

January 8, 1962

Mr. Cleon O. Swayzee, Associate Director
International Training and Research Program
The Ford Foundation
477 Madison Avenue
New York 22, New York

Dear Cleon:

Inasmuch as Paul Zinner's book on the Hungarian Revolution and its background is now in the hands of the printer, and the remaining funds of the Ford grant will be exhausted in the course of its publication, this is an appropriate time for a final and general report on the Columbia University Research Project on Hungary, which was initiated in the spring of 1957. In making this report I should like to indicate not only the achievements but also the shortcomings and negative results. Since I have been responsibly involved in the Project from the outset, I should not want to pretend that all has gone well or that the results were all we hoped for. Moreover, it has occurred to me that a frank and critical appraisal could be of use to the Foundation in conjunction with other undertakings of this nature that may come up for consideration in the future.

Let me first report on what has been achieved:

1. In the first place, the Project did realize its primary aim. The interviews with over 200 Hungarian refugees were held (chiefly in Europe in the summer of 1957), the protocols translated and stenciled. We have an archive of about 15,000 pages of interviews (plus some essays). This information would be quite impossible to obtain now. One set of interviews is in the Columbia Library, available to properly qualified scholars. We have nine other sets, which we intended to deposit in other libraries, if so desired. We have felt obliged to delay, however, in making these materials completely accessible to all users. Despite our efforts not to have information of a delicate or possibly compromising nature, we have not felt sufficiently sure of our screening (given the murky situation in Hungary) to feel that we could, without risk, put the materials now in the public domain. I would hope, however, that in the near future, wherever a responsible scholar is willing to serve as custodian for the materials, we can let his library or institution have a set.

In conjunction with our own archive, we have also acquired a set of the Free Europe Committee interviews, and also the Russian

interviews of the earlier Harvard Project (which provide comparable data in many areas). Hence, we have established a quite valuable and irreplaceable collection of data for future scholarly use.

2. Publications:

Paul Zinner's manuscript on the revolt and its political background is now at the printers. The book, of about 500 pages, should be published in the course of the spring. This was to be our central study, and while it has been very long in travail, it does, in my opinion, significantly advance our knowledge of the Hungarian revolution.

A second monograph, by Rainer Koehne, dealing with social attitudes, is still in progress - glacial progress - but I am hoping for the completed text in the course of the spring. As yet I do not know whether it will turn out to be a single book or should be published as a series of articles. This will depend upon the author's ability to tie his various threads together.

A doctoral dissertation on the Hungarian Communist Party was started as part of the project; the author has been in Munich this past year working through the RFE materials. It should be completed in the course of this coming year. The author, William Mc Cagg, now a Ford Fellow, is a promising young scholar and I trust that his study, when completed will warrant publication.

One of our interviewers, Miss Marian Low, is writing a dissertation, at Harvard, on the Hungarian populists. Some of her material is based on the Project, and we provided her with one grant to assist her in writing it up. When last I heard from Robert Wolff, her supervisor, it had not yet been completed.

Several shorter pieces, based on the interviews, have appeared:

Paul E. Zinner, "Revolution in Hungary: Reflections on the Vicissitudes of a Totalitarian System," The Journal of Politics, Vol. 21, 1959.

Paul E. Zinner, "Hungary's Imre Nagy: Revolutionist at the End," Columbia University Forum, Vol. II, No. 1, Fall, 1958.

Elinor Murray, "Higher Education in Communist Hungary, 1948-1956," The American Slavic and East European Review, October, 1960.

Harris L. Coulter, "The Hungarian Peasantry, 1948-1956," The American Slavic and East European Review, December, 1959.

In addition, two books have recently been published which - while they were not supported or sponsored by the Project - made substantial and authorized use of the interview materials:

Paul Kekskemeti, The Unexpected Revolution: Social Forces in the Hungarian Uprising (Stanford, 1961). The author states in his preface: "I also examined transcripts of over a hundred interviews collected in the Columbia University Project on the Hungarian Revolution."

Ferenc A. Vali, Rift and Revolt in Hungary (Harvard, 1961). In looking through the author's footnotes I found over 100 references to the Project's interviews.

So, the Project has not been without publishable products, and I am reasonably certain that most of the works still in progress will, in one form or another, be published eventually. The Project has, though very belatedly, achieved the principal goals set forth in the initial proposal and in the supplementary request.

To turn to the negative side -- the difficulties, shortcomings, and failures -- these fall under several headings. In a general way we were aware in advance of many of the problems we were likely to encounter, partly because of the previous experience of the Harvard project. We consulted with many of the participants of that project when we were setting up our own. Looking back, however, I am struck by the manner in which, despite advance warning, we ran into nearly all the same troubles (and came up with some of our own). This would suggest that such undertakings have certain inherent liabilities that may be very difficult to avoid.

1. Hasty organization! One whole set of difficulties, perhaps unavoidable under the circumstances, arose from the fact that the project was organized very rapidly. We had to recruit interviewers in a hurry, make housing arrangements in Germany under some pressure, devise terms of work (salaries, rights to use the materials, royalties, etc.) as we went along. In nearly all cases we paid dearly for this haste: battles with the German landlord, friction in the staff, disputes on authors' rights, etc. These housekeeping and administrative problems involved an enormous loss of time and temper for all concerned. There is no need to go into the details, but I would warn future project directors to have all eventualities covered as well in advance as possible. This is very obvious, perhaps, and I may have had to learn a number of administrative axioms the hard way.

2. Temporary organization: The project had to hire quite a number of people for a short term. This created the inevitable

difficulty that midway in the project people on temporary assignment either felt that they must start looking for their next job, or were tempted to drag out their present assignment. Either way the project suffered. This experience has made me very shy of assuming responsibility for short-term projects involving the recruitment of a staff; they seem bound to produce extremely tough personnel problems.

Moreover, the permanent members of the faculty who were associated with the project were under heavy, and natural, pressure to resume their normal duties, especially as time passed. While both Dallin and I spent several summers on the material, neither of us, because of our other obligations, was able to make much of an intellectual contribution to the analysis. It was not the kind of work that could be handled in spare hours. Fortunately, it was possible to get quite a bit of released time for Zinner, who did complete the central study.

3. Cooperation with other groups: As you may recall, after the completion of the interviews, it became clear that the various groups - the Columbia project and others - that had worked with the Hungarian refugees were all having trouble proceeding into the phase of analysis and write-up. We tried, in consultation with two of these groups, to join forces. Rather careful plans were drawn up and a division of labor agreed upon. Unfortunately, this effort simply did not work out. Men resigned and went on to other jobs, agencies lost interest or had new tasks. A great deal of time went into these attempts at coordination and cooperation that we must write off as a nearly complete loss. In all this there was no friction or dispute; just no results.

4. Relation of input to output: I am not at all sure that the product is commensurate with the quite considerable financial investment, though such things are hard to measure. A team project, involving administrative staff, quarters, etc., carries a lot of costs that are not directly productive of results. Some costs-- such as the legal fees arising out of our dispute with the landlord -- had no positive value. Certain major costs were necessary: I still think it was a sound decision to do the interviewing in Europe, where we got a much better sampling than would have been available in this country. It is harder to judge whether the number of interviewers and the number of interviews were an optimum, or whether we went past the margin of returns. This, however, leads to my central area of doubt: the utilization of the interviews.

5. The use of the interviews: We had far better luck (including the amount of time spent) in gathering the material than in digesting, interpreting, and presenting it. The reason may, in part, be the administrative problems referred to above. But beyond that I have the impression that we have not yet mastered the techniques for making adequate use of this type of data. I

spent one whole summer going through every interview and at the end was quite depressed to find that, while it had made most absorbing reading, I was quite snowed under by both the volume and the repetitiousness of the information. I have subsequently had a number of conversations with various people, historians, sociologists, and political scientists, and have come to the conclusion that an appropriate methodology is yet to be devised.

If my impression is correct, this has a number of significant intellectual and practical implications. In the present world situation this type of data may often be the best we can hope for. It is clearly important that we be better equipped to extract the most from it. On the purely practical side I would strongly urge that any project contemplating such a venture have in mind quite clearly, and at the outset, just how it will carry out all the stages of the job, and, in particular, how it plans to analyze its raw findings. It is not enough simply to project so many months for data gathering, so many for processing, so many for analysis and write-up. These steps should be envisaged quite concretely.

To conclude, I should like to make one defense of the whole project that may not be so apparent today. When the Project was first considered, immediately following the Soviet suppression of the revolt, it looked for a time as though the iron curtain were going to close again as in the darkest days of Stalin. Our initial proposal had an urgent sense that unless these refugees were interviewed for what they knew, we might remain seriously ignorant about the shape of things in Eastern Europe. Fortunately, a degree of relaxation returned, Eastern Europe is relatively accessible, and hence the reasons for the project are not as urgent as they appeared in mid-winter of 1956-57. I cannot regret that our fears in this were not born out.

Finally, I should like again to thank the Ford Foundation for its generous assistance, and for its patience.

Sincerely,

Henry L. Roberts

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