

December 26, 1956

Interviews with Hungarian Refugees on Western Broadcasts

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Summary:

Bonn Embassy official T.M. Rechnagel, reports his impressions of interviews with some 100 refugees in the Salzburg area in December

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MEMORANDUM

TO: L. R. Higgs, Special Assistant for Operations, Department of State
FROM: T. M. Recknagel, American Embassy, Bonn
SUBJECT: Hungarian Reaction to Western Radio Broadcasts
REF: Department Telegram 1437, November 26, 1956

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In the period from December 9 to December 22, 1956, I conducted approximately 100 interviews with Hungarian refugees in the Salzburg area. Most of the refugees were in the refugee encampment at Camp Liezenheim (Roeder), Salzburg, Austria, where they were being "processed" for entry into the United States as "parolees". Possibly 15 percent of the interviews were with persons either not in Camp Roeder or destined for some other country other than the United States.

The primary purpose of these interviews was to develop information of assistance in evaluating the reaction of the Hungarian people to broadcasts beamed at Hungary by various western media, and particularly United States media. Especial attention was paid to information which might indicate whether the Hungarian refugees echo the charges voiced in various circles in the west that Radio Free Europe and to a lesser extent, the Voice of America were guilty of inciting rebellion and of making false promises to the Hungarian people of material aid from the West.

It is recognized that the interviews conducted at Salzburg are possibly open to the criticism that they were all conducted with persons whose entry into the United States had already been approved and were, therefore, inclined to be less critical of things American than possibly the average. Also there is admittedly among such a group an element of fear lest an adverse statement might jeopardize chances of entry into the United States. I feel, however, that these aspects are of minimal significance. The Hungarians are not a people who mince words, and I had the impression that the Hungarians with whom I spoke, with few exceptions, spoke frankly and candidly. I made an especial effort to avoid any appearance of conducting questioning concerning radio broadcasts and I believe that very few of the interviewees were aware that this was my particular interest. I am sure that the pattern of the response which I received would be borne out, at least in its essentials, in similar interviews conducted among any of the recent refugees from Hungary.

The interviews

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The interviews revealed that virtually everyone in Hungary to whom an adequate radio is available listens to broadcasts in the Hungarian language from western radio stations. Those people to whom an adequate radio is not available include those who either don't have radios, have radios such as the so-called People's Radio that are too weak to get anything except Radio Budapest, or, as in the case of enlisted men in the army, are simply not in a position to listen to western broadcasts. Even the great majority of people in these categories, however, seem to have managed, particularly during the past year, to keep abreast of the news from the west by reports from trusted friends with radios. They were usually well aware of the broadcasts, could almost always name the major western stations such as VOA, RFE and BBC, and occasionally knew even individual programs.

Basic listening habits do not vary greatly on the basis of social, intellectual, or financial position. All who can, including allegedly even the communist officialdom, listen with great regularity to news programs broadcast in the Hungarian language by western media. There is seemingly universal awareness that Radio Budapest is purely a propaganda mouthpiece which is utterly unreliable, and the popularity of western broadcasts rests to an overwhelming degree on the simple fact that they are the only readily available source for the truth both about what is happening in the outside world and within the orbit.

Views on non-news programs varied, but not so much on the basis of group differences as simply on the personal preferences of the individual listener. Thus a young person long active in the resistance wanted more commentaries of the hard-hitting type "which appeal to the hot Hungarian temperament". A scientist heartily condemned such commentaries and wanted only news, careful objective commentary and programs bringing the best of western culture. A young jazz fan felt that American stations (by which he specified VOA and RFE) should broadcast only the news, cut out the commentaries and the local "Hungarian appeal" program and play quantities of American jazz. And so on. Only laborers and peasants as a group seemed to show a reaction generally common to the group. They tended to be uncritical of the programs providing only that the news and other programs were aimed at Hungarian interests.

Listening was considered more dangerous by those of higher intelligence than by the laborers and peasants probably because the former were more often the targets of the regime's wrath. None talked about what they heard except within the family and circles of intimate friends. This situation gradually changed over the past year, particularly since the XXth Party Congress in Moscow. Many said that even before October 23 it was possible to walk down the street and hear western radio broadcasts coming over radios in houses along the street. The regime apparently did very little to curb this. Since October 23 listening had been overt and, as might be expected, has become more intense and constant. Many people reportedly simply devote all of their free time to listening, hopefully, to western radios for the latest news. Refugees who left Hungary as

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-3-

recently as the second week in December reported that this continues to be the case.

It is of interest that very few persons among those interviewed, even those with a good command of English or some other western European language, professed to have been interested in or ever to have listened extensively to regular western European radio stations. The usual explanation for this was that they found the stations hard to receive and the programs generally uninteresting; the news programs often had nothing to say about Hungary and in terms of both reception and language were harder to understand than those broadcast in Hungarian by western media. Those few who said they did listen regularly to English, French or German broadcasts said they did so either because they felt it somewhat safer or because it gave them some feeling of escape.

Certain specific questions were raised in the Department's telegram of instruction concerning the interviews. These and the answers thereto on the basis of information obtained from the interviews follow:

(1) Do the refugees consider that the United States radio and pamphlet campaign over the period of years preceding October 23, 1956, had as its purpose the instigation of armed revolt?

The refugees definitely do not consider that the United States radio campaign as represented by both the Voice of America and Radio Free Europe (the only two American radio broadcasts with which they are familiar) had as its purpose the instigation of armed revolt. No one with whom I spoke suggested the idea and when I mentioned that there were charges circulating in some of the western press that these broadcasts either attempted to instigate revolt directly or, at least, contributed to the outbreak of demonstrations and armed revolt, they scoffed at such charges as absurd and probably communist inspired.

Insofar as the pamphlet (balloon) campaign is concerned, no one interviewed by me voluntarily mentioned ever having seen a balloon or having found a pamphlet. I did not ask direct questions concerning balloons but rather a general question as to whether they were aware of any way other than by radio in which news or communications from the west entered Hungary. Letters, scientific and academic publications and occasional newspapers were all mentioned, but never balloons or pamphlets.

The Hungarians appear to consider the United States radio campaign had and has as its purpose a continuing expression of interest by the United States in the plight of the Hungarian nation, and a contribution to the Hungarians own efforts to maintain their national self-respect and national consciousness in the face of Soviet efforts to destroy them.

Asked what they think did cause the revolt, the great majority replied that it was a combination of the increasingly intolerable economic and

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-4-

social conditions and the loosening of the Soviet grip after the XXth Congress. The pent-up hatred and the growing hope of release which accompanied awareness of events such as the Poznan riots, Tito's Crimea visit, the greater freedom to criticize initiated by the Hungarian "Petofi" Society and seized on avidly by the students, and finally the Caro visit to Belgrade provided the necessary ingredients. When the AV0 fired on the still unarmed crowd at the Radio Building in Budapest on October 23, it provided the spark which ignited the revolution.

There were only two ways in which any of the persons interviewed ever associated United States radio broadcasts with the revolt, both were very indirect. One was in praising the part that the broadcasts played in keeping the Hungarian spirit alive. The other was in criticizing broadcasts comparing the bad conditions in Hungary with the good conditions in the west on the grounds that such broadcasts merely aggravated discontent to no useful purpose since the Hungarians themselves knew the situation well enough without anyone telling them.

(2) What differences, if any, did refugees note as between United States and other western media, and as between United States media?

The refugees interviewed were almost without exception and regardless of their level of intelligence, position in the social scale, or even ownership of a radio, well aware that there were three major Hungarian language broadcasts from the west: BBC, VOA and RFE. This, too, was usually the order in which they listed them by preference. Although I did not question any one in detail concerning individual broadcasts to ascertain whether they really always knew to which station they were listening, I was satisfied from their awareness of broadcast times and broadcast techniques that they normally made an accurate distinction. A few refugees also mentioned distinctions between VOA, Munich and VOA, Washington, but this was always rather hazy.

As between United States and other western media United States media almost invariably came off second best to the only real rival, the BBC Hungarian Service. The two primary reasons given for this preference for BBC were: (a) BBC's news broadcasts are reliable and objective yet aimed at Hungarian interests, and (b) BBC's policies are "serious" and responsible and it has a reputation for dependability. It is interesting that I encountered this opinion "right across the board", with a noticeable variation between different social types and classes.

Other western or, at least, non-Moscow controlled media include Hungarian language broadcasts from a Spanish station, from Yugoslav stations and, allegedly, from Turkey. The Spanish station apparently is

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-5-

strongly pro-Worthy and indulges itself in vehement denunciations and violent quasi-fascistic harangues which despite their anti-communist nature seemingly find little echo in Hungary today. No one had much use for the Yugoslav broadcasts which were generally condemned as just another variety of communist lies. The Turkish station was mentioned vaguely by a few interviewees, but I was never sure that it was ever more than a figment of their imagination.

Regular western European stations, as mentioned above, were apparently listened to by relatively few and played no significant part in the Hungarian radio listening pattern.

Preference for BBC broadcasts, however, did not mean that BBC was the most listened to of the western stations. On the contrary, it was apparently hard to receive and on the air a relatively short time. RFE which was normally easier to receive and was on the air all but a few hours a day benefitted the most from this and seems quite surely to have the highest number of listeners day in and day out. Although RFE appears to have suffered heavier jamming than others this does not seem to have permanently discouraged listeners.

On the other hand the most popular American station, according to the refugees, was not RFE but VOA. Like BBC, however, VOA was not on the air long enough per day to compete with RFE in terms of listener-hours. The reasons for VOA's popularity are basically the same as those applicable to BBC - its news broadcasts were straightforward and reliable. VOA seems to lose out to BBC only in that its reputation is long established.

RFE generally was criticized for not being a "serious" station, for lack of objectivity and for irresponsibility. RFE was constantly charged with having made false promises, with having broadcast unconfirmed rumors as fact and with having involved itself too directly in the revolution. On the other hand the minority which supports and defends RFE cites these very aspects in RFE's favor, particularly the promptness of RFE news, the support given the Freedom Fighters by RFE in relaying news and messages from Freedom Fighter Stations during the revolution and RFE's position as the voice of Free Hungary itself. In general, and it must be stressed that there are so many variations in individual reactions that generalizations on this subject are difficult, refugees seemed to feel that RFE improved substantially after about November 7. There were, however, some who were critical of RFE's general policy prior to October 23 and praised the role that RFE played during the revolution.

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-6-

(3) During the period October 23 to November 15, 1956, were there any specific broadcasts which could be termed inflammatory?

Of the three major stations broadcasting to Hungary, only RFE was accused by the refugees of having made broadcasts which could have been termed inflammatory. The charges were relatively general, however, and I had no success in pinning anyone down to an exact hour and an exact statement of what the announcer actually said.

The most usual criticism took the form of a statement that the broadcasts between November 4 and November 6 contributed directly to keeping hostilities alive since RFE in this period specifically told the Hungarian people that if they would keep up the fight for at least three days they would have help from the United Nations. Persons making this criticism generally assert that they clearly understood this to mean that U.N. troops would be sent to Hungary - some even said "I heard him say just that with my own ears" - and many apparently fully expected that such troops would come. In seeking more accurate details I usually found agreement that these statements were made on broadcasts late at night and concerned the resolution introduced in the U.N. by the Cuban (variously referred to by the Hungarian refugees as the Italian, the Peruvian, etc.) delegate. The RFE announcer apparently made statements to the effect that the Freedom Fighters should keep up the resistance, that the U.N. was considering the Hungarian situation and preparing to act.

Although none of those who charged RFE with "encouraging" continued resistance would say, on further questioning, that in the absence of RFE fighting would have ceased. Some did insist that many persons continued fighting in reliance on "promises of help heard on RFE".

RFE was also criticized by at least 50 percent of the refugees for indirectly inflammatory broadcasts in that in the period after October 23 and again after November 4 RFE broadcasts told of fighting in areas where there was in fact no fighting. RFE broadcasts also urged the Hungarians to greater activity on behalf of the revolution, told them it was their glorious hour, and generally supported the cause of the Freedom Fighters. Of these activities cited by the refugees only the first was criticized. Almost every one of the many refugees who mentioned this stated that he was in such and such a town on a specific date and heard an RFE broadcast that there was fighting in that town when there in fact was none. These refugees criticized such broadcasts as undermining faith in the news and immediately after November 4, in encouraging hostilities beyond the impression of a more effective armed resistance than the Hungarians in fact were able to achieve. The more intelligent of the critics who raised these charges were inclined to excuse RFE, however, on the ground that they were reporting such "news" in good faith.

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Only one RFE commentator was criticized individually and this was an announcer known as "Gallant". Good enthusiasm was not necessarily accompanied with his good judgment. His programs in the period of the active revolution for the Freedom Fighters and were, according to the refugees who mentioned him by name, of a nature to encourage in the Hungarians the belief that the west was surely with them and would never let their revolution fail. Several refugees also mentioned, but not critically, a "Colonel Bell" who apparently broadcast advice on partisan fighting.

(4) Were commentaries regarded as more influential in the above respects than the selection of straight news items, including statements by prominent western leaders?

Definitely yes. This appears to be quite clear from the simple fact that BBC and VOA which engaged purely in the broadcast of direct news items without, apparently, any embellishment, were praised by the Hungarians but never criticized as having built up false hopes or encouraged continued resistance.

I very strongly received the impression that the Hungarians primarily are interested in listening to western radio stations for news, and, in the majority, prefer commentary in terms of reasoned serious comments on the news or, possibly even better, in terms of comments of leading public figures on world developments. Emotional commentary and commentary appearing to be from the Hungarian point of view apparently has a surprisingly small appeal and does run the risk of appearing inflammatory. Such commentary also runs the risk of provoking unintended political resentments in the minds of the listeners - for example several refugees stated they had the strong impression that RFE was controlled by rightist elements supporting the claims of the former land-owners and a return to pre-World War II conditions in Hungary.

(5) Were any concrete promises of material aid made by United States media or other western media?

Only RFE, of the three primary western media, was charged by any of the refugees interviewed with having made concrete promises of material aid. Usually this charge involved the same broadcasts discussed in detail under question 3 above which apparently led many Hungarians to the erroneous belief that United Nations troops were coming to their aid. Apart from this there were a few who stated that the radio had announced that there would be economic assistance for the Freedom Fighters and for the free Hungarian government and some interpreted this to mean immediate material aid. Reports on planned Red Cross assistance also appear to have caused some confusion as to the extent and type of material aid which

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-8-

to be extended to Hungary. No one mentioned hearing from western broadcasts any promises of material assistance in the form of arms for the Freedom Fighters.

COMMENTS AND CONCLUSIONS

I was greatly impressed by the fact that person after person of those interviewed, quite without any apparent connection with his social background, income or education, would express a preference for BBC, and would stress that the reason he liked it was because BBC news broadcasts were reliable. Similarly, VOA was quite regularly preferred over RFE for the same reason. Obviously the dominant reason for Hungarian listening to western broadcasts is to hear honest news and specifically to hear clear, accurate, well-presented news without embellishment. It also seemed evident that unless the news is presented simply, accurately and relatively objectively there is grave risk of serious misinterpretation by the listeners - this was most dramatically demonstrated in the misunderstanding concerning U.N. troops which arose from the RFE broadcasts on and immediately after November 4.

I was impressed by the number of persons interviewed who criticized RFE as not being a "serious" station. I interpreted the word "serious" when used by the refugees in this context to mean that they did not consider RFE a dependable and responsible station speaking accurately and with authority concerning the policies and views of the United States Government or any other western European government. This interpretation was borne out by further questioning. This criticism, particularly the charge that it is not a responsible and reliable station, would indicate failure by RFE to develop the degree of confidence in its reliability and integrity necessary to assure maximum effectiveness of its campaign.

I was not persuaded from the interviews that RFE had ever deliberately sought to incite the Hungarians to demonstrations or armed revolt, but I received a strong impression that some RFE broadcasts after October 23, and specifically those by the commentator called "Gallicus" which so actively and indirectly supported the revolutionary cause, even to the point of calling on all Hungarian citizens to support the Freedom Fighters and to stay out on strike, came dangerously close to the borderline of incitement. The refugees generally felt that such programs were damaging rather than helpful. The excessive support gave unjustified hopes of western assistance and the outspoken emotional identity with Hungarian interests was not nearly as helpful as straight re-broadcasts of messages from Freedom Fighter stations and similar forms of actual assistance.

The refugees with whom I spoke seemed in general to have a very hazy idea as to exactly what type of a station RFE is. Most assumed that it was some sort of an officially-sponsored American station but not the

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official American station which they consider the Voice of America. Some thought RFE was a station controlled by Hungarian spies, a few said they really felt it was the Voice of Free Hungary.

Finally, I was impressed by the extent of listening to western Hungarian language broadcasts. It is scarcely an exaggeration to say that the three primary western stations broadcasting to Hungary, VOA, RFE and BBC, are the three most popular and regularly heard stations in Hungary (including even Radio Budapest). Unless the Hungarian listening habits change radically or the regime introduces more stringent anti-listening measures, it would seem that any of these three stations could be assured of a sufficient listening audience for as many hours as they wish to broadcast per day.

On the basis of the foregoing and on the basis of the detailed information which I amassed from the interviews, I reached the following conclusions concerning the future of the United States radio campaign toward Hungary.

- 1) It is absolutely essential to the future effectiveness of the United States radio campaign in Hungary that news broadcasts be not merely given priority, but that maximum care be taken to assure the accuracy and clarity of presentation of news items to assure that they are not misleading or build false hopes. If rumors are reported at all, which is questionable, they should be clearly labelled as rumors.
- 2) Commentary should preferably avoid emotionalism and vituperation, instead emphasis should be placed on intelligent analysis of current world developments and the dissemination or rebroadcast of statements of interest by responsible statemen.
- 3) "Wonderful life in America" programs should be used sparingly.
- 4) Programs describing conditions inside Hungary should be used only to the extent necessary to assure the Hungarians that we know and understand their situation.
- 5) The balloon pamphlet campaign should be discontinued and the funds used for it applied to improving radio transmissions.
- 6) Speciality programs such as RFE's "Black Book" program should be handled with as much discretion and care as possible. This program, for example, is popular in general, but several refugees complained that it had also hurt innocent people.

7) Programs

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-10-

Programs apart from news and commentary deserve possibly
attention from the point of view of their entertainment value.
Programs of all types are surprisingly popular, emphasis in these
should be on western rather than Hungarian music, but not entirely.

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