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The Unnoticed Continuity

The prehistory of the Hungarian refugee interview project

We should go back at least to June 13, 1942 to see the political, ideological, historical and historiographical significance of the massive, unparalleled 1956 Hungarian refugee interview-project in proper perspective. On that day President Roosevelt's Executive Order created the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), a federal organization in charge of coordinated intelligence to respond to the needs of the United States under the condition of World War II.

Not long after it had been established, OSS organized a Research and Analysis (R&A) Branch and started recruiting young and senior scholars, mostly from the humanities and the social sciences, to make use of their intellectual and professional skills in the service of the U.S. war efforts. Seven future presidents of the American Historical Association, future presidents of the American Economical Association, and future Nobel Laureate, Wassily Leontieff, together with prominent, mostly left-wing emigrant European academics worked for OSS during the war. In less than a year, more than nine hundred scholars would work for the R&A Branch.

The R&A Europe-Africa Division's Central European Section hired not only bright American academics but also exiled scholars, freshly arrived from Hitler's Germany and Austria. Quite a few of them had a Marxist background, most of them belonged to the intellectual left, they were the first serious experts of Nazi Germany, and the early proponents of totalitarian theory. Some had been originally affiliated with the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research, and its successor

institute, the International Institute for Social Research. Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Friedrich Pollock, Herbert Marcuse, the historian Otto Kirschheimer, the literary scholar Leo Lowenthal, Arkadij Gurland, the film theoretician Siegfried Kracauer, all were associated with OSS. Richard Krautheimer, the historian, Paul Baran who left the the Plekhanov Insitute of Economics in 1928, together with Paul Sweezy, founding editors of the radical left-wing Monthly Review, and Eugene Fodor (of the Fodor guidebooks series) were employed too.¹ The Central European Section was responsible primarily for analyzing and interpreting the developments in Germany, but it was also in charge of Central Europe at large. (This is why Paul Zinner worked on Czechoslovakia – he would have a role to play in the Hungarian Refugee Interview project in 1956– and Leslie Tihany, together with Robert von Neumann, John von Neumann’s brother, worked on Hungary.) OSS set up an USSR Division as well, led by Geroid T. Robinson, professor of Russian history at Columbia University, New York, the future head of the first Russian and Soviet area-studies program at the U.S. Post-World War II area studies, one of the most important academic innovations of the 1950s and 1960s grow out of the activities of OSS; most of the early leaders and personnel of the programs had been affiliated with the Office of Strategic Services. The Ford and Rockefeller Foundations that provided the financial backing for the area-studies programs had close connections to the U.S. government and the intelligence community, whose needs shaped the curricula and initial professional directions of the area-studies

¹ The section on the role of academics in general and especially emigre intellectuals at OSS is indebted to Barry M. Katz, *Foreign Intelligence. Research and Analysis in the Office of Strategic Services 1942-1945*. Cambridge, MA., Harvard University Press, 1989. A chapter of the book was published as *The Criticism of Arms: The Frankfurt School goes to War*. In: *The Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 59. No.3. September, 1987 pp. 439-478.

programs. In 1956 Henry L. Roberts, head of the Russian Institute became the leader of the Hungarian interview project at Columbia.

The story of the Hungarian refugee interviews starts even before the summer of 1942. The scholars at the Institut für Socialforschung, had already had some important ideas about the working of Fascism, and the nature of totalitarianism. Our views on Nazi Germany – despite the enormous quantity of documents consulted and work published after World War II – is still heavily influenced by those early ideas about the nature of totalitarianism. As Herbert Marcuse formulated it later on: “If there was one matter about which the author... and his friends were not uncertain, it was that the fascist state was a fascist society, and that totalitarian violence and totalitarian reason came from the structure of existing society...”.

The theoretical work of the prewar years, especially early notions of totalitarian theory highly influenced the way how the scholars, working at OSS, perceived both National Socialist Germany and the future task of the occupational forces in post-war Germany. One of the most important intellectual influences for the scholars working at OSS was Franz Neumann’s study, *Behemoth: The Structure and Practice of National Socialism*, first published in 1942. Neumann had finished working on the book right before he joined the staff of OSS. In the book – that had not been submitted to the usual rigorous peer review of the Institute, so Neumann rejected Horkheimer’s influential thesis on bureaucracy – Neumann argued, similarly to Hannah Arendt’s thesis in her *The Origin of Totalitarianism* (which is indebted to Neumann’s work, although barely refers to it), that National Socialism was a new, until then unknown political form, a monstrosity, forewarned by Thomas Hobbes in his “Behemoth”, a work, not of prophecy of course, but one on the English Civil War. Neumann notes

that the Nazi theoreticians and propagandists abandoned the notion of “totalitarianism” after 1934, and he decided to rescue and reevaluate the concept in his book. Neumann’s *Behemoth* asserted, although in a less dramatic way than Hannah Arendt’s *Origins*, that discontinuity played a decisive role in the development of the totalitarian regime, and that it was a novelty in contemporary history “I venture to suggest that we are confronted with a form of society in which the ruling groups control the population directly, without the mediation of the rational though coercive apparatus hitherto known as the state.” (p. 470.)²

Public opinion research, and propaganda based on information distilled from public opinion, played central role in the work of OSS. During World War II émigré scholars from Germany and Austria representing several disciplines – art history, psychoanalysis, film-studies - began interpreting propaganda and were engaged in early public opinion studies. The key figure of American public opinion research was Paul Lazarsfeld, an Austrian refugee himself, who had been close to the members of the Vienna circle (Carnap and Otto Neurath). Lazarsfeld became the founder of the Bureau for Applied Social Research at Columbia University, where, among others, including quite a few of the European refugee scholars, Krackauer, and his friend Adorno worked, and which would play the key role in the East European interview projects, among them the 1956 Hungarian refugee interview project. (Adorno was not formally connected to the Bureau. During his first years in the US it was Lazarsfeld who helped him find a job at the radio research operation in Newark, New Jersey.)

² On the relation between Arendts' and Neumann's views on totalitarianism, see: Alfons Söllner, *Hannah Arendt's The Origins of Totalitarianism in its original Context*. In: *European Journal of Political Theory*. vo. 3 No. 2., 2004. pp. 219-238

The scholars at the Research and Analysis Branch, with the help of the so called "Morale Section" of the OSS, got engaged in studying and interpreting public opinion. They monitored radio broadcasts, especially radio programs from Germany but also from the Soviet Union; they used prisoner-of-war interrogations and conducted interviews. The program was headed by Hans Speier, who was affiliated with the émigré scholars at the New School.

These were the early days of professional public opinion research, which started only in the 1930s in the U.S. (The *Public Opinion Quarterly*, the professional forum of public opinion research was launched in 1937 at Princeton University.) What the scholars at OSS did in this regard, was quite similar to what their colleagues did for example in London, where there was another important Central European émigré community, working in support of the British war efforts.

The political scientists, art historians, and psychoanalysts of the interwar years still made no distinction between propaganda (the attempt to persuade) and public opinion (what people actually thought). Despite the long tradition of the perception of the importance of persuasion (rhetoric in antiquity, Gustave Le Bon's famous study, *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* from 1896, the lessons learned from the time of World War I, propaganda pursued by members of the avant-garde in the 1920s, etc.) it was especially the political propaganda waged by the Soviet and Nazi regimes that directed attention to issues of modern mass propaganda. (The Soviet regime set up the *People's Commissariat for Enlightenment*, while the Nazis had their *Ministry for Propaganda and Popular Enlightenment*.) All the early theorists of totalitarianism became aware of the special importance of modern propaganda both in the birth and the

consolidation of the modern undemocratic state. Franz Neumann, Adorno, Krackauer, Hannah Arendt, Marcuse devoted long chapters to the issue, which they considered as one of the defining features of the totalitarian state. OSS considered the Soviet propaganda efforts not in isolation but as part of broader programs aimed at psychological warfare. In March 1944, for example, M. G. Natirov, working at OSS prepared a memorandum for the Joint Chiefs of Staff on "Soviet Psychological Warfare".

Ernst Kris, the well known art historian, before emigrating to England, had been curator of applied arts at the Kunshistorisches Museum in Vienna, and an analyst at the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society. Kris, together with some of his former students, including Ernst Gombrich, the future director of the Warburg Institute in London, worked at the monitoring and war propaganda section of the BBC. (Later on, Gombrich wrote *Myth and Reality in German War-Time Broadcasts*, published in London in 1970.) In 1939 Kris became a senior research officer at the monitoring service of the BBC. In 1940 he moved to New York to the New School of Social Research, where he became Hannah Arendt's colleague, and together with the German émigré scholar, Hans Speier, he initiated a program to analyze Nazi broadcast.³ Kris put together a research team, supported by the Rockefeller Foundation's Research Project on Totalitarian Communication, and published *German Radio Propaganda: Report on Home Broadcast during the War* in 1944, influenced by Freud's and Abby Warburg's ideas on memory. As part of the Rockefeller Foundation's project on totalitarianism, Siegfried Kracauer worked in the archives of the Museum of Modern Art, and wrote his famous essay, *Propaganda and the Nazi War Film* that would later be included as a supplement in his

³ On Kris, see: Louis Rose's fascinating study, *Interpreting Propaganda: Successors to Warburg and Freud in Wartime*. In: *American Imago* - Volume 60, Number 1, Spring 2003, pp. 122-130

important book, *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film* (1947). In that chapter, analyzing Leni Riefenstahl's *The Triumph of the Will*, Kracauer claimed: "(F)rom the real life of the people was built up a fake reality that was passed off as the genuine one; but this bastard reality, instead of being an end in itself, merely served as the set dressing for a film that was then to assume the character of an authentic documentary. (301)

OSS ceased to exist as of October 1, 1945. Neuman left for Columbia, Kirschheimer and Marcuse stayed on, and Löwenthal moved to the research Department of Voice of America. Marcuse was at the State Department until 1952 then went back to academia, first to Columbia, then to Harvard's Russian Institute, Brandeis, and finally to San Diego. Quite a few former OSS employees, however, having no other alternative, remained in public or quasi-public service, working for different agencies, continuing their studies on the impact, and features of totalitarian regimes, prominently among them the nature of propaganda. After the end of World War II the emphasis shifted from Nazi Germany to the Soviet Union, East and Central Europe. With the advent of the Cold War, the interest of the successor organizations of OSS and that of the remaining refugee intellectuals moved: besides hard data on the state of the economy and society, the military capabilities of the Communist countries, the analysts became primarily interested in the techniques and effectiveness of Soviet-type persuasion and propaganda, psychological factors, and "brainwashing". There was a marked shift towards uncovering the psychological workings and effects of the Soviet totalitarian rule, and in the midst of Cold War phantasmagoria, interviews conducted with East and Central European refugees were used for identifying the

techniques of Soviet psychological warfare. In the heightened atmosphere of the late 1940s, early 1950s solid, academically grounded research on propaganda and dubious attempts at finding the secrets of "brainwashing" were not clearly indistinguishable anymore. It was the trial of the Hungarian archbishop cardinal József Mindszenty, which triggered obsessive interest in psychological warfare, forced interrogation and brainwashing. As a secret CIA document put it: "The behavior of defendants at court trials in Russia and her satellite countries, and the whole pattern of Soviet Trial procedure in general, make it essential to investigate the use of drugs, hypnotism, hypno-narco-analysis, electric and drug shock and possible the use of ultrasonics ... The trials of Cardinal Mindszenty, the Jesuit priests... furnish many indications of the Soviet use of drugs for obtaining forced confessions in court procedure and probable extensive use on war prisoners in the future."⁴

The first extensive refugee interviews were conducted in the hysterical atmosphere of the early phase of the Cold War. Between June 1951 and March 1952 more than three hundred Polish, Czechoslovak and Hungarian refugees were interviewed in German and Austrian refugee camps by a cover organization called International Public Opinion Research, Inc. (later known as International Research Associates), the same organization, which conducted thousand and seventy interviews with Hungarian refugees after 1956. The 1951-52 interviews were analyzed by Siegfried Kracauer and Paul L. Berkman, on behalf of Columbia University's Bureau of Applied Social Research. The work was supported by the Ford Foundation, which also provided financial support to the 1956 Hungarian Refugee interviews. Under the conditions of the Cold War and the McCarthy hearings it was no

⁴ National Security Archives. John Marks Collection. Entry 261. Box 7, folder 5. ("Defense Against Soviet Medical Interrogation And Espionage Techniques)

wonder that *Satellite Mentality*, the published version of the qualitative analysis had the subtitle *Political Attitudes and Propaganda Susceptibilities of Non-Communists in Hungary, Poland and Czechoslovakia*. The book was published in the fall of 1956, just a few weeks before the outbreak of the Hungarian revolution. Henry L. Roberts, director of the Russian Institute of Columbia, wrote the foreword; in a few months' time he would become the head of the 1956 Columbia Hungarian refugee project. As the foreword acknowledged, the study was conceived by Leo Löwenthal, former member of the Frankfurt School, a veteran of OSS, who after the end of the war worked as Chief of the Evaluation Division of the International Broadcasting Service of the State Department. Besides Löwenthal, other former members of the R&A Branch of the OSS, such as the Cornell sociologist, Alex Inkeles, provided expert advice for the *Satellite Mentality* volume.

The interviews were conducted before Stalin's death, before the workers' uprising in Berlin, but the book saw publication only in 1956 under somewhat changed conditions. Kracauer and Berkman address this issue in a way that is especially interesting in the light of the 1956 Hungarian events. "Under the impact of cold war conditions as they obtained in 1951 practically all Polish, Czechoslovak and Hungarian respondents in effect declare that active resistance is out of question. But what if conditions change? Significantly, most interviewees envision only one kind of crisis favorable to large-scale uprisings – the crucial period attendant on the outbreak of a new shooting war....They just cannot imagine rebellion without the aid of the American war machine...According to a report by Foreign News Services Inc., on interviews with 110 young refugees from Communist countries who fled as late as 1953, these new arrivals resemble much the

respondents of 1951; like them, they stake their hopes on liberation and insist that liberation will not come without war.”⁵

Future contributors of the 1956 Hungarian refugee project published important scholarly essays with immediate policy relevance on the pages of the *Public Opinion Quarterly* in the early 1950s. Paul Kecskemeti, one of the experts of the 1956 Columbia project, who would publish his book *The Unexpected Revolution: Social Forces in the Hungarian Uprising* (Stanford, 1961), based on the analysis of the interviews, wrote *Totalitarian Communications as a Means of Control: A Note on the Sociology of Propaganda*, back in 1950. Kecskemeti, a former employee of the Office of War Information, later on a research scientist at the Rand Corporation, compared the role of “public opinion” and propaganda in Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. On the pages of the same journal Löwenthal and Joseph H. Klepper published *The Contributions of Opinion Research to the Evaluation of Psychological Warfare* (winter 1951-1951). In the winter of 1952 *The Public Opinion Quarterly* devoted a special issue to the problems of “International communication Research”. Leo Löwenthal wrote the introduction, Paul Lazarsfeld, Joseph Klapper, Alex Inkeles were among the contributors. Harold Lasswell devoted an essay to *Psychological Policy Research and Total Strategy*, Richard C. Sheldon and John Dutkowski asked the methodologically crucial question, *Are Soviet Satellite Refugee Interviews Projectable?*, and Siegfried Kracauer wrote an important piece on *The Challenge of Qualitative Content Analysis*. Kracauer, on the basis of his experience while working on the *Satellite Mentality* book, tried to make a virtue out of necessity, and argued for the superiority of qualitative analysis of limited and unrepresentative sample (which was the case with the

⁵ *Satellite Mentality*. New York, Praeger Publishers, 1956 p. 7.

refugee interviews) as opposed to representative quantitative methods. With the help of Kurt H. Wolff, the Institute experimented with qualitative research, however, the Rockefeller Foundation that had funded the experiment, decided not to renew Wolff's grant, as the Foundation wanted real, solid, American-type quantitative research.⁶ After having published his *Satellite Mentality*, Kracauer went on working for Columbia University's Hungarian Refugee Interview project, supported by Löwenthal. It is remarkable that the former members of the Frankfurt School became engaged not only in theorizing about the nature of totalitarianism, but were involved in producing those sources – the interviews – on which the theoretical insights were based. While the critical social scientists were refining the theory of totalitarianism, and the role of propaganda in its working, based on comparable empirical data distilled in part from the stories of the refugees, other analysts were still searching for the secret of the truth serum in the interviews.

In August 1956 Harold G. Wolff and Lawrence E. Hinkle published a paper in the American Medical Association's Archives of Neurology and Psychiatry. The special report, entitled "Communist Interrogation and Indoctrination of 'Enemies of the States': Analysis of Methods Used by the Communist State Police", was a declassified version of a secret report which the authors had submitted to Allen Dulles. Wolff, an expert in migraine, was president of the New York Neurological Association, he later became president of the American Neurological Association. Hinkle was a professor at Cornell University's Medical College in New York City. Both of them played central roles in setting up the "Society for the Investigation of Human Ecology", perhaps the most important academic cover organization for the Cold War mind-

⁶ Professor David Kettler's information,, based on his intimate knowledge of the activities of the Institute.

control programs. The study – most probably even in its published version – could be considered as the intellectual conclusion, if not the actual end, of research into brainwashing. The authors seemed to have doubts about magical psychological weapons, comparable to the effectiveness of nuclear arms in other military fields, allegedly possessed either by the Soviets or the Chinese. They stated that the Reds most probably did not make extensive and effective use of hypnosis or any other surprising brainwashing technique. They argued that the Soviets and the Chinese had to resort to old-fashioned, traditional, although exceptionally brutal, psychological and police investigation methods, to break the resistance of the suspect or the enemy. The report, however, did not make any real difference; the behavior modification programs and serious consideration of brainwashing continued.

At the time of the defeat of the Hungarian revolution, experts working directly or indirectly for clandestine agencies were still very much attracted to the psychological working of the Soviet-type totalitarian regime. As Philip Goldman, a former employee of the Central Intelligence Agency formulated it in response to Senator Kennedy's question before the Select Committee on Intelligence, "obviously, the study of the Hungarian refugees who came to this country after the Hungarian revolt was a very useful exercise to try to get information about the personality characteristics of the Communists..."⁷

The Society for the Investigation of Human Ecology, the cover organization that played the central role in the behavior modification experiments from the beginning of the 1950s, organized a seminar in April 1957 to discuss the first lessons learned from the Hungarian

⁷ Joint Hearing Before the Select Committee on Intelligence and the Subcommittee On Health and Scientific Research of the Committee on Human Resources, United States Senate Ninety-Fifth Congress, first session, August 3, 1977. U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington: 1977.

refugee project. Dr Wolff and Dr. Hinkle, the senior experts of the behavior modification program from Cornell's Medical School, who took an active part in investigating the Hungarian refugees, stated at the meeting that they were "interested in the Communist methods, brainwashing and so forth in Americans that (sic) had been prisoners of war...We have an interest in the impact of the Hungarian experience – the last decade, but more particularly the revolt of October, 1956 – on the psyche and the physical condition of Hungarian society. Our interest is in the individual, not in the system or in society as a whole.... in comparisons, but only to the extent that it influences the individual personality."

There were two conflicting approaches in relation to the interviews: on the one hand, there was a clear sociological interest that aimed at uncovering and understanding the working of the Communist system by analyzing the societies concerned – Kracauer argued for this in a memorandum written for the Bureau of Applied social Research in April 1958: There was a need to define "the total situation [that] involves various areas; not only sociology proper and social psychology (whereby, in view of the current bias in favor of 'psychology' the emphasis should be put on the sociological rather than psychological component of this discipline) but also economics, politics, anthropology, history."⁸ Others, closely associated with the Society for the Investigation of Human Ecology, the Cornell Medical School, or the representative of the so called Psychological Research Associates from Virginia, wanted to continue the psychological and para-psychological explorations of the early Cold War era. As a document, written by a certain colonel Monroe, also from the Society for the Investigation of Human Ecology stated: The primary interest should be 1. The effects

⁸ *On the Relation of Analysis to the Situational Factors in Case Studies.* (This was a discussion paper written for the Columbia interview project.)

of Communist indoctrination; 2. What do the various studies tell us on Communist control techniques; 3. The sources and conditions of loyalty; 4. Methodology in interviewing defectors. Despite the disagreement, the two approaches did not remain clearly separate from each other, as the example of one of the sidetracks of the interview project illustrates.

In the face of security leaks, and growing concern over secret programs without proper political supervision, after 1953 it became more and more difficult for the intelligence agencies to continue the brainwashing explorations, and experiment on unwitting U.S. citizens, even on criminals serving prison sentences. But for the proponents of the continuation of the clandestine activities, the arrival of large numbers of refugee after the defeat of the 1956 revolution, none of them U.S. citizens, promised the opportunity to continue the behavior modification experiments.

A large group of the newly arrived emigrants settled in New Brunswick, New Jersey, which has a traditional, large Hungarian community. It has been, in a sense, one of the centers of the Hungarian community in the U.S. since World War I. The central campus of Rutgers University is in New Brunswick, the Psychology and Sociology Departments of which had already had contacts with behavior modification program before 1956. Under the cover of the Human Ecology Society, Richard Stephenson and Jay Schulman from Rutgers received a grant to study a group of newly arrived Hungarian refugees. According to the research proposal, written as a private correspondence, the aim was "of course, to throw as much light as possible on the sociology of the Communist system in the throes of the revolution.... Only fragmentary information is available on the social processes through which a totalitarian government secures

cooperation or fails to secure it. This means for example that our U.S. psychological warfare program in Iron Curtain countries is greatly hindered... And now Hungary has revolted and the fleeing Hungarians are in our midst. This seems an ideal moment to study a totalitarian system in disruption.”⁹

The texts of the seminars make it clear there was a deep and irresolvable tension between the two groups, the representatives of the sociological and the psychological approaches. The fundamental disagreement has not disappeared in the course of the seminars and collective discussions; both sides remained dissatisfied and disappointed with the huge, and largely unmanageable material. Despite the enormous wealth of information, no magic formula was found. This might be one of the reasons why this historical and sociological goldmine remained largely forgotten and unexplored for very long decades to come. There has not been any serious efforts up to this day to make scholarly use, to analyze the tens of thousand pages of the interviews.

⁹ National Security Archive. John Marks Collection. Entry 261. Box 3, folder 4.(1 February 1957)