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SOME ASPECTS OF HUNGARIAN AUDIENCE REACTION TO
RFE NEWS, INFORMATION, AND COMMENTARIES

Audience Analysis Section
Radio Free Europe, Munich



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I. INTRODUCTION

As stated in the appendix on sources, RFE's Audience Analysis Section was able to determine the broad outline and trends of Hungarian public reaction before the outbreak of the revolution. Many of these findings have since been verified by the flood of Hungarians with whom this section and other RFE staff members have had first hand contact.

Confirmation of pre-revolution "Audience Analysis" findings is particularly true with respect to news and information. Conclusions reached about this area of Hungarian listener likes and dislikes during 1955 and 1956 have been borne out by the comments of people from all social classes who are not available for interview.

The Program Department and the Audience Analysis Section are now designing an experiment which undertakes to learn more about what people actually mean by "objective" news and information.

II. RELATIVE POPULARITY OF WESTERN STATIONS

On this basis of refugee statements during the period of April 1954 and October 1955, Audience Analysis Assessment Memorandum No. 24 concluded that RFE was then considered the most popular Western station in Hungary. It was further stated that the broadcasts of VOA elicited less response than those of RFE or the BBC, although BBC was cited as being the most popular station among the better educated listeners - largely because of people's belief in its news objectivity.

Current research indicates that RFE sources during this period understated the popularity of the VOA. Typical sources now available cite RFE and VOA as being the most popular, with VOA often having the advantage because of its official U.S. Government status. BBC continues to be preferred by the better educated classes. These latter sources often rank RFE as a poor third among the three major Western stations broadcasting to Hungary.

At the same time, RFE seems to have been listened to more frequently, and its programs are recalled far more frequently by people who are asked to name any Western radio personality or programs to which they listened. *

II. TRENDS IN CURRENT AND PAST AUDIENCE REACTION TO NEWS AND INFORMATION OF WESTERN STATIONS

Current refugee criticism of RFE programs strongly reinforces past Audience Analysis Section findings with respect to program reaction. It is particularly interesting to refer back to a special memorandum prepared in July 1956 which included a section on program reaction trends since July 1955. This memorandum employed findings which had been disseminated on several occasions during the period in question. Because radio listener-refugees and letter writers consistently raised the same objections throughout that

* See Audience Analysis Special Report No. 6 for a very dramatic demonstration of this in a sample of 800 recent Hungarian refugees.



period, and because Hungarians were still making these very same points en masse after the revolution, this portion of the memorandum dealing with Hungary is reprinted here exactly as it appeared interspersed with occasional interpretive comment.

In referring back to the above mentioned special memorandum, trends of refugee statements during the period July 1955 to June 1956 were as follows.

"News

1. News broadcasts are the only irreplaceable program category on Western stations.
2. The demand for straight, factual, unbiased news is a permanent feature of all refugee statements referring to this subject.
3. Many sources feel that objective and complete newscasts are equally important in interpreting the international situation as political commentaries.
4. Concerning objectivity in the news, RFE takes second place to the BBC."

(RFE newscasts have been subjected to scathing criticism by the majority of recent sources, both intelligentsia and otherwise. Although a number of sources approve of RFE news presentation, the consensus charges that RFE news is biased, sometimes inaccurate, and feeds Hungarian listeners a "milk diet" as far as unfavorable news is concerned.)

"Information About the West

1. One of the important trends in current audience response to RFE's broadcasts is the increasing demand for detailed and descriptive programs about the West.
2. The variety of requests concerning different aspects of life in the West would seem to indicate that RFE's audience acutely recognizes that it is completely deprived of objective sources of information at home.
 - a. Workers. Requests for information from this social group are of an essentially practical nature. Typical suggestions are trade unionism, status of social welfare in the West, working and living conditions, pay differentials for the different professions and purchasing power of the workers, safety (industrial), mechanical innovations and technical achievements, etc.
 - b. Peasants. Suggestions emanating from these sources are similar in nature to those of the workers but concentrating, naturally, on agrarian subjects. On the whole they revolve around the problems of their social counterparts in the industrial societies of Western Europe and America, mechanization, cooperatives, new techniques, etc.
 - c. Educated classes. These sources have at times been most critical of RFE's programs. In general they expect programs of higher intellectual standards than was the case heretofore. The educated members of RFE's audience still feel themselves to be a part of, and still have an interest in, the intellectual activity of the West."



(The emphasis on information about the West hardly needs to be emphasized at this juncture. Sources over the past two and a half years have almost universally stated that next to newscasts this type of programing is greatly desired by all Hungarians. From the listener point of view, too much time is taken up with empty verbiage directed against communism and on internal Hungarian affairs.)

"Commentaries

1. Commentaries on current political events which present a reasoned interpretation of the international situation from the point of view of RFE's various audiences are approved by listeners.
2. Listeners generally appreciate RFE's knowledge of internal affairs despite critical reservations as to the accuracy of some of the details. But some sources indicate that they dislike the emphasis placed on domestic events throughout the programs of RFE.
3. It is pointed out that such programs are double-edged -- impressive if correct, but damaging to RFE's prestige and credibility if proven wrong by personal knowledge or by evidence produced by the regimes.
4. The commentaries of Gallicus and Farmer Balint are approved by the majority of sources mentioning them.
5. A critical trend, however, can be noted in connection with domestic commentaries in general. RFE is accused by some sources of "trailing behind the regime", i.e., devoting too much time to refuting the claims of the regime. These sources, albeit a minority, assert that no one is interested in RFE's "opposition to the Szabad Nep". "

(The current findings in connection with the popularity of the Gallicus program reveals that Gallicus' popularity is found among the workers and peasants and among the members of the "old-time" intelligentsia. These sources were enthusiastic in their praise of Gallicus, maintaining that Gallicus "struck just the right tone in denouncing the communists".

Among those more dedicated adherents of the peaceful reform of the communist system, Gallicus is anathema. These sources are quite bitter about his programs, charging that he could not distinguish between black and white when dealing with the Hungarian "thaw". An engineer who supported Imre Nagy, put it thusly: RFE always distinguished between bad and worse, never or rarely between bad and less bad. When the whole nation turned toward Nagy as the less bad, the "Reflector only said that a communist remained a communist". (See Special Report No. 8 for an elaboration of this philosophy.)

Gallicus' tone was such that his programs are either accepted in toto or were similarly rejected in a similarly extreme way. To the great mass of Hungarians he acted as a necessary safety valve. As one source said: "Gallicus was an auditory phenomenon, not literary. He was extremely impressive if a little too theatrical".



Farmer Balint's popularity rests on similar premises as that of Gallicus. His manner of delivery and the dialect in which he addresses his audience is unique among RFE editors. Many sources in the past and also those few peasants among the sources reporting in the current emigration maintain that he has a large following among the peasantry in Western Hungary. However, Farmer Balint's programs are praised far more for the knowledge they indicate of peasant psychology than for knowledge of the agricultural situation, including the system of selling agrarian products to the state.

As noted in the last point in the trends of audience response to Western broadcasts, sources decisively reject over emphasis on internal Hungarian affairs and empty polemics with regime periodicals. It is significant that the most violent criticism of RFE is directed at RFE's treatment of domestic events.

Polemics with regime periodicals are characterized by many sources as a waste of time, because people do not read them anyway. This lends credence, sources said, to the accusation that RFE is essentially negative in approach. Having nothing positive to offer, this reasoning continues, RFE must always "counter-punch" and seldom offers new and original ideas.

Similar views of RFE's commentaries on Hungarian events came from an official of the Nagy revolutionary government. He said that during the last two years RFE's programs increasingly assumed approximately the same content as the regime's press and radio media: "We could find out just as much about what was going on in and outside of Hungary by consulting our own press and listening to the regime radio. RFE talked down to its audience constantly, exaggerated some small item of information about Hungary out of all proportion, and omitted things of real importance. It demonstrated a complete lack of understanding of the political maturity of the people".

The complaint about alleged RFE misinterpretation of the domestic political situation is also closely connected with the related charge of too much propaganda content in RFE programs. This propaganda consciousness is immediately evident in conversations with new refugees.

Propaganda Consciousness

The majority of sources usually volunteered their dislike of any type of programing which smacked of what they termed propaganda. RFE, many sources insisted, was the one Western station consistently guilty of this "travesty of Hungarian intelligence". Sources usually coupled the need for objectivity in broadcasting while deploring what they termed "RFE's propagandist tone".

A member of the economic planning ministry summed up RFE's four years of activity as follows: "The broadcasts were essentially negative in character. RFE's pathetic, theatrical and chauvinist voices stirred our existing hatred... (but)... they were ^{never} sufficiently objective for us to accept as sober and reasonable guides".

From several sources comes the information that RFE's reputation for exaggeration and slanted bias has become a colloquialism in Hungary. In political arguments, the participants countered the



charge of "that's a communist lie" with "that's a Free Europe lie!" Another source compared RFE with the communist press. He said that listening to RFE was like reading Szabad Nep: "When reading the Szabad Nep one always tried to read between the lines and while listening to RFE one had to listen between the words."

When questioned about his knowledge of alleged deportations, a refugee forester replied that he had "heard about them over RFE, but this station is not very reliable".

Examples of this type of criticism are frequent, and increase as more refugees are asked to comment on the credibility of RFE. The most damaging of all accusations in this connection was the statement of an intelligent Hungarian whose opinion on other subjects was rational enough. This source claimed that at times "the programs on RFE reminded him of the propaganda of Dr. Goebbels!"

The complaints of propaganda in most cases were directed at programs dealing with the internal situation. As mentioned elsewhere, sources would prefer to hear less about their daily misery or the chicanery of the regime and more about the West. They point out that commenting on internal Hungarian affairs carries with it the danger that inevitable inaccuracies are bound to be caught by listeners.

Honest mistakes due to insufficient information can be forgiven, asserted a source. But the superior tone of programs dealing with internal affairs infuriates people who know and can see with their own eyes that RFE is making a "stupid mistake". What we resent most, said a young engineer, is the tone of RFE which seems to say "Dear listener, now you will hear God Almighty report on Hungary". More restrained sources suggest that RFE use more humility in reporting on Hungarian affairs. They pointed out that RFE certainly must have realized that it has been wrong before in its guessing game with regime policy and by now should have drawn the necessary consequences.

The voice production of some RFE speakers was also criticized by many sources. These voices were said to be "harsh", "strident", "insincere" and "infuriatingly superior" in tone.

From the foregoing it would appear that the tone of RFE's programs was almost as important in influencing listener reaction to programs as the actual content. Many sources asserted that RFE's tone directly contributed to the feeling, prevalent among many Hungarians, that RFE's approach to Hungarian affairs was "biased", "supercilious" and "exaggerated".

Special Note on "Contradictory" Reaction to Gallicus Program

This paper is not concerned with defining good propaganda or bad propaganda. Listeners are obviously the ultimate judges of what is propaganda and what is not.

Hungarians have conclusively demonstrated that they do not have to be told that communism is bad; that the Soviet Union is exploiting the country or that the country's economic situation is catastrophic. In this connection listeners maintained that



programing dealing with these topics - if they do not contribute specific information - should be discontinued.

Hungarian listeners do feel they need to be assured that RFE is cognizant of the significance of the revolution to the future generations of Hungary. They also hope that RFE realizes and approves of the national aspirations of the revolution and will adjust its programing accordingly.

The case of Gallicus is not a simple one. As stated previously, he is not a neutral personality among RFE's audience. He enjoys great popularity among the majority of RFE listeners -- even among those who criticized RFE for lack of adequate objectivity -- while at the same time he is anathema to a significant and important minority. Gallicus was very likely the consistently most influential voice of the VFH. It is just for this reason that Gallicus is so heartily condemned by those intelligentsia who supported the "thaw" elements in Hungary.

It may appear contradictory that the "average" listener in Hungary is an enthusiastic supporter of Gallicus on the one hand, and yet still approved the activities of the communist opposition. Gallicus listeners have probably stopped considering the "communist opposition" as mortal enemies exemplified by Rakosi and Gero. A hypothetical case can be reconstructed as an illustration. Prior to the revolution Gallicus launches a scathing attack on the publisher of the Monday News. He points out that the publisher had been a fascist, an admirer of Hitler, a servant of stalinism and now claimed to be in the vanguard of the liberalization movement in Hungary. Gallicus' listeners impressed only by the undeniable impact of his language and the élan which characterizes his programs probably said: "Gallicus gave it to them again!" The following Monday this same person probably jostled his neighbors at the news stand trying to get his copy of the sensational anti-stalinist Monday News because this paper was "giving it to them" as well.

(For a "thaw" reporter this program must have seemed like blasphemy. At that moment, he could not care less about the past reputation of the publisher of Monday News. The important thing was that this paper was fulfilling an important task: hammering at Stalinism in Hungary.)

The apparent answer to this contradiction (i.e., favor for Gallicus broadcasts in spite of a desire for a more realistic appraisal of internal events) is that Gallicus listeners have apparently long since stopped listening for the significance of what he says. He is identified in the minds of his audience as a colorful, eloquent and indomitable opponent of communism and Hungarian communists. In other words, Gallicus is "auditory, not literary" in his satisfaction of their emotional needs, with the accent on auditory.

IV. APPENDIX: PRE- AND POST-REVOLUTION SOURCES FROM HUNGARY

As in past Audience Analysis material, the claims of one interview source are often challenged and contradicted by the assertions of another. However, there have been important differences in the type of sources available for interview since the revolution began. Large numbers of sources are now available for interviewing



purposes and the characteristics of sources are subject to a greater degree of selectivity.

The pre-revolution refugee was an anomaly in contrast with the Hungarian population as a whole. This few refugees who were successful each month in the dangerous attempt to reach the West had left a "normal" Hungarian society because of non-typical factors operating in their lives. How qualified were they to discuss the morale of the nation, of their friends and neighbors? Could they accurately ascertain and interpret the degree of resistance of the Hungarian people to its communist regime? What were the effects of previous interrogation by Austrian authorities and (sometimes) other Western agencies? In short, were these people and their opinions an accurate reflection of the mood of the nation? These questions always had to be considered in appraising source data.

Many pre-revolutionary sources, extenuating circumstances aside, had in the main a defeatist mentality. In any normal Western society there are frequent job-changers, run-away husbands, etc. -- individuals who tire of professional, community and personal responsibilities who simply remove themselves to more distant cities without, in the case of refugees, physically leaving their native countries.

As important factor to be considered when evaluating the statements concerning RFE from members of the current emigration is that they may be termed "independent" sources as opposed to the former "dependent" sources typified by the lone, individual pre-revolutionary refugee.

Pre-revolution sources were "dependent" in the sense that knowing they were being interrogated by an RFE official they probably withheld or were restrained in their criticism of the VPH. (In comparison to some of the severe and detailed criticism from the current emigration, even some of the violent pre-revolutionary criticism of RFE pales into insignificance.)

The pre-revolutionary source being usually alone, in contrast to his post-revolutionary counterpart who undoubtedly finds some comfort in numbers, possibly looked upon RFE as an official agency which could help him in becoming settled in the West and probably felt it better not to jeopardize this potential help by too much negative criticism.

Conversely, the post-revolutionary refugee, regardless of his activity during the revolution, is independent in the sense that he is less subject to inhibitions in connection with RFE such as described above. There is obviously a great psychological difference in that he feels that the recent events in Hungary compel him to tell what he believes to be the truth about RFE and its past activities. Every source is concerned with the fate of the revolution and the ultimate fate of Hungary. Their criticism of RFE is colored by the fear that RFE will not play an adequate role in the political life of post-revolutionary Hungary. According to many of these sources, RFE's past activities have not always had an efficacious effect or impact on public opinion in Hungary. Although there is some purely malicious criticism of RFE, the majority of sources are motivated by the desire to correct alleged past mistakes in RFE policy and to improve the broadcasts of the VPH.



On the basis of the above it would seem to follow that many of the pre-revolution sources would be less susceptible to appeals to resist the regime by methods outlined or suggested over RFE. And the majority of these sources would not be found among the adherents of the "peaceful reform" of the communist system. A firm believer in such a possibility would be more apt to stick it out even under personal danger to fight for his conviction under "normal" circumstances.

Nevertheless, despite these differences characterizing refugee sources available to RFE for analysis before and after October 23, careful evaluation of refugee statements supplemented by regime information media, regime officials abroad and reports of visitors and western correspondents, made it possible to establish in broad outlines the trends of Hungarian attitude toward RFE and the various political and economic problems confronting pre-revolutionary Hungary.

