

TRANSMITTING A REVOLUTION: MASS COMMUNICATIONS AND THE 1956  
HUNGARIAN UPRISING

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## ABSTRACT

The 1956 Hungarian Revolution was a remarkable event in a tumultuous year. Utilizing American archival sources, this paper explores the role of mass communications before and during the uprising. The theories developed in historian Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1983) are drawn upon to create an interpretive framework that furthers understanding of the reasons behind, and nature of, the revolution. The paper analyzes two types of mass communications: print media and radio broadcasting. Both means of communicating fostered the establishment of independence-minded communities in local, national, and international realms.

The intellectual leadership of the revolution recovered the spirit of Hungary's war for independence in 1848-49, which they then disseminated through mass-print media. Foreign broadcasting stations operating in Hungary created the perception of a powerful ally in the minds of listeners. These listeners then promoted this knowledge through interpersonal communication, constructing communities bound by the possibility of Western-assisted independence. On 23 October, print media and radio dictated collective action, which constructed a framework for the ignition of an armed uprising in Budapest. Radio transmissions inspired Hungarians throughout the nation to join what became a war for independence.

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If I could remember the name of the gentleman who pointed me in the right direction at the College Park archives in Maryland, I would thank him by name.

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## INTRODUCTION

On 4 December 1956, approximately one month after the Soviet Union had decidedly crushed the Hungarians' attempt to break orbit, young, middle-aged, and elderly Hungarian women gathered near Heroes' Square just before lunch. Numbering between 3000 and 5000, they carried the national and black flags as they proceeded towards the memorial of the Unknown Soldier.<sup>1</sup> While en route to the square, armed Soviet troops broke up the march, but the women reformed, and the troops allowed an orderly procession to march past the symbolic grave and deposit flowers. A combative group of approximately 200 women then attempted to march on parliament but found their path again blocked by Soviets troops with personnel carriers and foot patrols. The women turned and advanced toward the American Legation where they sang hymns and the Hungarian national anthem. They began to shout slogans: "Russki go home", "down with Kador[sic]."<sup>2</sup> In an effort to appease the crowd, the minister of the legation received a delegation of three women from the crowd who, once inside, urged him to send a message to the United Nations describing Hungarian suffering and Soviet brutality.<sup>3</sup>

The gloomy morning's ceremony was an appropriate coda to a struggle that witnessed a nation of fewer than 10 million rise up against, and ultimately succumb to, the military might of a world superpower in an effort to win independence and return Hungary to her natural place in European and world affairs. The actors in this scene do much to (re)create a microcosm of what happened in Hungary in the fall of 1956. Here we have our Hero, the Unknown Soldier, his (or perhaps her) compatriots, their oppressive adversary, and a third party that offered its best wishes- a message of hope, but not much more. The most noteworthy portion of the scene is the

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<sup>1</sup> Bulletin of the Central Workers' Council of Greater Budapest. December 5, 1956. 1<sup>st</sup> Volume, No.3.

<sup>2</sup> National Archives II. Central Decimal Files. Wailes to Secretary of State. RG 59. File 764.00/12-456.

<sup>3</sup> National Archives II. Central Decimal Files. Wailes to Secretary of State. RG 59. File 764.00/12-456.

Unknown Soldier, as it is he who represents Hungary, or more specifically, the “eternal” Hungary. Benedict Anderson has suggested that the empty cenotaphs in which Unknown Soldiers rest, although void of identifiable remains, are beset with national imaginings.<sup>4</sup> In the case of our Hungarian mourners, they undoubtedly failed, or did not stop to consider the nationality of the soldier in the tomb, for he could be nothing other than Hungarian. The connection (and gratitude) the women felt that morning stemmed not from a shared ideological/political outlook, nor simply from the loss of a fellow human being or citizen, but from a common historical lineage. The recital of the Hungarian national anthem in front of the Unknown Soldier’s tomb produced an act of harmony: strangers reciting the national hymn simultaneously in honor of one of their own.<sup>5</sup> This common heritage, the nation or one’s nationality, transcends political affiliations, family backgrounds, social class, and age. Nationalism’s ability to trump these and other differentiators is augmented during times of catastrophe, war, and in this case, and perhaps the best case, revolutionary struggles to restore the nation. Finally, the massive crowd was able to meet at the same time and location because the event had been announced over the radio and in the newspapers.

If the mourners that morning felt the tug of national imaginings, so too did the Hungarian Freedom Fighters on the day he chose to take up arms. Anderson has suggested that giving one’s life to the revolution derives its “grandeur from the degree to which it is felt to be something fundamentally pure.”<sup>6</sup> Certainly, throughout time and space individuals, communities and nations have found themselves in less than desirable conditions. Many Europeans both during and after the Second World War found themselves living in countries occupied by foreign

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<sup>4</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1991), 9.

<sup>5</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 9.

<sup>6</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 9. (We will run across this notion of a ‘pure’ revolution in chapter 4)

oppressors, or victors turned watchdog. In the case of Hungary, which had hitched its star to Germany for both world wars, the outcomes had been devastating, if not catastrophic. Before retracing the processes by which Hungary found itself in a revolution, it is vital to understand the Magyars' role in nineteenth and twentieth-century Europe.

The 1848 revolutions that spread through Europe like wildfire in the spring of that year reached Hungary when on 13 March, Klemens von Metternich was driven out of office in Vienna. Emperor Ferdinand V pledged to Austria a free press and a constitution. Young Magyar intellectuals led six months of political transformation and instigated the war for national independence that took place from September until August the following year. Lajos Kossuth, a lawyer with radical political views, spearheaded a campaign to liberalize and free Hungary from Austrian control. His 3 March program, which he presented at the Pozsony Diet, carried over into Pest where Jozsef Irinyi penned "The Demands of the Hungarian Nation," later to be widely known as the Twelve Points. The list demanded a free press, a responsible government in Budapest, an annual parliamentary session in Pest, a national bank, the release of political prisoners, a Hungarian national guard, union with Transylvania, equality before the law regardless of religion, and a joint sharing of tax burdens.<sup>7</sup> On 14 March, young intellectuals, writers, journalists, clerks, members of the petty bourgeoisie in Pest gathered at Café Pilvax where Sandor Petofi composed a patriotic poem. The following day, the revolutionaries energized students at the University and their ranks swelled to around 2000. The demonstrators marched towards the Landerer Heckenast printing shop where they had the poem and the Twelve Points printed in direct act of defiance toward the state censors. These Twelve Points totaled 69 words and the demands were both diffuse and uniform: a sovereign Hungarian state. Petofi's poem (often referred to as the 'National Poem') read as follows:

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<sup>7</sup> Miklos Molnar, *A Concise History of Hungary* (Cambridge: University Press, 2001), 185.

Arise Hungarians, Your country calls  
You to the Struggle  
The hour has struck-  
Shall we be slaves or free?  
Choose!  
It is a matter of honor and rights.  
To the God of the Hungarians  
We swear that  
Never again shall we bow down  
Before Tyranny!<sup>8</sup>

On 15 March 10,000 people gathered in front of the National Museum to listen to the Twelve Points. The crowd grew to approximately 20,000 demonstrators who marched through the streets eventually compelling the Viceregal Council to accept the demands. It would appear that the young revolutionaries brought the regime to its knees simply by protesting. However, it would later be revealed that the Diet in Pressburg and the Court in Vienna accepted the demands as a rumor circulated that Petofi had in his footsteps 40,000 armed peasants prepared to march into Budapest and proclaim the republic. In actuality, while the peasants *did* plan to arrive in the city, they intended only to sell goods on the day the market opened in Budapest. Nonetheless, this “imaginary” uprising, proved successful.<sup>9</sup>

Kossuth’s party decidedly ousted conservatives at the Pozsany Diet in March and by April the main demands had been met. Hungary was now a parliamentary monarchy, a new national currency, the Forint, was introduced, and a Hungarian army and national guard formed. The Austrian Emperor, however, remained king of Hungary. Austrian victories on the Italian peninsula at Custoza and the re-conquest of Milan restored political confidence in Vienna in late spring early summer 1848. The Austrian government began to backpedal regarding the concessions it had granted Hungary and fermented nationalist separatist movements within

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<sup>8</sup> As quoted in Paul Lendvai, *Hungary: A Thousand Years of Victory in Defeat* (London: C. Hurst & Co., 2003) Originally translated and published in Istvan Lazar, *Hungary: A Brief History*, chap. 10.

<sup>9</sup> Miklos Molnar, *A Concise History of Hungary, 183-185.*, Paul Lendvai *Victory in Defeat* (London: C. Hurst & Co., 2003), 217.



Hungary's border. War broke out on 11 September when Croatian troops crossed onto Hungarian soil.<sup>10</sup>

The October Revolution in Vienna, brutally suppressed on 31 October by Field Marshall Winisch-Graetz, resulted in a military dictatorship in the Austrian capital, a change in leadership, and a government prepared to extinguish Hungarian hopes for independence. In December 1848, the Hungarians refused to recognize the newly appointed Austrian Archduke Franz Joseph on the basis that he had not been properly crowned with the crown of St. Stephen. This proved the fissure that led to an Austrian-led invasion of Hungary. What at first appeared to be an easy Austrian victory became a drawn out war lasting into the spring of 1849, prompting Emperor Franz Joseph to request the assistance of Tsar Nicholas I in May. Almost 200,000 Russian troops combined with an Austrian force of 176,000 to outnumber Hungarian soldiers almost two to one. While the Hungarian revolutionary army held out through spring and half of the summer, the outnumbered Magyars suffered defeat in August 1849. Kossuth's appeals to Paris and London for aid went unanswered and the small nation's aspirations for independence were crushed by an imperial force from the west, and more importantly, a future occupier to the east. The illusion of Western support for self-determination in Eastern Europe would resurface in 1956.<sup>11</sup>

Hungary would remain unequal partner in the Hapsburg Empire until a string of Austrian setbacks sufficiently weakened its political clout in 1867. The Austrian expulsion from German affairs at the hands of Bismarck's Prussian army resulted in the formation of the Austro-Hungarian dual monarchy that would last until after the First World War.<sup>12</sup> Hungary's historical ties with Austria placed Hungary on the same side as Germany during The Great War, and at its

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<sup>10</sup> Molnar, *A Concise History*, 185-195.

<sup>11</sup> Lendvai, *A Thousand Years*, 229-236; Molnar *A Concise History*, 185-195.

<sup>12</sup> Molnar, *A Concise History*, 201.

conclusion, at the mercy of the Allied victors. The first of three revolutions in Hungary between 1918 and 1920 resulted in Count Mihaly Karoly's ascent to power. The Count's cabinet was composed of members from his own Independence Party, the Social Democrats, some radicals and several interest groups. Support for the government stemmed primarily from widespread concern over the potential loss of territory from invading armies (Czechs advanced into Slovakia, Yugoslavs were in Pecs, and Romanians were in Transylvania) and food shortages caused by the Allied blockade. These concerns compelled more revolutionary elements to remain peaceful until the winter of 1919 when inflation, food shortages, and living and working conditions disintegrated to the point where the extreme left's voice resonated with the masses.<sup>13</sup>

The unstable period following the First World War before and during Karolyi's tenure as minister president witnessed the fermentation of workers' councils in Budapest, but it was not until economic strife reached a tipping point that the Communist Party gained political traction. The Allies demanded that Hungary concede territory to the Romanians, including the majority of Transylvania, which left Karolyi unable to form a coalition with conservatives who would not accept such a concession. Russian support for the leader of the Hungarian Communist Party, Bela Kun, led to a belief among Hungarian political figures, as well as among the population, that Bolshevism would inevitably take hold of Budapest. Kun and the communists assumed power in Hungary in late March, 1919.<sup>14</sup>

Kun quickly began restructuring the internal workings of Hungary. He instituted a land seizure program, separated church and state and began to nationalize industry, all while establishing relations with Lenin. But for all its ambition, Kun's regime was short-lived. On 5 April 1919, the Allies offered Kun a revised deal regarding territorial lines with Romania, yet

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<sup>13</sup> Crampton, *Eastern Europe*, 78-79; Molnar, *A Concise History*, 250-252; Sugar, *History of Hungary*, 295-299.

<sup>14</sup> Crampton, *Eastern Europe*, 80-81; Molnar, *A Concise History*, 252-253.

Kun refused on the basis that he would lose support from his officers, and possibly his allies in Moscow, were he to reach agreement with Western powers. The Allies then allowed the Romanian army to advance into Hungary, bringing an end to Kun's Republic of Councils following a Hungarian Red Army defeat on 1 August.<sup>15</sup>

Initially, Kun and the communists had derived power and support from a distinctly nationalistic aspiration: the integrity of national borders. However, the communist Kun regime's policies did not always jibe with the Hungarian sense of nationalism. Soldiers were forbidden to place the national seal next to the red star on their uniforms, statues of national heroes were toppled, and the singing of the national anthem was condemned as was flying the national standard. Peasants in the countryside resented communist bands that enforced the sale of grain in exchange for newly printed currency. They also failed to accept the regime's efforts to convert churches into theaters and its effort to nationalize large states. Hungarians living in urban areas also begrudged the communist efforts to nationalize factories as often former owners and managers retained high level positions due to a shortage of skilled replacements. The conservative political party that replaced Kun's failed soviet experiment would last under various guises until the Second World War.<sup>16</sup>

The conservative elements that came to power following the collapse of Kun's regime had formed in 1919 in the city of Szeged. Under French occupation, counter-revolutionary forces established a national army under the command of Admiral Miklos Horthy, formerly a commander of the Hapsburg Navy. From November 1919 until December 1921, the National

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<sup>15</sup> Crampton, *Eastern Europe*, 81-83; Molnar, *A Concise History*, 259-261.

<sup>16</sup> Crampton, *Eastern Europe*, 81-83; Molnar, *A Concise History*, 256-262. See also: Peter Pastor, *Hungary Between Wilson and Lenin: The Hungarian Revolution of 1918-1919 and the Big Three* (New York: Columbia, 1976), 1-20.

Army and its right-wing political arm unsuccessfully lobbied for anti-Semitic legislation and land reform. Older conservative elements rejected both measures.<sup>17</sup>

The Treaty of Trianon (4 June 1920), impressed upon Hungary by the Allies and signed by Sandor Simonyi-Semadam's conservative coalition government could be described as nothing less than devastating. Hungary lost seventy percent of its territory, and sixty percent of its population. The kingdom of Transylvania, considered by many Hungarians the intellectual foundation of the nation, was absorbed by Romania. 28 million native Hungarian speakers would also find themselves living outside Hungarian borders. Industrial capabilities were crippled and raw materials and machinery now had to be imported. The treaty, imposed on Hungary by Western democratic nations, created resentment among the population in Hungary during the interwar years that failed ever to subside fully. During the inter-war years, Western-style democratic government failed to secure a place in the minds of many Hungarians and Hungary's tortured independence led to another war-time miscalculation.<sup>18</sup>

Admiral Horthy, who remained regent, appointed Transylvanian Calvinist Istvan Bethlen as prime minister. Bethlen would remain in power until 1931 through rigged elections and fractured opposition parties. The administration restored some semblance of order to the economy and propelled revisionist sentiments concerning the Treaty of Trianon to the front court. Conditions in Hungary between the wars remained less than optimal, with an annual economic growth rate of only 1.5%, although illiteracy rates continued to increase and industrial expansion was encouraging. Half of the population was peasant farmers, yet university graduation rates during the interwar years increased to approximately 30,000. Although growth

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<sup>17</sup> Crampton, *Eastern Europe*, 83-84, Sugar, *Hungary*, 310-312.

<sup>18</sup> Crampton, *Eastern Europe*, 84-85, Sugar, *Hungary*, 313-316.

in certain sectors was considerable, including the dissemination of consumer goods such as radios and radios, Hungary remained a poor agrarian nation by Western European standards.<sup>19</sup>

Between 1932 and 1939, three conservative prime ministers steered Hungary's pre-war course. Gyula Gombos (1932-36), Kalman Daranyi (October 1936-May 1938), and Bela Imredy propelled Hungary's rightist trajectory. Anti-Semitic legislation and a rearmament program indicated the nation's direction. The rise of Hitler posed new challenges, and the Munich agreement of 1938 signaled to Hungary that the West had abandoned (again) the nations of Eastern Europe. At the same time, Hungary regained some lost territory from Czechoslovakia. Hungary declared itself a non-belligerent at the outbreak of the Second World War and as a result of Hitler's territorial alterations in Eastern Europe, regained much of the land lost through the Treaty of Trianon. Hungary signed the Tripartite Pact in 1941, which led to its participation in the invasion of the Soviet Union as well as the Holocaust.<sup>20</sup>

Hungarian attempts to switch sides during the war began after the allied D-Day invasion and became more urgent as the Red Army marched onto Hungarian soil. Attempts proved futile, however, and Hungarians found themselves encircled by both the Red Army and the Wehrmacht in the late summer of 1944. The ensuing battle for Budapest lasted from September until December that year, leveling much of the city and leaving the country in shambles. And then it was over. The Germans retreated, but Soviet occupation would last almost fifty years.<sup>21</sup>

Even before a provisional government could form in December 1944, Moscow-oriented communists began organizing in the city of Szeged. Among these communists were Matyas Rakosi and Erno Gero, the Stalinists who would construct a Stalinist state between 1947 and

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<sup>19</sup> Molnar, *A Concise History* 268-278; Crampton, *Eastern Europe*, 85-88; Sugar, *History of Hungary* 320-331.

<sup>20</sup> Crampton, *Eastern Europe*, 85-94; Molnar, *A Concise History*, 278-283.

<sup>21</sup> Bennet Korvig, *Communism in Hungary: From Kun to Kada*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1979):143-149; Joseph Held, *The Columbia History of Eastern Europe in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 201-204.

1953. Communism, however, proved largely unpopular in Hungary after the war. Although membership in the Hungarian Workers' Party (HWP) grew rapidly after the war-about half a million members towards the end of 1945, up from 30,000 in February of the same year- the party would receive only 17 percent of the vote in the November elections. The Smallholders' Party emerged as the majority vote winner in the 1945 elections and their victory initiated the first round of the communists' struggle to seize power in Hungary. The communists allied themselves with the socialists and charged several Smallholder deputies in Parliament with counts of espionage and conspiracy against the Red Army. The elections of 1947 witnessed the communists earn only 22 percent of the vote and the smallholders 15 percent in rigged elections. By 1949, the HWP had forcefully merged with the Social Democrats to create a coalition that received an astonishing 95.6% of the vote: Communists had achieved absolute power.<sup>22</sup>

In July, 1947, the United States had announced the creation of the Marshall Plan, which set the Stalinization of Eastern Europe in motion. Between 1949 and 1953, living conditions in Hungary deteriorated: prices had risen while wages stagnated, and continuous shortages stemmed from a shift of rural populations to urban centers, leaving fewer peasants to meet target demands. Matyas Rakosi's forced collectivization of the countryside combined with an unrealistic industrial drive left the nation on the brink of ruin. Political opponents (both perceived and real) found themselves in prison as enemies of the Stalinist state under construction, or in questioning by the AVH (state security apparatus). The army was neutered and placed under Soviet command with Soviet weapons and tanks. The tanks, of course, could not actually fire a shell. Stalinization in Hungary extended beyond the political realm and resembled something more akin to colonialism. A Hungarian scientist who was a student in the early 1950s recalled the time period: "Having communism thrust down our throats unwillingly

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<sup>22</sup> Tony Judt *Postwar*, 136-137; Molnar *A Concise History*, 100-105.

was bad enough. Terrible. But having so many alien ways imposed on us, and being told they were superior, was a constant insult.”<sup>23</sup> In March 1953, Stalin’s death led to a much needed reprieve.

Stalin’s successors, particularly Georgi Malenkov, sought a solution to the economic devastation and excesses in their Hungarian satellite. This would lead to Imre Nagy’s ascension in 1953 to the premiership of the Hungarian Communist Party. Nagy’s peasant background and the fact that Rakosi was Jewish (a situation that never sat well in Moscow) made the decision obvious in Moscow. In an effort to de-Stalinize Hungary, Nagy introduced the New Course that reflected Moscow’s goals to soften Rakosi’s unsuccessful policies. Nagy immediately, with Soviet blessings, began to undo the work of Rakosi. He tempered the collectivization drive, abolished Kulak (a well-to-do peasant) lists, and did away with extreme abuses by the AVH. The New Course found its most fervent fan base among urban dwellers, and in particular, writers and other intellectuals. Unfortunately, the relaxation of collectivization drives and slacker working conditions in factories resulted in poor production. The economy’s expansion into consumer goods resulted created a shortage of export goods. Hungary lacked hard currency and loans were simply not an option. By fall 1954, through both a combination of previous Stalinist policies and Nagy’s reforms, Hungary’s economy was in near ruin. Rakosi secretly visited officials in Moscow and convinced them that Nagy was responsible for Hungary’s economic woes. Although a reasonably popular leader in Hungary, Nagy was dismissed by Moscow in early 1955, and Rakosi reinstated as Party leader. Rakosi began to undo the New Course and restore collectivization.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> As quoted in Victor Sebestyen *Twelve Days: The Story of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution* (New York: Pantheon: 2006), 28. For information on the New Course, see Paul E. Zinner, *Revolution in Hungary* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1962), 103-128.

<sup>24</sup> Zinner, *Revolution in Hungary*, 168-178.

After his reinstatement, Rakosi's re-Stalinization drive ran aground following Khrushchev's Secret Speech during Twentieth Party Congress in February 1956. In an effort to distance himself from Stalinism's excesses, and place the blame safely in Stalin's casket, Khrushchev simultaneously undermined all that Rakosi stood for. On 18 July, 1956, Khrushchev had Rakosi dismissed as Party leader. However, another hardliner, Erno Gero assumed leadership of the party until October 1956.<sup>25</sup>

Elsewhere politically in 1956, Wladyslaw Gomulka, a once discredited "national communist" in Poland was again elected by the Communist Party as First Secretary. Only several years earlier, Gomulka had been in prison, the result of accusations of rightist deviations. His reputation as a "National Communist" and appointment as First Party Secretary over Stalinist Boleslaw Bierut represented nothing less than an act of defiance towards Moscow: the Polish United Workers' Party (PUWP) essentially ousted a Muscovite in favor of a Nationalist. Additionally, the PUWP resolved to remove high-ranking Soviet officials from the Polish government. The Soviet Union confronted the Polish leadership on 19 October in Warsaw, but backed down after Polish representatives assured them that Soviet hegemony would not be compromised. Although the situation found a resolution through diplomacy, Soviet tanks had mobilized and moved towards Warsaw. Fall would not be so peaceful in Hungary.

Hungarian students gathered on 23 October to show solidarity with the Poles, and what began as a demonstration, erupted in thirteen days of open revolt. Soviet forces crushed the revolution through the use of brute force and Hungary remained in the Soviet orbit. Stripped to its fundamentals, this is what is generally accepted by historians and non-historians alike, to have

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<sup>25</sup> Zinner, *Revolution in Hungary*, 202-215.



occurred in Budapest, 1956.<sup>26</sup> We will see that two themes from Hungary's past re-emerged before and during the 1956 revolution. First, as in 1848-9, a revolution inspired by international developments ended without previously implied assistance from the West. Secondly, in 1956 Russian troops would again crush Hungarian hopes for self-determination, as they also did in 1849.

An essay entitled "Forty Years on" by historian Timothy Garton Ash is perhaps the most eloquent statement concerning the state of the historiography of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution. Written in 1996, Ash raises several points regarding what happened in 1956. Channeling the German historian Leopold von Ranke, he posits the notion that we know more about an event as time passes: we become impartial (or maybe, at least, less partial), consequences become clearer, and archives open up. This is true, particularly in the case of Hungary, which had to become an open society before this history could begin to be uncovered by its own citizens. At the same time, Ash notes that the passage of time takes with it the memories of things said and done. As Carl Becker noted in his address to the American Historical Association in 1931, there exist two histories, one absolute, that is all things said and done. There also exists, he argued, relative history, that is, what we think we know about the past, and it is the task of the historian to make the correspondence between these two histories as precise as possible. The Hungarian Revolution then, is an intriguing case for historians because knowledge is lost as participants and their memories pass, yet a greater understanding has been possible since the end of the Cold War and the openness that ensued. As Ash rightfully reasons, thirty years after the event, the archives remained mostly closed, while more than fifty years after the event, participants will no longer

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<sup>26</sup> Csaba Bekes, Malcolm Byrne and Janos M. Rainer, eds., *The 1956 Hungarian Revolution: A History in Documents* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2002), 12-13.

be with us. Before examining the most recent secondary literature, it is worthwhile then to examine some of the lasting interpretations produced before the end of the Cold War.<sup>27</sup>

Historians of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution have chosen between several starting points, the most popular dates being 1948 and 1953. The first marks the turning point towards a Stalinist state, including the launch of industrialization drives and the nationalization of private enterprise. The latter marks the end of Rakosi's Stalinism and the appointment of Imre Nagy and his New Course that initiated a social and political thaw. Still, some authors have chosen to begin with the Soviet occupation of Hungary following the Second World War. Interpretations and arguments have focused largely on the political aspects of the events leading up to the revolution and the most lasting works have perhaps been those that placed the revolution in its international political context. In the last ten years, much progress has been made regarding our understanding of the actions and diplomatic processes in Moscow and Washington. Social histories have been attempted, yet little has been completely settled, as we will see shortly.

To offer a comprehensive overview of all the literature produced in the wake of Revolution would be a daunting task and is outside the scope of the work. Furthermore, relatively few works left a lasting impression on the historiography.<sup>28</sup> Several of the more famous works survive although their value to the professional historian has diminished as the historiography has become more sophisticated. Francois Fejto's *Behind the Rape of Hungary* (1957) offers a more scholarly interpretation of events, although archival evidence to support the

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<sup>27</sup> Timothy Garton Ash, "Forty Years On." *History of the Present: Essays, Sketches, and Dispatches From Europe in the 1990s*, (New York: Random House, 1999): 212-226., Carl Becker, "Everyman His Own Historian." *American Historical Review*, Volume 37, Issue 2, 1931, 221-236.

<sup>28</sup> Such examples would include Melvin Lasky, Ed., *The Hungarian Revolution: The Story of the October Uprising as Recorded in Documents, Dispatches, Eyewitness accounts and World-Wide Reactions* (New York: Frederick A Praeger, 1957), which is essentially a collection of translated documents. However, the introduction by Hugh Seton-Watson lends the book some weight, particularly his conclusion (23) that the Soviet attempt to indoctrinate the youth had failed. Other notable publications that failed/fail to garner serious attention from scholars due to lack of sources include: Herbert Aptheker, *The Truth about Hungary*. (New York: Mainstream Publishers, 1957); Hugo Dewar, *Revolution and Counter-revolution in Hungary*. (London: Socialist Union of Central-Eastern Europe, 1957).

Hungarian historian's claim are lacking. Fejto argues that between 1945 and 1948, a democratic alliance between peasants, intellectuals, and workers blossomed. Nagy's New Course revived this alliance and Rakosi's reinstatement in 1955 only stimulated the movement towards democracy. The events on the night of October 23, he contends, ignited this attempt for "democratic evolution."<sup>29</sup> Tibor Meray, another Hungarian, published *Thirteen Days that Shook the Kremlin* (1959) and although once again not of the scholarly integrity of later works due to lack of archival sources, his treatment of Imre Nagy's decision-making merited attention, notably his analysis of Nagy's inability to procure a compromise with Soviet leadership.<sup>30</sup> Tibor Meray teamed with fellow Hungarian and former member of the Hungarian Writer's Association Tamas Aczel to publish *The Revolt of the Mind* in 1959. In it, they argue that 1954 proved a turning point for communist intellectuals as political prisoners put in jail by Rakosi were released by Nagy during the New Course. These former political prisoners then revealed the truth behind the HWP, forever disenchanting communist intellectuals.<sup>31</sup>

While many of the works published during the fifteen or so years following the Revolution proved inadequately documented, others radiated such strong political biases or overtly bombastic prose that they played no significant part in the construction of the scholarly historiography.<sup>32</sup> Two of the most durable studies from the 1960s include Paul Zinner's *Revolution in Hungary* (1962) and Paul Kecskemeti's *The Unexpected Revolution: Social Forces in the Hungarian Uprising* (1961). Utilizing interviews collected and published by the Columbia University Research Project, Zinner focuses on social transformation, particularly

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<sup>29</sup> Francois Fejto, *Behind the Rape of Hungary* (New York: David McKay, 1957.)

<sup>30</sup> Tibor Meray, *Thirteen Days that Shook the Kremlin: Imre Nagy and the Hungarian Revolution* (New York: Praeger, 1959).

<sup>31</sup> Tamas Aczel and Tibor Meray, *The Revolt of the Mind: A Case History of Intellectual Resistance Behind the Iron Curtain* (New York: Praeger, 1959).

<sup>32</sup> Examples of too little time between the writer and his subject: Francis S. Wagner, Ed., *The Hungarian Revolution in Perspective* (Toronto: Weller, 1967); Andy Anderson, *Hungary 56* (London: Little, 1964).

democratization that took place behind communistic fronts, which in turn reared its head in the form of a nationalistic, democratic movement on 23 October. Kecskemeti also considers the social roots of the revolution, concluding that two separate processes leading up to the revolution: one “elite” and one “mass”. These developments, he argues, which can best be described as defiance towards Rakosi’s regime, intersected on 23 October. While an accurate assessment of the events leading up to the revolution, Kecskemeti’s contention that the processes remained exclusive until the outbreak of the revolution needs adjustment. Another valuable study from the era includes Ferenc Vali’s *Rift and Revolt in Hungary* (1961). Vali, a Hungarian refugee and former professor of international law in Budapest argues that the repressive pre-1953 Rakosi regime created fissures in Hungarian society between communists and the general population that Nagy’s New Course only deepened.<sup>33</sup>

Towards the end of the 1960s, the historiography had begun to reach a consensus regarding the various causes of the revolution. Hungarian scholars living in the United States and other Western nations including Janos Radvanyi (*Hungary and the Superpowers: The 1956 Revolution and Realpolitik*, 1968) and Miklos Molnar (*Budapest 1956: A History of the Hungarian Revolution*, 1968) continued to shed light on the events of and leading up to 1956, particularly the relationship of the revolution to international happenings. Radvanyi argued that events such as Mao’s Hundred Flowers campaign, the Twentieth Party Congress and the growth of alternate forms of communism created a demand for sovereignty in Eastern Europe. The Soviets’ refusal to bequeath self-determination to their satellites resulted episodes such as the suppression of the Hungarian revolution. Molnar develops a similar international framework, or process, contending that anxiety in Moscow following Stalin’s death, Imre Nagy’s New Course,

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<sup>33</sup> Paul E. Zinner, *Revolution in Hungary* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1962); Paul Kecskemeti, *The Unexpected Revolution: Social Forces in the Hungarian Uprising* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1961); Ferenc A. Vali, *Rift and Revolt in Hungary* (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1961).

the Twentieth Party Congress, harsh policies, and protests in Poznan in 1956 led to the outbreak of violence in Hungary.<sup>34</sup>

The flurry of publishing so prevalent during the decade after the revolution subsided during the 1970s and 1980s, which produced only a few noteworthy works. Noel Barber's *Seven Days of Freedom*, (1974) offers a narrative of the revolution that begins on the evening of 23 October, yet draws no original conclusions. Bill Lomax's *Hungary 1956* (1976) tenders a more analytical survey of the event. The author focuses on the roles of various social groups and concludes that elites (politicians and intellectuals) played a lesser role in the nurturing of the revolution than did peasant and worker discontent. The latter, he contends, led the way, while the elite altered their reformist strategies accordingly. David Irving, an Australian journalist later agreed with Lomax, arguing that discontented industrial workers comprised the driving force behind the revolution. Both authors based their studies on interviews produced by the CUOHP, which Irving claims reveal the workers' feelings of betrayal, persecution, and deception. These authors' break with the historiographical trend of assigning initial responsibility to students and intellectuals is noteworthy, although not entirely convincing, as we will see. Indeed, Nikita Khrushchev disagreed, commenting that "If ten or so Hungarian writers had been shot at the right moment, the revolution would never have occurred."<sup>35</sup>

In 1978, distinguished scholars, predominantly Hungarians and former revolutionaries, collaborated to publish a book of essays edited by Bela Kiarly and Paul Jonas. The list of

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<sup>34</sup> Janos Radvanyi, *Hungary and the Superpowers: The 1956 Revolution and Realpolitik* (Stanford, Calif.: Hoover Institution Press, 1972); Miklos Molnar, *Budapest 1956: A history of the 1956 Revolution* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1968).

<sup>35</sup> Noel Barber, *Seven Days of Freedom*. (New York: Stein and Day, 1974), Bill Lomax, *Hungary 1956*. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1977), David Irving, *Uprising!* (Western Australia: Veritas Publishing, 1981). Khrushchev quoted in Noel Barber, *Seven Days*, p. 17.

contributors reads like a who's who list of authorities on 1956 Hungary.<sup>36</sup> In the volume's introduction, Hugh Seton-Watson contends that the West's failure to intervene emboldened the Soviets in Eastern Europe, while at the same time noting that the revolution allowed a more lenient kind of socialism after 1956. Anna Kethly's essay disputes this notion, viewing the revolution's success less optimistically by noting that its fundamental aim, self-determination, was never fulfilled. Bela Kiraly views the revolution as the first war between socialist states, while the last three essays, which examine the revolution's effects on the West, conclude that the Soviet Union's behavior further damaged its reputation among Western communists. This in turn influenced Western communists to abandon Soviet style communism in favor of a more flexible Eurocommunism. Kiraly co-edited another volume of essays in 1984 entitled *The First War between Socialist States: The Hungarian Revolution of 1956 and its Impact*. Although lacking in cohesion, the section concerning the Hungarian writers' role during and preceding the revolution is noteworthy, but will be addressed in chapter two.<sup>37</sup>

As mentioned earlier, not until the 1990s did scholars gain access to the archival materials necessary to confirm international decisions and intents before, during and after the revolution. Some authors found their books sent to press as the "velvet revolutions" of 1989-90 unfolded, thereby permitting previously untapped archival sources either to confirm or negate their theses. Miklos Molnar's *From Bela Kun to Janos Kadar* (1990) found validation in its argument that communism constituted nothing more than a means through which power was seized, and had no real support in Hungary. The book's English language translation was

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<sup>36</sup> Leading communist intellectuals Tamas Aczel and Tibor Meray, deputy minister of foreign affairs in the revolutionary government George Heltai, minister of state Anna Kethly; major general and chairman of the Revolutionary Council of National Defense Bela Kiraly; Imre Kovacs, secretary general of the smallholders' party, and Paul Jonas, president of the Petofi Circle.

<sup>37</sup> Bela K. Kiraly and Paul Jonas, Eds., *The Hungarian Revolution of 1956 in Retrospect* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978); Bela Kiraly, Barbara Lotze, and Nandor F. Dreisziger, Eds., *The First War between Socialist States: The Hungarian Revolution of 1956 and its Impact* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984).

updated to include a preface that takes into consideration the elections that year that reduced the Communist Party's representation to a small minority in parliament. Zoltan Barany's *Soldiers and Politics in Eastern Europe* (1993) claims that during the revolution, soldiers and officers remained loyal to the communist regime, although this contention is still disputed.<sup>38</sup>

*Twentieth Century Hungary and the Great Powers*, edited by Ignac Romsics and published by the Columbia University Press, appeared in 1995. This collection places Hungary in its context relating to the Great Powers during the twentieth century. That external powers and situations shaped the course of Hungarian history forms the theme of the book. The section concerning the events surrounding 1956 include professor Bennet Korvig's essay "Liberators: The Great Powers and Hungary in 1956," which contends that the West's disinterest in liberating Hungary from Soviet orbit represented the nail in the coffin for Hungary's endeavor for independence. However, at the same time, Korvig rightly recognizes the revolution as a watershed event, a contention shared by the majority of post-1990 scholars who have also viewed the revolution as the first step towards the collapse of the Soviet empire. *Soviet Military Intervention in Hungary 1956* (1999), a volume edited by Jenő Gyorki and Miklós Horváth unanimously concluded that the term revolution (as opposed to counter-revolution) remains appropriate as the revolutionary forces were victorious (if for only a short period). It should come as no surprise that this volume also reaffirms the contention that 1956 witnessed the "first war between socialist states," considering the book shared its editor with the earlier volume of that title.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Miklós Molnár, *From Béla Kun to János Kádár: Seventy years of Hungarian Communism*. (New York: Berg, 1990); Zoltan D. Barany, *Soldiers and Politics in Eastern Europe, 1945-90: The Case of Hungary*. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993).

<sup>39</sup> Ignac Romsics, Ed. *20<sup>th</sup> Century Hungary and the Great Powers* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995); Jenő Gyorki and Miklós Horváth, *Soviet Military Intervention in Hungary 1956* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 1999).

Recently, the most significant monographs to deal with the international aspects of the revolution include those by Charles Gati, Csaba Bekes, and Johanna Granville. Gati, a political scientist who fled his native Hungary following the 1956 revolution, has authored five books on Eastern European Cold War politics. His most recent study, *Failed Illusions* (2006) focuses on why, exactly, the revolution failed. Gati correctly concludes that “excessive romanticism” in Budapest, Washington’s unrealistic faith in rhetoric and Moscow’s inability to resist its imperialist urge resulted in idealistic, rather than politically pragmatic, leadership in all three capitals, which ultimately doomed the revolution’s prospects for success.<sup>40</sup> Another Hungarian scholar, Csaba Bekes, in “The 1956 Hungarian Revolution and World Politics,” (1995) argues that the international status quo regarding the Soviets’ control of the Eastern Bloc was firmly established by 1956, and Washington harbored no intentions of challenging this system. He concludes that subsequent efforts on behalf of the captive Eastern Bloc states to reform the system failed, reaffirming what the Hungarians had already learned in 1956. This claim is perhaps partially true, as the HWP abandoned certain practices that led to the events of 1956.<sup>41</sup>

Finally, two recent studies worth mentioning include Johanna Granville’s *The First Domino* (2004) and “Independence before all Else” (2007) by Tamas Meszerics. Meszerics’ article considers the extent to which active anti-communist resistance existed in Hungary, and concludes that this question may be unanswerable as the very nature of resistance activity precludes historical paper trails. Meszerics also concludes that young people, such as the Hungarian Freedom Fighters, rarely possess sophisticated political views, and that they found their struggle to be one of national independence. Granville’s political study primarily argues

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<sup>40</sup> Charles Gati, *Failed Illusions: Moscow, Washington, Budapest and the 1956 Hungarian Revolt* (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2006). See also by Gati: *Hungary and the Soviet Bloc* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1986).

<sup>41</sup> Csaba Bekes, “The 1956 Hungarian Revolution in World Politics.” *The Hungarian Quarterly*, Vol. 36 Summer, 109-121.



that Soviet political aims were not as cohesive as previously claimed by Western observers. Despite Charles Gati's less than flattering review of the book, Granville considers the important and frequently forgotten history Hungarians share with Russia.<sup>42</sup> Hungarians, she notes, recalled Russia's intervention and eventual suppression of Hungary's struggle for independence in 1849. More importantly, the author notes the continuity here, citing the 1956 Hungarian Freedom Fighters references to Imre Nagy as their "new Kossuth."<sup>43</sup> She also cites the fact that this did not go unnoticed by the KGB head Ivan Serov, who commented that "The young people of the Petofi Circle say that the Petofists are also communists, but they don't want to copy Russian methods.... If we Petofists are 'Martovtists' [March people of the 1848 revolution], then Imre Nagy is our new Lajos Kossuth."<sup>44</sup> This quote is revealing of the attitudes held by Hungarian Freedom Fighters. While authors do not deny that nationalist sentiment saturated the revolution, the historiography rarely devotes sufficient attention to the common themes and actors of 1948-9 and 1956. This paper then, will try to shed light on this continuity.

The scholarly secondary literature has focused primarily on the traditional political aspects of the revolution, perhaps because this history has yet to be settled. The historiography has also traditionally been shortsighted, with too little consideration of Hungary's past. The alliances made during the two World Wars directly and indirectly landed Hungary under Soviet control. The occupation faced by the Magyars began as an occupation and turned into something resembling traditional colonialism. What authors have traditionally referred to as Soviet domination or even Soviet imperialism was in all actuality, colonialism. As postcolonial scholar Ania Loomba has demonstrated, imperialism is primarily a global system, which can exist

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<sup>42</sup> Gati has taken issue with Granville's claims as to the originality of her work, citing her omission of recent (preceding her own work by almost ten years) monographs by Mark Kramer and Csaba Bekes dealing with the same topic. See his review in the *Slavic Review*, Vol. 64, No. 1. (Spring, 2005), 176-177.

<sup>43</sup> Johanna Granville, *The First Domino: International Decision Making During the Hungarian Crises of 1956* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2004), 3-4.

<sup>44</sup> Quoted in Granville, *The First Domino*, 4.

without formal colonies, while colonialism is defined as the “takeover of territory, appropriation of natural resources, exploitation of labor and interference with political and cultural structures of another territory or nation...”<sup>45</sup> The notion that Hungary existed as a colonial possession of the Soviet Union has only begun to be articulated by Victor Sebestyén.

Sebestyén, a Hungarian who left his native country as an infant and now lives as a journalist in England, has adamantly illustrated the degree to which Soviets colonized his country of birth. He notes in his book *Twelve Days* (2006) the Sovietization of Hungary: the school system adhered to the Soviet model, the hammer and sickle replaced Kossuth’s image on the flag, public holidays conformed with those in the Soviet Union, Christmas became “Pine Needles Day”, the army reorganized and issued Soviet equipment, and streets were renamed. The Soviets plundered Hungary’s uranium reserves, which were shipped back to the USSR. Russian language lessons became compulsory for students and the Catholic Church undermined. If Western Europeans replaced indigenous religions in Latin America and Africa with Christianity, Soviets replaced religion in Hungary with communism, replete with its traditional form of confession- the self criticism. The similarities between traditional European colonialism and Soviet colonialism continue.<sup>46</sup>

*The Spanish American Revolutions: 1808-1826* (1973), John Lynch’s classic study, describes those revolutions as sudden, violent and universal. But at the same time, he notes, independence stemmed from a lengthy development in which Spanish Americans “became aware of their own identity, conscious of their own culture, jealous of their own resources.”<sup>47</sup> Here we find some direct parallels to developments in Hungary, and by considering what

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<sup>45</sup> Ania Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 6-7.

<sup>46</sup> Victor Sebestyén, *Twelve Days*, 25-33.

<sup>47</sup> John Lynch, *The Spanish American Revolutions: 1808-1826* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1973), 1.

happened in Hungary in the vein of these earlier colonial revolutions, light is shed on the nature of the Hungarian Revolution of 1956.

If Hungary's defeat in two world wars resulted in the situation in which Magyars found themselves in October 1956, then 1848-49's war for independence was the spiritual ground for the Hungarian nationalism of the 1956 revolution. The revolution that broke out stemmed from a resurgent nationalism, where Hungarians almost simultaneously rediscovered and asserted their place in the world. Historians, as well as participants, have consistently referred to this revolution as spontaneous, unexpected, unified, and nationalistic. These adjectives, however, are often used with little reflection. To apply these characteristics raises the following question: How did the revolution ignite so quickly as to prompt observers to use the label "spontaneous"? When tracing the developments of the 1956 revolution, one is struck by how largely radio and print medium factored into the pivotal events. Literary groups, dissident periodicals, leaflets, lists of demands, and radio broadcasts, both foreign and domestic are all briefly mentioned in analyses, yet never evaluated as a whole. This paper will examine the role of these components before and during the revolution.

This paper will argue that mass communications allowed for the transmission and dissemination of independence-minded nationalism. This occurred in Hungary before the revolution, beginning in 1952, through the foreign production and domestic consumption of Western broadcasts. These transmissions created optimism among the population for an independent Hungary, while Hungarian writers produced their own brand of dissident literature. These forms of dissident material, both print and broadcast, found a massive and receptive audience in Hungary. Readers and listeners furthered the dissemination of opposition ideas through interpersonal contact, creating communities of dissidents bound and inspired by hopes of

an independent Hungary. The popularity of Western broadcasting allowed Hungarians to imagine two communities, both of which opposed Soviet domination of Hungary. Hungarian listeners imagined a powerful ally, the United States, who was willing to come to their aid should they take up arms. Secondly, Hungarians became acutely aware that others, in both the local vicinity and throughout the nation, tuned into these stations. This allowed for Hungarians to imagine a large community of like-minded listeners, many of whom discussed with each other these inspirational broadcasts. These discussions affirmed the imagined community and fostered hopes for liberation.

In addition to creating dissident communities, radio broadcasts allowed the revolution to unfold in a rapid, unified action. The popularity of radio broadcasting, promoted before the revolution by the popularity of foreign broadcasting, meant that the overwhelming majority of Hungarians owned a radio. Broadcasts allowed for collective action in the form of dissident demonstrations on the eve of the revolution which formed the framework for a unified uprising. The intellectual leadership in Budapest, which adopted the spirit of 1848-49 war for independence, leveraged their leadership through the publication of a list of demands. When students attempted to broadcast these demands over the airwaves, signaling a fusion of the two mass-media formats, the revolution ignited. Throughout the nation, Hungarians learned of the events in Budapest (and elsewhere) through radio broadcasts, which allowed for a national revolution to be imagined and briefly sustained.

Chapter two will examine the role of domestic and foreign print material, its creators, and the means by which it spread prior to the revolution. Chapter three will analyze the role of foreign radio broadcasting in Hungary, particularly Radio Free Europe (RFE) and Voice of

America (VOA), leading up to the revolution. Finally, chapter four will examine how mass communications allowed for the ignition and maintenance of the uprising.

## WORD PLAY

As psychologist Henry Gleitman correctly stated in his 1957 study, the HWP used every media of communication in its attempts to indoctrinate the population of Hungary. This included, but was not limited to, newspapers, youth groups, radio, film, and schools.<sup>1</sup> The two dominant forms of public and mass communication were the written word and radio. This chapter will focus on the dissident community building of Hungary's professional writers and how these networks created the foundation for the mass uprising in 1956. In addition to professional writers' groups, this chapter will also consider the role of other forms of writing, namely leaflets and newsletters. The popular reaction to Hungarian dissident literature will be explored, followed by the role of foreign literature, primarily the material of Operation Focus, Radio Free Europe's leaflet action. This chapter will argue that professional writers created the spiritual leadership of dissident communities, and articulated the thoughts of Hungarians. Mass-print provided a corridor through which elite ideas spread among the general population. At the same time, RFE's leaflet action fostered community building through the sharing of resistance-oriented knowledge in both mass and intimate spheres of communication. These movements marked the beginning of a return to Hungarian nationalism in the vein of 1848, that is, *independence-minded Nationalism*, and created a support base for a sudden and galvanized national uprising.

That intellectuals play a role in the initial stages of revolutions is not, of course, an original insight. The *philosophes* of the eighteenth century laid the intellectual foundations for the French Revolution just as Sandor Petofi and his associates propelled the revolution and war for independence in Hungary in 1848-9. Indeed, one writer, the editor of *Irodalmi Ujsag*

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<sup>1</sup>Henry Gleitman, *Youth in Revolt: The Failure of Communist Indoctrination in Hungary* (New York: Free Europe Press, 1957), 1-2.

(Literary Gazette) from 1950 to 1955, likened the writers' movement's priming of the revolution to that of the encyclopedists, Diderot, Rousseau and company. Concerning Hungary, the editor equated the writers' movement with that of their spiritual forbearers; Berzsenyi, Kazinczy and Vorosmarty- writers who prepared the war of independence in 1848.<sup>2</sup> Tibor Meray has argued that writers and intellectuals in Eastern Europe traditionally have occupied a unique station on the national stage in contrast with their counterparts in Western Europe. He contends that the political environment of Eastern Europe, namely the lack of parliamentary democracy and independence, left writers and intellectuals on duty to assert the national consciousness. Meray also notes that the leading intellects in 1956 found themselves *within* an existing system, that is to say, these dissidents were by and large members of the Hungarian Communist Party. Whereas earlier writers aimed to destroy an existing system, these writers sought to "correct" the system which had so devastated Hungary.<sup>3</sup>

Tamas Aczel's concise analysis of the Hungarian literary tradition and its function leading up to and during the revolution focuses primarily on Hungarian writers as the spirit of Hungarian nationalism. These individuals he argues, traditionally served to articulate the traditional notion of the folk-nation, which throughout Hungarian history has rarely been in unison with the political state. When these writers began to write in opposition to the HWP, they signaled the spiritual return to a traditional, moral, humanistic society, one which sharply diverged from the inhumane coldness of Soviet style communism. Aczel refers to the writers' movements after 1953 as a "moral awakening" in which the writers unearthed a moral tradition in Hungary that had been buried under the detritus of Soviet totalitarianism. Furthermore, he

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<sup>2</sup>Columbia History Research Project Hungary – 1956 Hungarian Refugee Interviews. No. 616, p.5, August, September 1956.

<sup>3</sup>Tibor Meray, "The Hungarian Writers' Movement" eds., Bela Kiraly, Barbara Lotze, and Nandor F Dreisziger, in *War and Society in Eastern Europe vol. xi: The First War Between Socialist States: The Hungarian Revolution of 1956 and its Impact* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 203-5.

contends that these writers achieved the role of social catalysts; their ultimate triumph was a “return to a *traditional* morality of self-imposed limits, responsibilities, and understandings, away from the unbridled immorality of totalitarian violence.”<sup>4</sup> While Aczel is correct in his assessment of the writers’ role, he overlooks perhaps their most important contribution to the revolution: the formation of dissident communities that would allow an uprising to gel in such a sudden fashion. Returning to the idea that the Hungarian people felt themselves to be a colonial possession, or had at least reached the realization that Hungary did not exist as an independent state, the importance of solidifying opposition became an integral portion of the process by which Hungary moved towards a war for independence.<sup>5</sup>

That the writers longed for a more principled and ethical state is not in question- but their true lasting contribution to the revolution was the initial “core” community they created. In other words, the longing for a “return to traditional moral, humane society” is simply rhetoric if the rhetoric does not become something more material. In this case, a community or network of dissidents materialized through the circulation of dissident literature that openly criticized the massive deficiencies of Soviet style communism in Hungary. Mass print media operated as the avenue through which dissident ideas galvanized the Hungarian population.

This development of dissident community building began with the New Course in 1953. The New Course, which was the form de-Stalinization took in Hungary, tempered extreme forms of state control and oppression. The regime relaxed its chokehold on the press and various literary outlets between spring 1953 and late 1955. This in turn allowed the Writers’ Association, on paper an apolitical professional organization which included HWP members, to

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<sup>4</sup> Tamas Aczel, *The Intellectuals of 1956: The Past and the Present* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 211-21.

<sup>5</sup> Bela Kiraly, Barbara Lotze, and Nandor F. Dreisziger, Eds. *War and Society in Eastern Europe vol. xi: The First War Between Socialist States: The Hungarian Revolution of 1956 and its Impact*. Tamas Aczel, “The Intellectuals of 1956: The Past and the Present” (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984): 211-21.



voice their dissatisfaction with the regime's policies and Hungary's position as a Soviet possession. The organization published *Irodalmi Ujsag* (Literary Gazette), *Beke es Szabadsag* (Peace and Freedom), *Szinhaz es Mozi* (Theater and Cinema), *Uj Hang* (New Voice), *Muvet Nep* (Cultured People), and *Csillag* (Star).<sup>6</sup>

Before 1953, *Fiatal Irok Munkakozossege* (FIM: 'Workshop of Young Writers') operated as the association for aspiring young writers. FIM formed in 1950 under the auspices of the Writers' Association and was the first step towards full membership in the latter. Shortly before FIM disbanded in 1953, one young writer commented that a 'reform spirit' entered the organization. The Writers' Association funded one student's excursion to Poland where he had a chance to meet other poets. It was in Warsaw where he came in contact with a French émigré community through which he discovered the West and Western-style communism. Upon his return to Hungary he attended a meeting of young writers on 29 October. "The revolt of the writers began here...it began in 1953 when people were allowed to open their mouths" he recalled, "Everybody unburdened himself."<sup>7</sup> The young writers attacked two literary periodicals, *Uj Hang* and *Csillag*, the regime's (repressive) literary policies, and Rakosi's cultural and economic policies.

Beginning in 1954, writers began to argue that if Hungary belonged to the people, then the writers had an obligation to write what was on the people's minds. The writers became more and more daring. They expressed what was on the minds of individuals in all spheres of society from the field to the factory floor. One young communist writer, Istvan Orsi, age 22, wrote a poem in which a factory worker is punished for stealing a spoon, yet the government continued to collect the people's money for projects that never found completion. Although never

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<sup>6</sup> Kecskemeti, *The Unexpected Revoltuion*, 40-54.

<sup>7</sup> Columbia History Research Project Hungary – 1956 Hungarian Refugee Interviews. No. 527, October 1957, Oxford, England, 5-7.

published, the poem was a rousing success inside the Writers' Association. Between 1953 and 1954, the discussions within the Association became more patriotic. One particularly thorny issue raised by author Zoltan Zelk included the uranium being taken by the Soviets without the opportunity to place the commodity on the free market.<sup>8</sup>

One of the most important organs of the professional writers' opposition, *Irodalmi Ujsag* first criticized the party's excesses in 1954, and particularly chastised Rakosi, who although demoted to second in power behind Nagy, still wielded influence among his clique. A young student who fought in the revolution recalled that the significance of the intellectual groups' activities was found not in what they said, but rather in the fact that they spoke what was on everyone's mind.<sup>9</sup> Another student (age 21) who fought in the revolution found *Irodalmi Ujsag* to have had the greatest effect as far as changing the atmosphere for publications in Hungary prior to the revolution. He recalled people paying three to four times the cover price to purchase a copy of the paper while "literally thousands have been standing in lines for it."<sup>10</sup> In this student's opinion, the importance of these dissenting papers was not so much their revolutionary content, which the papers never truly offered, instead aiming for moderate reforms, but rather the reaction from the masses. Recalled the student: "[Dissenting publications were] read mostly by the workers and thus that proves that not so much the content of the articles was revolutionary and radical, but the reaction on this new tone was revolutionary and radical."<sup>11</sup> One can see here the power of mass-print media to disseminate elite opposition ideas among the general population. This type of evidence suggests that elite and mass fermentation began to fuse after the onset of the New Course, rather than the eve of the Revolution.

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<sup>8</sup> Columbia History Research Project Hungary – 1956 Hungarian Refugee Interviews. No. F-85 JP, August, 1957, 49-50.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* 30.

<sup>10</sup> Columbia History Research Project Hungary – 1956 Hungarian Refugee Interviews. No. 413, June 1957, Innsbruck, 3.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* 4.

As the above student correctly recalled, literary organs such as *Irodalmi Ujsag* did not take on a revolutionary tone until 1956. The New Course simply allowed for a thaw during which writers felt they could speak more freely. One young student recalled that he, like others, found himself in opposition not to socialism, but rather to the particular (Soviet) brand of it: “The way I would sum up the main elements of communism would be this:…Communism supposes a religious state of mind. The second element is radical socialism.”<sup>12</sup> While in University, the student was elected as a member of the University’s student association in 1953. He attempted to publish an article arguing against communism as a religion, but was forced to make so many editorial changes as to dilute the piece. The article still, however, retained enough critical elements to move Party officials to seize copies of the work after publication. This episode illustrates the contention that communism constituted not merely a political stance, but rather an entire way of life- one that was not compatible with traditional Hungarian life. The student also wrote two satires, which although never published, were circulated, much to the chagrin of the HWP.<sup>13</sup>

In the spring of 1955, the HWP Central Committee forced Imre Nagy to resign as Prime Minister and Matyas Rakosi was reinstated. Intellectual opposition activities stagnated until the formation of the Petofi Circle, which was founded in late 1955, and named for the famed poet of the 1848 revolutions. The revelations of the Twentieth Party Congress in February 1956 dangerously undermined Rakosi’s position as a Stalinist hard-liner while fueling the popularity and influence of the Petofi Circle as an opposition group. The debates of the group were now

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<sup>12</sup> Columbia History Research Project Hungary – 1956 Hungarian Refugee Interviews. No. 507, July 1957, London, 6.

<sup>13</sup> Columbia History Research Project Hungary – 1956 Hungarian Refugee Interviews. No. 507, July 1957, London, 16.

public and the organization attracted a variety of intellectuals who now openly criticized Hungary's Stalinist past.<sup>14</sup>

The Petofi Circle, whose role as the nucleus in the ferment of the revolution has been discussed by a number of authors, served as final frontier for writers: independence. One young writer noted that his political outlook began its transformation between 1953 and 1954, through the literature and views of people around him. Later on he recalled that in debates with his friends in the Petofi Circle, the group's ideology changed into something more nationalistic: "We realized that if we really believed in March 1848, in the tradition of independent Hungary, then we must strongly disapprove of the existence of Russian troops in Hungary...In other words I came to understand what the fundamental problem was."<sup>15</sup>

But the Petofi Circle and the Writers' Association did not become overt advocates of Hungarian independence overnight (although The Petofi Circles' namesake suggests that a certain spirit provoked its formation). The group's contributions to the development of a large, imagined, dissenting community that looked to oust the Stalinist-flavored communism preceded (and ultimately assisted in giving birth to) the full-fledged independence spirit. These two movements are more closely related than has been accepted by historians who have viewed this fermentation period as a modest, reform oriented period, because the Stalinist system had come to define communism in Hungary. The removal of Stalinists from power essentially meant the removal of Soviet control, or at least democratization. For example, in September, 1956, a little more than seven months after the Twentieth Party Congress, *Irodalmi Ujsag*, which by that time had exploded in popularity due to its connection to the Petofi Circle, published in its 22 September issue a review of the 17 September Writers' Association Congress. The paper

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<sup>14</sup> Andras B. Hegedus, "The Petofi Circle: The Forum of Reform in 1956," in *Hungary 1956- Forty Years On*, ed. Terry Cox (London: Frank Cass, 1997), 108-34.

<sup>15</sup> Columbia History Research Project Hungary – 1956 Hungarian Refugee Interviews. No. 527, 12.

published speeches by writers such as Tibor Meray, who stated at the meeting, “Those Stalinist errors and crimes that curtailed the freedom of literature, also curtailed the freedom of the people. Those persons...who restricted freedom of literature were the same who acted unlawfully against the individuals and the nation as a whole.”<sup>16</sup> Peter Veres, president of the Writers’ Association, also had his remarks published by *Irodalmi Ujsag*: “The socialist world regime has to create, and in my opinion will create, the functionary democracy which enables every citizen and every social category, respecting revolutionary sovereignty, therefore also the writers, to ascertain the elementary human rights, to which belong freedom of thinking and opportunity.”<sup>17</sup> It is here we can see the flowering of an independence spirit formed by the elite, yet disseminated by means of mass-print media.

While Hungary’s dissenting writers built a nucleus from which rebellious sentiment radiated through commandeered communist propaganda channels (it must be remembered that the Writers’ Association was an extension of the HWP), another community developed between 1953 and 1956 based on the written word. Western publications also found their way into Hungarian hands through various avenues and this literature served three purposes: it 1) reminded Hungarians of their inferior living standard, 2) created a community among dissidents with whom it was felt the information could be safely shared, and finally, 3) created a sense of community with the West, particularly, the United States, whom Hungarians viewed as a potential liberator.

Hungarian students sought Western publications such as Vienna’s *Die Presse*, the *Neue Zuercher Zeitung*, and *Le Monde*, and often went to great lengths to obtain them. One Hungarian

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<sup>16</sup> RFE/RL Background Reports. “The General Assembly of the Writers’ Union.” 27. September, 1956, 3. Open Society Archive Digital Archive.

<sup>17</sup> RFE/RL Background Reports. “The General Assembly of the Writers’ Union.” 27. September, 1956, 6. Open Society Archive Digital Archive.

writer, Zoltan Zstaray, noted that in some cases, those who sought these types of publications would bribe friendly Foreign Ministry clerks who would lend the papers for several hours. The student would then mimeograph and circulate the material secretly, or pass on the information by word of mouth. The writer also recalls that students and professors, while not condoning the activities outright, knew of these happenings yet did nothing to impede the clandestine activities.<sup>18</sup>

Some young intellectuals visited reading rooms of British and American foreign embassies to browse Western periodicals. One editorial office contained the *Zuercher Zeitung*, *Die Tat*, and *Weltwoche*. The editorial office of *Magyar Nemzet* (Hungarian Nation) had available twice weekly the *New York Herald Tribune* and the *Paris Soir*.<sup>19</sup> One journalist recalled that a copy of George Orwell's *1984* was circulated clandestinely, which he did not personally read, although he did manage to read a copy of Arthur Koester's *Darkness at Noon*, which he felt to be "an excellent report by a political pamphleteer."<sup>20</sup> Although it is impossible to ascertain exactly what each reader read and deduced from these papers, this activity is noteworthy as the HWP viewed Western publications as contraband, thus reading them constituted resistance to the regime. Also, to circulate forbidden material, particularly Western, anti-Soviet literature, was perceived by individuals as a form of passive resistance to the HWP.

In addition to Hungarian dissident literature and foreign periodicals, Radio Free Europe's Balloon Action (called Operation Focus in Hungary) created communities of dissenters who imagined the West as an ally and sympathetic community against the Soviet Union. Operation Focus, essentially an extension of RFE programming, which will be discussed in chapter three,

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<sup>18</sup> Zoltan Sztaray, *The Changes within Social Groups in Hungary*. Available online: [http://www.osa.ceu.hu/files/holdings/other/blinken/pdf/B\\_SF\\_20.pdf](http://www.osa.ceu.hu/files/holdings/other/blinken/pdf/B_SF_20.pdf)

<sup>19</sup> Columbia History Research Project Hungary – 1956 Hungarian Refugee Interviews. No. 442, July, 1957, Vienna, 123.

<sup>20</sup> Columbia History Research Project Hungary – 1956 Hungarian Refugee Interviews. No. 505, July 1957, Oxford England, 17.

sought to undermine and challenge Soviet control in Hungary while encouraging resistance. RFE activities, including Operation Focus, were funded by the National Committee for a Free Europe (founded in 1949 as the Free Europe Committee), superficially a private organization funded by American volunteers in New York, but in reality a program funded by the CIA through the U.S. Congress. The balloon action took off when Frank Wisner, who headed up the office of Policy Coordination, the CIA department responsible for RFE, came into possession of leftover World War Two weather balloons. Leaflets printed by the Free Europe Press (an organization responsible for the production of papers relating to Eastern European affairs) were hung from the balloons in baskets ballasted by dry ice, which melted during its journey and allowed for the leaflets to fall over targeted regions of Eastern Europe. The first leaflets were sent to Czechoslovakia in 1951, and the project's Hungarian operations commenced in fall 1954 and ended in March 1955. Over 16,000,000 leaflets traveled to Hungary.<sup>21</sup>

Leaflets carried by unmanned balloons were launched in Bavaria and then traveled over neutral Austria before reaching the western portion of Hungary. Leaflets that reached Hungary contained the "Twelve Demands" (also referred to as the Twelve Points), which were approximately four by eight inches in size and two folding booklets, approximately four by eighteen inches.<sup>22</sup> The Twelve Demands, noted by recipients for their tempered political points, strived for such things as freedom to criticize the government, the abolishment of collective farms, university admissions based on merit, an end to the manipulations of trade unions, and a restoration of traditional Hungarian religious holidays. The two folding booklets contained a

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<sup>21</sup> Richard H. Cummings, "Balloons over Eastern Europe: The Cold War Leaflet Campaign of Radio Free Europe" *The Falling Leaf* no 1666. (Autumn 1999): 1-6; Gati, *Failed Illusions*, 99-105; Cissie Dore Hill, "Voices of Hope: The Story of Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty." *Hoover Digest*, no.4. (2001).

<sup>22</sup> Dispatch 1086, "Balloons to Hungary," From Foreign Service Dispatch, Amembassy to the Department of State, Washington. March 24, 1955. Published in Bekes, Byrne and Rainer, eds., *The 1956 Hungarian Revolution: A History in Documents* (New York: CEU Press, 2002): 66-7.

caricature of Rakosi, pictures of American scenes, helicopters, and photographs of Winston Churchill.<sup>23</sup>

These demands were an extension of Eisenhower's policy towards Eastern Europe, which after the failure of the 1953 East German Uprising, focused less on liberation, and hoped rather to gain concessions from the HWP. Washington viewed the New Course as a sign of the HWP's weakness, and aimed to exploit this frailty. The central Operation Focus policy guideline read: "Our primary purpose is to focus the attention of the Hungarian people upon certain legitimate means by which they can continue to battle, thwart, and wrench concessions from the regime."<sup>24</sup> The leaflets did not, through orders that had trickled down from President Eisenhower in fall 1952, allude to liberation or challenge Soviet rule. The HWP, nonetheless, viewed the leaflets as a threat, and as a police state, instructed authorities to act accordingly.

Local police forces in Hungary did their best to prevent the spread of these leaflets, often arresting distributors as "reactionaries" and "enemies of the people". Those arrested received jail sentences that varied according to their age and social standing. According to one source who supplied information to the American embassy in Vienna, a kulak boy received a two-year jail sentence while a 16-year-old student was banned from all Hungarian schools. In attempting to destroy the leaflets before they could be circulated, local police instructed local populations to destroy the leaflets by burning, notify the police of a "landing", or to collect and deliver the leaflets to the authorities. In one case, a cluster of balloons floated over the town of Sopronkovesd at a height of approximately 150 meters. The AVH marched into a field in battle formation and fired at the balloons with rifles and machine guns failed to down a single balloon.

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<sup>23</sup> "The leaflets are not sufficiently aggressive because they do not contain instructions on how to resist the regime." 8 March 1955, RG59. Item No. 1137/55 1207f.

<sup>24</sup> Quoted in A. Ross Johnson, "Setting the Record Straight: Role of Radio Free Europe in the Hungarian Revolution of 1956." Working paper, version: December 2006, 7.



The AVH instructed civilians to assist in collecting the leaflets, wherein a source noted that the vast majority of participants, including AVH, saved a few leaflets for themselves.<sup>25</sup>

Five Hungarian escapees, who fled their native country independently between the dates of 11 November, 1954 and 30 January, 1955 commented that the balloons “reminded the people of Hungary that they had not been forgotten nor abandoned to their oppressors” and “delivered into Hungarian hands valuable material which was read and retained.”<sup>26</sup> During operation focus these leaflets were strewn throughout Hungary created a sense of an imagined ally, the news of which spread clandestinely among workers, students and peasants, creating dissident communities within non-elite groups.

Communities began as small groups of friends who regarded each other as “reliable” and “trusted”. Another 24-year-old Hungarian living in Budapest remembered sitting in a tavern in November 1954 when a fellow patron relayed information he heard on Radio Free Europe. He revealed that the “Free West” had dropped leaflets over Hungary that asked the population to “Resist the Red Regime.”<sup>27</sup> When the two met several days later the man who had presented the news expressed his disappointment that the leaflet campaign was only an ideological one. He told the 24-year-old that, “The people can do nothing with promises on paper, they want armed operation.” The two agreed that it was the only way to liberate Hungary.<sup>28</sup> The source summed up his feelings regarding the leaflet campaign as follows: “I believe that the purpose of the leaflet operation is to free Hungary. The Twelve Demands can only be realized in the absence of the Reds, as the latter would fight such realization; however, the Soviets can be driven out of

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<sup>25</sup> Dispatch 1086, “Balloons to Hungary,” From Foreign Service Dispatch, Amembassy to the Department of State, Washington. March 24, 1955. Published in Bekes, Byrne and Rainer, Eds., *The 1956 Hungarian Revolution: A History in Documents*. (New York: CEU Press, 2002): 66-7.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, 66.

<sup>27</sup> “The leaflets are not sufficiently aggressive because they do not contain instructions on how to resist the regime.” 8 March 1955, RG59. Item No. 1137/55 1207f.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*.

Hungary by war only.”<sup>29</sup> Interpersonal communications regarding the leaflets could take place among friends on the street, but news of the leaflets spread throughout places of work even more quickly. This episode illustrates the how the leaflets fostered dissident discussion among individuals, which created dissident communities among the Hungarian population.

A Jewish woman in route to Israel recalled that her nephew, who worked in the Gamma Factory, told her of the leaflets in November 1954. She knew that they came from the West but was not aware of the actual text. She had also learned from her nephew that the workers at his factory discussed the leaflets for weeks, which created, “A disturbing effect on the [workforce] who whispered among themselves. Whenever a ‘confidential’ man entered the room, the workers stopped whispering.”<sup>30</sup> The discussions initiated by the dissemination of leaflets, in turn led to communities of dissidents, in this case, in one factory, who bonded through their common readership of Focus leaflets.

If small dissident communities sprang to life through interpersonal contact, larger communities sprang to life in the imaginations of the population. Many felt that the leaflets stemmed from a larger resistance organization, both within Hungary and outside, which sought the captive nation’s liberation. According to some Hungarian villagers, the leaflets provided the local population with new thoughts and brought their dissatisfaction “To a common ground.”<sup>31</sup> The leaflets and the discussions that ensued created “a kind of comradeship in crime” among Hungarians recalled one source in 1954.<sup>32</sup> The value of a large community of dissidents was not lost on rural Hungarians, one of whom spoke of his desire to unite opposition-minded individuals: “If, for example, the leaflets spoke about the resistance of workers or peasants in

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<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.* 4.

<sup>30</sup> “Personal Opinion on Focus.” 24 February 1953, RG 59. Item No. 1197/55 1207f.

<sup>31</sup> “Public Opinion on the Focus Action and on the 12 Points.” RG 59. Item No. 10642/54

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.* 2.

other parts of the country, the people would have more courage to do something alike. It is easier to act when one is not alone.”<sup>33</sup> In addition to small dissident communities developing, many imagined the support of the West, and in particular, the United States. One peasant boy heard of the leaflets when the Twelve Demands were recited at his local barber shop, to which one patron replied that, “it was time for the West to do something.”<sup>34</sup> Apparently, while the leaflets inspired hope, they could also frustrate Hungarians who longed for more tangible action.

In October 1954, one individual noted that Hungarians welcomed the arrival of the leaflets with joy. His friends felt that at last something was happening, although they had not yet seen a leaflet in Budapest. Instead they had been advised by the leaflet operation through Radio Free Europe. The citizen noted that there existed a general feeling of relief after the action began and that many attached naïve hopes to balloons. “Politically, the hopes of the population are entirely based on American intervention or help,” he stated. “Our people are glad to hear about the present developments [in this case referring to German rearmament] by which they hope in the course, the Soviets will be compelled to withdraw behind their own frontiers.”<sup>35</sup> A refugee who escaped from Budapest to Austria in November 1954 professed to know little of the leaflet actions, having never seen one himself. However, he had heard of them through a colleague, his landlady, and friends. So although the source never came into physical contact with a leaflet, intrapersonal communication allowed him knowledge of the Twelve Demands.<sup>36</sup>

A Hungarian man and his wife, who escaped to Vienna after Christmas 1954, also learned of the impending leaflet action through Radio Free Europe programs. When the leaflets fell in their town of Sopron, in western Hungary, the police arrived the following day and

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<sup>33</sup> “A Student Reports on ‘Operation Focus.’” 11 March 1955. RG59. Item No. 1509/55 1207f.

<sup>34</sup> “A young peasant boy tells about leaflets in Western Hungary.” 24 February 1955. RG 59. Item No. 1065/55 1207f.

<sup>35</sup> “Some Information from Budapest” October 1954. RG 59. Item No. 10425/54 1207f.

<sup>36</sup> “No Leaflets over Budapest?” November 1954. RG 59. Item No. 11132/54 1207f.

searched door to door for contraband. Police forced those seen bending over on the street to produce an identity card and then searched the suspect. Peasants gathered leaflets that appeared on the highway between Sopron and Győr, and rumors spread that a car had passed along the highway from which the leaflets were thrown. The couple noted that the leaflets inspired hope among the general population, yet people needed rifles, or even a single American soldier.<sup>37</sup> Three refugees from Budapest stated they had never seen an actual leaflet, yet knew of them during 1954 through RFE programming, friends, including an AVH border guard, and newspapers. One refugee assumed “the People” sponsored the leaflet campaign, and all three agreed that the leaflets aimed to liberate Hungary and provide a brighter future for its people. They had observed the exchange and circulation of the leaflets on streetcars, in cigarette packets, and by posting them in public places.<sup>38</sup>

In the fall of 1954, a 27-year-old wine purchasing agent went on an official tour of Somogyvár, Somogyváros, and Balatonboglár. Upon his arrival, farmers informed him that leaflets had fallen in the area, and although he did not see a leaflet, was made aware of the Twelve Demands. The young man observed a changed spirit in the town after the leaflets arrived: “They were in high spirits. It was noticeable how they lost their hopeless attitude and how happy they seemed to be that the West had not forgotten them.” He added, “I do not believe that the “National Resistance Movement” would claim too many victims if everyone would stand behind the idea as one man.”<sup>39</sup> The young man explained further the “National Resistance Movement,” noting that the balloon action had begun at the right time, as the New Course had tempered resistance activity and it had lost its unity. He also offered his opinion as to the

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<sup>37</sup> “Focus in Sopron and Vicinity.” 3 January 1955. RG 59. Item No. 1/55 1207f.

<sup>38</sup> “‘Focus’ Leaflets fall on Outskirts of Baja. A A Guns Allegedly Used Against Balloons.” 30 December 1954. RG 59. Item No. 11647/54 1207f.

<sup>39</sup> “‘Focus’ Leaflets found at Latrany, Somogyvár, Somogyvamos and Balatonboglár in County Somogy.” 29 December 1954. RG 59. Item No. 11610/54 1207f. Note: “National Resistance Movement” was printed on the demands so as to appear as the creator of the demands.

leaflets' design: "I think white with a frame in the national colors would be the best. My opinion is that the resistance movement should be organized after the pattern of the 1848 revolution."<sup>40</sup>

This man's comments illustrate three important themes. First, the leaflets created in his mind the notion of a powerful ally, while secondly, he envisioned national resistance movement that could succeed through solidarity. Finally, the source conjured in his mind the spirit of the 1848 Revolution.

A refugee from Ajak in the County of Szabolcs heard of the Operation Focus leaflets from a friend in 1954. He noted that the leaflets raised hopes of a change and proved that the West did not intend to let Hungary suffer under communism for an extended period of time. He felt that people who found the leaflets should pass them on to "good" friends.<sup>41</sup> Another source appreciated the name of the movement printed on the leaflets, "NEM" [*Nemzeti Ellenallasi Mozgalom*] or, People's Opposition Movement] but would have preferred that the leaflets encouraged Hungarians to not only resist, but to overthrow the regime. He felt that the rigged elections muffled the voice of the people, and claimed that, "If there was a chance for them to express their opinions freely, they would say: 'The Russians should leave the country.'"<sup>42</sup>

Six Hungarian escapees, five of whom came from the Sopron area, offered the U.S. Foreign Embassy in Vienna news of the leaflet action in 1954. One source, previously employed at a carpenter shop stated that beginning in October, workers in his shop began circulating leaflets containing the Twelve Demands. He remembered that a coworker secretly inserted a leaflet into his pocket, but later asked to have the leaflet returned so as to continue its circulation. He remarked that the leaflet represented the first instance of a free press since 1948. The second

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<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.* 2.

<sup>41</sup> "Severe Punishments Imposed on Persons who Retain, Read and Circulate 'Focus' leaflets." 23 December 1954. RG 59. Item No. 11496/54 1207f.

<sup>42</sup> "'Operation Focus' Leaflets Found at Latrany in Somogy County." 23 December 1954. RG 59. Item No. 11492/54 1207f.

escapee, like many others, had first become aware of the leaflets through Radio Free Europe. He recalled that on or around 10 October, a communist border guard gave him a leaflet. Although the guard had confirmed that his unit had received instructions to collect and turn in the leaflets, he distributed the 24 he had collected to reliable friends. At the factory where the source worked, he noted that officials made a concerted effort to overlook the circulation of leaflets.<sup>43</sup>

Like others, one Jewish woman, interviewed in Naples, Italy while in route to Israel, felt that the leaflets needed to adopt or promise more radical strategies. She first heard of the leaflets through Radio Kossuth and newspapers, and although initially unimpressed, having expected the leaflets to contain communist propaganda, became intrigued after hearing of their contents through a letter from a relative. She finally came into possession of an actual leaflet when a relative from the countryside where leaflets had fallen brought one with him on a visit to Budapest. The relative left the leaflet in her possession with instructions to post it in a public place, so as to avoid the possibility of a possession charge by the authorities. She eventually posted the leaflet to a wall in front of a café. Her relative explained to her that while the text of the leaflets aroused considerable discussion, all agreed that that the West should send weapons rather than paper. The respondent did not know the party or organization responsible for the leaflets, but felt that the purpose of the action was to inform Hungarians of the true nature of their situation and to encourage resistance against the regime. She felt that those who took part in resistance activities could and should have had only one goal: to resist bolshevism and liberate Hungary.<sup>44</sup>

A notable trend regarding the leaflet action includes the transmission of information contained in the leaflets by word of mouth. One may not have come into physical possession of

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<sup>43</sup> Foreign Service Dispatch: 764.00/1-755 RG59 From: Amembassy, Vienna to The Department of State, Washington. "Balloon Action in Hungary." 1-2.

<sup>44</sup> "Opinion on Operation Focus." 25 February 1955. RG 59. Item No. 1200/55 1207f.

a leaflet, but their arrival and message spread quickly and clandestinely. Enthusiasm, the broad reaction to the leaflets, stemmed not from their actual message, but simply because they constituted a tangible reminder that Hungary had not been forgotten by the West. Not everyone read the leaflets' contents precisely, and rumors circulated that Hungary was soon to be liberated by American forces. One respondent mentioned that because the leaflets fell from Heaven, they assumed a "symbolic and miraculous religious meaning" among "simple people."<sup>45</sup> In contrast, this respondent argued that intellectuals felt the leaflets did not inspire a marked deviation from what had occurred during 1954 under Imre Nagy's New Course. This opinion seems to have had some traction, but most leaflets were dropped in non-urban areas, populated with people of less sophisticated political outlooks.<sup>46</sup>

But news of the leaflets spread quickly throughout the country. A 24-year-old electrician in Budapest first heard of the leaflet action in the fall of 1954 through Radio Free Europe. The poor reception of the broadcasts, due to jamming, however, left the young man with only a vague notion of what information leaflets contained. Through the distorted transmission, he gathered that leaflets from the West contained Twelve Demands, and encouraged a resistance movement. He informed a relative of the news who responded, "Finally, the West is thinking of us."<sup>47</sup> The electrician searched the streets of the twelfth district of Budapest for a leaflet without success. After work that evening, he met a good friend to whom he imparted what little he knew of the development. Overjoyed, his friend danced a "czardas" (a traditional Hungarian folk dance) in the street and enthusiastically responded, "You see, this will be the beginning of our fight for liberation."<sup>48</sup> The two friends promised to contact each other immediately when a leaflet was

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<sup>45</sup> "Opinions on the Focus Operation." 4 February 1955. RG 59. Item No. 876/55 1207f.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.* 2.

<sup>47</sup> "An Electrician's comment on Operation 'Focus'." 25 February 1955. RG 59. Item No. 793/55 1207f.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.* 2.

found. Two days later the electrician met with another friend with whom he shared his secret. This friend replied, “This is nothing, I know much more than you do,” and proceeded to explain that through another friend he had learned that balloons had been spotted over the districts of Zala, Vas, and Szeged. This man expressed a criticism of the leaflets that he claimed every Hungarian already knew: “Fegyverek Nelkul nincs Felszabadulas” (“without arms, no liberation”).<sup>49</sup>

These stories illuminate several developments. First, news of the leaflets inspired hope amongst the population and reminded them that the West had not abandoned captive nations. Secondly, the content, or something approximating the gist of the leaflets, spread amongst the population rather quickly. Many believed that the West would intervene on their behalf if they were to take up arms. This helped create communities of dissenters who trusted each other, the West, and believed in a heightened possibility of a liberated Hungary. Finally, it is evident that the possibility of an *armed uprising* did not become a reality ‘spontaneously’ in late October 1956, but rather had fermented since the onset of the New Course as dissident literature spread in streetcars, pubs, and factory floors. The notion that leaflets had fallen over the entire nation created a sense among many that their fellow countrymen had digested the same information. When tension and tempered resistance gave way to open rebellion, Hungarians would have in mind their supporters in the West.

The dissemination of elite dissenting thought through communication channels designed to indoctrinate the population infused the minds of the populace with rebellious thoughts. Ironically, the information system designed to maintain the totalitarian state became the nervous system of the revolutionary ferment. Finally, the radio, the other tool used by totalitarian regimes to broadcast propaganda, was hijacked by a hostile community in the West. While radio

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<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.* 3.



alerted Hungarians to the leaflet action, it also permeated the airwaves with programming geared towards a liberation movement in Hungary.

## RADIO WAVES

Just as the circulation of dissident reading material created imagined dissident communities within Hungary and the perception of an ally in the West, foreign radio broadcasts did likewise. Also similar to the balloon action, foreign broadcasting beamed anti-Soviet propaganda through the Iron Curtain and into the homes and minds of captive peoples, albeit on a much greater scale. Whereas only a fraction of the Hungarian population procured a balloon leaflet for themselves, rather relying heavily on intrapersonal communications as a means of spreading dissident material, we will see in this chapter that radio reached the majority of the population. When balloon communiqués reached the population, the overriding message garnered by Hungarians was the notion that the West had not forgotten Hungary and this in turn aroused hope for liberation. In these ways, foreign broadcasting produced what domestic and foreign dissident literature did: large anti-Soviet communities bound through the idea of driving out a colonial occupier with the assistance of an imagined ally. This chapter will argue that between 1951 and 1956, foreign broadcasting, particularly RFE and VOA, instilled in Hungarian listeners the belief that the West would come to their aid, while at the same time creating communities of dissent linked through listenership of these stations.

Whereas leaflets weaved their way through the factory floors and passed between hands on street cars, listening to foreign broadcasts was done in private, or perhaps with several trusted friends. This chapter will show that listening was mostly relegated to the evening hours, and resulted in a simultaneous, covert (or more specifically, resistance-natured) action, performed throughout the nation. We will see that because listeners knew of the massive popularity of foreign broadcasting, they could easily imagine people in their villages, towns, and nation performing the same act of defiance while imagining the same enemy and ally. So, although the

individual listened alone, he could imagine the ceremony being replicated simultaneously throughout an imagined community. At the same time, an individual listener could discretely discuss with trusted acquaintances in public and private spaces information gleaned from Western broadcasts, thereby affirming that this imagined world was “rooted in everyday life.”<sup>1</sup> This type of community that developed through the listenership of foreign broadcasts does much to explain the overwhelming unity among Hungarians during their attempt to drive out their Soviet occupiers in the fall of 1956.

Historians have tended to reduce the role of radio in the 1956 Hungarian Revolution to the questions of whether it incited the revolution or encouraged its development, neither of which has been ultimately settled. In some cases historians have dedicated little space to dismiss foreign broadcasting as a factor in the revolution. As historian Burton Paulu noted in 1974, the debate as to whether American broadcasting in Hungary incited and propelled the revolution arose among governments (American and German) and academics following the incident. Hungarian author Leslie Bain, a participant in the revolution who fled to the United States, stated that American radio never promised military help was imminent, but rather that “promises of all-out help were implicit in the broadcasts, and if the Hungarians understood that to mean military aid, the fault lies in the ambiguity of the broadcasts.”<sup>2</sup> Paulu quotes an American observer at the time who argued that “Hungarians in their emotional state at that time would have read promises into stock market quotations.”<sup>3</sup> After an extensive study, American scholar Robert T. Holt deduced from transcripts of broadcasts, that RFE did *not* incite the revolution, nor did the existence of VOA or RFE in Hungary for six years suggest that military aid would be

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<sup>1</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 35-6. Anderson suggests a similar phenomenon occurred through the circulation of newspapers.

<sup>2</sup> Burton Paulu, *Radio and Television Broadcasting in Eastern Europe* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1974), 363.

<sup>3</sup> Paulu, *Radio and Television*, 363.

forthcoming. The German government also investigated the charges and reached the same conclusion.<sup>4</sup>

While these studies investigated the role of radio *during* the revolution, foreign broadcasting had effects on Hungarian society years before the revolution occurred. Also, as noted in chapter one, scholars have kept busy sorting out the political aspects of the revolution while less attention has been directed towards the social conditions that preceded the event, with some attention to the professional writers' organizations. Charles Gati has produced the most thoughtful and balanced analysis of the role of RFE, although like others, he does not delve into any type of detail regarding the listening habits of individuals before the revolution, the opinions formed through listening, and the discussions among Hungarians that foreign broadcasts instigated. He concludes that the maximalist, overzealous demands of RFE during the revolution helped doom what could have been a successful, albeit softer revolution.<sup>5</sup> By fall 1956, the work of RFE and VOA, including everything they represented to Hungarian listeners, was done.

As with other forms of mass and long distance communication, international communications (or to be more precise here, long range international broadcasting) developed as political necessity, technological capability, and invention took place. The cable telegraph allowed nations with far flung territories, such as Great Britain, to maintain control and contact with its subjects. The advent and implementation of wireless telegraphy (1901-1926), which coincided with the development of the radio tube, opened the door to wireless, instantaneous

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<sup>4</sup> Paulu, *Radio and Television*, 363.

<sup>5</sup> Gati, *The Revolution that Failed*, 96-107. For recent scholarship on Radio Free Europe, see Arch Puddington, *Broadcasting Freedom: The Cold War Triumph of Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2000).

communications. The inherent short range of longwave broadcasting during the 1920s restricted broadcast's audiences to within a range of 50-100 miles.<sup>6</sup>

During this same time period, however, the development of shortwave radio, which allowed for long range transmissions, became the domain of amateurs avoiding interference with long range commercial broadcasts. From 1927 on, shortwave broadcasting became an instrument and an extension of foreign policy in Europe, for example in Germany, where the Nazi party beamed its messages in shortwave format throughout the world. Americans first used the technology to broadcast entertainment programs in Central and South America. The Soviet Union, whose sheer size required numerous, powerful radio stations, broadcasted propaganda in German, French, and English throughout the world. During the Second World War, Allied and Axis forces employed foreign broadcasting as a tool to create uncertainty and confusion in enemy and occupied territory. The United States and the Soviet Union replaced the opposing forces of the Second World War and the use of foreign broadcasting intensified during the Cold War.<sup>7</sup>

The RFE project began in 1949 under the direction of some of the most notable American Cold Warriors: George F. Kennan, Allen W. Dulles, Frank Wisner, and DeWitt C. Poole. These men, aside from being Princeton alumni, knew firsthand the vicious tactics of the Soviet Union and the earliest broadcasts (early 1950s) did not mince words when exposing Soviet brutality. Radio in the American Sector (RIAS), which had been on the air since 1946 broadcasting to American soldiers stationed in Berlin, served as a technical template for RFE.<sup>8</sup> Americans chose Munich as the city in which to locate the broadcasting station, for both its sizeable Eastern

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<sup>6</sup> James Wood, *History of International Broadcasting* (London: Peter Peregrinus Ltd., 1992), 1-20.

<sup>7</sup> James Wood, *History of International Broadcasting*, 20-42.

<sup>8</sup> The investigation of RFE following the 1956 Revolution tempered further the tone of the station, as many concluded that the station crossed acceptable boundaries during the revolution, leading to what these critics deemed overly aggressive and encouraging broadcasts.

European minority population and also its proximity to Eastern Europe. RFE fell under the direction of the Free Europe Committee (1949), which would later become the National Committee for a Free Europe. Two post-war political developments- the establishment of a Communist dictatorship in Czechoslovakia and the Italian elections (1948), in which Communists almost defeated the Christian Democratic Party, as well as the Berlin blockade- convinced American politicians that Stalin sought to territorially expand Soviet influence. The role of RFE then was to foster instability in Eastern European nations, so as to immobilize a possible Soviet progression into Western Europe. To accomplish this, RFE broadcasts focused on specific regions so as to offer local news to Hungarians, while also offering world news from the Western perspective. Local newscasts could “blacklist” local communists, often by revealing them as informants, which was one way in which the station undermined the HWP. These types of programming helped comprise the overarching objective of RFE, which was, in the words of DeWitt Poole, to “comfort and encourage those now in bondage; to reassure them constantly of the West’s steadfast concern for their plight; to keep alive and fortify among them the Western tradition of freedom and democracy; to hold up the prospect of a better future.”<sup>9</sup>

On 4 July 1950, Eastern European exiles took a seat behind a microphone at a station near Frankfurt, and RFE beamed its initial broadcast. This broadcast announced only the forthcoming programming and exactly ten days later, Bastille Day, regular programming commenced. Established as a “non-profit, private corporation”, secretly funded by the United States Congress through the CIA, RFE adopted a more confrontational tone than did the other American station heard in Hungary, VOA .<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> As quoted in Arch Puddington, *Broadcasting Freedom*, 18.

<sup>10</sup> Puddington, *Broadcasting Freedom*. 1-19; Sig Mickelson, *America’s Other Voice: The Story of Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty* (New York: Praeger, 1983), 1-23.

The VOA came to being in 1942 as a means by which the United States could broadcast its war aims and plans to follow. After the war, Harry Truman eliminated the Office of War Information (OWI), the original home of VOA, and moved the broadcasting agency to the State Department. Despite efforts of Republicans and Southern Democrats who felt the government had no business in the radio business, even though VOA could *not* be heard within the United States, the station prevailed through the bipartisan effort to combat Communism. Starting in 1947 in New York, the station transmitted abroad American ideology, policy, civics lessons, and culture.<sup>11</sup> In 1953, former President Herbert Hoover headed up a commission appointed by President Eisenhower, which was instructed to review U.S. foreign information services. The commission elected to remove VOA from State Department Control, and instead created a new governing body, the United States Information Agency (defunct since 1999) which oversaw the stations activities. As the official station of the United States Government abroad, a more mellow tone characterized the programming. The confrontational tone of RFE was not to be found on the more sober VOA, whose programming, particularly jazz music, appealed to more sophisticated listeners. VOA aimed to promote American interests, and like RFE, counter Soviet influence, but the programming adopted a gentler methodology.<sup>12</sup>

Foreign radio broadcasting in Hungary competed with domestic broadcasting. As of 1951, radio listenership was widespread in Hungary. While it is difficult to determine the exact percentage of those residences or individuals that owned a radio, between 1951 and 1952,

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<sup>11</sup> From 1953 onwards, VOA was run by the United States Information Agency, whereas before, it had been controlled by OWI.

<sup>12</sup> David F. Krugler, *The Voice of America and the Domestic Propaganda Battles, 1945-1953* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2000), 1-11; James Wood, *History of International Broadcasting*, 108-9. Also see: Kenneth Osgood, *Total War: Eisenhower's Secret Propaganda Battle at Home and Abroad* (Lawrence: University of Kansas, 2007).

approximately 70% of those questioned acknowledged either frequent or intermittent listening.<sup>13</sup> This number is a bit misleading, however, for two reasons. Workers often heard domestic radio programming (such as Radio Budapest) at the workplace, where the station aired over loudspeakers during the lunch hours.<sup>14</sup> Kolkhoz members who did not own a radio found themselves in a public space called the “Hall of Culture” where domestic radio could be listened to collectively.<sup>15</sup> Rural residents listened to domestic radio broadcasts via local loudspeakers that broadcasted regulations and instructions pertaining to agricultural work.<sup>16</sup>

Aside from these types of captive audiences, Hungarians listened to domestic radio primarily when the news affected everyday life: ration and food price news, work-related happenings, and cultural and sporting events.<sup>17</sup> Domestic radio found its largest voluntary audience through the broadcast of music and sports news, while only one-third tuned in “general or political” news.<sup>18</sup> The general feeling towards the domestic media as a source for truthful information ranged from skepticism regarding the interpretation of events to (the more prevalent) automatic dismissal. One young man who noted that while in the past he had listened to domestic radio in his home, “the content always boiled down to two things: the defense of peace and the increase of production. After a while we always shut it off, saying ‘the hell with this

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<sup>13</sup> International Public Opinion Research, Inc (IPOR), *Media of Communication and the Free World as Seen by Hungarian Refugees: Prepared for Division of Radio Program Evaluation, Department of State*. (New York City: Empire State Building, 1952), 2. This study, conducted between September 1951, and April, 1952 by an independent research firm, sampled 100 Hungarian refugees. Approximately 66% of the sample consisted of urban workers and peasants while only 6% were considered intelligentsia. While the sample size is small, the results proved to be accurate as a larger sample (1,000) of refugees interviewed in March, 1957 produced remarkably similar responses. This later study will be consulted in the later half of this chapter.

<sup>14</sup> IPOR, (075/2), 10.

<sup>15</sup> IPOR, (023/6), 10.

<sup>16</sup> IPOR, (040/3), 10-11.

<sup>17</sup> IPOR, 11.

<sup>18</sup> IPOR, 12.



nonsense, we have had enough of it.”<sup>19</sup> This young man’s opinion was not unique, and the popularity of Western broadcasting in Hungary filled the void left for a candid news source.<sup>20</sup>

The political climate created by the HWP led Hungarians who sought to listen to Western broadcasts to do so in unique social situations. The HWP and its apparatus never decreed an official position in regards to foreign broadcasting, probably so as to avoid expanding the awareness of its existence. Instead, a listener could find himself the subject of ambiguous charges, which most commonly cited the listener as an “enemy of the people” or as one connected to the black market.<sup>21</sup> In any case, charges varied but could be guaranteed to affect a person’s well-being and standing with the HWP and local authorities. One refugee noted that if someone was caught listening to foreign broadcasts, that person could find himself out of a job. This individual also stated that “They [the Communists] find other means of trapping, compromising and punishing them. For example, they accuse them of spreading panic provoking lies.”<sup>22</sup> Sometimes AVH (Secret Police) informers eavesdropped outside the houses of suspected listeners, which in one instance resulted in a tailor threatened with the confiscation of his radio and a jail sentence should he continue listening to RFE.<sup>23</sup> Since 1946, the dissemination of “panic-provoking rumors” was a punishable offense in Hungary.<sup>24</sup> As a perceived source of these types of rumors, foreign radio listeners, and particularly those who

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<sup>19</sup> IPOR (060/4), 19.

<sup>20</sup> That these opinions came from those who found themselves sufficiently opposed to the regime to escape their native country should not go unnoticed. However, their testimonies still accurately reveal the attitude and audience of domestic and foreign radio for several reasons: later studies of different refugees concerning the same topics revealed extremely similar results, and more importantly, participants testimonies often included information regarding the listening habits and opinions of friends, relatives, co-workers, etc. who did *not* escape. Also, the fact that these Hungarians sought refuge in the West illustrates the ineffectiveness of domestic Hungarian radio propaganda as far as denigrating conditions in the Western World. One refugee, when presented with this critique of the study, countered: “If everything is so good about communism, why is it that people only escape to the West while nobody escapes to the East?” (IPOR, (047/3)).

<sup>21</sup> IPOR, 34-37.

<sup>22</sup> IPOR, (019/11), 37.

<sup>23</sup> IPOR, (091/5), 37.

<sup>24</sup> IPOR, 38.

listened in groups were forced to keep their activities undetected. One man who repeated what he had heard through a foreign broadcast to his neighbor, found himself in prison for three days and beaten before his release, after his conversation had been overheard by a stranger.<sup>25</sup>

To use a radio, one needed a license, which appeared to be easily attained, judging by the percentage of listeners, as well as the Party's desire to broadcast propaganda into the homes of the masses. In addition to this license, one had to visit the local post office, complete a form, pay a type of inscription fee and from then on, pay ten forints per month.<sup>26</sup> To use a radio to receive foreign broadcasts required that the radio undergo an alteration by a radio mechanic that altered the internals to receive shortwave broadcasts. One Hungarian who escaped to Austria in March of 1954, noted that in his native town of Baja, every house contained a radio. He revealed that the majority of the people had their radios converted to receive shortwave broadcasts, and that such alterations were performed by "friendly mechanics" for approximately 150-200 forints.<sup>27</sup> In addition to the potential punishments for listening to foreign broadcasts, authorities attempted preemptively to prohibit the availability of foreign broadcasts through jamming and other less effective measures, such as offering rebuttals to RFE and VOA assertions. When jamming occurred, typically during the evening hours when Hungarians were home from work, the program would be interrupted with what one listener described as a "buzzing motor which fluctuates in volume."<sup>28</sup> While an annoyance that diminished some of the pleasure of listening, jamming did nothing to discourage listenership, and instead even garnered a more intense interest among some Hungarians.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> IPOR, (058/10), 38.

<sup>26</sup> U.S. Department of State, *Audience Analysis- Hungary*. Item No. 278/55 RG59, January 15, 1955, 2.

<sup>27</sup> "Hungary: Audience Analysis." 15 January 1955. RG 59. Item No. 278/55.

<sup>28</sup> "Hungary: Audience Analysis." 15 January 1955. RG 59. Item No. 278/55.

<sup>29</sup> IPOR, 44-45.

Between 1951-2, approximately 80% of Hungarians listened to foreign broadcasts. Although only half of the population owned a radio, the majority had some sort of access to one. 45% listened on their own radio while 49% listened on another's set. While this chapter will focus on VOA and RFE, other stations found an audience in Hungary, although none as large as those enjoyed by the combination of the two American stations. In 1952, 93% of those questioned admitted to listening to VOA, while 77% claimed to listened RFE. The BBC followed with 74%. Out of 80 listeners polled, almost 40% reported listening daily, 14% more than three times per week, and 20% between one to three times per week. As far as the time people chose to listen, 63% listened during only the evening while 23% listened both during daytime and evening hours.<sup>30</sup>

The information revealed by listeners in the study also tells us much regarding the listening habits of both the interviewee and those he/she knew before escaping. In the sample, one source told of a farmer who attended party meetings as a member of the HWP, yet listened to foreign broadcasts on a regular basis, as confirmed by his son who revealed this information to the refugee.<sup>31</sup> Another respondent recalled that the foreman at his place of work, "a real Communist", threw a party during which he tuned in the BBC, then VOA, and finally RFE, afterwards admitting that he usually listened.<sup>32</sup> Another source reported that on one occasion, the village loudspeaker that broadcasted announcements from the village Soviet, suddenly blared VOA programming. It turned out that the secretary had forgotten to turn off the loudspeaker before tuning into a Western station.<sup>33</sup> To counter accusations of listening to foreign broadcasts, officials would often claim that they listened in order to later refute the claims made by these

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<sup>30</sup> IPOR, 46-54.

<sup>31</sup> IPOR, (084/7), 56.

<sup>32</sup> IPOR, (003/6), 56.

<sup>33</sup> IPOR, 051/6), 56-7.

stations.<sup>34</sup> One respondent mentioned the manager of a nationalized factory who listened to VOA every evening. Despite this manager's success thanks to the communist system, the refugee stated, "It is my impression that Hungarian Communists or those close to them have come to believe the VOA by now and are more and more skeptical."<sup>35</sup> This illustrates one way in which Hungarians became aware of the widespread popularity of foreign broadcasts.

During these early years (1951-2), the motivation to listen to these foreign broadcasts stemmed above all, from a desire to be liberated. We return here to the notion that these broadcasts fostered and stimulated listener's (and those with whom they shared the news of American broadcasts) hope for liberation through the possibility of Western assistance. When asked for their motivations behind listening to Western broadcasts, 44% stated they looked for hope that liberation was coming. The study found that the mere presence of these stations, particularly VOA, which served as the official voice of the only country capable of successfully challenging the Soviets, provided hope for Hungarians. As one nineteen-year-old farmer's son put it: "Only they [the Americans] can help us, as American policy fights most against the Russians."<sup>36</sup> A young waiter expressed similar feelings, stating that "The most important thing is when the (Western) radios say that the Hungarians should be persistent, and that the time will come when they will get free from Communism."<sup>37</sup>

While 44% stated that they listened to Western broadcasts in search of liberation hopes, 45% claimed to listen for the news. These reasons were not mutually exclusive, and in fact can be viewed as one and the same. Most listened to the news for information pertaining to trends that would accelerate chances of Hungarian liberation. One young student noted that reports of

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<sup>34</sup> IPOR, 58.

<sup>35</sup> IPOR, (017/5), 58-9.

<sup>36</sup> IPOR, (081/4), 63.

<sup>37</sup> IPOR, (059/8), 63.

American armament had the greatest interest among the listeners he knew. “News about any kind of [American] diplomatic or Korean defeats of the Communists also spread very fast among the people.”<sup>38</sup> Here we see that news stories circulated among the people, creating a sense of a shared hope among the population. The student continued: “Further news of great interest was that in the West they were able to produce weapons with atomic energy which only kills soldiers but not the civilian population.”<sup>39</sup> This illustrates a tendency of listeners to exaggerate or distort news, perhaps subconsciously, which in turn spread among acquaintances.

Listeners at this time also appreciated domestic (Hungarian) content that attacked Communist officials and aired the dirty laundry of the regime. One young woman explained that RFE mentioned and denounced communist officials by name, which offered her a sense of protection. In particular, she expressed interest in programming that detailed Hungarian financial crises and what she considered to be the inevitable economic ruin on the horizon. Like the student mentioned earlier, she also felt that words should lead to action: “When they (Western stations) talk about communist mistakes and failures, they should also discuss the possibility of an overthrow of the communist regime.”<sup>40</sup> A former pre-war government (Hungarian) official regarded the Western broadcasts as the “conscience of the world.”<sup>41</sup> He argued that the news broadcasts offered little new news to Hungarians, as word spread by mouth more quickly than it could be picked up by radio. He did contend, however, that the broadcasts “reduced the feeling of isolation among people back home, and the resulting despair, if people continually see that Western radios are well informed.”<sup>42</sup> This type of comment suggests that Hungarians desired not only to hear of Western (primarily American) actions that could lead to

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<sup>38</sup> IPOR, (033/5), 64.

<sup>39</sup> IPOR, (033/5), 64.

<sup>40</sup> IPOR, (073/4,7), 68.

<sup>41</sup> IPOR, (093/18), 69.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

their liberation, but also that the West knew of their situation, which offered reassurance and ultimately created an imagined ally.

Although respondents often referred to Western broadcasts as one entity, different stations appealed to different social groups for various reasons. While VOA and RFE were most popular, followed by the BBC, which some preferred for its gentler tone, the two American stations served different purposes for different people. More educated individuals preferred VOA, while the BBC clearly remained the domain of highly educated listeners.<sup>43</sup> One former soldier employed by a shipping firm for the last five years he spent in Hungary cited RFE's "tid bit" reporting style as the factor behind the composition of its audience. He recalled that while the intelligentsia from the previous regime listened to VOA and the BBC, his co-workers preferred RFE. "This is because there are many brief news items broadcast by the RFE which concern individuals," he stated. "The simple man is more interested in this, and he tells this news to others, because spreading such news is easy and does not require any special intelligence."<sup>44</sup> Place of residence also helped determine the audience composition of the three stations. BBC listeners could be found almost exclusively in urban areas, as only 4% of the respondents in 1952 lived in towns, while none lived in rural areas. Most respondents agreed that RFE was more popular in small towns and villages. One refugee noted that RFE broadcasted *localized* domestic news, often naming every communist personality in various plants throughout Hungary. The respondent noted that listeners in his town particularly enjoyed RFE programming when it named communists in his own neighborhood.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> In the 1952 IPOR study, 41% cited VOA as their preferred station; 37% of these listeners had at most an elementary school education while 48% had either completed high school or college. 28% of the sample cited RFE as their favorite station; 37% having at best elementary education while just 13% had completed high school or college. Of the 12% who cited the BBC as their favorite station, 4% had at best an elementary school education while 26% had completed high school or college.

<sup>44</sup> IPOR, (027/16), 75-6.

<sup>45</sup> IPOR, (021/16), 77-78.

VOA's popularity stemmed from its position as the official mouthpiece of the U.S. government. This diminished the appeal of other foreign broadcasts for two reasons. First, VOA listeners argued that other stations, including RFE, appeared redundant when the official line aired directly from Washington (or New York, as was the case). Secondly, Hungarians viewed the United States as their most powerful ally and as the nation most capable of releasing them from captivity. Hungarians considered British capability and clout as a world power greatly diminished. Stated one VOA listener: "One thing is certain: the VOA has far more listeners than BBC. One of the reasons is that Great Britain has lost a great deal of its prestige in international politics."<sup>46</sup> Hungarians turned to American broadcasts as they found comfort in American anti-Communist policies. "We had great confidence in the U.S. and we believed that only the U.S. can bring relief to Hungary...[American policy towards Communism] showed us that the US is that master of the world."<sup>47</sup> One listener claimed that during the Second World War, American assistance made British victory possible. This assistance seemed to inspire hope among Hungarians: "...if somebody wants help he tries to turn to the top man and not his brother or his subordinates..."<sup>48</sup> The almost universal preference for VOA demonstrates that Hungarians listened not only in search of more truthful news, but to hear of developments in American foreign policy/actions that signaled an impending liberation of captive eastern European nations.

The upheavals that stemmed from Stalin's death, Imre Nagy's New Course, and its eventual liquidation, the number of Hungarians tuning in to RFE and VOA remained steady. Roughly 90% of the Hungarian population continued to listen to Western sources of

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<sup>46</sup> IPOR, (020/6), 89.

<sup>47</sup> IPOR, (073/6), 89.

<sup>48</sup> IPOR, (027/8), 90.

information.<sup>49</sup> Around 40% tuned into regime-based broadcasts while almost 90% claimed to listen to foreign broadcasts.<sup>50</sup> Still 21% claimed to receive news from balloon leaflets. Around 80% of the population relied on foreign radio as their primary source of news while only 2-4% of the population relied on regime radio as their sole source of information.<sup>51</sup> In 1951 only 50% of Hungarian households contained a radio, yet by 1956, 80% claimed to have a radio in their residence. Among these radio owners, 90% stated they could receive shortwave broadcasts, while surprisingly less than half received longwave broadcasts.<sup>52</sup> Between 1952-6, RFE became the most popular station, with approximately 90% listening in, while 70% tuned into VOA.<sup>53</sup> Individuals' preferences concerning the different programs presented by the Western stations are difficult to discern. Fully one-third did not name one favorite while 22% favored general news programming. "Gallicus Reflector," which received 11% of a vote, ranked as the only other program to garner a noticeable "favorite" status with listeners.<sup>54</sup> Finally, as had been the case in 1951-52, Hungarians continued to discuss content of Western broadcasts with friends and co-workers. 70% frequently talked about foreign broadcasts, while 19% occasionally discussed what they heard; only 9% never engaged in conversations regarding Western broadcasting outside of their family.<sup>55</sup> Finally, the central motivation behind listening continued to stem from the sense of comfort and hope Hungarians derived from Western (again, primarily American) broadcasts.

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<sup>49</sup> Audience Analysis Section, Radio Free Europe, Munich. [AAS-RFE, 1957] *Hungary and the 1956 Uprising: Excerpts from Report Published by International Research Associate (Special Report No. 12)*. (New York, New York: International Research Associates, 1957.), 4. This study, conducted in December, 1956, in Austria, sampled approximately 1,000 refugees. The study considered the composition of the Hungarian population in regards to sex, age, and religion. The sample group interviewed was therefore selected with the goal of achieving a representative model based on these three variables.

<sup>50</sup> AAS-RFE, 1957, 3-4.

<sup>51</sup> AAS-RFE, 1957, 19-22.

<sup>52</sup> AAS-RFE, 1957, 4-5.

<sup>53</sup> AAS-RFE, 1957, 26.

<sup>54</sup> AAS-RFE, 1957, 30-1.

<sup>55</sup> AAS-RFE, 1957, 32.



One veterinary student who escaped in November of 1954 recalled listening only occasionally to RFE. He first heard of RFE in early 1953 from a former classmate in his village of Komadi, near the eastern border. He began listening to broadcasts with his friends there and later he listened to RFE at the home of his relatives who lived in Budapest on their “People’s Super” radio set. The set had been purchased in 1954 for the amount of 880 forints (~\$6.00). He and his relatives listened between eight and ten in the evening. Although he could not recall any of the program titles, he stated that, “...my relatives loved all of them: there was something in the programs, which gave us hope and faith.”<sup>56</sup> A 27-year-old wine purchasing agent who escaped from his native country on 21 November 1955 stated that he did not own a radio and was therefore unable to listen regularly to either domestic or foreign broadcasts. He did, however, manage to listen in at the homes of friends, where he noted that during the fall of 1954, RFE had earned a nickname: The Voice of Hope. He recalled one particular episode in which an RFE broadcast mentioned the name of Zsuzsa Kozma, the leader of the Cegled tractor factory and her two cohorts.<sup>57</sup> The station accused the three of spying in the service of the AVH. The following day he recalled, the entire town looked upon the agents with disdain and made efforts to avoid the traitors.<sup>58</sup> These two episodes illustrate the ability of RFE to create the impression of an imagined ally, and at the same time, encourage small groups of listeners to gather in the same time and space. Finally, the station clearly demonstrated the ability to divide a village along lines of liberation-minded Hungarians and communist others.

One 28-year-old machinist born in Ozd (northern Hungary) claimed to have attempted unsuccessfully to escape twice which resulted in two prison terms. During his second escape

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<sup>56</sup> “A Student’s Radio Listening Habits” 11 January 1955. RG 59. Item No. 147/55 1207.

<sup>57</sup> Although source adheres to the Hungarian custom of placing the surname first, I use the more common convention of placing the family name second. Cegled is located in the northern portion of the Pest region.

<sup>58</sup> “Opinion of RFE Broadcasts” 25 January 1955. RG 59. Item No. 101/55 1207.

attempt, authorities apprehended him in East Germany and shipped him back to Hungary via Prague. He remained in prison from May 1951 until July 1952. After his release from prison he found work as a machinist thanks to his technical skills before successfully escaping in October of 1954. He first heard of RFE during his second stint in prison where visitors and fresh prisoners informed inmates of its existence and message. He recalled that news of the new station created a sensation in Hungary and many at first thought the station originated in Austria with the financial backing of Hungarian émigrés. Asked his opinion of the various programs, he found “Gallicus Reflector” to be a “perfect program”. He recalled one particular program that explained the Soviet exploitation of Hungary in terms of the import and export trade. This machinist, who had worked at the Rakosi Works in Budapest, confirmed the RFE report, stating that 65% of the machinery manufactured in the Works went to Russia, 15% to the Peoples’ Democracies, 5-10% to South America and other Western Countries, and the remaining machines, often of inferior quality, stayed in Hungary.<sup>59</sup> Here, this machinist’s grievances illustrate the dissatisfaction prevalent among the population regarding Hungary’s status as a victim of colonial style exploitation.

The machinist noted that the program “Farmer Balint” accurately reflected the opinions of his friends in the agricultural sector, and that in the event of liberation, Farmer Balint would most likely be elected Prime Minister. The machinist claimed that “Colonel Bell”, a military program, always found an enthusiastic audience, while the program “Glossary” achieved its goal of ridiculing the Communists and their policies. When asked his opinion of VOA, the source said that he appreciated the station’s candid news broadcasting, which he absolutely trusted. He reported that many Hungarians believed that were the United States to maintain its strong anti-

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<sup>59</sup> “Audience Analysis Interview with a 28-Year-Old Machinist Escapee from Budapest” 28 December 1954. RG 59. Item No. 11554/54 1207.

Communist position, or apply more pressure, liberation would occur. Finally, he noted that while resistance remained passive, it continued to smolder under the surface. This source demonstrates both the Hungarians' status as a colonial possession and their desire for liberation through American intervention. Also, his recollection of the programming and its audiences illustrates individuals' knowledge of the widespread popularity of these stations.<sup>60</sup>

A Hungarian refugee and his wife, who escaped to Vienna shortly after the Christmas of 1954 recalled that before he left his native town of Sopron, it was impossible not to have been aware of Western broadcasting. His favorite stations included VOA, RFE, and Rot-Weiss-Rot, the shortwave broadcasts from Vienna. He listened on his own Orion radio each evening that he did not have to work a night shift, citing "Black Book", which named local Communist informers as his favorite program. He noted only listening to domestic radio for non-political programming such as music, recalling that regime backed broadcasting was nicknamed the "Babbling Duck". Finally, the escapee noted that a reliance on the possibility of outside help remained the most pertinent issue among dissidents.<sup>61</sup> Here again we can see that a listener expressed an awareness that Hungarians harbored a common hope, which was buoyed daily in the minds of individuals by RFE and VOA.

Bela, A 19-year-old machine locksmith from Baja escaped from Hungary in early December of 1954. Before his escape, Bela recalled a Hungarian movie that attempted to ridicule VOA, but this intention turned out to have the opposite effect. Instead, people became more curious and he noted more people tuning into VOA. He noted one particular incident in which he sat down at the piano in the Hall of Culture outside his place of work. Before beginning to practice, he played the first bars of the national anthem and the widely recognized

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<sup>60</sup> "Audience Analysis Interview with a 28-Year-Old Machinist Escapee from Budapest." 28 December 1954. RG 59. Item No. 11554/54 1207.

<sup>61</sup> "Response to our Political Orientation Questionnaire." 13 January 1955. RG 59. Item No. 232/55 RG59 1204.

intro-notes of RFE, noting that most of the young workers recognized them as such. Likewise, during parties he recalled that the drummer would play the distinctive BBC drum beat before a pause.<sup>62</sup> This episode demonstrates that foreign radio listening, although often done in private, created a type of *clandestine* public community in which dissident individuals quietly became aware of one another's political orientation.

Bela listened to RFE alone at home but recalled that two or three workers could be found listening to RFE in the Hall of Culture in his hometown of Nagykoros without fear of repercussions. This suggests that the authorities responsible for this space were either known listeners, or turned a blind eye to such activity. At the same time, Bela took care not to discuss news heard on RFE with unknown persons. He would initiate the conversation by beginning; "There are rumors that Western radio said this or that..." If the other person nodded and acknowledged having heard the broadcast, he/she could be identified as a listener and as such, a safe person with whom to discuss forbidden news.<sup>63</sup> It was in this fashion, he recalled, that information circulated. Finally, Bela acknowledged that the most important attribute of Western broadcasts was the impartiality with which they delivered the news. To him, this inspired hope. Asked what the consequences would be if the West were to discontinue its broadcasts, Bela replied, "...it would be disastrous. People would lose all their confidence in the West."<sup>64</sup> Like the others, Bela's commentary regarding RFE reinforces the idea that Western broadcasts created a sense of hope among Hungarians, as well as close-knit dissident communities among fellow listeners. Like the pianist who played the opening notes of RFE programming, one could signal

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<sup>62</sup> "Audience Analysis Interview with a 19-Year-Old Machine Locksmith from Baja." 10 February 1955. RG 59. Item No. 890/55 1207.

<sup>63</sup> "Audience Analysis Interview with a 19-Year-Old Machine Locksmith from Baja." 10 February 1955. RG 59. Item No. 890/55 1207.

<sup>64</sup> "Audience Analysis Interview with a 19-Year-Old Machine Locksmith from Baja." 10 February 1955. RG 59. Item No. 890/55 1207.

their membership in this community formed by radio through a wink, while a respondent's nod affirmed membership in the dissident community.

A 20-year-old farmboy from the village of Kapuvar escaped to Austria in the summer of 1954. His father's status as a private tradesman prevented him from procuring definitive employment at the District Soviet where he worked as an auxiliary clerk. The young man listened to Western broadcasts on a Phillips 4 tube radio set and noted that approximately 30% of the households in his village contained a radio capable of receiving shortwave broadcasts. Hungarian wired radio (which offered domestic content) was available in the village, although he remembered that families resisted having this type of radio installed as it interfered with shortwave broadcasts. The young man noted that Western stations were only listened to in family circles or in the company of trustworthy friends. He recalled that many were encouraged by signs of German rearmament as it frightened the Soviets enough so that it could possibly have positive consequences for Hungarians. This Hungarian even went so far as to write a letter to RFE and waited by the radio for weeks for acknowledgement that the station received it, which it did not. In spite of this disappointment, he contended that Hungarian listeners should send letters to RFE or contacts in the West who could forward mail and express their opinions.<sup>65</sup> This is significant as it demonstrates that this young man expected communication with the West to work in both directions. Attempts to contact Western nations and institutions would blossom after the opening shots of the revolution rang out. Also illustrated here is the fissure prevalent in Hungary in 1954 between pro-Soviet communists, and Western oriented dissidents. First, as shown by Hungarians resistance to wired domestic radio that interfered with shortwave broadcasts, Western and Communist broadcasts competed for the airwaves in private homes.

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<sup>65</sup> "Audience Analysis Interview with a 20 Year-Old Refugee from Kapuvar." 10 February 1955. RG 59. Item No. 993/55 1204 a.

Secondly, the source's contention that Hungarians celebrated Germany's rearmament despite recent history, suggests the nation's ingrained Western orientation.

A 32-year-old elementary school headmaster recalled RFE's broadcasts in Hungary before he escaped to Austria in 1954: "RFE has a great audience in Hungary. Whenever there was some new or interesting program, people discussed it with their friends the next day."<sup>66</sup> Joska, a man from Budapest, rarely had the opportunity to listen to Western broadcasts as he experienced constant jamming on his radio. Like the others, he confirmed that people often listened to Western radio and discussed its programming among trusted friends. "After hearing or reading distorted news in our press and over the radio, about which they had already been informed by the Western broadcasts, factory workers and others gathered to discuss and compare the Western interpretation to the Communist one."<sup>67</sup> A young woman from Budapest who also escaped to Austria found herself unable to listen at home as her fiancé spent all of their savings on either drinks or bets. She first heard of RFE's existence during her eight month prison sentence that was served as punishment for leaving the Rakosi Works without authorization. She overheard the prisoners of Nagyfa (near Szeged, in southern Hungary) discussing RFE with immense enthusiasm. After her release in the spring of 1954, she entered the home of a friend to find the husband fiddling with the radio in an effort to tune in RFE. She asked him to continue as she had never heard any of the programs. After this, she visited in the evening to listen. She recalled her affection for the station: "They [RFE programs] give some hope to the poor suffering Hungarians that one day, the liberation for which they have been waiting for so long, will come."<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> "Opinion of RFE Broadcasts." 30 November 1954. RG 59. Item No. 10684/54 1207.

<sup>67</sup> (Untitled) 1954. RG 59. Item No. 10971/54

<sup>68</sup> "Opinion on RFE Broadcasts." 2 December 1954. RG 59. Item No.10739/54 1207.

Western broadcasts united the Hungarian population. Listeners, who became aware of others' political stances through a mutual affection for Western broadcasting, formed a large, though fragmented, community of dissidents. These groups, whether friends, classmates, co-workers, or prison mates, found a common bond through RFE and VOA. That these stations existed as a sort of underground (or, rather, through the air) alternative source of information that allowed one to be "in the know" or "part of a club" proved alluring. As several younger listeners noted, the Communists avoided attempts to dissuade citizens from listening to these stations as they knew it would only accentuate the intrigue surrounding these broadcasts. Listeners did not have to personally know their fellow listeners. Rather, they could imagine other Hungarians like themselves huddled around a radio in their own home. Perhaps not all Hungarians imagined this occurring throughout the country, but at the very least, listeners knew that the local population tuned in. Regardless of which station one preferred, the overwhelming majority of listeners developed a faith that the West would expel their occupiers and allow for the creation of an independent nation. Foreign broadcasting, primarily RFE and VOA, created a community of dissidents linked throughout Hungary by their faith in an imagined ally and established radio as a key means of communicating. The rapid eruption of a unified uprising rested upon these conditions.

## THE REVOLUTION STARTS NOW

So far, we have examined the role of mass print and broadcast media during the period leading up to the Revolution, and demonstrated that these modes of communication created two types of imagined dissident communities. The popularity of domestic dissident literature aroused and nurtured reform-minded opposition, while RFE leaflets and radio transmissions created the illusion of both an imagined ally, primarily the United States, in the West, and imagined (as well as corporeal) allies, or more precisely, independence-minded Hungarians, within Hungary. As a result, when Hungarian radio broadcast news of the uprising, Hungarians immediately felt the tug of patriotic imaginings. Domestic radio stations would quickly fall into the hands of the freedom fighters (at which point they were dubbed “freedom stations”) and information was transmitted between cities, and oftentimes *through* RFE which acted as a relay station. Print media included leaflets, posters, and flyers, which sustained and broadened the Revolution. To sum this up, mass communications allowed for Hungarians both to imagine and to transmit the Revolution within Hungary’s borders, while envisioning help on the way from their allies in the West. Secondly, radio encouraged and dictated collective action. The popularity of both shortwave and longwave radio as principle modes of communication leveraged the leadership of the uprising and allowed large crowds to form and express popular opposition to the Communist regime.

To be sure, there existed signs of fatigue, or cracks in the Communist foundation erected by Muscovites over the previous eight years. The liquidation of the New Course, and the Soviet directed demotion of its popular architect, Imre Nagy, created a disjointed and contentious leadership issue atop the HWP between Nagy and Rakosi between 1953 and 1955. Rakosi, who despite his previous demotion, had continued to wield considerable power and in April 1955



regained leadership of the Party. Although the effects of the New Course failed to radically alter the socio-political landscape in Hungary, it had been seen as a step in the right direction.

Perhaps the most important consequence of the New Course lay in Nagy's release of political prisoners who, as noted in chapter two, told their stories, which made their round among the literati and ultimately found their way into the pages of popular dissident periodicals. Rakosi's attempts to stifle the spread of this increasingly dangerous literature failed, and the opposition's voice grew louder through mouthpieces such as the Petofi Circle. But still, although these events weakened the Party's position, nothing resembling an uprising occurred.<sup>1</sup>

Khrushchev's speech denouncing Stalinism before the Twentieth Party Congress in February 1956 administered a coup-de-grace to Rakosi's chosen brand of Communism. Although the speech never made its way into the pages of Hungarian periodicals, RFE broadcasted the news within several weeks. This news spread rapidly, enhancing RFE's image while simultaneously devastating Rakosi's.<sup>2</sup> Attacks in periodicals such as *Irodalmi Usag* became commonplace and among the Petofi Circle, increasingly hostile. The mass transmission of opposition news and its dissemination through dissident literature created another fissure.

Yuri Andropov, the Soviet ambassador to Hungary, now considered the situation in Hungary critically unstable, and when his reports reached the Kremlin, Khrushchev took action. Senior Soviet official Anastas Ivanovich Mikoyan landed at Budapest airport on 13 July, 1956, just outside the city where Rakosi and his Prime Minister, Andras Hegedus, took him by car into the city. Before arriving at their destination, Mikoyan informed Rakosi that he would no longer remain head of the HWP. Instead, he appointed Erno Gero to assume leadership of the Party

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<sup>1</sup> Sebestyen, *Twelve Days*, 73-8; Zinner, *Revolution in Hungary*, 167-182.

<sup>2</sup> Sebestyen, *Twelve Days*, 84-5; Zinner, *Revolution in Hungary*, 203-4.

while commenting to Khrushchev via cable that “The press and radio are not under [Party] control anymore. Everyday the influence of the hostile, opposition mood...is expanding.”<sup>3</sup>

In what many historians consider a dress rehearsal or prelude to the uprising, purge victim Laszlo Rajk was ceremoniously reburied on 6 October.<sup>4</sup> The symbolism of this date was not lost on those who attended the funeral: on 6 October 1848, Austria executed thirteen Hungarian generals after the failed 1848 Revolution. 100,000 lined the streets to pay their respects, or at least witness the spectacle, while after the ceremony, approximately 500 students marched to the Batthany monument in Buda. They gathered at this monument, a memorial to the first prime minister of Hungary whom the Austrians executed in 1849, and began shouting anti-communist slogans shortly before police intervened, putting a peaceful end to incident.<sup>5</sup> The Revolution would not begin here.

Although the months leading up to the Revolution witnessed an increasingly unsettled population, violence did not take place until the night of the 23<sup>rd</sup>. As noted before, the commencement of the Revolution remains a point of contention.<sup>6</sup> Historian and participant Charles Gati contends that the Revolution could have begun as soon as the Red Army occupied Hungary, during the communist power seizure (1945-1949), when Tito broke free of the Soviet bloc, or perhaps after RFE began to broadcast its messages of hope. In other words, it remains difficult to clearly mark the beginning of the Revolution. But despite historians’ inability to do

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<sup>3</sup> As quoted in Sebestyen, *Twelve Days*, 93-5., For the dismissal of Rakosi, also see: Zinner, *The Unexpected Revolution*, 214-19.

<sup>4</sup> This idea of a “dress rehearsal” seems to suggest a certain inevitability regarding the events of October 23, when in fact, the Revolution did not *have* to happen. Laszlo Rajk (1909-1949)- former Minister of the Interior for the HWP and sentenced to death in a 1949 show trial. He had been disliked immensely during his lifetime, the result of having been one of the primary architects of the Hungarian communist infrastructure, particularly, the AVH. Over time, he came to be perceived as something of a martyr, having been the most prominent execution during Rakosi’s early reign and accompanying terror purge. Gero allowed the reburial after repeated requests by Rajk’s widow, Julia, believing that he could use the event to mark a watershed between his regime and Rakois’s.

<sup>5</sup> Sebestyen, *Twelve Days*, 96-7.

<sup>6</sup> Charles Gati, *The Revolt that Failed*, 141-2.

so, the fact remains that the Revolution unfolded rapidly- so quickly in fact that “spontaneous” and “unexpected” remain according to some historians, the defining characteristics of the event. Between 22 and 24 October, the Hungarian nation experienced a massive national awakening, which began in Szeged, erupted in Budapest, and spread almost instantly throughout the nation. By 24 October, what began as a localized skirmish had begun spreading throughout the nation. The starting point of the Revolution then can be most accurately dated as the evening of the 23<sup>rd</sup> through the following morning. This awakening, which manifested itself in the form of an independence movement quickly captured the imaginations of citizens throughout the country who rose up, village after village, town after town, in unity against atrocious odds. Mass communications would prove to be the transmitter and amplifier of the uprising.

During the beginning of October, university students began forming makeshift political groups. These existed now in addition to DISZ, the official student Communist organization, which did not jibe with Party leaders’ designs. In Szeged, the demonstrations produced a new student organization known by the acronym MEFESZ, or the Association of Hungarian University Students. This in turn inspired the students of the Budapest Technical University to hold a meeting during the evening of 22 October to determine whether they should withdraw from DISZ. By the end of the meeting, they had withdrawn from the Communist organization and the most famous document of the Revolution had been produced, the Sixteen Points.<sup>7</sup> Students planned a demonstration to show solidarity with the Poles the following day in conjunction with other Budapest university students. News of the unrest in Poland had been

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<sup>7</sup> The Sixteen Points, which demanded political (a new government under Imre Nagy, with the removal of Stalinist leadership, the evacuation of all Soviet troops), economic (the right to sell Hungarian resources on the open market and the effective end to Soviet exploitation), and cultural (the reinstallation of traditional Hungarian symbols and the removal of Stalinist and Soviet statues and symbols) alterations from the powers that were. In effect, they demanded an end to what has been described as Soviet Colonial occupation of Hungary. These demands have been reprinted in the appendix of most every work dealing with the 1956 Revolution. For an example, see: Gati, *Failed Illusions*, 303-4.

carried by RFE, which students in Hungary had picked up. The event was then announced on Hungarian radio and in *Szabad Nep* the morning of the 23rd. By this time the Party had begun to lose its grip on the content of official organs. Editors at Radio Kossuth fabricated a news brief that the Party had given permission to proceed with the demonstration. The demonstration would begin at 3:00pm.<sup>8</sup>

Although the spiritual heart of the Revolution undoubtedly rested in Budapest, its inspiration originated in the town of Szeged, 170 kilometers from the capital.<sup>9</sup> On 22 October, a 34-year-old woman, employed as a writer of children's programming broadcast on Radio Kossuth, recalled a tension in the air in Budapest. The newspapers and radio had been reporting on the student demonstrations in Szeged that had begun on 20 October and could potentially spread to Budapest. She remained at home the following day, eagerly awaiting Gero's planned radio address. When the speech aired and nothing changed, desolation descended upon her and she cried herself to sleep. Her reaction to Gero's speech would prove atypical among the population of Budapest.<sup>10</sup>

By noon on the 23<sup>rd</sup>, students had already begun filling the streets. News of the demonstration had spread quickly throughout Budapest. Gero decided to ban the demonstration via radio announcement at 12:53pm, which he then *reversed* (on air) at the urging of aids at 2:23pm. This reversal was aired on the radio, which allowed for more Hungarians and potential protestors to become aware of the event. A procession of over 10,000 students began their journey at the statue of Petofi, and proceeded to the Statute of General Bem, a Polish General

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<sup>8</sup> Columbia History Research Project Hungary – 1956 Hungarian Refugee Interviews. No. 222, July 1957, 3; Gati, *Failed Illusions*, 142-3; Sebestyen, *Twelve Days*, 102-9.

<sup>9</sup> This incident is often overlooked, although Charles Gati contends that it was in this town that the Revolution ignited. At the same time, Gati maintains that the Revolution was completely spontaneous. Gati, *Failed Illusions*, 143, 156.

<sup>10</sup> Columbia History Research Project Hungary – 1956 Hungarian Refugee Interviews. No. F-85 JP, August 27-9, 1957, 4.

who had fought with the Hungarians in their 1848 war for independence. Hungarian flags with the Soviet emblem removed waved above the crowds. By nightfall, 200,000 people had amassed in front of Parliament.<sup>11</sup>

The power of the airwaves was not lost on the demonstrators in front of the parliament building. The Sixteen Points had already been making rounds through the crowds as copies had been printed in massive amounts, but this medium of communication could not touch the capability of longwave radio. With their Sixteen Points in hand, demonstrators made their way to the Budapest Radio building where they planned to have their points read over the air. A 25-year-old assistant at the radio station remembered overhearing a discussion earlier in the afternoon sometime before 5:00pm whether the demonstrators would be allowed radio access.<sup>12</sup> Officials decided that the students would not be allowed to air their demands, as it was likely Gero would air a speech that evening. To permit students to voice opposition the same evening was a situation that did not jibe with HWP officials.<sup>13</sup> When a massive crowd of demonstrators arrived later at the radio building they presented their Sixteen Points to the station manager. She agreed to broadcast the demands and allowed the students into the station. Demonstrators outside celebrated until they realized music played from the radios in apartments above them.<sup>14</sup> The young radio assistant, who had left the station a couple hours earlier, returned to find a massive crowd outside his place of work. AVH guards denied him entrance as he was in street clothes. He instead joined a high official in his personal automobile where they tuned their station just in time to hear not the Sixteen Points, but the voice of Erno Gero.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Gati, *The Revolt that Failed*, 147; Sebestyen, *Twelve Days*, 109-113.

<sup>12</sup> Columbia History Research Project Hungary – 1956 Hungarian Refugee Interviews. No. 119, May 1957, 5-7.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* Gero's speech was taped and the man never set foot in the radio station.

<sup>14</sup> Sebestyen, *Twelve Days*, 116-118.

<sup>15</sup> Columbia History Research Project Hungary – 1956 Hungarian Refugee Interviews. No. 119, May 1957, 6.

Gero's speech, which aired on Radio Kossuth at 8:00pm, criticized the demonstrators as proponents of chauvinism and enemies who sought to sever the socialist bond between Hungarian and Soviet proletariats. The speech concluded: "Let our party organizations oppose with discipline and complete unity any attempt to create disorder, nationalistic well-poisoning and provocation."<sup>16</sup> The speech incensed demonstrators throughout Budapest. As one young fighter later recalled, "...The turning point-point was Gero's radio speech...[It] infuriated so much the Hungarians that the tide of the Revolution, which was rising rather rapidly throughout the afternoon, by nightfall became a mighty torrent."<sup>17</sup> At 9:00, Nagy arrived at the Parliament building to address the crowd and attempted to appease the crowd. He pleaded with his comrades to return home and allow their grievances to be worked out via political means. But it was too late. The opening shots had been fired at the radio station and the Revolution was underway throughout the city.<sup>18</sup>

At this point radio had fanned the flames of the fire that was to become the Revolution. The announcement of the planned demonstration encouraged collective activity throughout 23 October. The announcement of the demonstration allowed news of the event to spread simultaneously via airwaves and word of mouth. The broadcasts of the cancellation and de-cancellation of the demonstration meant that news of the demonstration aired three times. As far as attracting a crowd, any news was good news. Secondly, while one young lady lay in bed heartbroken after Gero's speech, it further impassioned the demonstrators on the street, who then spread rumors of AVH atrocities, compounding the damage already generated by the Party leader. Unbeknownst to party officials, their transmissions bolstered and then provoked the

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<sup>16</sup> Gero's speech on Radio Kossuth, 23 October, 8:00pm in Melvin J. Lasky, ed., *The Hungarian Revolution: The Story of the October Uprising as Recorded in Documents, Dispatches, Eye-Witness Accounts and World-wide Reaction* (Freeport, New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1957), 50.

<sup>17</sup> Columbia History Research Project Hungary – 1956 Hungarian Refugee Interviews. No. 429, July 1957, 4.

<sup>18</sup> Sebestyen, *Twelve Days*, 119; Gati, *Failed Illusions*, 147.

opposition's collective action. After the outbreak of violence, communications would both sustain the Revolution in Budapest and extend the uprising throughout the country.

A young student remembered when news of the happenings in Budapest first reached his town of Kecskemet, 86km north of Budapest. Over the radio he first heard of what was to become the Revolution shortly after the events began to unfold on the night of 23 October. The following day, filled with excitement, he returned to school only to be dismissed early as a result of the events taking place in the capital. Before leaving to be with his parents in Lajosmisze, a smaller town just north of Kecskemet, he noticed crowds had gathered on the streets and demonstrators had toppled a Soviet monument. Upon arrival in Lajosmisze, the scene proved less dramatic. A national guard had already been formed; whose armed members patrolled the streets at night. The student immediately joined the group.<sup>19</sup>

Those who awoke in Budapest found themselves in a Revolutionized city. The American charge d'affaires, Spencer Barnes recalled the (literal) overnight linguistic change. Noted the eye-witness: "It is unlikely that there has ever been another occasion in European history when linguistic change, which normally even in times of ferment moves at a gradual pace, was so abrupt."<sup>20</sup> The language, he claimed, almost immediately came alive and was reminiscent of the period of the 1848-49 Revolution. It was "alive, colorful, vibrant; every communist cliché was immediately shed."<sup>21</sup> The most striking example of this phenomenon was the chorus of boos directed at Imre Nagy when he addressed the crowd of demonstrators before him as "elvtársok" (comrades).<sup>22</sup> This massive linguistic change, patriotic in nature, liberation-minded in objective, was inspired by mass communications. As Soviet troops and armored divisions rolled into

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<sup>19</sup> Columbia History Research Project Hungary – 1956 Hungarian Refugee Interviews. No. 405, July, 1957, 1-3.

<sup>20</sup> Spencer Barnes, Amlegation Budapest to the Department of State, Washington. March 18, 1957. RG 59.

Desp. No. 444 764.00/3-1857.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

Budapest, freedom fighters continued to produce massive amounts of dissident literature in the form of posters, leaflets, and flyers.

A crowd surrounded the offices of *Szabad Nep* the afternoon of the 23<sup>rd</sup> where they demanded the office print their leaflets.<sup>23</sup> While it is quite difficult to trace the origins of printed media, the fact remains that it circulated in massive quantities beginning on 23 October. Iona Varady-Huszar remembered the commotion surrounding a man handing out leaflets near the Margit Bridge in Budapest. It became apparent to her that these were not Party leaflets as people had begun stealing them out of the man's hands. "It was a declaration of the students for freedom; freedom of speech and change...It was wonderful!"<sup>24</sup> On either 24 or 25 October, a Hungarian army officer who had sided with the freedom fighters hurled hundreds of copies of a single-page newspaper from an upper window to a crowd waiting below. Contained in the paper were the Sixteen Demands of the students several days before.<sup>25</sup> Through their mass appeal, these leaflets generated excitement among Hungarians and circulated rapidly, in effect amplifying the leading voices of the Revolution.

The myriad of correlated lists of demands that circulated throughout Budapest during the Revolution is testament to the widespread dissemination and appeal of the original Sixteen Points. *Irodalmi Ujsag* published a list of seven demands that declared Hungary could persevere in its struggle for freedom if the entire nation rallied around a single camp, in this case, that of the nation's professional writers. As with the vast majority of lists, the demands' central aim was an independent Hungary. After the demands, the paper read, "We believe that the

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<sup>23</sup> Columbia History Research Project Hungary – 1956 Hungarian Refugee Interviews, No. 616, August, September, 1957, 29.

<sup>24</sup> Andrew Prinz, *Bridging the Divide: Canadian and Hungarian Stories of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution*. Interview with Iona Varady-Huszar. ([www.ontheglobe.com/bridgingthedivide/leavingvisegrad.htm](http://www.ontheglobe.com/bridgingthedivide/leavingvisegrad.htm), 2006 ): 2.

<sup>25</sup> Reported by John MacCormac, *New York Times* 27 October in *Hungarian Revolution*, ed. Melvin Lasky, 76.



conscience of the nation has spoken through our vote.”<sup>26</sup> Similar lists of demands circulated in Budapest, authored by groups such as Hungarian trade unions, professors and students, writers and artists, “the Revolutionary youth” of Lorand Eotvos University, and a Hungarian Historical Society, to name a few. The prolific creation and circulation of these leaflets not only quickly distributed the aims of the Revolutionary spirit [shorthand for the students’ and intellectuals’ grievances?], but also demonstrates the esteem in which Hungarians held print media.<sup>27</sup>

Print media and radio were not mutually exclusive modes of communication, and in many cases they fused to allow the transmission of written demands and information. One young freedom fighter recalled that during the early stages of the Revolution, people were under the impression that Imre Nagy, who had replaced Andras Hegedus as prime minister, had knowledge of the events transpiring. “One hour after a poster appeared, the demand was granted, the government answered through posters.”<sup>28</sup> The general population also communicated with each other through posters. This young freedom fighter recalled one example: “...when Radio Free Kossuth announced that the Russians were leaving, posters appeared: ‘The radio is lying because the Russians are still in...(name of city in Hungary given)’”<sup>29</sup> The radio station would then admit its mistake and apologize for the inaccurate transmission. Revolutionaries would then write on the posters, “Radio Free Kossuth is not lying anymore.”<sup>30</sup>

Approximately 100km south of the town of Lajosmisze (southern Hungary), a young coal miner awoke in his barracks at the Pecsbanya coal mine on the morning of 24 October. He recalled that nothing out of the ordinary occurred the day before, yet when he switched on his

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<sup>26</sup> *Irodalmi Ujsag*, extra edition, October 23, 1956.

<sup>27</sup> Recall here the traditional status reserved for Hungarian writers, who throughout history had been viewed as the voice and true possessor of the national conscience. See chapter 2, 2-3.

<sup>28</sup> Columbia History Research Project Hungary – 1956 Hungarian Refugee Interviews, No. 619, II, August 1957, 9.

<sup>29</sup> Columbia History Research Project Hungary – 1956 Hungarian Refugee Interviews, No. 619, II, 9.

<sup>30</sup> Columbia History Research Project Hungary – 1956 Hungarian Refugee Interviews, No. 619, II, 9.

“Molotov Box”, he heard the sound of gunfire.<sup>31</sup> An announcement aired that counterrevolutionary crowds had started a revolt, but that the government had the situation well in hand. Regardless, the news created a stir among the workers who shocked management by refusing to return to the mines. The local Party Secretary called a general meeting the next afternoon, insisting that the miners return to work. They refused, vowing to continue the strike “as long as Russian soldiers were murdering their brothers in Budapest.”<sup>32</sup> The strike continued throughout the Revolution, while only maintenance work was completed and carloads of coal were sent for hospital use in Budapest. Meanwhile, in the city of Pecs, five miles from the mines, a massive demonstration had taken place already on 25 October. The local loudspeaker system that once aired communist propaganda had been hijacked and broadcast the Revolutionary news from Budapest. The crowd began to shout the standard motto of the Revolution: “Russkik Haza!” (Russians go home). The young coal miner, an intellectual who upon his recent release from prison (into which he claimed to have smuggled RFE leaflets) had been unable to find more befitting work, drafted a list of demands. The demands mirrored those prepared by students in Budapest two days earlier. The primary objective: the removal of Soviet troops followed by an independent Hungary. With the help of a lithographing machine, hundreds of these demands found their way into the hands of Revolutionary Hungarians in Pecs. Through radio transmissions, the Revolution was quickly becoming a national affair.<sup>33</sup>

The following demonstrates a similar synthesis of mass print and radio communication media, as well as the unifying power exerted by the two types of communication. On 26 October, the Students’ Parliament of Miskolc read aloud their demands at meetings in that city,

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<sup>31</sup> The worker noted that “Molotov Box” was a nickname for a central radio receiver that broadcast through loudspeakers in several rooms. This may not have held true for the general population outside his barracks.

<sup>32</sup> Columbia History Research Project Hungary – 1956 Hungarian Refugee Interviews. No. 36-M, t, April 1957, 5.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.* No. 36-M, t, 4-7.

on the northern border of Hungary. The first few demands read: “We support the resolutions of the University youth, we demand the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of Soviet troops from Hungary,” and finally, “We demand that October 23<sup>rd</sup>, the first day of our national fight for freedom, become a national holiday.”<sup>34</sup> The demands were then broadcast on Radio Free Miskolc. This episode demonstrates the manner in which mass communications caused geographically divided groups to coalesce into a unified, patriotic, and Revolutionary community.

While state run radio transmissions inadvertently ignited the Revolution through blunders (Gero’s cancellation, reversal, and his provocative speech), radio stations fell into the hands of Revolutionary fighters and allowed them to transmit the Revolution to their allies, both domestic and foreign. During the first phase of the Revolution, 23 October through 30 October, Revolutionaries used radio to coordinate their efforts. As mentioned before, they utilized former state-run radio stations and often relayed their demands through RFE, although foreign stations did not play their most important role until the second phase (the failure) of the Revolution.

On the morning of the 24<sup>th</sup>, one enterprising student from the Polytechnic University (Budapest) went home and hastily constructed a shortwave radio set and began broadcasting his fellow students’ fourteen demands, demanding that the government accept them. Throughout the following days, the student walked the streets of Budapest and observed the mood and activities of the people. He would then return to his makeshift broadcasting station where he “broadcast to the world the truth, that we were not the counter-Revolutionaries the Government said, but rather the whole Hungarian people fighting for our freedom.”<sup>35</sup> Travelers near the western provinces of Hungary reported to the *London Daily Telegraph* that two resistance radio stations giving

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<sup>34</sup> As reprinted in Lasky, *The Hungarian Revolution*, 90-91.

<sup>35</sup> From article that appeared in *The Observer* (London) by George Sherman. Re-printed in Lasky, ed., *The Hungarian Revolution*, 81.

military orders had been overheard. Through one station, the travelers learned that the coal miners in Pecsbanya had joined a general strike, called for via radio by the rebels in Budapest.<sup>36</sup> Through communications they were brought into the Revolutionary fold, and now communicated with their counterparts throughout the country.

An electrical engineering student remembered a call that went out over his university radio on the 26th, requesting help to establish a Revolutionary radio service. He recalled, “I wanted to help some way in the Revolution....every fight has to have good news connection, because that is the nerve center of the fighting...”<sup>37</sup> He helped set up a news service center in the engineering building of the school which was now occupied by the (Revolutionary) army. From this location, he received news from all over the country and relayed information gathered from the foreign radio stations. He was transferred to the history department on the 30th where political news was gathered, assembled, and transferred to the engineering department, from whom they received military news.

One young student fighter recalled that people were surprised when he explained to them that the fighting was directed from Prater Utca school and not from the Killian Barracks, which directed much of the fighting during the Revolution.<sup>38</sup> Both posts contained shortwave radios and communicated with each other, although most would argue that the Killian Barracks directed the majority of the fighting. But the point remains that shortwave communications enabled the fighters’ awareness of each others’ efforts.

By 30 October the Revolution’s success seemed certain. The Revolution had largely consolidated. Nagy was in power. The most intense fighting had diminished. The vast majority of HWP leadership had either been forcefully removed from power by the rebels, or had

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<sup>36</sup> From *Daily Telegraph* (London), 27 October. Re-printed in Lasky, ed., *The Hungarian Revolution*, 85.

<sup>37</sup> Columbia History Research Project Hungary – 1956 Hungarian Refugee Interviews, No. 106, May 1957, 9-10.

<sup>38</sup> Columbia History Research Project Hungary – 1956 Hungarian Refugee Interviews, No. 222, July 1957, 11.

relinquished authority on its own. Revolutionary councils were assembled, often with names inspired by the 1848-9 Revolutions. Villages in the countryside had dissolved collectives and burned records and documents. Red stars were torn down and Revolutionaries vandalized Soviet memorials.<sup>39</sup> Radio Kossuth fell into the hands of the Revolutionaries and was broadcasting news to the entire country. At the same time, the station was now receiving phone calls from throughout the country concerning troop movements and political developments at the local level.<sup>40</sup> Erno Gero, among other now former HWP leaders had fled the country or hidden within Soviet military installations, which had withdrawn to the countryside.<sup>41</sup> Nagy announced on the 30<sup>th</sup> that the one party system had been abandoned and introduced his new cabinet comprised of diffuse, democratic, or at least anti-Stalinist, political minds.<sup>42</sup> Finally, Khrushchev agreed to withdraw Soviet troops from Hungary. The Revolution appeared victorious.<sup>43</sup>

After 1 November, daily life began to normalize. Shops re-opened and long lines formed outside of bakeries. Trams and street cars resumed operating on certain streets. Michael Korda, an Oxford undergraduate who had journeyed to Budapest to deliver medicine to needy Budapest hospitals, remembered Hungarian students cheering as planes flew overhead. Although these low flying fighters were in fact Soviet planes, the students mistook them for American or British planes delivering paratroopers or at the very least, medicine.<sup>44</sup> But while Imre Nagy cabled the UN to announce Hungary's withdrawal from the Warsaw Pact, his newly appointed Minister of

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<sup>39</sup> Garret G. Ackerson, Jr, Charge d'Affaires, a.i., Amlegation Budapest to the Department of State, Washignton. Desp 1, 764.00/7-157, 1-8.

<sup>40</sup> Columbia History Research Project Hungary – 1956 Hungarian Refugee Interviews, No. 514, August, 1957, 10-11.

<sup>41</sup> Csaba Bekes, Malcolm Byrne and Janos M. Rainer, Eds. *The 1956 Hungarian Revolution: A History in Documents*. 203-5.

<sup>42</sup> Csaba Bekes, Malcolm Byrne and Janos M. Rainer, Eds. *The 1956 Hungarian Revolution: A History in Documents*, 206-8.

<sup>43</sup> Gati, *Failed Illusions*, 178-80.

<sup>44</sup> Michael Korda, *Journey to a Revolution: A Personal Memoir and History of the Hungarian Revolution of 1956* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006), 151-2.

the Interior was in Moscow accepting his appointment to replace Nagy after the second invasion. The final phase and termination of the Revolution was set to begin.<sup>45</sup>

On 31 October, Khrushchev had privately reversed his decision to accept the Hungarians' demands and on 4 November sent a vastly superior wave of reinforcements streaming into Hungary. Foreign broadcasting had created and fostered the illusion of an imagined ally for almost five years and Hungarian freedom fighters would now respond to the West. During the first period of the Revolution, rebels had used RFE's shortwave operators to relay their messages between centers of fighting, and to institute, and maintain contact, between far flung centers of activity. After 4 November, RFE became the recipient of the sentiments and hopes it had developed in Hungary.<sup>46</sup> Hungarians would *not* cite RFE as the spark that ignited the revolt: the uprising was the work of the Hungarian population.<sup>47</sup> But this is not to say RFE played only the role of a relay station during the Revolution. As one study concluded after sampling over 1,000 refugees in and around Vienna after the Revolution, aid from the West, and in particular the United States, was universally expected during the Revolution. Fully three quarters of the respondents claimed to have expected military assistance. 50% stated that American foreign broadcasting had given Hungarians the impression that that country was willing to fight on Hungary's behalf.<sup>48</sup> That Hungarians were willing to rise up in open, armed rebellion against the exponentially superior Soviet forces can be traced to the illusion of imagined allies.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Csaba Bekes, Malcolm Byrne and Janos M. Rainer, eds. *The 1956 Hungarian Revolution*, 212-214.

<sup>46</sup> Audience Analysis Section, Radio Free Europe (AAS, RFE). *Reactions to RFE from Hungary during the Hungarian Revolution 23 October – 8 November 1956, Special Report No. NR 2.* (Munich: 11 November 1956):1.

<sup>47</sup> Audience Analysis Section, Radio Free Europe (AAS, RFE, 1957). *Hungarian Refugee Opinion: Based on the Findings from 800 Self Administered Questionnaires, Special Report No. 6.* (Munich: January 1957): 2. This report found that 85% of those questioned stated that “suffering under Communism” constituted the primary cause of the Revolution. The events of Poland ranked second among the causes of the Revolution.

<sup>48</sup> AAS-RFE, 1957, *Special Report No. 12.* 1.

<sup>49</sup> AAS-RFE, 1957, *Special Report No. 12.* 1.

During the course of the Revolution RFE existed as the primary and oftentimes sole link between Hungary and the outside world. Between 4-8 November, RFE received 59 radio appeals, which both requested aid and wished to inform the outside world of the situation in Hungary. Shortwave radio broadcasts were picked up by RFE, and recorded the original transmitters knowing fully well that they had both domestic and foreign audiences. On 4 November, an amateur German ham radio operator picked up a transmission from a Hungarian Freedom station: “We request urgent help...Those foreign radio stations, in particular Radio Free Europe, which hear the broadcast of the free Hungarian Radio should forward it to the UNO [United Nations].”<sup>50</sup> Another call received by RFE later that day broadcast, in simple terms, the events of the day: “Attention! Attention! Attention! For everybody! Help the Hungarian Revolution! Hundreds of Soviet tanks attack the Hungarian capital! We request the help of the whole World!”<sup>51</sup> The calls became more desperate. From an unknown radio station on the twenty meter shortwave band: “...we appeal again and again to the conscience of the world! The civilized world cannot look on... Terrible destruction and massacre...the Soviet Union...destruction and slavery...”<sup>52</sup>

Calls for help continued, with many asking for specific types of aid. One station requested that paratroopers be dropped over the Dunapentele area (central Hungary).<sup>53</sup> Minutes later the same station appealed to those Hungarian girls, mothers, and women with first aid training to report to the hospitals. After appealing to Hungarians for help, a broadcast went out requesting aid in French, English and then German: “This is Hungary calling: “We request that you send us immediate aid...It is possible, that our broadcast will soon come to the same fate as

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<sup>50</sup> AAS, RFE, *Special Report No. NR 2*, 14.

<sup>51</sup> AAS, RFE, *Special Report No. NR 2*, 15.

<sup>52</sup> AAS, RFE, *Special Report No. NR 2*, 15.

<sup>53</sup> AAS, RFE, *Special Report No. NR 2*, 16.

the other Hungarian broadcasting stations.”<sup>54</sup> A call from another unknown shortwave radio station at 2:00 (4 November) asked RFE to indicate the wavelengths and frequencies of the other freedom radios operating while taking care not to reveal their locations.<sup>55</sup> This illustrates how RFE allowed freedom fighters both to establish communities within Hungary while at the same time affirming the faith Hungarians had attached to the station throughout the course of its existence.

A freedom station in Csokanai (near Debrecen) broadcasted its message several times: “We are asking Radio Free Europe to inform us- has help from the West started!”<sup>56</sup> Calls from this station then went out in search of the United Nations: “We speak to you in the name of the entire Hungarian people!”<sup>57</sup> Later that evening, Radio Free Rakosi requested help in German and Italian, followed by a recitation of Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address in English.<sup>58</sup> That evening, while under heavy bombardment, Radio Free Rakosi broadcast a demand from a group calling themselves the “Radio Revolutionary youth.” “Budapest is continually bombed.... Whoever hears this and has a radio transmitter, please forward.”<sup>59</sup> By 5 November, the situation was deteriorating. Refugees had begun streaming into Austria. A radio station in Vienna reported overhearing the following from refugees: “Where is NATO? Where are the Americans? The British? The French? We listened to your radios. We believed in freedom. There is no time now for conference and discussion. Give us arms.”<sup>60</sup> On 7 November, a barely audible rebel broadcast stated that the Killian Barracks had fallen to Soviet forces.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> AAS, RFE, *Special Report No. NR 2*, 17.

<sup>55</sup> AAS, RFE, *Special Report No. NR 2*, 17-18.

<sup>56</sup> AAS, RFE, *Special Report No. NR 2*, 18.

<sup>57</sup> AAS, RFE, *Special Report No. NR 2*, 19.

<sup>58</sup> AAS, RFE, *Special Report No. NR 2*, 20.

<sup>59</sup> AAS, RFE, *Special Report No. NR 2*, 21.

<sup>60</sup> AAS, RFE, *Special Report No. NR 2*, 23.

<sup>61</sup> AAS, RFE, *Special Report No. NR 2*, 33.



Excepting pockets of resistance, the Revolution had ended. Janos Kadar, who had betrayed Imre Nagy and the Revolution, would become the leader of Hungary until 1988. Nagy would be executed on 16 June, 1958.

Mass communications figured largely in the commencement and character of the Revolution. Domestic radio broadcasts, which until the Revolution, served as one way in which the HWP sought to maintain the construct of a totalitarian state, figured largely into the outbreak of violence. The events in Szeged spread to Budapest via radio, which inspired the planning of the Budapest demonstration. The demonstration, news of which was broadcast over the radio three times on the 23rd, gathered steam as more people became aware of the event. In this case, radio directed and allowed for unified collective activity while undermining the control of the regime. Student demonstrators, whose Sixteen Points had already been printed on leaflets, and passed throughout the crowds, knew that the radio would further leverage their influence and leadership. By substituting Gero's inflammatory speech for the students' demands on the eve of the uprising, the regime incited the already hostile crowds. Ironically, that their demands were *not* leveraged by radio, led to the opening shots of the demonstration. Between 1952 and 1956, the HWP combated the presence of leaflets with threats and punishment. They jammed foreign radio stations, and exercised various degrees of censorship on dissident newspapers and periodicals. The question then, as to who controlled Hungary's airwaves came to a head on the evening of 23 October. By substituting Gero's inflammatory speech for the students' demands, the regime incited the already gathered crowds.

By the morning of 24 October, news of the Revolution had already spread outside of Budapest, and inspired Hungarians throughout the nation to follow the example set in the capital. News of the Sixteen Points inspired copycat lists of demands and unified the gestalt of the

Revolution. Dissident literature in the form of posters, flyers, and newspapers unified and spread the Revolution at the local level. Insurgents used the written word to verify or counteract the claims made by HWP controlled radio stations. The popularity of Western broadcasting stations during their existence up until 1956 contributed to Hungarians recognition of shortwave radio as an effective means of broadcasting. Users had become adept at utilizing the potential of this type of radio. This allowed for the service of Revolutionary radio operators who transmitted local news and leveraged the leadership of the Revolution. The desire to listen to Western broadcasting meant that the majority of Hungarian households had procured (or had altered) a radio to receive shortwave broadcasts. Those transmitting the Revolution had a large audience.

The American leaflets and broadcasts that had reached students, factory workers, peasants, and friends during the fermentation period also figured into the character of the Revolution. Individual dissidents had shared, and enhanced through embellishment, the messages of RFE and VOA. This created a collective faith in the West, which heartened Hungarians' ambitions as to what they could achieve through action. Also, these broadcasts had created communities and individuals with a shared common desire: to oust their colonial occupier. Finally, for five years, these broadcasts had stimulated conversations among listeners (and readers) that often led to discussions regarding the possibility of an armed uprising, with help from the West. When this possibility became reality in October 1956, Hungarians learned that their imagined ally was nothing more than a mirage.

## CONCLUSION

Mass communications fostered and allowed for the rapid outbreak of the 1956 Hungarian revolution. During the fermentation period, 1952-1956, mass communications provided a corridor for the transmission and dissemination of opposition ideas. Western broadcasts instilled thoughts of independence in Hungarians who then furthered these ideas through personal contact. On 23 October, 1956, the eve of the revolution, mass communications, particularly radio, allowed for the collective action that provided a base for the revolution in Budapest. Radio transmissions leveraged the leadership of the revolution in the capital, and extended the uprising to areas throughout the nation. Print material, in conjunction with radio broadcasts, connected centers of fighting, and in essence, maintained the revolution, before an overwhelming Soviet military crushed Hungarians' hopes of self-determination.

From 1953-1955, Imre Nagy's New Course afforded Hungarian writers a new found freedom to voice opposition ideas. Periodicals such as *Irodalmi Ujsag*, which provided an avenue for elite opposition ideas, found a fervent fan base among both students and workers alike. The revolutionary tone of these dissenting periodicals was disseminated through mass-print technology. The writers' opposition to the HWP found its ultimate expression in the formation of the Petofi Circle in 1956. This group, named for the Hungarian national poet of the 1848-49 war for independence, signaled a resurgence of independence-minded nationalism.

From late 1954 until the middle of 1955, Operation Focus, an outgrowth of RFE, dropped millions of leaflets over Hungary. These leaflets, an extension of American foreign policy, sought to stir resistance activity and ultimately force concessions from the HWP. In reality, the fact that these leaflets came from a Western power proved much more significant to Hungarians. These leaflets created the notion of a powerful ally in the minds of Hungarians that would come

to their aid should they attempt armed resistance. These leaflets then circulated among the population creating communities bound by a newfound trust in an imagined ally. Furthermore, they led to conversations among dissidents pertaining to the possibility of action, some even speaking of a desire to model such an event after that of 1848-49.

During this same period, twentieth-century advancements in broadcasting technology, such as the affordability of consumer radios, and the establishment of international shortwave transmissions, meant that Hungarians now received more information than ever before. In 1951, foreign broadcasting penetrated the HWP's monopoly of Hungary's communication infrastructure. Western nations, most importantly the United States, with RFE and VOA, broadcasted messages of hope to Hungarians who listened covertly on specially modified radios. While the United States did not imply the possibility of military insistence, Hungarians heard what they wanted to hear. Through these broadcast, listeners gathered that they had on their side a powerful ally, willing to come to their aid should they actively resist Soviet domination.

Listeners tuned in either alone, with family, or among small groups of trusted friends. Those who listened were aware that others tuned in at the same times. They could imagine communities of dissidents consuming the very same messages throughout their village, town or city. Listening, often relegated to the evening hours, meant that this activity came to resemble a ritual where individuals imagined two communities: a powerful Western ally and like-minded Hungarian dissidents in their homes huddled around a radio. These imaginings did not stay private long. Hungarians discussed the news of Western broadcasts among trusted friends and known listeners. Through blinks, nods, and conversation, listeners affirmed the community of dissidents existed in everyday life. These conversations also furthered, and sometimes led to exaggerations as to what the West was capable of, or intended to achieve. Above all, they

reminded listeners of Hungary's traditional ties to West. Colonization, in the form of Sovietization, had severed these ties. The hopes of liberation fostered by these broadcasts, indicated the possibility that Hungary, through independence, could regain its traditional identity as Western European nation. Finally, these transmissions established shortwave radio as a means by which anti-Soviet elements communicated with each other. This would figure in to radio's role during the Revolution.

After mass communications created imagined communities during the fermentation period, they allowed for the ignition, spread, and maintenance of the revolution. The disturbances in Poland between 19 and 22 October, were picked up by Hungarian students via RFE broadcasts. In an effort to show solidarity with the Poles, students in Szeged began demonstrating, which in turn inspired similar demonstrations in Budapest. In the capital, dissident print and broadcast media began to collide. On the evening of 22 October, students drafted a list of demands, just as dissidents had done in 1848. Radio broadcasts on 23 October dictated the collective action of the opposition and allowed for mass gatherings that formed the basis for a popular uprising in Budapest. The students' march from the Petofi monument to the statue of Josef Bem, the Polish General who had fought for the Hungarians in 1848, signaled another manner in which the spirit of 1848 resurfaced. Hungarian flags with the Soviet emblem removed served as a metaphor for the nation's desire to oust Soviet intrusion and entrenchment in all its forms.

When students attempted to broadcast their demands over the airwaves the night of 23 October, a contest as to who controlled Hungarian media ignited the demonstration. News of the outbreak of violence spread throughout Budapest, and what began as a skirmish became a city-wide uprising. Through radio transmissions, leaflets, and posters, the revolution gelled in the

capital. Fighting factions communicated via shortwave broadcasts, many of which were relayed by RFE from one group of Freedom Fighters to another. Copycat lists of demands circulated among the population while posters and the written word verified the veracity of claims made by radio.

Mass communications also served to spread the revolution outside of Budapest, and what could have remained a localized disturbance became a national uprising. On 24 October, workers and students hundreds of kilometers from the hostilities in the capital city were brought into the fold via radio transmission. When those outside of Budapest heard the news of the violence, they immediately felt the pull of national imaginings. Communities throughout Hungary rose up against their foreign occupiers. Copycat lists of the Sixteen Points were drafted such as those by the coalminer in Pecsbanya. These were then printed, and distributed, illustrating mass communications' power to leverage the leadership of the revolution. The coalminers, who had gone on strike immediately after hearing of the events in Budapest, refused to resume work "as long as Russian soldiers were murdering their brothers in Budapest."<sup>1</sup> Likewise, a young Freedom Fighter who sought refuge in Vienna after the Revolution commented, "I will never forget how happy I was the first time they pressed in my hand a gun in order that I should defend the country. You know, to tell the truth, I never really knew what the country was; since our greatest worry was always to secure our daily bread and I never had time to philosophize on such abstract notions, as e.g. somebody's home country."<sup>2</sup> Even this young peasant boy, who had become aware of the revolution through radio transmissions that reached his remote village, imagined himself to belong to a unified and patriotic community struggling

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<sup>1</sup> Columbia History Research Project Hungary – 1956 Hungarian Refugee Interviews. No. 36-M, t, April 1957, 5.

<sup>2</sup> Columbia History Research Project Hungary – 1956 Hungarian Refugee Interviews, No. 403, June 1957, 7.

for its independence. Illustrated here are two striking examples of an imagined national community bound by mass communications.

This rapid swelling of the uprising has become one of its defining characteristics. Authorities on the 1956 Hungarian Revolution, such as Charles Gati, maintain that the revolution was spontaneous.<sup>3</sup> Paul Kecskemeti would agree, having titled his book *The Unexpected Revolution*.<sup>4</sup> Western governments, particularly the United States, were caught off guard as well. As demonstrated above, however, the causes of the rapid explosion all stem from the communications infrastructure in place. The swift unification of the uprising can also be explained by the communities formed through Western broadcasting between 1951 and 1956, primarily RFE and VOA. These broadcasts had fostered the establishment of independence-minded communities, bound by the belief in Western assistance. When news of the first shots aired, Hungarians knew that those in their communities harbored the same thoughts of liberation, and shared similar faith in Western assistance. Through their calls for help, Hungarian Freedom Fighters who manned shortwave radio stations affirmed the pre-existing faith in Western stations. Furthermore, domestic radio stations commandeered by freedom fighters shed their station name in favor of a “Radio Free” prefix, pointing of course, to the influence of RFE.

After Soviet forces crushed the revolution on 4 November, 1956, the belief in Western aid held by Hungarians proved an illusion. This proved a recurring theme for Hungarians and Eastern Europeans. In 1848, Western Europe had professed the desire for Hungarian self-determination, yet in reality, held little interest in intervening in a meaningful way. Russian troops intervened instead. Before World War II, Western Europe looked on as Hitler meddled in Eastern Europe. The American role in the 1956 Revolution echoed Western Europe’s historical

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<sup>3</sup> Gati, *Failed Illusions*, 143, 156.

<sup>4</sup> See p. 17.

role in Eastern Europe. Soviet troops capitalized, ending another Hungarian struggle for independence.

Hungary's long road to independence has been punctuated in the last two centuries by the 1848-49 and 1956 battles for independence. Both events witnessed a unified, patriotic struggle against a vastly superior foe, while implied foreign assistance never materialized. Neither uprising was successful. But while the results of the 1956 Revolution reaffirmed the inflexible lines of demarcation adhered to during the Cold War, its failure would ultimately come to be seen as a crack in the foundation of the Soviets' Eastern European Empire. The process that led to Hungary's eventual independence, long in the making, found its way through Prague, 1968, Poland, 1980-81, and finally the Velvet Revolutions that began in 1989.

On 16 June, 1989, approximately 100,000 Hungarians gathered in Heroes' Square in Budapest for the ceremonial reburial of Imre Nagy. Others remained in their home in front of television sets, as the event was to be beamed into homes by the national broadcasting service. Among statues of Hungary's founding fathers, including Lajos Kossuth, the leader of the 1848-49 war for independence, mourners paid a solemn tribute to Nagy and those who perished in the 1956 revolution. After a wreath laying and eulogies, a massive procession including a hearse with Nagy's remains, made its way to Plot 301, a potter's field outside of Budapest. The field, located next to the prison where revolutionaries from 1956 were tried and hanged, contained 260 graves. In recent weeks, the site had been transformed into a landscaped funeral park, and a proper tomb had been prepared for Imre Nagy. Two actors read aloud, in alphabetical order, the names of 260 victims, including Nagy. As each name was called, those in attendance, as well as those viewing the event on television, witnessed a torchbearer hold a flame high and reply, "He



lives in us; he has not gone.”<sup>5</sup> It is difficult for one to imagine an occasion more beset with national imaginings.

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<sup>5</sup> Henry Kamm, “Hungarian who led ’56 Revolt is Buried as Hero,” *New York Times*, 17 Jun. 1989, 1, 6.

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