

**December 19, 1956**

**Letter, Horace J. Nickels (American Consul) to L.  
Randolph Higgs (Special Assistant for Operations,  
Department of State)**

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**Summary:**

Horace J. Nickels, American Consul in Munich, reports his impressions of interviews with some 60 Hungarian refugees in Vienna the week of December 10

**Credits:**

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**Contents:**

Original Scan



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assisted at the outset by Emery R. Kiraly (on detail from the Department) and, for most of the time, by Emile W. Juhass (on detail from Stuttgart, a former member of the Peripheral Reporting staff in Austria). These two Hungarian-speaking officers were already engaged in processing the refugees for parole purposes and their services as interpreters were also made available to me.

Every effort was made to minimize occasion for self-serving responses on the part of the refugees in consequence of their desire to migrate to the United States. My interviewing has taken place after their papers were certified to ICEM and just before they moved out for transportation. In some instances the personal acquaintance or mutual associations of Mr. Juhass with the refugees were utilized to stimulate an atmosphere of frankness. But for the most part, I took subjects at random as representing a cross-cut of types, age and place of residence.

Since the refugees are being interviewed by many others such as MRC newsmen, ICEM public relations representatives and commercial correspondents and since most of them seem perfectly willing to talk, I believe the sampling done for our purposes will not occasion any attention.

In the circumstances, it has been impossible to apply the sort of controls employed in "scientific" polling. And because the parole processing of the refugees whom I interviewed could not be delayed unduly, the time and care which might normally be devoted to a Peripheral Reporting case have been circumscribed.

#### B. RESULTS OF INTERVIEWS

As a result of a week's interviews with more than sixty refugees, a pattern of response has emerged which varies only in minor and incidental respects. Its essentials are as follows:

1. A majority of the refugees interviewed claim to have been regular listeners to Western, especially American, radios before and during the uprising.
2. Their choice of stations was limited somewhat by conditions of reception. Otherwise, their likes seem to bear a strong relation to their respective social strata: in general, those of the intelligentsia express a preference for BBC and VOA (in that order); RFE seems to have more of a mass appeal. The reasons given by those who prefer BBC and VOA programs are that they display greater objectivity, provide less colored and more factual news,

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and are marked by a higher degree of accuracy. The principal reason given by those who prefer RFE (besides its more extensive programming and easier reception) is that its broadcasts are harder hitting. Whether blame was attributable to the

3. The refugees interviewed state unanimously that the American media had no direct responsibility for occasioning the uprising, which they attribute to the part-up, explosive hatred of the twelve-year Soviet-Communist oppression and restiveness under bad economic conditions which needed only a spark to set off the explosion. This was supplied by Gero's speech on his return from Budapest and by the AVD shooting. The revolt was spontaneous, unorganized and unanticipated when the writers and students (encouraged by Polish successes) made their initial demands. As a matter of fact, the active resistance was launched not by the anti-Communist elements but by the student-worker-intellectual cream of Communist society. The refugees say that our media contributed only indirectly to the outbreak of the revolution, in the sense of having helped to keep alive ideas and love of freedom, an awareness of Western sympathy, hope for a better future and a latent spirit of (passive) resistance.

4. All of the subjects interviewed have disclaimed hearing or hearing of any specific American radio programs which led them to expect Western military aid. Nevertheless, all but a few of the most sophisticated have stated that they, their associates and the Hungarian people generally expected some kind of tangible assistance from abroad, although, for the most part, this was conceived in vague terms. A considerable number of the subjects have avowed a hope of receiving armament material (especially anti-tank weapons) without reasoning the manner or consequences of delivery. A majority say they looked for assistance through UN auspices, whether by a contingent of troops or other form of decisive pressure to effect a Soviet withdrawal. A very few have expressed the belief that armed assistance would have threatened another world war in which Hungary would have suffered even more. While some have admitted that their hope for Western armed intervention sprang from their own needs, some have stated that radio reports of current developments in the UN and other Western circles (although not inflammatory or misleading per se) contributed to the expectation that some effective aid would be forthcoming.

5. The subjects interviewed overwhelmingly reject the attribution to American media of any direct responsibility for prolonging the fighting. The media, they say, made only an indirect

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contribution comparable to that mentioned above. A couple of exceptions to this response proved either to be hearsay or lacked specificity as to whether blame was attributable to the radios themselves (in particular, RFE) or to the Hungarian freedom stations (some of whose appeals RFE relayed back into Hungary). The subjects agree that Western broadcasts (including those of American media) performed a highly valuable and welcome service during the critical period as the only source of dependable information for the Hungarian people, facilitating contact between different sections of their country, bolstering internal solidarity, communicating outside interest, and supporting a feeling that they were not left alone.

In this sense, the media are said to have sustained the spirit of active resistance, but also in this sense were not criticized by any of the refugees interviewed. All agree that the prolongation of the fighting was due to such factors as the apparent initial successes of the insurgence, the spirit of outrage or revenge against AVO and Soviet actions (including the crack-down of November 4) and a determination, springing from strictly Hungarian motivation, to continue resistance by whatever means so long as possible. The subjects have been unanimous in the opinion that the fighting would have kept on regardless of the media.

6. As to specific programs before or during the crisis to which the subjects interviewed might have taken exception, a great preponderance of them stated either positively that they had no objections or could not recall any programs which left a sufficiently adverse impression to cite. A few expressed dislike for "the exaggerated tone" of RFE broadcasts; two of them mentioned in particular the commentaries of "Callicus" (vis. Imre Mikes). One said he found distasteful the broadcasting of jazz programs while people were dying. One thought RFE spent too much time conveying messages of refugees that would have been better spent on news. These criticisms, however, appeared to be essentially a matter of personal taste, not directly pointed to potentially basic faults in question. A more serious complaint of one subject was that RFE's refugee messages tended to pin-point relatives and friends remaining in Hungary. (I understand that these messages may in fact have merited this criticism when they were initiated, but that subsequently precautions were taken to avoid identification by the hostile agencies).

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2. With regard to balloon leaflet operations, my inquiry at Vienna has developed by and large only a slight first-hand acquaintance on the part of the refugees interviewed -- less as regards the Budapest area and somewhat more as concerns other parts of Hungary. A very few among the refugees expressing opinions in this regard considered the leaflet operation unnecessary under conditions where radio reception is adequate. Only one subject stated an objection to the operation on the ground of danger to a person found with a leaflet in his possession. None of those interviewed have raised objection on the score of an alleged safety hazard. Most affirm a view that the leaflet operation is a useful supplement to radio broadcasting especially for rural areas.

### C. OBSERVATIONS AND EVALUATION

My observations on the results of the interviewing to date are as follows:

1. In another context than that within which my inquiry has been conducted (viz. interviewing by an American official in connection with the processing of refugees for onward migration to the United States) significant differences of response might be obtained. I understand that the results of Tom Recknagel's inquiry even under similar conditions differ to some extent from mine. In a few informal conversations with newspaper correspondents and ICEM public relations representatives during my stay in Vienna, mention has been volunteered by them of refugee complaints against the media. However, discreet questioning on my part has failed to elicit anything concrete from such sources. They have either failed to obtain particulars from the refugees or have not differentiated between what might be attributable to the radios themselves (as in their commentaries) and thoroughly legitimate reporting by the radios (as, for example, of UN developments or statements by Western spokesmen). A meaningful evaluation of the question, of course, requires delicate precision of evidence. Out of their intensely felt need and certain misapprehensions, for which the media were not responsible, the Hungarians evidently developed expectations which may improperly be attributed to the media. An extreme example of such a possibility is illustrated by one or two of the persons I have interviewed who had the impression that a sizable German military establishment already existed (a notion which had been carefully fostered by Communist propaganda). They say that when Chancellor Adenauer voiced German sympathy for the Hungarian people and expressed a desire to be helpful in such ways as possible, some of them interpreted this as a prospect of German armed intervention.

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Whatever the exact phrasing of Adenauer's statement, it would doubtless have been quoted by the media and could even become the basis of a complaint that the media had misled the insurgents. In such soil, rumors of complaints against the media may have roots and need to be carefully explored.

2. It is my opinion also that responses of the refugees at this date may differ significantly from those which might have been obtained from even the same persons at the height of the crisis and in the immediate reaction to events following upon the Soviet invasion of November 4. The refugees have had time and opportunity to become more fully informed, to reflect upon the matters at issue and to discuss them with their fellow refugees. It is inevitable that their initial reactions have been modified and probably mellowed with the passage of time after the first frustrations.

3. Translations of RFE Hungarian program scripts for the period in question were being received at my office in Munich before my departure and being forwarded to you. Of perhaps 100 of these scripts which I had opportunity to scan, I found several which I considered highly questionable and one which was particularly bad from the standpoint of this inquiry. Dick Condon, whom I saw this past week in Vienna, stated that out of some 200-300 Hungarian programs of the period, they had found about 20 which should not have been broadcast. On this topic I shall write separately. I mention it now because I was prepared to hear specific complaints from the refugees against RFE. What is of special interest is that these failed to develop. My impression is that, however faulty such programs may have been, they did not have a far-reaching effect in producing adverse reactions by the Hungarians or in altering the course of events in Hungary.

4. I have interrupted my interviewing to give you this summary of my findings to date, partly because I realize that time is of the essence of their utility to you and partly because the pattern of response has become so strikingly clear and consistent that I doubt it will be altered by additional numbers of interviews. In any event, at the rate of parole case processing, interviewing in that connection probably cannot be continued much longer. And, as indicated above, I doubt that secondary sources of information will prove fruitful. Possibly additional data useful to the inquiry may be developed in the course of regular Peripheral Reporting from Austria, Germany and elsewhere.

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I know that RFE has conducted an inquiry of its own (both by analysis of scripts and refugee interviews) on which it reported to the New York office. This was not made directly available to the Consulate General before my departure and may be treated as only an internal matter between RFE/Munich and RFE/New York. Some of those who had a responsible hand in it made a sincere effort at objectivity and an attempt to avoid whitewash. I am reliably informed

As soon as my notes on the individual interviews can be worked into finished form, I shall forward them to you for detailed illustration of the above summary.

I should like to record my appreciation for the cooperation I have received at Vienna in every necessary respect.

My best wishes to you and Jack for the holiday season.

Sincerely,

/s/ Nick  
Horace J. Nickels  
American Consul

HJN:vb  
cc: Vienna  
Bonn  
Munich

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