

Final Report

While in residence at the Open Society Archives (OSA) I consulted a number of collections (which are listed below). Broadly speaking, my dissertation research seeks to explore how Hungarian refugees from 1956 were instrumentalized in the early Cold War geopolitical landscape? How was their symbolic potency used both by non-communist and communist states in the months and years after the Revolution, and perhaps most importantly, to what extent did these refugees themselves appropriate these Cold War narratives for their own ends? Put simply, to what extent were they aware of a certain Cold War “way of speaking,” how exactly did they use this “way of speaking,” and when did they reject it altogether? I have consistently run material from this archive against these questions, noting in particular where surprises have cropped up and where things appear inconsistent since these are the entry points for most historical analysis.

Lurking behind these questions is the methodological quandary of the Cold War: to what extent can historians even differentiate actual sincerely held convictions, from rhetorical posturing during the Cold War? What is “real” and “substantive” about the Cold War and what is merely smoke and mirrors – that is to say, Cold War propaganda? After two months of research I am beginning to realize that the question itself is ill-posed. The distinction may not actually be that useful considering that distinguishing conviction from posturing is always an imperfect historical endeavor. Perhaps more interesting is to ask how the slippage between these two concepts was understood by contemporaries and how it generated the ideological dimensions of the Cold War. In this vein, we can ask what role the refugees, as well as their host states, played in constructing the international meaning of the Revolution of 1956? In this regard, Radio Free Europe played a prominent role. As an intermediary situated between the refugee and larger international actors, the records of Radio Free Europe, which are housed at OSA, are an invaluable resource for this project.

During this research I was surprised by the extent to which the notion of a Cold War often functioned more as a proxy for discussing other international concerns, which ostensibly were not about the Cold War at all. For instance, Cold War rhetoric was often used to process the unresolved controversies of WWII, particularly the issue of anti-Semitism and the continuing persistence of the myth of Judeo-Bolshevism. Also, the events of 1956 were continually filtered through the prism of decolonization. I suppose this shouldn't be a surprise considering the events of the Suez Crisis occurred simultaneously with the Revolution in Hungary and many Hungarians were explicit about this connection. Moreover, both sides accused the other of being involved in neo-colonial activities. Many refugees accused the Soviet Union of being a colonial power in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union continued to accuse the West of exploiting the world along imperialistic lines. The extent to which subjects, even institutions deliberately established in a Cold War framework like Radio Free Europe, used the idea of the Cold War in order to discuss decolonization surprised me. Moreover, the erroneous link between communism and Jews persisted from the interwar years and WWII into the events of 1956, but were recoded in light of Cold War priorities.

While exploring Béla Király's Personal Papers, for instance, I came across an opinion piece that he had written addressing widespread concerns that the Revolution contained anti-Semitic currents. Király insisted that the Revolution represented the combined will of the Hungarian people – Jews and Christians alike – and that it should therefore supersede the

memory of anti-Semitism and the Arrow-Cross catastrophe. It was almost as if the heroism of 1956 – clear and uncontested (at least according to him) – served to exonerate the less savory memories of the interwar period and the Arrow Cross regime. Consider this revealing passage: “Only the magnificent 1956 October revolution succeeded finally in erasing the bad memory left by the ‘Arrow Crossist’ era in world public opinion.”¹ Notice here how an event explicitly coded as Cold War – the Revolution of 1956 – is actually a re-triangulation of older controversies in the light of Cold War priorities. Indeed, as my research has shown, Király was very proficient at using Cold War vocabulary in order to rearrange uncomfortable narratives from his own past.

I also noticed this kind of clever appropriation of Cold War scripts in the witness testimonies before the UN Special Committee on the Problem of Hungary. Here, subjects repeatedly “tweaked” the story of the Revolution in ways that would bolster their case in relation to the formulaic precepts of international law. For instance, witnesses were always careful to emphasize that Imre Nagy was firmly in control of the situation only a few days after the chaos of October 23rd. Why? Because the committee itself was trying to determine if Nagy’s government was indeed the legitimate governing authority of Hungary. Without this assurance, the rigid formulas of international law may have invalidated Nagy’s claim to legitimacy on the international level. There is no time to get into the details here, but suffice it to say that the witnesses cleverly navigated the maze of international law and politics in order to construct a narrative of events that was advantageous to them. This is not to say that these witnesses were lying, or that they did not in fact believe their account of things, but it is to say that actual experience (if there is such a thing) and the meanings we construct around it are inextricably linked. This is another reminder that in terms of the Cold War one should not become too preoccupied with distinguishing between “true” inner convictions, and the strategic maneuvers needed to thrive in the Cold War geopolitical landscape. The records I consulted at OSA were uniquely situated for elucidating this very important mutual relationship between convictions and posturings.

In terms of broader historical research, these collections intersect with a number of historiographical trends. First, and most obviously, these records support the growing historiographical consensus that the Cold War was not nearly as bipolar as we have traditionally assumed. The Iron Curtain was in fact perforated and many links existed between East and West. Furthermore, the emphasis on colonial tropes, and a preoccupation with decolonization and the non-aligned movement in the documents confirms arguments made by some historians that the Cold War was actually a rhetorical stand-in for the larger processes of decolonization that occurred throughout this period. Finally, historians have long noted the long shadow that Cold War rhetoric casts over WWII, and they have emphasized the extent to which Cold War propaganda obscures events. The primary challenge for historians of the Cold War then, is getting behind this rhetoric, or at least making the rhetoric itself the subject of study. This remains true of my research project and my time at OSA has only reinforced this impression in me. I have taken the approach that the rhetoric, although misleading in terms of identifying “what really happened,” is very useful in terms of understanding exactly how discourse worked in the postwar world.

To conclude, my time at OSA can be likened to a hub, helping me link up broader historiographical and methodological debates with the primary source material. My project is now more focused and I have a clearer idea of where to go from here. I have appreciated this opportunity.

¹ “Statement Regarding Nazi Vandalism,” *Hungarian Freedom Fighters Federation: Progress Report*, Dec. 10, 1959. [336-0-5:1/5]

Collections Consulted

1. Radio Free Europe – Subject Files.
 - a. '56 Files.
 - i. [Ötvenhatos] 56-os Forradalom Küldföld a Magyarírók Érdekében Disszidált Magyar Írók, 1957. Call Number: 300-40-1:1312/5.
 - b. Emigráció Files.
 - i. Emigráció – Anglia, 1956-1983. Call Number: 300-40-1:258/4.
 - ii. Emigráció – Ausztria, 1955-1958. Call Number: 300-40-1:259/1.
 - iii. Emigráció – Dominika. Call Number: 300-40-1:259/8.
 - iv. Emigráció – Jugoszlávia, 1957. Call Number: 300-40-1:259/13.
 - v. Emigráció – NSZK. Call Number: 300-40-1:260/8.
 - vi. Emigráció – USA, 1955-1958. Call Number: 300-40-1:261/6.
 - c. Information Items.
 - i. Exile – Cultural Institutes Abroad, 1960-70. Call Number: 300-40-4:2/18.
 - ii. Exile – Emigrants – Austria, 1958-1970. Call Number: 300-40-4:21/2.
 - iii. Exile – Emigrants – Dominica, 1957. Call Number: 300-40-4:21/3.
 - iv. Exile – Emigrants – England, 1964-1970. Call Number: 300-40-4:21/4.
 - v. Exile – Emigrants – France, 1956-1967. Call Number: 300-40-4:21/5.
 - vi. Exile – Emigrants – General, 1957-1970. Call Number: 300-40-4:21/1.
 - vii. Exile – Emigrants – West Germany, 1956-63. Call Number: 300-40-4:21/8.
 - viii. Exile – Emigrants – Yugoslavia, 1956-57. Call Number: 300-40-4:21/9.
 - ix. Exile – Emigrants' Visit to Hungary, 1967. Call Number: 300-40-4:21/10.
 - x. Exile, 1956-63. Call Number: 300-40-4:2/19.
 - xi. RFE – Criticism, 1960-1971. Call Number: 300-40-4:9/9.
 - xii. RFE – General, 1958-1964. Call Number: 300-40-4:9/1.
 - xiii. RFE – Teenager Party, 1967-1969. Call Number: 300-40-4:9/5.
 - xiv. RFE. Call Number: 300-40-4:2/9.
 - xv. Science – History, 1956-1970. Call Number: 300-40-4:9/12.
 - xvi. Science – Sociology, 1965-1969. Call Number: 300-40-4:9/11.
 - d. Recent Aspects of the Redefection Campaign – Menekültek Hazacsábítása. Call Number: 300-5-40:13/8.
2. Héderváry Collection.
 - a. Witness Testimonies on the UN Special Committee on Hungary.
3. Columbia University Research Project on Hungary Interviews with 1956 Hungarian Refugees.
4. Personal Papers of General Béla Király.
 - a. Personal Files [336-0-6].
 - i. Béla Király – US Citizenship Application. Call Number: 336-0-6:2/6.
 - ii. Interview with David Irving and Letter to Peter Gosztony, 1974-1984. Call Number: 336-0-6:1/6.
 - iii. MP Files – Election Campaign, 1990. Call Number: 336-0-6:2/16.
 - iv. Imre Nagy Foundation, 1989. Call Number: 336-0-6:2/18.
 - v. Slandering Campaign – Documents of Court Procedures, Expert Report Related to the Campaign of 1991-1993. Call Number: 336-0-6:6/4.