

Broadcasting a Revolution: Radio Free Europe and the Hungarian Revolution

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On October 23rd, 1956 a group of 200,000 protesters, mostly students, marched to the parliament building in Hungary and removed a statue of Stalin that had been erected several years earlier. The protesters then marched to the Radio Budapest building in order to broadcast their demands against the Soviet rule that had taken power in Hungary. Upon arriving to the Radio Budapest building the protesters were met by the AVH, a Soviet police force created to keep order throughout occupied Eastern European nations. Amidst the chaos tear gas was thrown into the crowd of protesters, and the AVH opened fire. Hungarian soldiers refused orders by the Communist leaders to help put down the revolt, and instead joined the side of their fellow countrymen. What ensued was twelve days of violence in which the Communist leaders fled Hungary until Soviet tanks were able to regain control. But what led to one of the most violent phases of the Cold War that fall day in Hungary? After almost six years why did the citizens finally revolt against their oppressive government? While many factors played key roles into the revolution in Hungary, the messages broadcast by Radio Free Europe convinced the citizens to violently rise against the communist leaders, suggesting help from the West would come.

The revolt against communism in 1956 was against the regime that had taken over just ten years earlier. After WWII, the Soviet military occupied Hungary, gradually replacing the freely elected government with appointed Communist leaders. In 1948 Matyas Rakosi was appointed leader of Hungary and the Stalinist-Communism takeover was complete. During Rakosi's reign, the citizens of Hungary saw a drastic decrease in economic success and almost the entire elimination of human rights and freedoms. The methods of Stalinism included the collectivization of agriculture and rapid industrialization, which cost many farmers money and the entire country food, virtually

eliminated all due process of law, and massive political purges against those who disagreed with the parties policies. However, in March of 1953 Stalin died, and the future of Stalin's brand of Communism in Eastern Europe was in question. Imre Nagy, a popular Communist politician, was elected Prime Minister and conditions immediately began improving. Nagy was known as a Socialist Communist, one who believed in human rights and equality. During his first reign as Prime Minister, Hungarians saw an immediate loosening up of the authoritarian Communism that had existed. But by 1955 Nagy and his Socialist Democratic ideals had fallen out of favor by the new Soviet politicians led by Khrushchev, and he was removed from office. Under Erno Gero the new Prime Minister, the authoritarian Communist government was back in power. In February of 1956, newly appointed leader of the Soviet Union, Nikita Khrushchev, gave a speech to the members of his congress denouncing Stalin and his methods of leadership. He denounced Stalin's abuse of purges during the Second World War, and accused the former leader of taking advantage of Communism for personal gain. For the first time since the Soviet Revolution of 1917 Communist officials were questioning their own methods. After the removal of Nagy, who had introduced freedom from a Communist leader that Hungarians weren't used to, along with the questioning of politics and policies of the Soviet Union from Khrushchev, Hungarian citizens began to question the role of Stalinism in their country. The unrest from these events helped lead to the Revolution that took place in October of 1956.

Radio Free Europe had been broadcasting into Hungary since its creation in 1949. RFE was created in part by the United States CIA along with other nations in Western Europe who feared the spread of Communism. It was created to broadcast unbiased news

from the democratic nations, and to inspire the citizens of Eastern Europe to protest against their Communist governments. The initial goal of Radio Free Europe was to simply broadcast news from the West into the Satellite countries where information was filtered and edited by the Communist governments. The goals of RFE were clear from the beginning: to bring down Soviet control in Eastern Europe. When President Eisenhower was elected president in 1953 the use of Radio Free Europe changed. Frank Winser was an American Secret Service Agent during WWII, and served as a spy in Berlin and Vienna in the early years after the war. The United States government put him in charge of a propaganda department in which over 3,000 people were on payroll in an effort to eliminate all support for Communism in Eastern Europe.¹ The death of Stalin in 1953 left the future of Stalinism in Eastern Europe in question, and the United States viewed it as their prime chance to bring down Soviet control in the region. Winser believed that the most effective way to spread the “voice of liberty” into Eastern Europe would involve RFE. Within 18 months of Eisenhower’s election in 1953 Winser had the station broadcasting anti-communist propaganda. The early propaganda group was the initial foundation of the CIA, with Winser becoming known as one of the founding fathers.² After Winser took charge of RFE, a new handbook informed the employees of RFE what was expected while on the air:

Broadcasts should emphasize Western determination to undermine Communist regimes... The station’s purpose is to contribute to the liberation of the nations imprisoned behind the Iron Curtain by maintaining their morale and stimulating in them a spirit of non-cooperation with the Soviet-Dominated regimes.³

¹Victor Sebestyen, *Twelve Days: The Story of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2006), 58.

² Ibid.

³Sebestyen, 59.

While RFE earned the reputation as being truthful in the first four years of its existence, it was very clear that the intentions of the station were changed to create unrest in the Satellite countries.

While Social and governmental issues in Hungary sparked unrest, the use of Radio Free Europe as a propaganda tool directly led to the Hungarian Revolution of 1956. The radio reports were used to influence the citizens listening to take action, and in some cases to take up arms against the communist governments in charge. While it quickly became clear that Western nations had no intentions to intervene, they were still willing to offer tactical plans over the air. The Hungarians were just another piece of the chess board for the United States and the Soviet Union, but for the Hungarians themselves, their entire lives were affected for the worse from the whole ordeal.

Historians have viewed the uprising from several different vantage points since the revolution in 1956. Different historians state different events that drove the Hungarians to revolt against the Soviets, but don't discuss why the Hungarians believed they could win. A rebellious group of students wouldn't seem to stand a chance against a trained and organized world wide power like the Soviet army, and yet the students took arms anyway. Why have historians ignored the reasons that drove the revolution from a desire to an actual event? The values of those authors who have looked at the revolution will be vital to understanding this. The Hungarian Revolution came during the Cold War, a time where people viewed the world issues as good versus evil, Capitalism versus Communism, the United States versus the Soviet Union.

Many of the early Historians who wrote about the Hungarian Revolution had been actively involved in the fighting. Those historians from Hungary have been unwilling to

blame themselves for what took place, and instead have simply focused on the misdeeds and horrendous actions taken by the Soviets to combat the uprising. English speaking historians who fought during the Revolution are even less credible. These historians were outsiders from either Western Europe or the United States, and entered Hungary to defend Capitalism and the freedom of democracy. Due to their involvement in the revolution as well as their relationship to the West, their views are skewed when it comes to the role of propaganda from the West. Later historians focused on the Hungarian Revolution and its relationship to the Cold War. While the involvement of the revolution as a part of the Cold War is extremely important, many of these historians ignore it as an individual event, and thus downplay the causes of the revolution and the impact of Radio Free Europe. Many of these historians have also created articles and books portraying the Hungarians as martyrs for democracy, and concluded that the Soviet Union was solely to blame for the violent episode that took place. Not until recently have historians begun to study the causes of the revolution and the possible role that RFE had in causing the students to take arms against the Soviet Union.

One of the early historians involved in the fighting was Michael Korda. Korda was a student at Oxford when the revolution began, and he and several of his friends traveled to Budapest to help with medicine supplies as well as assisting in the fight against Soviet soldiers. Fifty years after he took part in the revolution, Korda wrote *Journey to a Revolution*, a personal memoir and history of the Hungarian Revolution. Korda viewed the revolution as a tipping point, even stating that the “collapse of the Soviet Union itself could be traced back to the consequences of the uprising in the streets

of Budapest.”⁴ Korda, writing fifty years after the revolution, obviously has strong personal beliefs that the revolution was one of the greatest moments in history, as he was involved first hand. But the fact that he was involved, as he puts it, on the side of the “Independent, Democratic” Hungarians skews his views. He certainly believes that the Soviets were completely to blame for the violent revolution.

The book is an excellent source to help paint the picture of the chaos that existed in the fall of 1956, but it doesn’t present the events from both sides. The book is enjoyable in that it is the first hand account of a man who was actively involved in the uprising, but as an outsider from England volunteering to enter Hungary, it is impossible to take his point of view without questioning its authenticity. The reason Korda went to Hungary was to fight for democracy against the Communist government, so it is understandable that he is going to be unwilling to blame his own government and its push for democracy for what took place. Korda downplays the role of RFE broadcasts in stating that:

For years Radio Free Europe, broadcasting from Munich, had been urging the people of the “captive nations” to rise against the Russians, and promising help from the West when they did so. Much as these broadcasts irritated communist governments, it is doubtful that anyone else took them all that seriously.⁵

Rather, Korda believes that what took place was a random uprising against a tyrant regime. While it was a “revolution against eleven years of alien, heavy-handed, unyielding Russian domination and occupation,”⁶ he also saw it as “spontaneous, popular, and embraced.”⁷ His explanation is vague and unclear; was it a planned out aggression against the Soviet government, or was it a spontaneous event that boiled over? While it is

⁴Michael Korda, *Journey to a Revolution*. (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2006), 2.

⁵ Korda, 103.

⁶ Ibid, xiv.

⁷ Ibid.

interesting to hear first person accounts from Korda, it is impossible to completely rely on everything he has to share. As a Westerner entering into the war zone that was Hungary, he simply saw it as good versus evil. In no way is he willing to look beyond the Soviet Union to blame the unimaginable violence that took place those twelve days in 1956.

A later historian named Phyllis Schlafly wrote an article titled “1956 Hungarian Revolution Lit the Lamp of Freedom” for the journal *Human Events* in October of 2006. The article Schlafly presents portrays the Hungarians and those involved in the fighting as martyrs for democracy, solely blaming the Soviet Union for the atrocities that took place. The first sentence states: “The revolution started Oct. 23, 1956, as a peaceful student protest in Budapest, but after Russian soldiers fired on the students, it escalated into a full-scale revolution against Soviet tyranny,”⁸ immediately indicating the direction that Schlafly’s article is going to take. Schlafly never once mentions RFE or the propaganda sponsored by the United States as a reason for the unthinkable violence that ensued, but rather makes statements accusing the Soviet troops as being “trigger happy.”⁹ Schlafly even goes as far as to compare the Hungarians to the Founding Fathers of the United States, stating: “They fought in the tradition of Patrick Henry: ‘Give me liberty or give me death.’”¹⁰

While Phyllis Schlafly spends a considerable amount of time discussing the revolution itself, the purpose of her article becomes clear when she ties it back to the impact it had on the Cold War:

⁸ Phyllis Schlafly, “1956 Hungarian Revolution Lit the Lamp of Freedom,” *Human Events* 62, no. 36 (October 23rd, 2006): 15.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

... the valor of the Hungarians who fought in the streets gave courage to other countries. The dream was rekindled all over Eastern Europe that the day would come when they, too, might have the opportunity to throw off their captors. The effect of the Hungarian revolution in the U.S. was dramatic: It changed the debate about communism and punctured the Communist lie of peaceful coexistence.¹¹

Schlafly also claims that the revolution of 1956 “started the unraveling of Soviet communism that finally came to pass in 1991.”¹² While the article is written with celebrated passion, it is almost difficult for any true historian to read. The wonderfully glorious light that the Hungarians are portrayed through is reminiscent to those early historians who were actively involved in the fighting. It solely puts the blame for the thousands of deaths on the Soviet Union, and sets the revolution on such a high pedestal that one reading it would think it was the single most important event to ever occur in the twentieth century. While it does give insight to a small faction of interpretations, the entire article has to be viewed with extreme skepticism.

Despite the lack of historians that have covered the role of RFE on the Hungarian Revolution, it is imperative to study the effects that the propaganda barrages had on Hungarians to fully understand the event. To examine how the broadcasts of Radio Free Europe influenced the Hungarian citizens to fight against the Soviet soldiers, this essay is going to analyze transcripts from RFE, conversations amongst high ranking political officials from the United State, Hungary and the Soviet Union, interviews with Hungarian Refugees, military surveys conducted by the United States and declassified CIA documents. Through all of these documents it is clear that the United States understood the impact that RFE had in Hungary, and how the propaganda could eventually lead to a violent revolt. Despite knowing the risks of a diminished reputation

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

and potential for uprising, the United States continued their media barrage on all of the countries in Eastern Europe.

One of the first big decisions that Radio Free Europe had to make was over the release of Khrushchev's famous "Secret Speech," given in February of 1956 in which the new Soviet leader openly admitted to his parliament that Stalin had committed heinous crimes of mass murders and unthinkable violence against the citizens who opposed the Communist regime. In May of 1956 the United States uncovered two copies that were deemed valid, and thus had to decide what action, if any, to take with them. Ray S. Cline, an official in the CIA, proposed the release of the full text be made available to the public, believing that it would create support and proof for the worldwide slander and the foreign policies the United States had taken against the Soviet Union since the end of World War II.¹³ Frank Winser rejected this plan, and instead implemented the Winser-Angelton act that would slowly leak portions of the document in an effort to exploit the speech rather than just presenting it.¹⁴

There were several reasons for the Winser-Angelton act to be used rather than just the all out release of the speech. The most notable was due to the covert plan called Red Sox/Red Cap, a project that included the training of refugees from the Satellite Nations for combat inside Eastern Europe. The Trainees were deemed not ready for battle, and Winser wanted to wait until the units were combat ready to begin releasing the speech.¹⁵ His reasoning was simple, he knew that the release of the speech would create unrest inside those nations who would be listening, and the potential for a violent revolution

¹³ Arch Puddington, *Broadcasting Freedom: The Cold War Triumph of Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty*. (Lexington, Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 2000), 91.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

existed. Until the exiled units were capable of combat with the Soviet soldiers, they would hold off.

It was slowly becoming clear to all those involved in RFE what kind of impact the broadcasts could have inside the Soviet bloc. In early 1956 the CIA admitted that they knew the impact of the propaganda broadcasts could be violent, and at that point in time they were unable to assist militarily. As it became clear that the end result was more than likely going to be violent, the CIA knew it might be asked to back up their broadcast with military help. Lawrence de Neufville, who began working for RFE in 1954, asked his bosses in Munich:

What happens if a man in a raincoat comes here and says, “We’ve been listening to all this stuff and we’re ready to start a revolution”? They discussed it in a special board meeting and they didn’t know what to do... They were all busy thinking they were doing good and nobody was doing any real plotting. And then the events caught up with them.¹⁶

Many involved with the United States government feared the same reaction by the Hungarians could occur. To protect the credibility of Radio Free Europe and in a sense the reputation of the United States if an incident did take place, the CIA found it necessary for the United States and Washington to be able to preserve plausible deniability.¹⁷ Walter Hixson, a historian working for RFE, explained that “RFE had to foster the illusion of being a genuine private radio station”¹⁸ in order to maintain credibility to those listening in Eastern Europe.

Despite knowing the risks, the propaganda barrage continued to be ordered by the United States government and Western European powers. One aspect of the propaganda

¹⁶ Frances Stonor Saunders, *Who Paid the Piper? The CIA and the Cultural Cold War*. (London: Granta, 1999), 140.

¹⁷ Sebestyen, 58.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

operation in Hungary was the use balloons and leaflets with messages to the people. In Hungary and other Eastern European nations, millions of leaflets were dropped into the country by balloons presenting statements and propaganda from the West, in particular the United States. The leaflets presented “inspirational” messages. An example of the leaflets is:

Czechs and Slovaks, know this: The regime is weaker than you think. Power lies with the people, and the people stand opposed. With unity and courage, organize your strength. Down with the collective. Insist on workers’ rights today. Demand concessions-tomorrow, Freedom.¹⁹

At the same time RFE announced on the air, “The Soviet Union is growing weaker. Only those will survive who detach themselves from the Communist boat in time...

Everywhere in the Free World your friends are with you.... All power to the people.”²⁰

Virtually the same effort was done in Hungary under Operation Focus calling for action to be taken against the Communist regime.

The United States Army created a survey in January of 1956 titled “Hungary: Resistance Activities and Potentials that analyzed the potential for Special Forces operations in Hungary. In the report, army officials admit that:

Dissidence and resistance potential appear to be strongest among peasants, whose continuing opposition has substantially contributed to the failure of the regime’s agricultural program; youth, whose cynicism and apathy has caused growing concern in Communist circles; industrial workers, whose disillusionment is widespread; and the Roman Catholic clergy, the majority of whom have not joined the regime-inspired “peace priest” movement....²¹

The survey openly admits that there was legitimate unrest amongst the working class and youth, yet the fliers were aimed toward those with anger and hatred toward the Soviet

¹⁹Puddington, 64.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ *Study Prepared for U.S Army Intelligence, Hungary: Resistance Activities and Potentials, January 1956* in *The 1956 Hungarian Revolution: A History in Documents*, ed. Csaba Bekes, Malcolm Byrne, Janos Rainer, (Budapest, New York: CEU Press, 2002), 88,89.

regime. The survey doesn't say whether they believed violent uprising was a possibility amongst these groups, but they do show that they know who to target with the propaganda fliers. Whether it was intentional or not, the messages sent in stirred up support for the anti-communist movement that would eventually become violent.

The incidents' surrounding the balloon and leaflet drops concerned officials in Washington regarding RFE and United States reputations. In Czechoslovakia, a load of several thousand leaflets were accidentally dropped onto the field of a sporting event in the middle of the action.²² In Prague the balloons were blamed for a plane crash that killed twenty two people on January 18, 1956.²³ Upon hearing the events in which the leaflets were blamed for, an official to President Eisenhower was quoted as saying:

The President recalled that both he and I had been rather allergic to this project and doubted whether the results would justify the inconvenience involved. The President said he thought the operation should be suspended. I agreed, but said I thought we should handle it so it would not look as though we had been caught with jam on our fingers.²⁴

Throughout the propaganda barrage, the United States attempted to do whatever it could to keep it's relationship with Radio Free Europe a secret from the public, for fear that it would discredit the reports broadcast into Eastern European nations.

As the year went on RFE continued to broadcast propaganda programs designed to undermine the regime in Hungary, and dissidence amongst the civilians in Hungary grew even larger. On October 23rd it all boiled over when a rally was planned by the students of Hungary to protest against the Soviet Union. The Communist leader of Hungary, Erno Gero, met with his delegation that morning to discuss the planned protests.

²² Puddington, 111.

²³ *Statement by Joseph Grew to the Secretary General of the United Nations*, March 19, 1956.

²⁴ Johanna Granville. "Caught with Jam on Our Fingers: Radio Free Europe and the Hungarian Revolution of 1956," *Diplomatic History* 29, no. 5 (November 2005) 815.

From his aides, two vastly different opinions were presented. Jozsef Revai and Gyorgy Marosan warned Gero that a threat of a revolution was possible, and even likely. The only possible solution the two men saw was to cancel the demonstrations and to have security fire on anyone who defied the ban not to protest.²⁵ Lajos Acs, the senior Political Committee member had a differing opinion. He believed that there was no way a revolt was imminent, and instead they should try to smooth things over with the protesters by allowing Imre Nagy back into the government.²⁶ The men compromised, coming up with the solution to ban the demonstrations, but not to use deadly force.

On October 23rd at 3:00 in the afternoon the protests began, with marchers from the east and west marching in unison. As the marches went through the city they quickly gained support by other citizens. As factory workers and working class joined the demonstrations, the onlookers increased their encouragement. One section of the protests went to Kossuth Square in front of Parliament, and called for Nagy.²⁷ As chants of “Imre Nagy into the government!” rang out, another set of protesters gathered in front of the Radio station near a statue of Stalin. After several hours of standoff between the protesters and the AVH protecting the station, violence broke out. At 8:00 p.m. a speech by Gero denounced the protests angering the crowd of listeners. An hour later at 9:00 p.m. the first shot rang out from the radio station, which was then under siege by the crowd. After an evening of fighting, the protesters finally took control of the building, and the start of the revolution had occurred.

²⁵ Csaba Bekes, Malcolm Byrne, Janos M. Rainer, *The 1956 Hungarian Revolution: A History in Documents*, (Budapest, New York: CEU Press, 2002), 191.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid, 192.

As the fighting began between the Soviet troops and the Hungarian citizens, Washington found itself in the middle of a crisis in which it needed to make a decision on what action to take. Some officials from the United States argued that the advantages of intervening were outweighed by the potential of disrupting the political status quo of the region, which had been running smoothly since 1945.²⁸ The other argument that many senior officials shared was the feeling that the United States had an obligation to follow through with the rhetoric it had been pumping into Eastern Europe, and it was the United States duty to live up to the expectations of the worldwide public which supported the Hungarians battle against the Soviet Union.²⁹ The debate continued when on October 24, 1956 John Foster Dulles called the U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, Henry Cabot Lodge, with Washington's concerns.

We are thinking of the possibility of bringing it to the [UN]SC [United Nations Security Council]. From a political standpoint, the Sec. is worried that it will be said that here are the great moments and when they came and these fellows were ready to stand up and die, we were caught napping and doing nothing.³⁰

From this message comes a sense that rather than obtain bad press, the United States government was willing to allow the Hungarians hopeless battle for freedom continue with innocent bloodshed. Officials were well aware that the rhetoric spread into the region by the United States and RFE was a huge inspiration to those Freedom Fighters squaring off with the Soviet Union, but the decision was still made to put U.S. repute over innocent lives.

²⁸ Ibid, 202.

²⁹ Ibid, 203.

³⁰ *Memorandum of Conversation between John Foster Dulles and U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Henry Cabot Lodge, October 24, 1956 in The 1956 Hungarian Revolution: A History in Documents*, ed. Csaba Bekes, Malcolm Byrne and Janos M. Rainer (Budapest, New York: CEU Press, 2001), 228.

The Communist officials of the Hungarian government were also faced with important decisions on how to end the uprising of the civilians. While the Soviet Union promised that reinforcements were on the way, officials in Hungary were fearful about how much support the revolution had garnished throughout the nation. Reports were flooding in to the leaders that rural citizens were taking arms and joining the fight, at which point decided that a desperate act was needed to suppress the fighting. On October 28, 1956 the Hungarian Communist party members met to discuss what to do. Among the thirteen on hand were Janos Kadar, Jozsef KoboI, Erno Gero and Imre Nagy, the highest ranking Communist officials in Hungary. Kadar began the meeting by stating, “We have to find a way to get the people who took part in the fighting to lay down their arms without regarding them [all] as counterrevolutionaries.”³¹ The leaders understood that the best way to get the Freedom Fighters to put down their arms was by making concessions. However, they were still unwilling to give in to the demands made by those initial protests, but by softening the punishment to those fighting there was a general hope amongst the Communist leaders that a ceasefire could be reached.

One member of the Communist party involved in the meeting, simply referred to as Comrade Mikoyan, suggested “It has to be said more clearly that there were mistakes in the old leadership.... If we want to be at the leading edge of the workers’ movement, we must demand that they end the fighting.”³² The first decision was to have Imre Nagy once again become the Prime Minister. The hope was to start negotiations between the new government lead by Imre Nagy and the fighters. By telling them that concessions

³¹ *HWP CC Political Committee Meeting, October 28, 1956* in *The 1956 Hungarian Revolution: A History in Documents*, ed. Csaba Bekes, Malcolm Byrne and Janos M. Rainer (Budapest, New York: CEU Press, 2002), 253.

³² *Ibid*, 255.

were going to be made, and that their uprising was no longer viewed by the Soviet Union as an uprising, but rather a reaction to past misdeeds, immediate acts of violence would cease to exist; At the very least until Soviet troops arrived. For the first time since the end of WWII, the Soviet led Communist leaders began to discuss the process of desalinization in Hungary.

On October 28, 1956 at 5:25 p.m. new Prime Minister Imre Nagy gave a radio announcement to the Hungarian citizens about the formation of a new government. His opening statement was right on cue with the meeting between officials earlier in the day;

During the course of the past week bloody events took place with tragic rapidity. The fatal consequences of the terrible mistakes and crimes of these past 10 years unfold before us in these painful events which we are witnessing and in which we are participating.³³

The speech that followed accused the citizens of criminal behavior, but only as a reaction to the crimes committed by the previous government. Despite the Soviet Union's warnings against it, Nagy also included a section of his speech discussing Soviet abandonment of Hungary:

The Hungarian Government has come to an agreement with the Soviet Government that the Soviet forces shall withdraw immediately from Budapest and that simultaneously with the formation of our new Army they shall evacuate the city's territory.³⁴

Nagy hoped that by announcing on air that a deal had been reached, the Soviet Union would be forced to abandon Hungary and Nagy's new government could begin recuperating the country. Unfortunately, the impression was given to those citizens listening that the Hungarians triumphant battle against the Soviet regime had been

³³ *Radio Message from Imre Nagy Announcing the Formation of a New Government, October 28, 1956, 5:25 p.m.* in *The 1956 Hungarian Revolution: A History in Documents*, ed. Csaba Bekes, Malcolm Byrne and Janos M. Rainer (Budapest, New York: CEU Press, 2002),284.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 285.

successful, and that the Soviet's exit of Hungary was official. A friend of Nagy, Tibor Meray, later analyzed the problem that took place after Nagy gave his speech:

It sometimes happens in history that a whole country becomes the victim of an optical illusion. That was what happened in Hungary. Nagy's announcement of the ceasefire order, which he linked this time to a promise that the Soviet troops would leave the capital, spread drunken joy throughout the country. The little people of Hungary, who had fought with such indomitable courage, now thought they had triumphed over the Soviet Union, not only morally but also militarily.³⁵

The same day that Imre Nagy and the rest of the Communist leaders were attempting to create some sort of stability and peace, Radio Free Europe was undermining their efforts. A broadcast on October 28 informed its listener's military tactics that were found to be successful against superior enemies. The report began with carefully edited statements that made it seem as though military support from the West, mainly the United States, was imminent.

Three days ago we said that every day, every hour gained by resistance is worthy the sacrifice, lessens the risk. This statement of ours is emphasized by the meeting of the U.N's Security council, called together for tonight... The calling together of the Security Council would have shrunk to a purely formal demonstration if Imre Nagy and his companions would have liquidated the revolutionary movement within two days.³⁶

The impression given was that a decision on what military action the U.N. was going to take was being discussed that evening. However, the meeting the broadcast was referring to was the previously mentioned meeting in which the members of the UN were attempting to figure out a way to separate their names from RFE in light of the revolution in order to maintain their reputations. The encouragement for the Hungarian soldiers to fight on was ignited by the belief that they were not in the battle alone. They weren't

³⁵ Noel Barber, *Seven Days of Freedom* (New York: Stein and Day Publishers, 1974), 128.

³⁶ Radio Program, "Armed Forces Special NO. B-1", Air Date 28 October, 1956 in *The 1956 Hungarian Revolution: A History in Documents*, ed. Csaba Bekes, Malcolm Byrne and Janos M. Rainer (Budapest, New York: CEU Press, 2002), 286.

taking part in a revolution, but rather they had just ignited a war with the Soviet Union in which the rest of the Free World was about to take part in.

To further confuse those Hungarians who were listening to the messages broadcast on RFE, the report warned that the Soviet Union was sending reinforcements to put down the uprising. The report added, “According to pessimists these forces will snap up the freedom fighters in no time. We on the other hand say: let us not be scared of these numbers indicated as overpowering forces.”³⁷ The reporter went on to tell a story from World War II when the Nazis were marching through South-Eastern Europe, where only 500 Serbian fighters “went into action by attaching themselves closely to the marching German division, popping up on the sides, in front and the rear and by keeping close contact with each other.”³⁸ The program wrapped up by saying,

It is by these means and not by a supremacy of arms and numbers that they succeeded to stop in a decisive place an enemy army which marched towards a decisive task, causing grave losses without suffering substantial losses themselves.³⁹

Following the reports broadcast to the Hungarians it became clear to those outside of the Satellite Nations that RFE was sending false reports to those listening. The call for action undermined all efforts for peace that surely would have prevented the revolution from continuing, resulting in unfathomable loss of life.

Following that program, RFE came back on the air with what later became known as the famous “Molotov Cocktail” speech. The announcer began the program by announcing that “we have asked our fellow worker Gyula Patko to report about his own

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid, 287.

³⁹ Ibid, 287.

experiences, in order to illustrate the possibilities of partisan warfare against tanks.”⁴⁰ To the citizens listening, the impression was still being made that these programs were sponsored by Western Europe and the United States, and that they were giving military advice to hold off the tanks until backup could arrive. The actual military advice began shortly after, with exact instructions for the Freedom Fighters on how to combat the Soviet tanks. The special guest told stories of how he defeated tanks during his time as commander during WWII, and suggested that those listening do the same.

One of these methods is in the first place the bottle filled with gas which was, at the time, jokingly called “Molotov cocktail.” All one needed for this was a wine bottle of one liter filled with gasoline to which we added a few crumbs of yellow phosphor and then sealed it tightly.... The moment the bottle broke, the phosphor set the gasoline immediately on fire and the enormous sucking effect of the powerful motor did then the rest. The motor caught fire and the tank became immovable. The crew was forced to leave the tank and our firearms done the rest.⁴¹

The Hungarians were hearing military tactics provided by the U.S., but they were again being fed more propaganda that was undermining all efforts to end the violence at once. The West had no intentions of intervening, nor had they ever seriously considered the proposition to do so.

After the United States and other Western coalition forces failed to respond to the cries for help by Hungarian citizens, the Soviet troops entered Hungary on November 4th to put down the revolution. After the twelve days of death and destruction, around 4,000 Hungarians were killed, over 700 Soviet troops were dead and thousands more were wounded. Over 200,000 Hungarians were forced to flee their homes and search for shelter from neighboring nations. After the Soviet Union regained power in Hungary,

⁴⁰ Radio Program, “*Special Armed Forces B-2*,” Air date October 28, 1956 in *The 1956 Hungarian Revolution: A History in Documents*, ed. Csaba Bekes, Malcolm Byrne and Janos M. Rainer (Budapest, New York: CEU Press, 2002), 288.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 289.

13,000 Hungarians were imprisoned and about 350 more were executed for their involvement in the Revolution. Janos Kadar became the Prime Minister, and despite his attempts at creating a worker-peasant government, the Soviet Union kept a tight grasp on the politics in the country.

Hungarians were misled by the messages broadcast over Radio Free Europe in the months prior to the revolution and through the uprising's entirety. As the students gathered against the Soviet opposition, messages and speeches rang in their ears that aid would come from the west. One of those involved in the fighting was an 18 year old male student in October 1956. After being actively involved in the uprising against the Communists, he was forced to abandon his home in order to save his life after the Soviets restored order. The young man, who preferred to remain anonymous, stated in an interview in 1959, just three years after fleeing his home in Hungary, "Since Stalin's death.... All knew then that something will happen. However they did not expect to do things themselves but the thought of aid and the solution to come from the West."⁴² The unnamed young man went on to reveal the concern, or lack there of, of Soviet intervention:

We knew that they would intervene, but we trusted in the West to help us. Ten years of propaganda has convinced us of this. Had they not intervened, there would have been no revolution and peaceful readjustment with Moscow would have been possible.⁴³

The young man referred to Radio Free Europe as the citizen's main source of news from the West during occupation. The broadcasts that were streamed over Radio Free Europe implied that all the Hungarians had to do was stand up against the Soviet regime and the

⁴² *Anonymous Interview with an 18 year old Hungarian* interviewed by Donald and Vera Blinken, *Hungarian Refugee Interviews from 1957-1958*.
http://files.osa.ceu.hu/holdings/other/blinken/pdf/O110_a.pdf.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

West would take care of the rest. As the rest of the world looked on, it was devastatingly clear that the Hungarians had no chance of defeating the superior Soviet army. However, the Hungarians acknowledged that they would not be able to defeat the Soviets as well, but were convinced the United States would aid them.

Other Hungarians had the same sentiment about the messages they perceived to be the truth. Another young man helped at the radio station in Budapest as the revolution broke out. He was actually working inside the Radio Budapest building on October 23rd, the day protesters and AVO officers clashed to mark the start of the revolution. The anonymous young man cited the same confusion that many others had from what was heard on the air from RFE. He also made more serious claims, suggesting that the broadcasts did more than ignite the nationalistic spirit and pride in the citizens, but actually directly led to the deaths of innocent Hungarians.

... I have to tell you something about Radio Free Europe. It is a fact that RFE served a useful purpose. It encouraged us during these 12 years but RFE also made statements which cost many Hungarian lives. On my way to Austria I met a Hungarian officer who told me that RFE's famous declaration, "wait another day, fight another day, and help will come," cost him 850 of his men.⁴⁴

The direct claim puts into question what the goals of the United States and the rest of the Western nations that supported RFE were. The creators of RFE, the CIA in particular, and the Hungarian citizens had the initial belief that RFE was in place to broadcast unbiased news from democratic nations, but the reports from the area seem to suggest otherwise. The broadcasts advanced from news updates to political speeches, and anti-communist propaganda intertwined within it all. Because the propaganda had advanced to such an extent, many Hungarians saw what they were doing as more than a

⁴⁴ *Anonymous Interview with a 27 year old Hungarian* interviewed by Donald and Vera Blinken, *Hungarian Refugee Interviews from 1957-1958*.
http://files.osa.ceu.hu/holdings/other/blinken/pdf/O119_a.pdf

revolution, but rather the beginning of a war between the United States and the Soviet Union.

The question of how such a disaster could have occurred began to be discussed worldwide. Questions about Radio Free Europe's involvement in the revolution began to be discussed. On December 5, 1956 a policy review of RFE during the revolution was conducted. An internal investigation was done by the RFE political adviser, William Griffith, in which several conclusions were made. The first conclusion was that "There were relatively few real policy violations."⁴⁵ Griffith then goes into detail of each of the policy violations that were committed by the broadcasts. The first he investigates is the "Armed Forces Special" #A1 of 27 October, which "gives detailed instructions as to how partisan and Hungarian armed forces should fight,"⁴⁶ while also "fairly clearly implies that foreign aid will be forthcoming if the resistance forces succeed in establishing a "central military command."⁴⁷ Despite the obvious faults of the programs, Griffith states that had the program had been done in "theoretical terms without any reference to current events in Hungary,"⁴⁸ then absolutely no policy would have been broken. Griffith goes on to say that probably the most serious fault of the broadcasts was the tone of the announcers, and that "too few writers appear willing to admit that the situation inside the country be so complex that they are not qualified to give listeners specific advice on what to do."⁴⁹

⁴⁵ *Policy Review of Voice of Free Hungary Programming, October 23-November 23, 1956 in The 1956 Hungarian Revolution: A History in Documents*, ed. Csaba Bekes, Malcolm Byrne and Janos M. Rainer (Budapest, New York: CEU Press, 2002), 465.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 466.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 479.

Griffith concludes that “there is no evidence in the 308 scripts read in this survey that the VFH [Voice of Free Hungary] could have *incited* the Hungarian Revolution- i.e., caused it to begin.”⁵⁰ He also states that “The VFH (with one exception) made no *direct* promise or commitment of Western or UN military support or intervention. Its broadcasts may well, however, have encouraged Hungarians to have false hopes in this respect; they carefully did little or nothing to counteract them.”⁵¹ Even if just one program *promised* directly that the West would intervene, not to mention the countless inferring made in almost every program, it was done too many times. The Hungarian citizens were basing their entire uprising on the belief that they were not going to be in the fight alone, and the West left them to fight a hopeless battle.

However, Griffith feels that the most regrettable mistake made by VFH was,

Not their relatively few policy violations, but their offense against the canons of good political warfare and broadcasting technique. They delivered in a bombastic and imperative tone a message which could have been conveyed in the form of reports on and repetition of the information coming out of Hungary, particularly that from the Free Stations. The VFH told Hungarians things they either already knew or could not in any case have been taught the last minute by radio.⁵²

Griffith states that the biggest mistake made by RFE in the months prior to and during the revolution was the tone in which stories were announced. The rhetoric included in the broadcasts and the direct instructions to fight were merely policy violations that were unfortunate to take place, but in no way aided to the fighting or inspired a nation to revolt. However, the false hope that seemed to be included in every broadcast is what was unacceptable.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 481.

⁵¹ Ibid, 481.

⁵² Ibid, 483.

Griffiths seems to be arguing that his broadcasts were viewed as propaganda by those in Hungary, and that there is no proof that they actually impacted the start of the Hungarian Revolution. All evidence that exists seems to suggest the contrary, that in fact the reports and broadcasts spewed over Radio Free Europe directly influenced the start of the revolution, and fueled it throughout its entirety. Somehow the United States was able to separate itself from RFE and received very little blame for the bloodshed that occurred. Throughout the propaganda barrage and even into the start of the Hungarian Revolution, it was clear that the United States was more worried about its foreign reputation than the outcome and impact that the revolution would have on the Hungarians. The CIA funded Radio Free Europe began its propaganda war by broadcasting messages of “freedom” from the west, encouraging non-cooperation with the Soviet Union. Somewhere along the line, the messages began to incite anger inside those listening in Hungary, and finally progressed into messages supporting and encouraging direct violent action to be taken against the Soviet Union.

Many historians argue that Hungarians themselves didn't believe the messages broadcast on air, but rather RFE was only effective in angering the Communist party. Instead, past historians believe that it was the policies of Stalinism, in particular the collectivization, rapid industrialization, loss of due process and political purges that took place. After a brief period of loosening up of policies after Stalin's death, Imre Nagy spread a period of hope and improvements for the Hungarians. Historians argue that upon Nagy's removal, Hungarians were angered and upset, and that directly led to the revolution. Even more common amongst historians is to view the Hungarian Revolution as the rise of freedom against an authoritarian regime. They view the Hungarians as the

underdogs who attempted to go against odds and try to fight for the freedom of their country. The revolution itself has often been viewed as a heroic event- democracy versus communism. The Hungarian Revolution was just a segment of the Cold War, not an individual event that cost nearly 4,500 innocent lives. The view that many historians have glorifies Western ideals rather than questioning how so many innocent lives were lost. The views of these historians are skewed, and their values bring into question the accuracy of their conclusions. Many of the early historians were active members in the revolution. Of those, most were outsiders, coming into the war zone from Western Europe or the United States. The only reason that they engaged in the fighting was because they were fighting for democracy against an authoritarian communist regime. It is impossible to expect these historians to present an unbiased, truthful representation about the impact that the democratic governments from the West might have had. Only recently have historians began to look at the impact that United States funded propaganda broadcast by RFE had on the revolution.

RFE broadcast messages- created and approved by the CIA- sent messages of hope and inspiration to take arms and continue their fight against the Soviet Troops. The propaganda dragged on an event that never should have been started in the first place, and in the end thousands paid the ultimate price for RFE's careless journalism. Instructions were given on military tactics and direct claims were made that the Soviet Union was retreating and victory was near, and yet RFE has received a free pass. Despite breaking some "minor" policies, RFE continued to broadcast into the region long after the revolution, and actually broadcasts in the Middle East today. The initial intent of RFE was to send unbiased news into the region, and Frank Winser manipulated the station to

the United States benefits. RFE and the United States should have received more blame for the unfortunate events that took place in October of 1956.

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