

Public Opinion Research in Czechoslovakia during the Cold War

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Research Project:

My dissertation focuses on the Czechoslovak Institute of Public Opinion (ÚVVM) through its various metamorphoses. Built upon the grand ruins of Tomáš Masaryk's interwar ambitions for a sociological state, ÚVVM was launched in 1945 along the principles of George Gallup, then closed dramatically after the 1948 communist coup. Outwardly, the Eastern Bloc eschewed public opinion research as a "bourgeois pseudo-science." Yet it was reborn in 1967 following the earlier acceptance of empirical sociology and polling in Soviet Russia, but closed again in 1971, eleven months after the Prague Spring. The project uses the Institute and its astonishing social surveys to chart successive shifts in how public opinion was understood.

In focusing on various iterations of the ÚVVM in Prague, I position the Eastern Bloc's wider social survey research community as an arena for tracking the early Cold War migration of ideas in the social sciences. ÚVVM was entangled with similar institutes operating in Warsaw, Budapest and Moscow- but also Paris, West Berlin, Princeton and New York. My dissertation builds upon my training in the intellectual and political history of Eastern Europe, and the social sciences to tell the emergence of public opinion research as a global story, in which the desires and fears of 'East' and 'West' intermingled.

Research Experience:

It became apparent quite soon after extremely interesting early conversations with OSA staff – particularly Ioana Macrea-Toma and Anastasia Felcher – that the OSA RFE holdings were a universe of their own, into which certain epistemological assumptions and research practices had to be scrutinized or rethought. I thus reorientated my plan to simply dredge public opinion-related documents at the OSA into something slightly more nuanced and structured. In fact, I decided to compartmentalize two separate, but parallel research tasks in order to prevent them 'contaminating' each other.

The objects of these two tasks were the following: 1) RFE's public opinion research division; and 2) Czechoslovak, Polish, and Hungarian public opinion research endeavors as covered by RFE media monitoring, East-West professional encounters, and the rare migration of official documents.

The latter project was far more ambitious, and took on the contours of a data gathering trip whose results I am still processing, but for which the OSA possessed unique potential in its exceptionally organized RFE collection of print, TV/radio, and academic journal monitoring (through which I found articles or segments I had been unable to locate, or was entirely unaware of, in Prague and Warsaw), and the uniquely intact fonds of the Hungarian Institute for Public Opinion Research.

1. Radio Free Europe's public opinion research unit

I began my research of RFE's attitude and opinion monitoring office (APOR) from its very beginning of operations in the early 1950s. In what staff termed 'shoestring operations', APOR members went by bus to international gatherings like the 1958 Brussels Expo or the 1959 International Youth Festival in Vienna to interview Soviet and Eastern Bloc travelers, and observe them like amateur ethnographers, the latter recalling the approach of the Mass Observation movement in 1930s-40s Britain. Though there is some literature on the unit's early period, I found it very useful to unpack this genealogy myself via the frustrated correspondence of APOR staff, and taciturn internal evaluations of RFE mid-level management, exasperated with the amateurish quality of anecdotal data at odds with the US government's embrace of big data.

The unit's shift to more mathematical and structured survey work came from an internal RFE backlash over the credibility of this data gathering, and a feeling of tightening congressional budget strings in Washington. APOR staff, I found, also displayed a growing awareness of the rise of social research in Poland and the Soviet Union during the Gorbachev 'thaw' in their reports, and a recognition of the burgeoning field of public opinion research in places it was not meant to exist.

At this point, my research here focused on two areas: APOR's statistical methodologies and paradigms for using public opinion polling techniques on populations that were literally beyond its reach; and its attitude towards polling work conducted by 'enemy' organizations in

socialist Central and Eastern Europe. For the former, I focused upon two interesting aspects: debates around APOR's design of the Method of Comparative and Continual Sampling, a statistical method for making interviews with tourists or emigres representative of a socialist target country as a whole, and APOR's outsourcing of interviewing work to a handful of private polling companies across Europe. For the latter, I read through all of APOR's reports and memos from the early 1960s to 1989. In doing so, I noticed two remarkable things: that APOR staff were carefully tracking polls conducted in Hungary, Poland and Czechoslovakia, and, more remarkably, were increasingly using those polls to validate and recalibrate their own polling data and sampling models, for which I will explain more.

RFE came to integrate socialist polling data through a process of triangulation. In one recurring pattern, APOR might organize a selection of respondent statements from this synthesized data to find symmetries with RFE's own polling on travelers and refugees from the same country, in quite visual ways reminiscent of structural anthropologists searching for patterns of equivalence across different languages. In one early report in March 1962, APOR wrote of a Hungarian party poll (whose summary results were printed in *Népszabadság*, received by RFE, and then unpacked by APOR staff) that the strong similarity "increases our confidence in the method of sampling employed by us and indicates that a cautious projection of the results is permissible wherever the behavior or attitude in question is broadly shared by the parent population". The report went on, "It is of special interest that even under police-state conditions empirical research can produce results of great political significance." What is of even more special interest to the historian is the fairly indiscriminate, almost naïve, attitude adopted to incorporating such newspaper-reported results into a validation of RFE's own efforts.

RFE also would compare error rates and polling distributions to retrospectively verify their earlier polls. By the late 1960s, it seems, this had become quite a quick operation too. During the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia in September 1968, APOR was able to cross-validate two separate and nationwide Czechoslovak polls on Dubček's popularity (one from the ÚVVM- on August 28th, and another from the newspaper Rude Pravo on Aug 31st) with its own polls from August 24th into a high-level report on the fluid situation in Prague. APOR reports describe how this turnaround in a matter of days would have been unthinkable even just a few years earlier- and reflected how integrated APOR's PO researchers had become

with Czechoslovak colleagues via the reporting and transmission of summary data via media outlets and RFE's monitoring-research transmission belt.

2. Czechoslovak, Polish, Soviet and Hungarian public opinion research

The second task at the OSA was to investigate media coverage and occasional original research materials of public opinion research occurring in socialist Czechoslovakia, and to a lesser extent, Hungary, and Poland. I had to foci to this potentially sprawling mass of documents: transnational and transregional entanglements; and media coverage that emphasized polling's public reception (or lack of). I was aided by the RFE's helpful (although not always thorough) system of cataloging its media records by theme, including the categories 'Public Opinion' and 'Morale'. I concentrated on three of the four periods my dissertation digs into: the late 1950s; the Prague Spring; and the early-to-mid 1970s. I found excellent and consistent materials for Poland between 1958-1960, unsurprising given the 'mania' for polling in the period, as well as surprisingly abundant roundtables and profiles of public opinion polling in Czechoslovakia in the 1970s and 1980s, which I had not expected. The latter suggest that the characterization of polling's disappearance and death after 1968 were inaccurate and premature, and that the Husak government remained eager to profile the technocratic potential polling offered as a technology even despite the risks and historical baggage it carried.

My original intention had been to focus on Czechoslovakia, but it became clear that the OSA's holdings for the Hungarian Institute for Public Opinion Research represented a special opportunity for my project. While in Budapest, I met with several former members of the Institute for oral history interviews, and also conducted research at ELTE University's holdings. With limited time remaining in my stay, I conducted a relatively blunt sweep of the Institute fonds at the OSA, focusing on materials that had transnational connections and German or English-language materials. I am currently in the process of working through these digitized materials and plan to return to Budapest in summer 2023 to conduct further interviews, as well as consult these fonds with less haste. For now, I walked away with two preliminary directions to pursue with the Institute: first, the close connections it formed after 1969 with regional peer institutions; second, it's conceptual and institutional rooting in the 'mass media' communications sphere. The latter provides a particularly interesting way to continue tracking public opinion research in the 1970s for Hungary that sidesteps the predominately cybernetic historiography of

prognostika in Poland and Czechoslovakia: as polling ostensibly recedes from public view after Normalization and the Prague Spring, the imbrication of polling technologies to power the 1970s turn to goulash communism places it closer to the public, via their TV and radio sets, than it had ever been before. More generally, the Institute fonds point toward the enormous potential of the OSA's archival materials for future researchers exploring the intersection of late twentieth century social sciences, popular culture, and state socialism.

On June 10, I gave a presentation from my time at the OSA to Archive staff and researchers alongside my colleague José Luis Aguilar López-Barajas, who also presented his research. Titled 'Trusting your enemy: Using Social Research in the Eastern Bloc', my presentation hued towards unpacking what I termed the "alternative geographies" of social survey data by RFE and their peers across the Iron Curtain. Though time was limited, there was a useful discussion, and a particularly useful series of follow-up discussions with Gabor Toka, whose own professional career has strayed into the domain of public opinion research.

Next Steps and Future Research Directions:

My primary goal is to solidify my digitized archival materials and preliminary findings into two dissertation chapters covering public opinion research in the 1960s and early 1970s in Czechoslovakia. One chapter, tracing the rebirth of the ÚVVM in 1967 is nearing completion; the other chapter, on 'elite studies' is outlined but will require additional travel to several archives before full writing can begin. This research has also been, or will be, presented at several international conferences and workshops as part of an effort to share my findings, refine my dissertation and generate a conversation around a topic that still remains fairly niche.

In November, I presented research at the annual convention of the Association for East European and Eurasian Studies – the largest and most important international gathering of historians of Eastern and Central Europe. I organized a panel composed of early career intellectual historians from Poland, Germany and Romania called "From the Spotlight to the Shadows: Social Scientists and Precarious Regimes of Knowledge in Socialist Eastern Europe." Playing with the concept of 'precarity'— an increasingly familiar and germane term for the economic, political, and social uncertainties of our contemporary life, as well as the academy itself— this panel looked at how the emergent fields of public opinion research, urban sociology and transnational archaeology took hold among scholars navigating political uncertainty, and the

vicissitudes of patronage or obscurity, under state socialism. The panel stimulated an extremely lively discussion about how we even begin to tell such stories, the role of materiality in concretizing intellectual history of the social sciences, and early ideas for new collaborations. Looking to the future, I will also present some of my Visegrad-funded findings at a workshop jointly organized by the University of Cambridge (UK) and Columbia University (USA) in New York, and at the University of Washington (USA) in Seattle in 2023.

OSA Archives consulted:

Czechoslovakia - Radio Free Europe (RFE):

HU OSA 300-30-2: including boxes 135, 139, 140, 141

HU OSA 300-30-3: including boxes 56, 74, 69, 73

HU OSA 300-30-6: including boxes 4, 61, 67

HU OSA 300-30-7: including boxes 452, 453

HU OSA 300-30-8: including boxes 29, 40

HU OSA 300-30-24: including boxes 11, 12;

Poland - RFE:

HU OSA 300-50-1: including boxes 2128, 2129, 2130, 2134, 2135;

Hungary - RFE:

HU OSA 300-40-2: including boxes 107, 108;

Media and Opinion Research Department- RFE:

All available materials surveyed: in HU OSA 300-6-1/2/3/4/5/6;

The Hungarian Institute for Public Opinion Research:

TK 420-1-1: including boxes 2, 12, 18, 14, 15

TK 420-2-1: including boxes 24, 25

TK 420-2-2: including boxes 1, 9, 10, 16.

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