this phenomenon of war scare (or rather war hope) could be interpreted as merely the internalization and reflection of Cold War dichotomy, the very fact that such rumors were not characterized by a fear of nuclear annihilation, but rather reflected an understanding of the coming hostilities as the continuation of World War Two (in the sense that its primary consequence was perceived to be the undoing of the political changes brought

about by 1945) makes it possible to consider it as a reflection of wartime experiences, and interpret it accordingly.

The other focus of my investigation was a problem with much more defined contours: it concerned the image of the Soviet soldiers as this appeared in the stories narrating their involvement in the suppression of the 1956 Hungarian uprising. More particularly, my goal was to trace the emergence and career of the urban legend according to which many Red Army rank-and-file—misled by their commanders to believe that they are actually sent to fight the Western imperialist in Egypt—mistook the river Danube for the Suez channel. This story, in addition to anecdotes about deserted Soviet soldiers joining the Hungarian insurgents came to be just as, if not more, dominant in the public narration of the Soviet military invasion as hostile accounts of Russian brutality. What made me interested in this particular story was that it appeared to impart an image remarkably different from those that characterized Hungarian wartime memories. Instead of depicting a culturally alien and rapacious invader, it presented the Red Army soldiers as potentially sympathetic to the cause of the uprising and confirming thereby, according to my hypothesis, the moral superiority of the uprising itself.

The materials my research focused on were the RFE Hungarian Unit Information Items (HU OSA 300-40-4), as well as the Records Relating to the 1956 Hungarian Revolution (HU OSA 306 Collective Fonds), while online I also accessed the Hungarian refugee interviews in the Donald and Vera Blinken collection and the UN Special Committee Documents on the Problem of Hungary, particularly the witness testimonies recorded in the Verbatim Reports of this committee's meeting.

### **General impression**

Upon becoming familiar with the archival material at OSA, I was immediately impressed by its richness and diversity, especially in respect of the Information Items collection. Although I also found interesting material among the subject files, these did not provide as an interesting insight into individual narratives and perceptions as the former. When it comes to the perspective these documents provided, they were often marked by a distinct anti-communist bias, which resulted from both the source of the information and the way these were presented by the report itself. As it can be referred (or assumed) from the material, the RFE interviewers were more likely to get access to informants who were more negatively disposed toward the communist regime (especially before 1956), and it also seems that members of the former middle classes were likely to be overrepresented in the interviews. Moreover, in addition to this filter that concerned the interviewees, there was also an often visible tendency by those finalizing the reports to interpret the received information through a lens defined by their own stance on communism. Yet, rather than seeing this as a deficiency, I welcomed the particular point of view these reports represented, especially as they differed from and thus complemented the impression I could previously gain from documents that recorded opinions and rumors for the party or state organs.

In terms of investigating rumors, I found the Information Items to provide a remarkably rich deposit of such material. In fact, many of the reports, unless they convey direct personal experiences, are likely to contain information that, to various degrees, was based on assumption, hearsay or rumor. This made my work easier on the one hand, as I could encounter a variety of such narratives, but it also required a broader approach in terms of the selection of research material, as it was difficult to predict when and where such stories would

pop up. The benefit of such wider selection is of course that it allows access to the context in which such rumors operated and therefore helps to evaluate them better.

### **How my approach has changed**

The density of sources soon compelled me therefore to alter my original approach. Instead of limiting myself to the subjects that appeared beforehand to be directly related to my topic, or to the original temporal framework of 1945-1956, it seemed wise to widen my research focus both in terms of temporal scope and subject range. For example, documents recording public reactions to Cold War crises from the 1960s and '70s (such as the Berlin crisis of 1961, the Cuban crisis and even the Arab-Israeli war of 1967) offered an interesting basis of comparison and thus helped to trace the surviving or disappearance of interpretative schemes that were characteristic to the 1950s. The Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 was particularly interesting from this point of view, not only because of the great number of documents reporting on Hungarian public reaction or because of the evident parallel to 1956, but also because this time Hungarians were on the side of aggressors, a fact that resulted in conflicting narratives of explanations and self-justification and thus brought to light a revealing variety of narrative strategies.

Similarly, a more inclusive approach concerning the subject matters covered by RFE documents offered a larger evidential backdrop against which to interpret the targeted phenomena. The image of Soviet soldiers during 1956 could be thus better contextualized when contrasted or compared to the various images of 'Russians' that came up in seemingly unrelated documents (covering such diverse topics as the impressions gained through tourist trips to Moscow or the opinions or doubts expressed concerning the Soviet achievements in the space race).

### **Preliminary findings**

In terms of how the research I conducted at OSA has altered my working thesis, overall I feel it has confirmed or partly confirmed my hypotheses, often adding nevertheless new perspectives that I have not considered previously.

The research thus confirmed the link between war scare rumors and the experience of WW2. Although the main message of these rumors was the hope in the transitory nature of communist rule, and the rejection of the continent's division symbolized by Yalta, the context in which they were brought up often also revealed that underlying them was a perception of both the national self and the outside world that rested on a twofold (and to certain extent contradictory) wartime experience. On the one hand, it reflected a sense of helplessness, felt in the face of external and overwhelming forces (whether it be the German or the Soviet occupation), and which apparently translated into the notion that such dominations can only be eliminated by another external force. On the other hand, the reason why the idea that Soviet occupation cannot be challenged from the inside did not lead to a paralyzing sense of resignation had also to do with the way the years 1944-45 were lived through. After seeing the German army come and go, many Hungarians found it easy to believe that the same would happen to Soviets, too. In this context, news about the increasing tension between the former Allies gave ample fuel to rumors about an imminent war (whose outcome, given the nuclear weapon monopoly enjoyed by the United States was predicted to be negative for the Russians).

Although I have also assumed that the experience of the US inability in 1956 to end Soviet domination in Eastern Europe gave a final blow to such hopes, the reports in the Information

Items suggest that such illusions survived—at least within some segments of society—the disillusion felt right after the uprising and continued to have a hold on public imagination up to the mid 1960s (although in some cases these were now projected into a different object: believing in the communist propaganda concerning the remilitarization of West Germany, some hoped that it would be the German military, again, which could challenge the Red Army and thus communist rule). These reports nevertheless also show the gradual emergence of alternative interpretative schemes, such as the fear of nuclear annihilation (which was up to this point often suppressed by a self-delusional underestimation of Soviet achievements in both military and missile technology) and, more importantly, by the interpretation of Eastern Bloc developments through the prism of how they affect (or can be explained in terms of) the assumed Hungarian advantage in the standard of living or consumption (often expressed in concerns about a possible end of political liberalization or imminent austerity measures).

Although the urban legend concerning the disoriented or uninformed Soviet soldiers searching for the Suez channel in Hungary seems to fit into the above narrative, it was in my view altogether less about Russian inferiority than about moral standing—its primary purpose being the projection of an idealized Hungarian self-image, although in a rather indirect way. It is important to note that the particular rumor, as it is evident from OSA documents, was part of a larger body of similar narratives, such as stories about Red Army soldiers believing that they are in Berlin to fight the Americans, or, more often, about bewildered Russians looking for the “fascists” that they were told to combat in Budapest. One reason why among these the Suez story gained such a prominence in the uprising’s folklore was of course that it condensed a number of key notions into a compelling narrative. It placed the uprising into a Cold War context, reflecting on the contemporary Suez crisis; it helped to express anti-Soviet sentiments by highlighting the untrustworthiness of the Soviet leadership that misled even its own soldiers, while at the same time it could also implicitly conveyed the resentment Hungarians felt for what they perceived as Western betrayal, perceiving the Suez adventure as the sign of the selfishness of the West (which, instead of coming to the aid of the uprising, exploited Soviet vulnerability for own purposes).

Another factor that contributed to the career and canonization of this urban legend was that besides its domestic appeal (which I assumed even before my research) it also seemed to have fascinated Western observers. Indeed, one of things that I came to realize during my research was the intense interest in the West (manifest, for example, in exaggerated reports about the number of Soviet deserters) in the conduct of the Soviet troops during the suppression of the Hungarian uprising. Importantly, however, although Hungarians and Westerners seemed both to have a vested interest in these stories, they had different motivations to do so: a dissimilarity that could be summed up with the difference between *morale* and *morality*. Whereas the accounts of the misled or deserting Soviet soldiers were, from the Western point of view primarily about the morale of Soviet troops (an important factor when it comes to assess the fighting value of these troops and thus the threat posed by the Soviet Union), in the Hungarian context these stories primarily served the purpose of projecting a moral superiority of the revolution.

It is in this respect that the Suez legend differs greatly from the war scare rumors discussed earlier. Whereas the latter interpreted the Cold War developments within the framework of World War 2, the agenda underlying the former was exactly the opposite: to exclude the war as a possible parallel or point of reference in making sense of the 1956 uprising. Indeed, as the documents consulted at OSA also confirmed, the memory of the war was remarkably absent in both contemporary and later accounts. This suppression was certainly not unrelated

to a clear pattern guiding collective action during the events that aimed at preventing any resemblance to the recent past, tainted by Hungary's alliance with Nazi Germany, and thus at countering (real or perceived) communist accusations branding the uprising as the revival of "fascist" or "reactionary" forces.

From this point of view it becomes especially important that the depiction of Soviet rank-and-file as being confused, ashamed or even sympathetic to the uprising (motifs that characterize most accounts) conveyed not the image of an antagonistic, but rather that of a misguided enemy (which, provided he recognizes the true nature of the revolution, would see no justification to continue fighting). This was a major difference to how the arriving Red Army was perceived in 1944-45. And although descriptions of the Russian invaders as a brutal and rapacious enemy was also present in the accounts (echoing wartime sentiments), this did not seem to dominate public narratives or challenge the popularity of the Suez legend. Although stories vilifying Russians had also a role to play (in highlighting the victim status of the Hungarian nation), the real target of despise were not the Soviet soldiers, but coward hard-liner Stalinists and the officers of the local state-security (ÁVH). In fact, in a number of stories told in the RFE documents, UN testimonies and refugee interviews, the behavior Soviet soldiers or officers are used to provide a contrast to the latter, proving their moral inferiority even further. Such stories not only illustrate one of the ways by which the image of Russian soldiers was instrumentalized to articulate a Hungarian self-image, but also shows that when it came to the expression anti-communist or anti-Russian sentiments, it was important to exclude the possibility that these can be interpreted as a sign that the uprising was in any way the continuation of the Soviet-Hungarian conflict during the previous war. (That such concerns were not entirely unfounded was demonstrated by the somewhat ambiguous and confused reaction of Western Europe to the 1953 Berlin uprising—which in turn might offer one explanation why the Berlin version of the Suez narrative did not make a lasting impact on the folklore of the '56 revolution.) So despite the remarkable situational similarity, there was thus a visible effort on behalf of the insurgents to avoid placing their struggle against the Red Army into a narrative framework that could be seen as retrospectively justifying the fight against the same enemy in 1944-45.

### **Conclusion**

My research at OSA reassured me that rumors can provide a rewarding venue to investigate the construction of postwar national self, and to demonstrate how in this process the shaping of national self-image vis-à-vis communism was intertwined with the ramifications of the wartime past. The sources I located provide an excellent springboard for pursuing this line of research further, and I am extremely grateful for the opportunity provided by the OSA Visegrad grant. I also would like to express my gratitude toward István Rév and András Mink for their advice and generous support, Katalin Gádoros for her kind assistance, and Örs Lehel Tari and Robert Parnica for their help with the source material.

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**Appendix to Research Report  
Open Society Archives Visegrad Scholarship, May-July 2013**

**OSA Files accessed during research**

- HU OSA 300-40-1 Box 1588
- HU OSA 300-40-4 Box 1 to 21
- HU OSA 300-40-5 Box 184
- HU OSA 306-0-4-28

**Files accessed online**

- CURPH Interviews with 1956 Hungarian Refugees
- RFE Information Items
- UN Special Committee Documents

**Number of Digital images taken**

Approx. 1200 images

**Documents uploaded to Parallel Archive (still in progress):**

8 documents with a total page of 77 (6% of taken image)