

# Final Report for Vera and Donald Blinken Open Society Archives, Budapest, Hungary

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Project Title: *Materializing Ghost Towns: Soviet Military Barracks and Hungarian Daily Life during the Cold War*

## Introduction and Overview of Project and Research

After the Second World War, Soviet settlements were established in dozens of Hungarian villages and cities, and grafted onto existing army bases. The larger ones contained apartment buildings, schools, medical facilities, shops and cultural amenities. Following the Soviet military withdrawal from Hungary, some of these abandoned sites were repurposed; others became ghost towns. These settlements are the focus of the project for which I was awarded a Visegrad Scholarship – specifically, Soviet military presence in Hungary from 1944, when Soviet troops first entered, through June 1991, when the last of them withdrew from the country. The aim of my study is to create a portrait of everyday life in Soviet sites and to trace shifting Hungarian-Soviet relations during what at different moments can be cast as invasion, liberation, occupation, and coexistence. On a broader level, I seek to capture socialism in practice in an unusual transnational context and to contribute to current understandings of interactions *within* the Soviet Bloc, thereby adding new dimensions to the histories of postwar Hungary and Cold War East Central Europe.

That said, I am only just beginning this research project. What initially drew me to the Open Society Archives (OSA) were the digitized Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE) “Information Items” on Soviet troops in Hungary that I had located on its website, the earliest of which was dated 1951. When I applied for the Visegrad Scholarship to explore similar items that are not digitized, as well as other types of materials, my goal was to focus on primary sources for the years leading up to one of the major turning points in the timeline I am exploring: the 1956 Soviet invasion of Hungary, a moment that increased the number of Soviet forces in the country and, for a time thereafter, proscribed interaction between Soviet and Hungarian citizens. During my fellowship, however, I managed to amass materials for the period after 1956, too, into the 1970s. This was possible in my one month at the OSA for the following reasons: 1) fellows were allowed to take photographs (I ended up with nearly 400, which was immensely helpful given that I had applied for only a partial scholarship); 2) “Information Items” relevant to my study seemed to peter out by the late 1960s; and 3) the repetitive nature of the officious published materials of interest to me (newspaper articles) made it possible for me to skim and collect items from “Subject Files” for a longer period than I had anticipated.

### I. Information Items

The following is a general overview of my findings in the three categories of sources I examined at the OSA; they are cited in detail in the bibliography at the end of this report. The first, **Information Items**, consists of observations by Hungarian emigrés, locals and individuals travelling in Hungary. These provide a sense of the ways in which Soviet soldiers and their families were becoming embedded in daily life, and how ordinary Hungarians perceived them. For example, Information Items shed light on the impact of the requisitioning of buildings to house officers and their families, and to establish recreational facilities for them, as well as

schools for their children. They underscore the separation from the local population of NCOs/rank-and-file soldiers, who were housed on the outskirts of towns, and were restricted in their movement to occasional “day passes.” They offer insight into economic circumstances generated by Soviet military presence (e.g. Soviet “contributions” to informal economic networks). They describe interactions between the foreign “occupiers” and the local population in ordinary circumstances (e.g. Hungarians serving in canteens for Soviet officers or cleaning their homes). They illuminate tensions between Soviet soldiers and Hungarians that led to altercations ranging from brawls to murder. They offer characterizations of Russians that might be holdovers from brutal wartime experience or rooted in earlier stereotypes (e.g. as “colonizers” and as “Mongols”). As a final illustration, they offer a sense of daily life for Soviet officers (e.g. their leisure pursuits and family dynamics).

Information Items, which to *some* degree can be read as “hearsay,” raise all sorts of interesting questions for my future research. What was the official procedure for requisitioning buildings, public spaces and other material resources for Soviet use? What role did Hungarian and Soviet authorities play in ensuring the lawful conduct of Soviet foreign nationals, or mediating between them and locals? How did Soviet military presence literally change the maps of Hungarian localities? What were the experiences of Hungarians in the employ of Soviet soldiers and civilians? Did Soviet foreign nationals see their time in Hungary as an opportunity to improve their socioeconomic circumstances, or as a burden?

To answer these kinds of questions, as well as determine the usability of Information Items *beyond* the evaluations and verification provided by RFE staff, will require triangulating them with different types of primary sources, as well as the findings of other scholars. For example, archival material from other institutions to which I have thus far had access reveals similar features of Soviet military presence in Hungary, and its complicated nature, as those captured in Information Items, if for different years.<sup>1</sup> This includes inventories of items requisitioned by the Soviet Army, and complaints to Hungarian leaders about violent behavior among its soldiers, which indicate that the loss and strife of wartime did not end after “the liberation.” Letters from Hungarian government officials to Soviet military authorities, meanwhile, whether sincere or pragmatic, display appreciation for the order that Soviet troops brought to their municipalities, and recognition or acceptance of the need to cooperate with the Soviet Union, given the role Hungary had played in the war. I shall look forward to examining *these* kinds of sources (e.g. on procedure, authority and government) in a future trip, and was encouraged to do so at the National Archives (Magyar Nemzeti Levéltár; MNL) during a very fruitful meeting with some of its scholars and staff while I was in Budapest.

## II. Subject Files

Another category of primary sources I explored at the OSA were **Subject Files**. The newspaper articles I found among these, in the boxes cited below, were very helpful in surveying the press for the narrative that Hungarian *leaders* constructed about the Soviet Army. To elaborate, RFE surveys of the media include many features and human-interest stories on the following:

- the erection of memorials to Soviet heroes of Hungarian battles at the end of World War II *and* during 1956 (presenting Soviet soldiers, respectively, as martyrs for Hungarian freedom, and saviors of Hungarian liberty from “counterrevolutionary” forces);

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, the document collection Béni L. Balogh, ed., “Törvényes megszállás”: *Szovjet csapatok Magyarországon 1944–1947 között* (Budapest: Magyar Nemzeti Levéltár, 2015).

- celebrations of April 4<sup>th</sup>/"Liberation Day" (i.e., giving thanks to the Soviet Army) and of February 23<sup>rd</sup> (marking the founding of the Red Army);
- Soviet troops providing assistance to the Hungarian public (e.g. helping to fight fires, clear snow or mitigate flooding);
- formal and "spontaneous" meetings between Soviet soldiers and ordinary Hungarians (e.g. groups of workers, and members of the Hungarian Communist Youth League or the Hungarian-Soviet Friendship Society); and
- Soviet troops reminiscing about their wartime experiences, or Soviet widows recounting how they located the resting place of their loved ones who had fought and fallen in Hungary.

The **Subject Card Files**, meanwhile, supplemented such positive official rhetoric about Soviet troops with quotations from the speeches of the Hungarian leader János Kádár. Among the themes that arose in the excerpts recorded on card files are the following:

- the "imperialist" intentions or "fascist" tendencies behind western calls for the withdrawal of Soviet troops;
- the "temporarily-stationed" Soviet military in Hungary as part of a friendly alliance, the Warsaw Pact, in response to NATO, i.e., not *occupiers*; and
- Soviet soldiers as ready to defend Hungary – though not in the country for that purpose, given the perfectly capable Hungarian armed forces.

### III. Situation Reports

Between the Subject Files on the media and the Information Items generated by observers are another source I explored at the OSA: **Situation Reports**. Although I have yet to examine them closely, these might be useful for gaging patterns in the Hungarian media like continuity and change in official narratives. For instance, in newspaper stories about the 1960 celebrations of April 4<sup>th</sup>, RFE staff reported a "return to Rákosi rhetoric," which they described as emphasizing the impossibility of the Hungarian "revolution"/socialism *without* Soviet liberation. RFE staff also claimed to have discerned a sense of popular apathy for the 1960 "Liberation" anniversary, attributing it to popular fatigue with talking about war.

### Conclusion

On May 11<sup>th</sup>, I presented a more detailed overview of the above findings in a talk for the OSA titled "Liberation – Occupation: Navigating the Continuum of Soviet Military Presence in Hungary." I would like to conclude by once again thanking the Visegrad jurors and the OSA staff, respectively, for their financial support for my project, and for a productive and delightful research experience.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

The following is a list of all of the material I examined/collected (via photographs) during my month at the OSA; all are primary sources generated by the **Radio Free Europe Research Institute**.

### **I. INFORMATION ITEMS** (in order of examination rather than Box #)

#### **HU OSA 300-1-2: General Records – Information Items**

-items for the period leading up to 1956 are *largely digitized*, so I conducted a search that included keywords like “Soviet” and “Hungary”

#### **HU OSA 300-40-4: Hungarian Unit – Information Items**

-items for the period after 1956, which I located in **Box 8**  
(the timespan for the materials contained in this box is broader than its label indicates)

#### **HU OSA 300-40-4: Hungarian Unit – Information Items**

-in **Box 7**, a few of the items on “border zones and defections” involved Soviet foreign nationals (I have yet to decide their relevance, thus omitted them from my report)

### **II. SUBJECT FILES**

#### **HU OSA 300-40-3: Hungarian Unit – Subject Card Files**

-my focus here was **Box 18**

-these cards contained quotations from media and RFE sources, but their origins/the citations were not always clear

-after taking notes on these cards, I began reading newspaper articles and RFE items in other boxes, in their entirety; whenever the quotations from Box 18 “resurfaced,” I cross-referenced them with my later findings

#### **HU OSA 300-40-3: Hungarian Unit – Subject Card Files**

-my focus here was **Box 41**, materials filed as “Szovjetellenes hangulat, 1961-1986”

-only a few items pertained to Soviet military presence in Hungary

#### **HU OSA 300-40-1: Hungarian Unit – Subject Files (Box 1588 and Box 1589)**

### **III. SITUATION REPORTS**

#### **HU OSA 300-8-47: Publications Department – Situation Reports (Box 18 and Box 19)**

#### **Other material I looked at, which did not prove to be useful to my project**

#### **HU OSA 300-40-9: Hungarian Unit – Daily Digest**

-I went through **Box 1** and **Box 2**, both for 1952, but after discovering articles in their entirety elsewhere, ones directly relevant to my topic, I abandoned this path

#### **HU OSA 300-80-10: Soviet Red Archives – Subject Files**

-**Box 2**, labelled “Coming Back to Motherland,” did not, as I had hoped, cover Soviet troops that had returned from Hungary

**HU OSA 300-80-10: Soviet Red Archives – Subject Files**

-**Box 12**, labelled “Soviet Army/Navy, 1985-1991,” turned out to largely cover military reform *inside* the Soviet Union

**HU OSA 300-40-1: Hungarian Unit – Subject Files (Box 1048)**

-labelled “Lakásügy,” this box did not, as I had hoped, address the impact on the Hungarian housing stock of the requisitioning of buildings for Soviet use