

## OSA Final Report - Tomas Sniegon

The Visegrad Scholarship was my first opportunity to work at the Vera and Donald Blinken Open Society Archives in Budapest. I had already heard about archives in very positive contexts and several times used the documents freely accessible in the electronic archive on the Internet, but it was not until the place in Budapest, where I spent a total of two months, that I was fully convinced of the richness and diversity of the archive funds there.

A relatively small portion of the documents that I have been able to study are available digitally, and given the scope of the documentation, I understand that the process of full digitization, if it happens, will take quite some time. However, with the fresh experience of my stay at OSA, I must state that I certainly do not regret the fact that I could not fully carry out my study of documents from home or from my home university.

The local environment with very helpful and experienced staff as well as discussions with fellow scholarship holders and other researchers were very inspiring, as were the opportunities to get to know Budapest and its institutions, which are relevant to my research, much closer. I therefore want to express my deep gratitude to the experts from the archive with whom I had the opportunity to work.

In this context, I only regret that my stay, as well as the stay of my colleagues, could not be more closely connected with the activities of the Central European University, which was forcibly relocated from Budapest to Vienna. I would very much like to visit some of the activities there in my free time, for example guest lectures, and possibly share my own knowledge and experience. The political context of the division of the university and the archive is of course well known to me, so I can only express my regret.

During my stay in Budapest, I worked at OSA both on the primary project, thanks to which I received the scholarship, and on two other projects - finishing work on a book on Soviet politics in the 1960s and revising a scholarly article for a scientific journal. Studying in the archive helped me in all these ways.

The topic of my main project is the events of the Czechoslovak Prague Spring of 1968 and their connections and systemic comparison with the Hungarian year 1956. The exact name of the project is *Authoritarianism with human face? New analysis of Czechoslovak "Prague Spring 1968" and its "lessons from history"*. The point is to study the Prague Spring of 1968 not as a qualitatively new/quite unique phenomenon, but largely as a manifestation of delayed de-Stalinization, which, however, had already largely failed in the Soviet Union itself in the years 1962-1966. The Soviet radical attitudes towards the Prague Spring can thus be studied

not as a misunderstanding of reforms, but as a result of the Soviet Union's own failures in the process of de-Stalinization. The lesson from the Hungarian events of 1956 was therefore used as a warning against the loss of control over Czechoslovak development, which naturally also leads to questions about who, how and why such warnings against a "repetition of Hungary" were used. Some aspects of Soviet strategic thinking in the given period have a broad overlap not only towards the later period of the Cold War, but also towards the thinking of the Kremlin in the post-Soviet period.

The main archival materials that I used during my stay in Budapest came mainly from five areas. The first of them consisted of Situation reports, which significantly helped to orientate in contemporary issues. The second area was video materials, mainly video recordings of interviews with some important actors. The third area consisted of biographies of selected personalities and actors, which are processed in very clear folders. The fourth area was the thematic components with a number of period analyses. And finally, the last, fifth area, which I managed to focus on in more detail, was the declassified telegrams of the US embassy in Budapest in 1956 and the period that followed.

Thanks to all this, I was able to study in detail both individual sub-events and some longer-term development processes, including the evolution of the attitudes of relevant actors. My advantage in this regard was that I had already become familiar with a number of important documents on the structural issues of the communist regime and on the methods of decision-making at the highest level, so I came to Budapest with a relatively decent prior knowledge.

Since the Open Society Archives do not contain essential political documents of the type of the most important decisions of the leading party organs or the power units, they are of course not the only or decisive archival institution in the process of my research. However, once I had previously studied the above-mentioned documents, the study of the contemporary press, analyzes and other sources at the OSA served me well to supplement and contextualize the previously acquired knowledge. Therefore, the importance of OSA in my entire study process is high.

One area that I did not have time to go through during my fellowship in Budapest is the older documents on microfilm. Due to time constraints and plenty of other work, I have changed my priorities from the original plan and focused on more available resources, but since my project will last at least another two years, I hope to be able to return to this source later.

Also, not knowing Hungarian forced me to correct some of my original ideas (here, for example, it concerns HU OSA 306 Collective Fonds – Records Relating to the 1956 Hungarian Revolution, HU OSA 357 Collective Fonds: Hungarian State Security Documents 1949-1980

or HU OSA 408 László Varga Collection on Hungarian State Security Services). In the final summary, however, this did not mean a significant qualitative loss for me, given the broader focus of the project.

I focused primarily on Soviet materials and printed matter, the richness of which was a welcome surprise for me. Of course, for example, printed matter from the 1950s and 1960s can be studied in other archives, but the way in which they are arranged and organized in the OSA makes the research work very efficient. In this regard, it can be seen that the RFE/RL archives were organized with the aim of the simplest and most operative practical use, so that their users - primarily journalists - could manage the search and stage of materials effectively even in the pre-internet age. In the biographical sections, for example, one can study the development of public speeches and attitudes associated with, for example, Yuri Andropov between 1956 and 1968, when at the beginning of this period he was the Soviet ambassador in Budapest and at the end of it the chairman of the KGB, who significantly participated in the invasion of the Soviet Union and its allies to Czechoslovakia. However, when one studies some processes connected with a given stage of the Cold War, one does not have to go back to the biographical folder (in this case, Andropov's folder) for certain appearances, but relevant Andropov's contributions can be found again precisely in such a themed selection and appear in a new context.

In addition, the biographical files surprised me by the fact that they contained not only the appearances of the given personalities in the central media of their country and time, but also more than once, for example, in lower-level media, in the Soviet case, for example, at the level of the union republics, or in narrowly specialized media. In this context, I mean, for example, the selection dedicated to the Soviet economist Evsei Liberman and the files on the unsuccessful, but still quite richly discussed economic reforms in the 1960s associated with his name. In my study, Liberman is relevant for the comparison with the Czechoslovak communist reformer Ota Šik and his ideas and, in a broader sense, for the study of repeated collapses of communist reforms in general. Given that he was active not only in Moscow, but above all in Leningrad at the time, and published not only in the central press, but also in smaller economic periodicals, I would hardly have found a similar number of his interviews and articles elsewhere than in OSA. If a person wanted to make such a thorough selection in ordinary libraries with printed materials, he or she would have to devote a disproportionately more time to the search, and it is questionable whether such a researcher would even then be able to get to the same high-quality and representative result.

From the individual collections, I also paid a lot of attention to the interviews conducted in Moscow by the Hungarian historian Miklós Kun in the 1990s. They were interesting both for their content and because I myself met some of the interviewed personalities during my interviews in Moscow in the 1990s. This involved, for example, the former ambassador of the USSR in Prague Stepan Červonenko or the former chairman of the KGB Vladimir Semichastnyi and Alexander Shelepin (Shelepin, however, refused the request for an interview, which is why Kun's material was all the more interesting).

A pleasant finding is the fact that OSA is not only relevant for researchers dealing with political and diplomatic history, but also for other scholars and researchers, for example those who deal with so-called memory studies. Since I am also engaged in a related field - historical-cultural research - I found that OSA can bring me new inspiration in this regard in the future. So I hope to be able to return here in the near future and I will be happy to do so when another opportunity arises.

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