

Contested Subjects across Cold War Frontiers: Hungarian Refugees from 1956

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Abstract

My project follows Hungarian refugees from the failed Hungarian Revolution of 1956 through the Cold War ideological and institutional structures of the immediate postwar period. To what extent did they adopt a Cold War script, and conversely and to what extent were they conditioned by the constraints of the geopolitical order? Moreover, how did they help constitute the international meaning of the Revolution? This project is motivated by answers to these questions and uses individual Hungarian refugee trajectories to unpack new insights on the Cold War, as well as how the Cold War obscured other concerns at the time – for instance, decolonization and processing the memories of the Second World War.

In the few months before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, I made several visits to the Rockefeller Archive Center with a research stipend I had received. I consulted records at the Archive Center as a crucial portion of my dissertation research. My dissertation project examines the various roles Hungarian refugees played in the international discourse of the Cold War after the failed Revolution of 1956. Generally, my dissertation is interested in the ways these refugees were conditioned by the early Cold War, as well as the extent to which they had agency in the construction of the international meaning of the Revolution and the meaning of the Cold War. As a project concerned with the Cold War, my research pointed to the important roles played by the Ford Foundation and Rockefeller Foundation. This brought me to the Rockefeller Archive Center.

While I was unable to complete my consultation of Rockefeller and Ford Foundation records prior to the imposition of COVID-related closures, I was able to construct two primary lines of inquiry. First, the case of the Philharmonia Hungarica, an orchestra composed of Hungarian musicians who had fled from their native Hungary during and after the Revolution and who applied for Ford Foundation funding in the years immediately after the events of '56. This case demonstrates the extent to which refugees adapted to the geopolitical and financial topography of the “West,” as well as how well they deployed scripts and narratives palatable to their Western sponsors. Second, I discovered a wealth of documents pertaining to the unique challenges presented in schooling Hungarian refugee children. What could be done to “deprogram” children who had grown up in communist societies and how could they be prepared for productive lives in capitalist and democratic modernity? The Rockefeller and Ford Foundations were clearly very invested in answering these questions and provided grants to many schooling ventures in the months and years after the Revolution.

Beginning with documents pertaining to the Philharmonia Hungarica, my consultation with the Rockefeller Archive Center’s records has helped me craft one of my dissertation’s central chapters. The Philharmonia Hungarica was founded in Austria in the months after the failure of the Hungarian Revolution.

The orchestra was composed of Hungarian refugee musicians and received Ford Foundation funds in its formation and early years of operation. The Ford Foundation supported the orchestra through an intermediary organization called the Congress for Cultural Freedom. Orchestra members learned quickly how to frame their efforts in terms that would be palatable to granting organizations such as the Ford Foundation and the Congress for Cultural Freedom. At times, conflicts also arose between the orchestra members and the granting organizations. I found that these conflicts to be particularly revealing. Since the Ford Foundation and the Congress for Cultural Freedom agreed to fund the orchestra on political grounds, ideological commitment to anti-communism was a priority for them vis-à-vis the composition of the orchestra. Members of the orchestra itself, however, were not always as committed to this ideological consistency. They seemed to have different ideas about the internal composition of the ensemble.

A dispute between the orchestra and the Congress for Cultural Freedom regarding the apparent mismanagement of orchestra funds by Tassilo von Daroczy-Merhals and the supposed declining musical quality of the group is revealing in this regard. As time wore on, some of the orchestra's best musicians moved on to more promising prospects, hired onto more prestigious orchestras or leaving music altogether. Moreover, their decision to leave was likely fueled by the Philharmonia Hungarica's uncertain future. Overall, the result was a marked decline in the musical quality of the group. Various music critics, as well as conductors brought on-board to assist with the orchestra, began expressing their concerns about the musical quality. Moreover, the Congress for Cultural Freedom grew increasingly impatient with what they perceived to be the mismanagement of orchestra funds.

As these problems mounted, Nicolas Nabokov, secretary general of the Congress for Cultural Freedom, pushed for the replacement of Tassilo von Daroczy-Merhals, a manager with the "Forum Kulturhilfe" who had been tasked with helping the orchestra. Apparently, Daroczy-Merhals burned through foundation funds too fast by taking on Hungarian actors for proposed operatic performances alongside the orchestra. Predictably, the language barrier was a

problem for these actors, who were not fluent in German or Italian.¹ More importantly, Nabokov insisted that the orchestra maintain a certain high standard of musical quality and that it retain members with what he called “unblemished political record[s].” This triggered the ire of the orchestra’s founder and part-time conductor Zoltan Rozsnyai. In a scathing letter to Nabokov and the Congress for Cultural Freedom, Rozsnyai asserted that he would “not tolerate” what he felt was “interference in [the orchestra’s] internal affairs.” In fact, Rozsnyai was shrewd enough to adopt the language of the Congress for Cultural Freedom and the big foundations. For instance, he acknowledged, even emphasized, the political nature of the orchestra. “It is the orchestra’s view that besides playing music it also has another function to fulfill, which is of a cultural-political nature.”² In his response, Nabokov emphasized that “this cultural-political task cannot be accomplished by an inadequate artistic instrument. The level of symphonic music in the Western world is very high.” Nabokov continued:

The competition is great and only a symphony orchestra of the highest quality, comparable to the great orchestras of Western Europe and America, can do justice both to the memory of the Hungarian Revolution and the great artistic tradition of Hungary. Philharmonia Hungarica must be able to measure up to the most rigorous critical standards, once the first flush of passionate enthusiasm has passed and critics and public alike listen to later performances objectively.³

He was quick to also highlight however, that it was “somewhat out of place” for Rozsnyai to lecture the Congress for Cultural Freedom about the fact that the “orchestra has not only an artistic role to play in the Western world, but also another and more important cultural-political task to accomplish.” In fact, Nabokov insisted that it “was for these very cultural-political reasons that we agreed to the orchestra sponsorship in the first place.”⁴

Furthermore, Rozsnyai argued that this “cultural-political” dimension was a “direct result of the October Revolution,” and therefore he insisted that the “orchestra can only exist as a homogeneous unit, just as the ‘Philharmonia Hungarica’ and [would] not tolerate interference in its internal affairs of any

kind.”⁵ So, with the orchestra’s internal cohesion and original membership on the line, Rozsnyai doubled-down on precisely the Cold War rhetoric that had been used to secure both Rockefeller Foundation and Ford Foundation funds in the first place. Rozsnyai insisted that the original membership, having come across the Iron Curtain together and spending time in Austrian refugee camps together, was best suited for carrying the symbolic messages that organizations like the Congress for Cultural Freedom, the Rockefeller and Ford Foundations were so interested in accentuating. For instance, having established his position, Rozsnyai later elaborated:

The whole orchestra is completely of the same opinion regarding these questions, who know first-hand, as the Hungarian musicians having participated in the revolution and knowing the conditions inside Hungary today, that the undermining of the orchestra’s unity or the dissolution of the whole body of sound is one of the most important tasks appertaining to the Hungarian communist propaganda apparatus. We firmly believe that every step in this direction serves primarily communist goals, even if such efforts come from the West!⁶

Here, Rozsnyai appeals to the first-hand experience of the Hungarian refugees themselves, including himself. The argument is simple: the value of the musically inclined Hungarian refugees was primarily in terms of their direct experience of life under communism and their musical talents, although meaningful in their own right, were only of secondary importance. He raised the stakes further by arguing that should the membership be tampered with, by Western organizations or otherwise, the effect would benefit communist propaganda emanating from Hungary.

Rozsnyai even went so far as to avow that only the members of the orchestra themselves, having actually lived through communism, could accurately and fairly judge the “political reliability” of fellow members. Referring to cases of political suspicion, Rozsnyai maintained that “nearly all members of the orchestra have already known each other for many years.” Therefore “we must reserve for ourselves the full right to make decisions on the judgement of political questions as we have done in the past, for example, in the case of Berei

– reporting to the communist authorities – as we have also already done.”⁷ Put simply, Rozsnyai was attempting to prove that he and the other members of the orchestra were sufficient in terms of policing the ensemble and ensuring nobody could undermine the political and symbolic potency of the Philharmonia Hungarica with secret communist credentials. Indeed, Rozsnyai point out to the Congress for Cultural Freedom that they had already done so, with Berei, a member of the orchestra who had been spying on the orchestra for the communists. Moreover, he insisted there was nobody better to sniff-out disreputable people among the musicians than their fellow musicians since they had known each other for years and had lived under the communist regime in Hungary. It is plausible, moreover, that Rozsnyai was referring implicitly to the discrepancy between the Congress for Cultural Freedom’s rigid strictures on not assisting those who had ever been members of any communist organization on the one hand, and the complex reality that everyday life in communist Hungary often required membership in some communist organizations. Therefore, according to Rozsnyai, personal experience with these communist systems and personal familiarity with one’s mates trumped abstract, one-size-fits-all strictures emanating from western organizations such as the Congress for Cultural Freedom or the big foundations.

If Rozsnyai’s letter came across as arrogant at times, Nabokov’s reply dripped with condescension:

It is difficult for us to accept what you say in paragraph 3 of your letter, namely that the Philharmonia Hungarica will not tolerate any interference or control of its internal affairs. If we are to continue our financial help to the Philharmonia Hungarica, we must preserve the elementary rights of any sponsoring organization to express its views, to give counsel, to approve or object to any changes in the internal structure of the organization it sponsors and to appoint for administrative and organization purposes (end of page 3) a person or persons in whom the sponsoring organization has complete confidence.⁸

Here, Nabokov reminded Rozsnyai, that as a sponsoring organization, the Congress for Cultural Freedom, and therefore, by proxy, the Rockefeller and

Ford Foundations as well, had financial leverage over the orchestra. A few sentences later, he added some bite. He reminded Rozsnyai, in these things the Congress for Cultural Freedom had “greater experience in the artistic and cultural life of the Western world than you and your Board were in a position to acquire [while in communist Hungary].”⁹ Now it was the Congress’ appeal to person experience, this time with the artistic milieu of the West that mattered most, not the Hungarian musicians’ experiences in communist Hungary. If anything, this experience was detrimental because it could not prepare them for artistic life in another socio-economic context. At least, this was Nabokov’s argument.

As for the “political reliability” of the orchestra’s members, Nabokov had revealing things to say, as well. “As to the various ‘suspicions and allusions’ you refer to in your letter, I wish to make it very clear that it is only natural for us to wish to deal with persons in whom we have complete confidence, persons whose honesty cannot be questioned and who have an unblemished political record.”¹⁰ One should immediately notice the euphemistic language used in this passage. Nabokov refers to “persons whose honesty cannot be questioned and who have an unblemished political record.” This was almost certainly code for people without a record of any membership in communist organizations. This was important since it was one of the stipulations affixed to those immigrant programs that admitted Eastern Europeans to the United States. Indeed, euphemistic language like this lubricated Cold War interactions by obscuring or blunting the underlying geopolitical motivations behind Ford and Rockefeller grants and fronting them with a veneer of cultural concerns.

Finally, Nabokov concluded with the following: “On the question of political records, we should indeed have thought, like you, that the orchestra itself would be best qualified for dealing with the matter, but unfortunately this has not always been the case.”¹¹ So, in terms of who should police the political consistency of the orchestra, both Rozsnyai and Nabokov had different visions, but more interestingly, they engaged in the same vocabulary, which had marinated in Cold War idiosyncrasies. They competed over who owned the political and symbolic value of the orchestra, and yet ironically, the metrics with

which they measured this value were strikingly similar. This case also shows the extent to which Hungarian refugees like Rozsnyai had agency, but where there was agency, it was conditioned by a certain way of speaking, which had traction in the geopolitical configurations that reigned in the mid-1950s. Rozsnyai tried to play this language to his own advantage by reframing the values attached to one's experience under communist rule; the very same language, we should add, that organizations like the Congress for Cultural Freedom activated in the months after the revolution. Nabokov, on the other hand, did his best to reassert control over these narratives and he had the most important trump card of all: access to funding.

By no means the only information I found on the Philharmonia Hungarica at the Rockefeller Archive Center, this dispute between Nabokov and the orchestra members is a representative case that I have integrated into my dissertation research. As explained above, the second type of source I have consulted at the Rockefeller Archive Center were those records pertaining to the education (or re-education) of Hungarian refugee children. For instance, the “English Language and Orientation Program for Hungarian Student Refugees” at Bard College. The orientation program was intended to prepare Hungarian college-age students for American universities. Like so many other education programs during the Cold War, the orientation program was funded in-part by a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation.

While conducting research at the Rockefeller Archive Center, I stumbled on the program faculty's final report submitted to the Rockefeller Foundation. This report sheds light on concerns regarding the re-education process and how to handle students whose previous education had occurred under Communist “totalitarianism.” For example, the report's authors examined the effect this communist system had on the Hungarian students' relationship with learning. For instance, consider this revealing passage:

While there is no doubt that the Hungarian students had reacted very negatively to the Russian-Communist experience in their homeland, the impact of the years of Russian domination, following as it did years of German control, and before that of

Fascist government under their own leaders, had had its effect. Little political maturity or sense of historical proportion could be expected under such circumstances; and the agitation of romantic and extreme émigré political groups in America did not aid in developing such understanding. Also, the tendency of Americans, knowing little of Hungary, to sentimentalize and oversimplify the Freedom Fight of October 26, 1956, confused the students, and often led them to imagine accounts to fit what their hosts seemed to want to hear. Since the objective of the program was to give ‘orientation’ to the newcomers these rather disrupting conditions are of some importance.¹²

The report continued by commenting on certain non-compliance and discipline problems among the Hungarian participants. Apparently, there was a “deeply instilled suspicion of authority.”

This passage is fascinating for a number of reasons. First, the authors were eager to lump Hungary’s various regimes together (fascist and communist) as equally corrosive to a proper democratic education. That being raised under these regimes had had a negative effect on the learning process was obvious to the faculty in charge of the orientation program at Bard. It is also interesting that the authors expressed concern about “romantic and extreme émigré political groups” already in America. This concern about the pre-existing Hungarian diaspora is interesting because it gestures to the various ways émigré communities and previous migrant waves conditioned this current wave of migration. A central theme in my dissertation will be how different generations of Hungarian migrants struggled over the international meaning of the Revolution. That the program faculty would refer to these émigré groups vaguely as “romantic and extreme” fits with much of my research; understanding an American Hungarian émigré community as seeing in 1956 an opportunity to rebrand the Hungarian narrative in the eyes of the world, and especially in the eyes of the United States. It is intriguing, for instance, that the program staff sought to redirect Hungarian students away from these émigré groups where they could be led astray and be prevented from “properly” integrating into American modernity. Finally, the authors commented on the fact that Americans’ general lack of familiarity with Hungary and Hungarian events contributed to the tendency among Hungarian refugee students to frame

their experiences of 1956 in terms that they felt their hosts wanted to hear. Again, this speaks to the refugees' awareness of scripts agreeable with host-society institutions and intermediaries.

The staff even agreed to create a student association in order to facilitate a sense of democratic participation among the Hungarian refugee students. The report explained the reasoning behind this decision in the following terms:

In view of the nature of the students – young people who had grown up under dictatorships and who had been tested in a bloody revolution, we considered it important that they should not feel subjected at Bard to a regimen that subordinated their role to one of passive acceptance. Rather, we wanted them to feel that they had come into a democratic community that invited their participation within a flexible framework, a community that respected their background, their experiences and achievements as well as their individual differences, needs and aspirations.¹³

Thus, the establishment of a student association was meant to overcome the “totalitarian” milieu in which they were born and raised by creating a venue within which these students could participate in their own education. Clearly, the faculty was preoccupied here with the meaning of a democratic education.

Other schools were also financed by American Cold War-era foundations such as the Rockefeller and Ford Foundations. For instance, I found exchanges between Edward F. D'Arms at the Rockefeller Foundation and Dr. A Kaan who founded the “Foundation of Friends of the Queen Juliana Hungarian High School at Iselsberg.”¹⁴ Furthermore, these foundations also backed personal grants to individual Hungarian refugee students. The disciplining effect scholarship aid could have on the behavior of Hungarian refugees was interesting in this sphere as well, especially when a given student's behavior did not conform to the standards expected by host-society universities and foundations. For instance, among the grant files in the Rockefeller Foundation records are exchanges between the foundation and Hungarian student Gabor Kemeny. Kemeny's arrogance and refusal to submit to a curriculum he believed was below his talents caused many problems. For example, in a phone call with

Rockefeller Foundation staff, Professor Eugene Paul Wigner urged them to give Kemeny a “‘fatherly’ lecture.”¹⁵ Notice the emphasis on appropriate behavior on the part of a refugee student as well as a paternalistic role assigned to the granting organizations. Taken together, these documents show the importance of educating these refugees. How to school Hungarian refugee students and children of all ages was a source of tremendous concern in the months and years after the failure of the Hungarian Revolution; concern which the Rockefeller and Ford Foundations clearly shared. I anticipate an entire dissertation chapter dedicated to this topic. In this endeavor, records at the Rockefeller Archive Center will help.

What I have outlined in this report is only meant to provide a sampling of the material I consulted at the Rockefeller Archive Center and to demonstrate how I intend to deploy this material into my developing dissertation research. I found my time at the Rockefeller Archive Center extremely fruitful and was sad to see the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic interrupt my research progress. I hope that I will be able to return sometime in the future to finish my research there. In any case, the research experience has been fulfilling and many documents from the archives will find their way into my dissertation.

¹ JM Diary, Thursday, June 27th, 1957, Vienna. Rockefeller Foundation Files. Record Group 1.2. Series 100. Box 6.

Folder 38. Also see Elfie Karmer’s letter of September 30, 1957 to Mr. Edward F. D’Arms. Rockefeller Foundation Records. Record Group 1.2. Series 100. Box 6. Folder 38.

² Letter from Zoltan Rozsnyai to the Congress for Cultural Freedom on July 4, 1957, Baden bei Wien. Rockefeller Foundation Records. Record Group 1.2. Series 100. Box 6. Folder 38.

³ Letter from Nicolas Nabokov to Zoltan Rozsnyai on August 13, 1957. Rockefeller Foundation Records. Record Group 1.2. Series 100. Box 6. Folder 38, p. 2.

⁴ Ibid, p. 1.

⁵ Letter from Zoltan Rozsnyai to the Congress for Cultural Freedom on July 4, 1957. Baden bei Wien. Rockefeller Foundation Records. Record Group 1.2. Series 100. Box 6. Folder 38.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Letter from Nicolas Nabokov to Zoltan Rozsnyai on August 13, 1957. Rockefeller Foundation Records. Record Group 1.2. Series 100. Box 6. Folder 38, pp. 3-4.

⁹ Ibid, 4.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² “English Language and Orientation Program for Hungarian Student Refugees: Final Report,” Rockefeller Foundation Records. Record Group: 1.2. Series 200. Box 14. Folder 111, pp. 12-13.

¹³ Ibid, p. 21.

¹⁴ Rockefeller Foundation Records. Record Group: 1.2. Series 705. Box 2. Folder 15.

¹⁵ Prof. Eugene Paul Wigner’s phone call with RPB on January 21, 1957. Rockefeller Foundation Records. Record Group: 1.2. Series 750. Box 1. Folder 8.