



A Witness to the Past

Salvaging Hungary's archival heritage

An international petition protesting the Government of Hungary's planned legislation to allow for the destruction of archival documents pertaining to the country's communist secret police.

Submitted to the

Embassy of the Republic of Hungary in Ottawa

and to the

European Union Delegation to Canada

On February 25th, 2011

Cover: The cover picture represents labour camps administered by Hungary's state security from 1949 to 1953. Thousands of innocent Hungarians were imprisoned in these camps and persecuted by the country's communist authorities. After the collapse of the one-party regime in 1989/90, surviving photos, archival documents and firsthand accounts allowed historians to begin reconstructing what had occurred.



Edited by: Christopher Adam

Ottawa, Canada

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Website: <http://hungarianarchives.com>

Acknowledgements

In addition to the more than 1,400 archivists, historians, artists, other academics and community activists of all nationalities and backgrounds who signed the petition, I would like to thank the many organisations that helped spread the word about this initiative. Some of these organisations include:

ActiveHistory.ca

Association for Slavic, East European and Eurasian Studies

Association of Canadian Archivists

Canadian Historical Association - Société historique du Canada

Élet és Irodalom (Hungary)

Galamus.hu

Habsburg List

Klubrádió (Hungary)

Network of Concerned Historians

Royal Historical Society (Great Britain)



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Christopher Adam

Hungary's Archives—Solidarity from Overseas

More than one thousand Canadian, American, British and western European historians, archivists and other researchers have signed a petition, which protests the Government of Hungary's planned legislation that would have a profoundly negative impact on the country's archival heritage. If passed and enacted, the new law could lead to the destruction of primary source material currently preserved by the Historical Archives of Hungarian State Security. I launched the petition and the HungarianArchives.com website in the Canadian capital, following Hungarian State Secretary Bence Rétvári's ominous announcement concerning the "immorality" of secret police documents preserved by Hungarian archives. I also informed the Embassy of the Republic of Hungary in Ottawa that the mission could expect to receive a petition, which would include the support of prominent Canadian academics. At this time, there were serious doubts concerning the interest that such a petition might generate and this situation was highlighted by a Hungarian government official, who explained to me that the preservation of archival documents constitutes an entirely esoteric topic, which is of absolutely no interest to anyone, except perhaps a small handful of historians.

Yet the petition gathered steam fairly rapidly, primarily among university professors, departmental chairs, archivists and community activists who were not of Hungarian origin. These scholars understand just how dangerous a precedent the planned legislation can be, particularly when it originates from a European Union member state.

Canada's Ukrainian community played a key role in distributing this petition, particularly after Lubomyr Luciuk—a professor and historian at the Royal Military College in Kingston—wrote a letter of protest to the Hungarian Embassy's chargé d'affaires, Tamás Király. The subject of archival preservation is an especially important issue to the country's 1.2 million Ukrainian Canadians, as many still recall the Government of Canada's 1954 decision to destroy documents relating to the first national internment operations of 1914 to 1920, when Ukrainians and other Europeans—especially from the lands of the Austro-Hungarian Empire—were interned in 24 camps. The government attempted to erase some of the last remaining signs of World War I internment and, in many ways, this endeavour proved successful. When Mary Manko, one of the last survivors of Québec's Spirit Lake internment camp, first told her children and grandchildren about this devastating episode in Canadian history and her own experiences as an internee, even her own family found it difficult to believe her. Mrs. Manko could not even point out on a map where she had been interned, as Spirit Lake had since been re-named as Lac Beauchamp. Nearly all remaining signs of the Spirit Lake camp have disappeared and even the camp's internee cemetery has been all but overgrown by the surrounding forests.

More than 8,500 Ukrainians and other Europeans were interned between 1914 and 1920. They and their descendents had to wait for eight decades before the Government of Canada finally acknowledged that their internment and forced labour was nothing less than an historical injustice. In 2008, the federal government established a \$10 million endowment fund, which helps researchers and descendents from all effected communities commemorate and explore the injustice that took place.

Canadians of Ukrainian origin know very well that the destruction of archival documents is never an esoteric issue, as in every case such action on the part of politicians can lead people to forget the past and falsify the historical record.

Hungarian scholarly researcher János Kenedi's assistance in circulating this petition among other Hungarian researchers also made it obvious that this concern for the fate of Hungary's archives is shared by many. Letters of protest and concern written by Canadian historians and archivists were sent on a daily basis to the Hungarian embassy in Ottawa and this clearly demonstrates that those behind this petition see their role as extending well beyond simply adding their name to an online list, but rather also includes taking concrete steps and calling on the Hungarian government to take into consideration their dismay and opposition.

In addition to the hundreds of professors, departmental chairs and professional archivists, the Association of Canadian Archivists circulated the petition among its members and discussed it during their February meeting, deciding to write a letter addressed to László Pordány, Hungary's ambassador. The Canadian Historical Association helped spread the word by posting my letter calling attention to the petition on their website and the Association for Slavic, East European and Eurasian Studies wrote to the Hungarian ambassador in Washington, György Szapáry.

Bence Rétvári's line of argument—which claims that his government's planned legislation would benefit victims of the communist secret police—rests on completely flawed logic. A significant portion of the documents preserved by the Historical Archives of Hungarian State Security refer to groups of people, rather than simply to individuals. If, in fact, the proposed legislation allows for the removal of these files, who would take home documents pertaining to the activities of a Hungarian agent who spied on a United Church of Canada congregation in Toronto, as well as on the congregation's pastor and his family? Who would obtain the originals of documents produced by an agent who spied on his own uncle and on his uncle's circle of friends in Montreal's Hungarian community?

The more than one thousand scholars who signed the petition demonstrate that the state secretary's announcement on the removal of original archival material has led to much concern and dismay overseas and throughout Europe. Perhaps the Hungarian government really believed that the scattering of archival documents was nothing more than an esoteric topic, of interest to no one, but a few overly enthusiastic historians. Clearly, they did not anticipate that Canadian, American and European historians—including those who are not of Hungarian heritage—would recognize the danger behind these plans and would not hesitate to express their views openly and unequivocally.

Christopher Adam

A magyar levéltárügy: tengerentúli szolidaritás

Több mint ezer kanadai, amerikai, brit és nyugat-európai történész, levéltáros és tudós írta alá eddig azt a petíciót, mely a magyar kormány azon kilátásba helyezett törvénytervezete ellen tiltakozik, melynek elfogadása az Állambiztonsági Szolgálatok Történeti Levéltárában (ÁBTL) található forrásanyag felszámolását eredményezheti. A tavaly decemberben indított aláírás-gyűjtést és az ehhez kapcsolódó angol nyelvű *HungarianArchives.com* című honlapot Rétvári Bence államtitkár ominózus bejelentése után indítottam a kanadai fővárosban, jelezve a Magyar Köztársaság ottawai nagykövetségének, hogy egy olyan petícióra számíthatnak, mely ismert kanadai tudósok támogatását élvezi. Ekkor még erős kételyek övezték az aláírásgyűjtést, és ezt a helyzetet fokozták egy magyarországi hivatalnok szavai, aki szerint a kommunista korszak kutatásához elengedhetetlen levéltári anyag megmentése „ezoterikus” ügy, mely egy maroknyi történészen kívül senkit sem érdekel.

A petíció azonban gyorsan életre kelt Kanadában, zömben olyan egyetemi oktatók, tanszékvezetők, levéltárosok és közösségi aktivisták köreiből, akik nem is magyar származásúak, mégis értik, milyen veszélyes precedens mindenki számára, ha az Európai Unió egyik tagállamának kormánya a levéltári anyag megsemmisítését lehetővé tévő törvényt dolgozik, mert érveik szerint ezen dokumentumok „erkölcstelenek”.

A kanadai ukrán közösség kulcsfontosságú szerepet játszott a petíció terjesztésében, miután Lubomyr Luciuk, a kingstoni Royal Military College történésze felháborodásában nyílt, tiltakozó levelet írt az ottawai magyar nagykövetség akkori ügyvivőjének, Király Tamásnak. A több mint 1,2 milliós kanadai ukrán kisebbségnek különösen kényes téma a levéltári anyag megsemmisítése, hiszen pontosan ezt kezdeményezte a kanadai szövetségi kormány 1954-ben, amikor az I. világháború idején létező 24 internálótáborban az Osztrák–Magyar Monarchia népei ellen elkövetett atrocitások utolsó dokumentálható nyomait próbálta örökre eltörölni. Jelentős részben sikerült is a kanadai kormány törekvése. Amikor Mary Manko, a Québec tartománybeli Spirit Lake internálótábor egyik utolsó túlélője gyermekeinek és unokáinak mesélt élményeiről, családjá sem hitt szavainak. Manko gyerekei kérésére sem tudta megmutatni a térképen, hol található ez a bizonyos Spirit Lake, mert a tó nevét azóta Lac Beauchamp-ra változtatták. Spirit Lake minden nyoma eltűnt, és az internáltak holttestét őrző romos temetőt is teljesen belepte észak-Québec dús növényzete. Mary Manko nem kért (és nem is kapott) kárpótlást, csupán azt kívánta, hogy a kanadai kormány ismerje el a közössége ellen elkövetett igazságtalanságot.

A több mint 8500, többségben ukrán származású internált nyolcvan évnél is tovább várt arra a pillanatra, hogy a kanadai kormány végre elismerje, kényszermunkatáborokba való bebörtönzésük és vagyonuk elkobzása történelmi igazságtalanságnak számított. 2008-ban, a kormány beismerése után létrejött egy tízmillió dolláros kárpótlási alap, mely kutatóknak és leszármazottaknak egyaránt támogatást nyújt.

Az ukrán származású kanadaiak pontosan tudják, hogy a levéltári anyag megsemmisítése nem ezoterikus ügy, hiszen minden esetben a feledést és a történelem meghamisítását eredményezi.

Kenedi János segítségével a petíció terjesztésében a magyarországi kutatók számára is nyilvánvalóvá tette, hogy nincsenek egyedül. A kanadai történészek és levéltárosok által írott heves tiltakozó levelek naponta érkeztek a nagykövetségre, jelezve, hogy a petíció mögött olyanok állnak, akik számára a tiltakozás nem merül ki egy gyors, online aláírásban, hanem konkrét lépésekkel követelik a magyar kormánytól, hogy vegye figyelembe felháborodásukat. A levélzőn és a petíció honlapján megjelenő több száz hozzászólás jelzi, hogy a kanadai, amerikai és nyugat-európai tudósközösségek szolidaritása a magyarországi történészekkel, levéltárosokkal és nem utolsósorban a kommunista politikai rendőrség áldozataival erős és eltökélt.

A több száz tanszékvezetőn, professzoron és hivatásos levéltároson kívül a kanadai levéltárosok országos szövetsége februári gyűlése napirendjére tűzte a magyar levéltárügy tárgyalását, a kanadai történészek országos egyesülete pedig honlapjára is feltette a petícióról szóló összefoglalót.

Rétvári Bence azon érvelése, miszerint törvénytervezetük éppen az áldozatoknak kedvez, teljesen hibás logikára épül, hiszen az ÁBTL-ben található dokumentumok jelentős része csoportokról és nem kizárólag egyes személyekről szól. Amennyiben tényleg széthordható lesz a levéltári gyűjtemény, ki viheti haza azt a jelentést, amit egy magyar ügynök készített egy torontói angol protestáns gyülekezettről, a gyülekezet lelkészéről és a lelkész családjáról? Vajon kinek a kezébe kerül az a dosszié, amit egy magyarországi ügynök a nagybátyjáról és az idős nagybácsi montreali magyar baráti köréről készített?

A petíciót aláíró több mint ezer tudós megmutatta, hogy a levéltári anyag kiosztását kilátásba helyező bejelentés a tengerentúlon is komoly aggodalmat és felháborodást okozott. Lehet, hogy a kormány tényleg úgy gondolta, hogy a levéltári anyag széthordása csupán ezoterikus ügy, ami néhány túlbuzgó történészen kívül mindenkit hidegen hagy. Nyilván nem számítottak arra, hogy kanadai és amerikai, nem magyar származású történészek is felismerik a bejelentés mögött rejlő veszélyt, mert láthatólag nem is tartottak az egyértelmű, nyilvános és a konkrét lépéseket követelő tiltakozásoktól.

A szerző az ottawai Carleton Egyetem történelemtanszékének oktatója



János Kenedi

Misleading tropes and deceptive taboos

International public opinion does well to follow legislative developments in Hungary-- a country with a fragile political culture. It is particularly in the interest of states with well-established democratic political cultures to keep their eyes on what exactly transpires in a country with an incoherent—and all too often state-directed—public discourse.

The outbreak of both world wars had much to do with Hungary's weak political culture. The continued crises of identity, as well as the media's inability or unwillingness to fight censorship are in part responsible for the consequences of the twentieth century's major conflicts. Over the course of the past century, a clear link existed between Hungary's explosive foreign politics and the society's lack of self-awareness. There is reason to fear that this correlation may still exist today. It is in the interest of international organisations to determine whether constitutional democracy in Hungary remains under effective civil, non-partisan control, or if it has deteriorated into the fanciful internal affairs of the country's political parties. It is enough to simply call to mind the last days of the Weimar Republic and it is certainly well worth to explore UNESCO's 1995 statement on history and archives: "Every country has the right to know the truth about its past. Everyone has the right to academic and historical research. Victims of persecution have the right to restitution..."

Legislation that allows for the removal of historical knowledge and the manipulation of the media both lead to the same dangerous situation. In order to avert these dangers, the European Union, the European Parliament, as well as archivists, other academics in North America and organisations that defend press freedoms around the world must see that the current Hungarian legislature may force a form of collective amnesia on the institutions that make possible the scholarly exploration of the nation's past. It is in the interest of all European and overseas countries to ensure that legislation aimed at eliminating press freedoms and hindering archival research does not bury under its hefty weight the democratic system that took shape following the eras of fascism and communism.

In the past few months, when Wikileaks radically reduced the restrictions that were in place for many scholars of contemporary political history, Hungary made two official announcements. Claiming to act on issues of privacy and access to information, the government announced proposed legislation that would take a razor, scissors and a knife to Cold War secret police documents, allowing for their dismemberment, all in an effort to destroy irreplaceable historical data.

Kenedi János

A civilnek *hamis* totem, a közösségnek *csalfa* tabu

Egy olyan vékony és törekeny politikai kultúrával rendelkező ország törvényalkotását – amilyen a magyarországi is – jó, sőt ajánlatos különlegesen érzékenyen figyelemmel kísérnie a nemzetközi tudományos és politikai közvéleménynek. A szilárdan demokratikus politikai kultúrájú országoknak különleges érdekük, hogy rajta tartsák szemüket azon, valójában mi is történik egy inkohereus politikai kultúrájú ország civil nyilvánosságában. Mi több, államilag dirigált nyilvánosságával.

Mind az I., mind a II. világháború kirobbanásában különösen fontos szerepe volt a magyar politikai kultúra gyöngeségének. A társadalmi önismeret történelmi zavarainak és a könnyedén cenzúra alá rendelhető sajtónak is súlyos a felelőssége a XX. század háborús következményeire. A társadalmi önismeret fogyatékosága és az ország külpolitikai robbanékonyága között ugyanis szoros korreláció volt az elmúlt évszázadban, s féltő, hogy van is a mai fluid nemzetközi politikai helyzetben. A nemzetközi szervezeteknek sem közömbös, hogy az alkotmányos demokrácia Magyarországon megfelelő civil kontroll alatt áll-e, vagy a politikai pártok szeszélyes és veszélyes belügye, még inkább kiszolgáltatottja. Elég a weimari köztársaság végnapjaira gondolni. Érdemes a levéltárosok számára kibocsátott 1995-ös UNESCO-ajánlást a figyelem középpontjába helyezni: „Minden országnak joga van megtudni az igazat a múltjáról. Minden embernek joga van a tudományos és a történelmi kutatáshoz. Az elnyomás áldozatainak joga van kárpótlásra...”

A történelmi tudás-megvonás és a jelenkori sajtó manipulálását magába foglaló törvénytervezet egyazon társadalmi veszélyhez vezethet. E két veszedelem megelőzéséhez egyaránt szükség van arra, hogy az EU és az Európai Parlament hivatalos szervein túl a levéltáros civil szervezetek Észak-Amerikában, de a sajtószabadságot figyelemmel kísérő egyetemes szervezetek is úgy tekintsenek a mai magyarországi törvényhozásra, mint ahol kollektív történelmi amnéziát kényszeríthetnek a jelenkor-feltárás jogi, tudományos, alkotmányos rendszerére és a sajtószabadság illegitim elfojtására. Valamennyi Magyarországgal szomszédos országnak, minden európai és tengerentúli demokráciának ön- és közérdeke, hogy e két törekvés, a sajtószabadság felszámolása és a levéltári kutatás akadályozása ne temesse maga alá a fasizmus és a kommunizmus után kialakult demokráciákat.

A legutóbbi hónapokban, amikor a politikatörténeti kutatás tilalomfáit radikálisan megnyírbálta a wikileaks, Magyarország kormánya két rendeletet is kibocsátott. Ezekben – az információs önrendelkezési jogra való hivatkozással – egy olyan törvényt helyezett kilátásba, ami még ez év novemberében beretvát, zsilettpengét, ollót kínál fel a hidegháborús tabukat tartalmazó politikai rendőrségi dossziék önkéntes csonkítására – a közérdekű adatok megsemmisítése céljából.



Association
of Canadian
Archivists

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His Excellency Dr. László Pordány
Ambassador of the Republic of Hungary
299 Waverley Street
Ottawa, ON K2P 0V9

February 24, 2011

Dear Dr. Pordány:

I am writing you on behalf of the Association of Canadian Archivists (ACA) to express our deep concern with the Hungarian government's decision to introduce legislation that would permit the removal and destruction of Hungarian communist secret police, interior ministry, and state security files currently held at the Historical Archives of the Hungarian State Security in Budapest.

Established in 1975, the ACA is a national professional organization that represents English-speaking archivists in Canada. Archivists have a professional obligation to preserve authentic and reliable records for evidentiary and historical purposes. As archivists, we strongly believe that archives are the foundation of democracy, social justice, and social memory.

We reject the notion that a democratic state cannot "preserve the immoral documents of an immoral regime". On the contrary, records that provide evidence of injustices hold accountable those responsible for abuses of trust and power. Archival records provide evidence documenting the actions of public leaders and protecting the rights of all citizens. As Canadian archivist Terry Cook states, archival records have allowed "citizens to seek justice in righting past wrongs, from aboriginal displacements to war crimes, from medical neglect to ethnic discrimination." Removing documents from the Historical Archives of the Hungarian State Security because they are deemed to have been created by "immoral" authorities would only weaken Hungarians' ability to hold those officials accountable and would thus undermine a fundamental pillar of democracy.

Further, we strongly believe that de-accessioning these irreplaceable documents would impoverish Hungary's archival heritage. It would undermine our ability to know and understand an important aspect of Hungary's past. Preserving the Hungarian communist secret police, interior ministry, and state security files supports an accurate account of the past and ensures that collective amnesia does not prevail.

The Association of Canadian Archivists believes that the Hungarian communist secret police, interior ministry, and state security files currently held at the Historical Archives of the Hungarian State Security have enduring value as reliable memories of the past. We urge the government of Hungary to take all steps consistent with professional archival practice to preserve these unique and important records. Anything less is an abdication of your government's responsibility to uphold democratic values and to preserve and to protect Hungary's collective memory.

Yours Sincerely,

Loryl MacDonald, President
Association of Canadian Archivists

Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies

23 February 2011

Georgy Szapary, Ambassador
Embassy of Hungary
Washington, DC

Dear Ambassador Szapary:

I write on behalf of ASEES, the Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies. We are the largest international professional association of scholars of the formerly socialist bloc, with just under three thousand members.

I joined with many of my colleagues in being startled by pending legislation before the Hungarian parliament that would withdraw the assurance of preservation of archives from, and relating to, the socialist period. However dim a view one might take of socialist rule in eastern Europe, I know of no one who would not insist on the careful preservation of its archival legacy, as required for best understanding this influential historical epoch.

Such legislation also challenges what has been the remarkable, tireless work of Hungarian archivists over the past twenty years. They have earned the extraordinary admiration of Hungarian and foreign scholars alike for their scrupulous cataloguing of papers from the socialist period, thanks to the country's new intellectual freedoms. They managed to do this in periods of relative privation, for the good of the country, and for the good of scholarship more broadly.

The association very much urges Hungarian legislators to support this crucial historical database.

With kind regards,



Bruce Grant
President, ASEES
Professor, New York University

The Petition¹

The Government of Hungary plans to pass a law allowing for the removal and destruction of original archival documents recounting the history of the communist secret police during the previous regime, as officials believe that these papers are the "immoral documents of an immoral regime." These archival documents are irreplaceable and once they are destroyed, Hungarian historians will no longer be able to uncover the activities of state security agents during the communist regime. I support the preservation of Hungary's historical record, access to historians, researchers, students and future generations and I do not believe that government officials have the right to destroy archival documents that they deem to be "immoral."



¹ The alphabetized version of the petition was sent to the printers on February 24, 2011 and does not include all names found on the original, online version of this document. Supporters who signed using only their first name or who simply provided their e-mail address and signed as „anonymous” are not included in this version of the petition. Hundreds of supporters also posted their comments. Please see these by opening the following link: <http://www.ipetitions.com/petition/hungarianarchives/signatures>.

The petition's supporters

Ceren Abi
Alice Adam
Christopher Adam
Jad Adams
Mashura Akilova
Gleb J. Albert
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Christopher Adam

Hungary erases the past and whitewashes the future

National Post -- January 13, 2011

The European Union had scant reason to celebrate the first days of the New Year, as tight-lipped bureaucrats in Brussels tried to muster a smile for the cameras when faced with the impending Hungarian presidency of the 27-member union. The EU's image as a stable, reliable and orderly economic community even amidst an international financial storm was already shattered when the sovereign debt crisis erupted in Greece, Ireland and Portugal.

But now the European Union's reputation as a credible international voice on issues of democracy, freedom and civil liberties may suffer a devastating blow, as Hungary's new government takes over the reins of power for the next six months.

Fidesz, Hungary's increasingly authoritarian ruling party, enjoys a two-thirds majority in Parliament. It used its political might to rush through a troubling bill restricting freedom of the press and raised the sceptre of a second bill threatening to erase the country's communist past, all before riding into Brussels on the coattails of stinging international condemnation.

The proposed bill on how to deal with the country's past is a stunning example of bureaucratic idiocy mixed with a wish to sanitize the historical record for political purposes. Bence Retvari, the parliamentary secretary of state at Hungary's Ministry of Justice, announced that it is unethical for a democratic state to preserve in its public archives the "immoral documents of an immoral regime." As such, the government will soon make it possible for affected citizens to remove and destroy original, irreplaceable documents on the country's communist past. The documents in question include thousands of secret police files currently available to professional researchers at the Historical Archives of Hungarian State Security, as well as a separate collection of unreleased data on over 50,000 communist state security officers, encrypted on magnetic tape.

Both collections are sensitive, but documents declassified over the past 10 years have been essential to understanding the nature and scope of four decades' worth of communist rule in Hungary. The prospect of government bureaucrats removing irreplaceable documents from public archives because they are deemed "immoral" harkens back to Europe's darkest twentieth century dictatorships. Using the government's warped logic, they might as well go all the way and destroy the records of interwar Hungary and light a fire under the boxes of documents detailing the history of the Habsburgs.

Not quite satisfied with unilaterally "renegotiating" the past, Fidesz passed a highly repressive bill three days before Christmas aimed at curbing the influence of newspapers, radio stations and television channels critical of the current government's measures. Fidesz established a new radio and television commission, with the ruling party appointing all five members to its board. Annamaria Szalai, the commission's president, has been a loyal party member for nearly two decades and can now enjoy unparalleled job security during her nine year term as the country's powerful media tsar. Hungarian newspapers and magazines published blank cover pages after the bill was passed, protesting a law that moves Hungary inexorably back in time to the days of the People's Republic.

The bill gives the government new powers in determining the content of privately owned broadcasters and introduces financial penalties that could immediately bankrupt newspapers and

websites. The bill also forces all journalists to reveal their confidential or anonymous sources, if the government determines that their article touches on issues of national security. Fidesz claims that the bill intends to protect minors, rather than ban political dissent. In fact, the media tsar launched the new year by investigating a radio station for their decision to play “negative” music by rapper Ice-T. The Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) has already warned that the law, which came into effect the same day that Hungary assumed the EU’s rotating presidency, endangers “media pluralism.”

Ironically, by shutting down critical newspapers and television stations, Fidesz may dig its own political grave. Provided that Hungary holds free and fair elections as scheduled in 2014, the current government and its institutional supporters would find themselves at the receiving end of the very authoritarian measures they implemented. If Socialist Party spokesperson Zsolt Torok’s characterization of Fidesz as a “criminal alliance” reflects the views of the largest opposition party, then many at the helm of the government may find themselves on the threshold of a brave new world indeed.

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Christopher Adam

Canadian petition to save the Historical Archives of Hungarian State Security

ActiveHistory.ca – February 18th, 2011

The Government of Hungary faced widespread international criticism last December, after it introduced legislation that curtailed press freedoms. The outcry came from all corners of Europe and North America, and Budapest had little choice but to bow to European Union pressure and amend the ominous law. But journalists, political analysts and foreign politicians paid far less attention to an announcement by Bence Rétvári, the secretary of state at the Ministry of Justice, when he noted that his government would enact legislation leading to the removal and possible destruction of original archival documents currently stored at the Historical Archives of Hungarian State Security (ÁBTL).

According to Mr. Rétvári, “a constitutional state cannot preserve personal information collected through unconstitutional means, because these are the immoral documents of an immoral regime.” The proposed legislation, scheduled to be drafted by November 2011, would allow for victims of the country’s former communist political police to remove files that include information on their activities and then do as they please with them, including either selling these documents online or destroying them at home.

These secret police files have been available to researchers, as well as to victims, since 2003, but as with any archive, only copies of these original documents may be removed from the reading room. Professional historians conducting research at the ÁBTL are also bound by ethical considerations when it comes to releasing names or personal information discovered in these files.

By proposing legislation that would lead to the destruction of archival material, the Hungarian government not only demonstrates a complete lack of concern for preserving and safeguarding the country’s national archival heritage, but is also clueless as to the nature of the documents that they seem willing to scatter. In many cases, the secret police files that form the ÁBTL’s collection refer to groups of people who were spied upon by communist state security, raising the question of who would actually obtain originals of individual files containing sensitive data on others and whether citizens could simply walk away with Hungary’s archival heritage on a first-come-first-served basis.

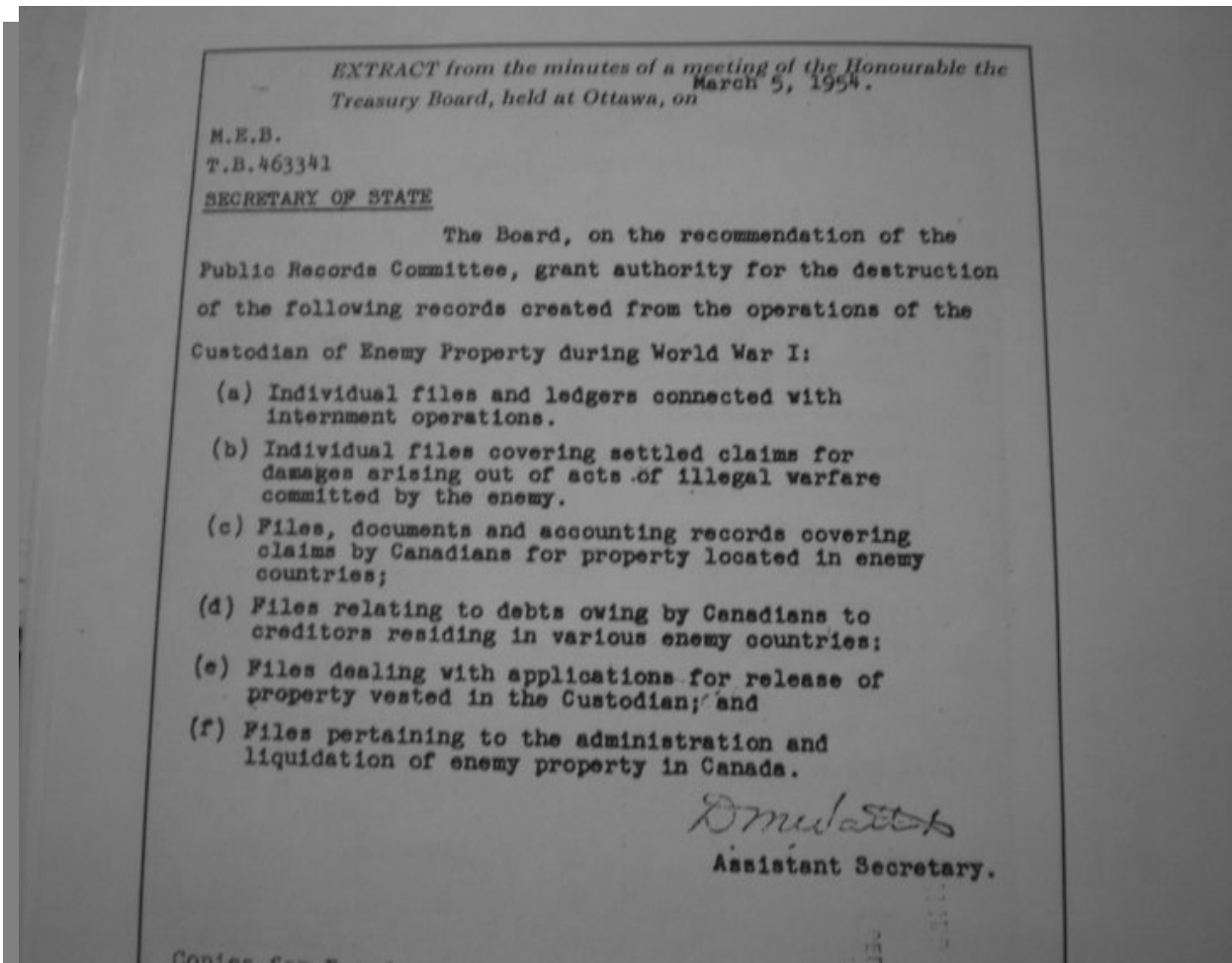
Even the ÁBTL’s files pertaining to the activities of Hungarian agents in Canada during the Cold War generally make references to groups of people, whether they be to a United Church minister (and his congregation), who was perceived as partial to developing closer ties with the Eastern bloc, or the Hungarian agent who visited Montreal to spy on his elderly uncle, and his uncle’s circle of politically active friends in the city’s Hungarian community.

The Hungarian government’s begrudging willingness to bow to international pressure and change its controversial media laws suggests that a similar outcry from historians, archivists, other academics, community activists and concerned citizens from around the world may have a similar impact and could help save irreplaceable archival documents from impending destruction.

A petition launched in Canada will be submitted to the Embassy of the Republic of Hungary in Ottawa at the end of February, in order to show the government the extent of overseas concern. Before I launched the petition, a Hungarian civil servant told me in a private discussion that only a small handful of enthusiastic historians really cared about such “esoteric” issues. But with enough support, the government and those indifferent to the fate of historical archives might just come to see how much they underestimated the concern among people around the world when politicians try to erase the records of the past.



Dangerous precedent



Even though there was never any evidence of disloyalty on their part, thousands of Ukrainians and other Europeans were imprisoned needlessly and forced to do heavy labour in 24 internment camps located in the country's frontier hinterlands during Canada's first national internment operations. Tens of thousands of others, designated as "enemy aliens," were obliged to carry identity documents and report regularly to the police. Many were subjected to other state-sanctioned indignities, including disenfranchisement, restrictions on their freedom of speech, movement and association, deportation and the confiscation of what little wealth they had, some of which was never returned. This happened even though the British Foreign Office informed Ottawa that these eastern Europeans were "friendly aliens" who should be given "preferential treatment." These men, women and children suffered not because of anything they had done but only because of who they were, where they had come from.

(Source: *Canadian First World War Internment Recognition Fund, Canada's First National Internment Operations, 1914-1920*)

The Issues – Background

“A constitutional state cannot preserve personal information collected through unconstitutional means, because these are the immoral documents of an immoral regime.”

-Bence Rétvári, Parliamentary Secretary of State (Ministry of Justice, Republic of Hungary)

How will the government’s decision to no longer preserve the “immoral documents of an immoral regime” impact historians and researchers?

The Government of Hungary announced that it will enact legislation by November 2011 allowing all those who were spied upon by the former communist regime’s secret police and Ministry of the Interior officials to remove files produced on their activities from the Historical Archives of Hungarian State Security. Those who were observed would have the right to destroy their files, resulting in the loss of irreplaceable archival documents on the history of communist Hungary and its state security agencies.

What will happen to archival files that are not collected by the victims of communist state security?

It is unclear as to what will happen to files that remain uncollected. Bence Rétvári’s statement on the “immorality” of a constitutional state preserving “immoral documents” collected through immoral means only makes sense if all remaining files are either destroyed or disposed of through other means. An inconsistent policy on how to handle archival documents represents a serious risk to the integrity of the primary sources on the history of communist Hungary. A random, completely haphazard group of documents might still be available to researchers despite their “immorality,” but so many pieces of the state security puzzle would be missing that the remaining collection ends up lacking any context and thus proves useless or misleading.

What are the broader implications of destroying archives due to the alleged immorality of the preserved documents?

Removing documents from archives and libraries because they are deemed to have been created by immoral authorities represents one of the most serious forms of censorship. While the proposed bill only targets documents stored at the Historical Archives of Hungarian State Security, the National Archives of Hungary preserves millions of documents produced by the communist regime’s Foreign Ministry, the Hungarian Socialist Workers’ Party and its communist predecessors.

Mr. Rétvári—and others in the ruling Fidesz-KDNP coalition—have only to take a cursory look at the nature of these documents—particularly in the foreign affairs collection—to discover that many of them are just as “immoral” and contain a significant amount of personal information on citizens as those found in the Historical Archives of State Security. The foreign affairs collection includes reports written by ambassadors and diplomats containing deeply inflammatory language and accusations about private citizens, as well as private addresses, dates of birth and data on their nationality and religion. If documents in the state security archives are deemed too immoral to be preserved by a democratic state, a consistent policy would also require the government to dispose of material held in other archives. Furthermore, government-financed archives would have no right to preserve material on any period in modern Hungarian history, including the interwar Miklós Horthy regime and the Nazi take-over of power in 1944-45, as well as material from the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

Permitting the destruction of documents because they are deemed to be “immoral” by party officials makes it nearly impossible for academic historians to research the country’s past, as scholars would have to rely exclusively on published primary sources (such as newspapers) and oral interviews.

What role did the recently disbanded Kenedi Committee play in this issue?

The Kenedi Committee (Kenedi Bizottság) was comprised of three non-partisan historians, led by scholar János Kenedi and was initially established in 2007. The committee functioned as a task force and its role was to sift through sensitive state security documents not yet deposited at the Historical Archives of Hungarian State Security. Many of the files containing the names of informants and employees of the state security agency were preserved by the Department of National Security (Nemzetbiztonsági Hivatal) on encoded tapes and are still waiting to be transcribed. More recently, the current three-member committee was created by former Prime Minister Gordon Bajnai and set up by Parliament on February 22, 2010. Other than János Kenedi, the task force’s members included historians Mária Palasik and Gergő Bendegúz Cseh. Dr. Palasik is a researcher at the Historical Archives of Hungarian State Security, while Dr. Cseh is the archive’s deputy head.

Now that the Kenedi Committee has been disbanded, who will be responsible for sifting through the classified state security documents and handing them over to the archives?

Mr. Rétvári has yet to give a clear answer as to who will be in charge of examining classified state security files. In an interview on ATV’s Egyenes Beszéd political television news broadcast, Mr. Rétvári would not provide the names and positions of the people selected to assume the tasks originally entrusted to the non-partisan historians on the Kenedi Committee. The best case scenario is that nameless bureaucrats may now sift through highly sensitive historical files from the pre-1989 period in an impartial–though possibly incompetent–manner. More troubling is the distinct possibility that documents will be examined and selected by party hacks affiliated with the governing Fidesz-KDNP alliance.

How did János Kenedi react to the government’s proposed legislation?

Kenedi indicated his committee faced delaying tactics and a lack of cooperation from government officials, ever since Fidesz-KDNP took power following the April 2010 parliamentary elections. Kenedi was not taken by surprise when the task force was disbanded on December 17, 2010, but he called the government’s decision to allow citizens to remove original archival documents “absurd.” The committee’s former head also suggested that the government’s proposed legislation was illegal, as removing, destroying or in any way defacing archival documents is prohibited by the regulations of all public archives as well as the National Széchenyi Library.



Scattered documents, throwing caution to the wind...
Tájkép a dossziétörvény elsikkasztásának korából



Parliamentary guards in Hungary | Photo credit: László Somorjai (*Hetek*)