

Report on Hungarian Refugees

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The Hungarian Revolution of October 1956 provided an unprecedented opportunity for the collection of intelligence on a Soviet Bloc country. Each of the many facets of intelligence activity played its role. Every known Free World and Bloc intelligence organization was involved. Every Hungarian refugee who could toddle was a potential target for an intelligence-minded group. It is obviously impossible, therefore, to claim with good conscience to tell the "intelligence story" of the Hungarian Revolution. It is also impossible to get the many participants to agree on which of the many efforts was the most fruitful. This, then, will be the account of one activity - the collection of the intelligence information and material from the Hungarians who were admitted to the US. Other operations will be mentioned only as they are considered pertinent. Because the opportunity was unique, certain adaptations in intelligence collection methods were required to take full advantage of it. The object was to extract the maximum amount of intelligence at a minimum cost while still abiding by decent rules of human conduct. As the methods used were necessarily determined by the processing and resettlement procedures as well as by the official US Government attitude toward intelligence exploitation, it might be well to begin with a brief historical background.

The story of the revolution has been told many times, probably best by the UN in its massive report. The outbreak took place on 23 October

1956, and in the months following, it is estimated that 188,000 Hungarians found refuge in Austria and 18,000 in Yugoslavia. As of 1 September 1957, approximately 35,000 of these refugees had accepted asylum in the US.

In early November 1956, when it became apparent that a massive influx of Hungarians was going to have to be resettled, it was decided that Camp Kilmer, New Jersey, would be the processing center for all of the refugees. Because the installation was an Army camp, the Army was charged with the initial responsibility for coordinating the resettlement effort and providing all of the housekeeping services. On 12 December 1956, however, the President appointed a civilian Committee for Hungarian Refugee Relief under the chairmanship of Mr. Tracey F. Voorhees. This Committee has coordinated all activities in connection with "Operation Mercy." In the process it utilized the services of more than 20 volunteer and governmental agencies. From the arrival of the first refugees on 21 November 1956 until early May 1957, when Camp Kilmer was closed, transportation was provided by 214 MATS flights, 5 military Sea Transport Service (MSTS) ocean voyages, and 133 flights chartered by the Intergovernmental Committee for European Migration (ICEM). The Bureau of Immigration and Naturalization and the Public Health Service performed the functions necessary for admitting aliens to the US, and various charitable-religious agencies arranged for most of the resettlements. Part of the job of fitting the individual's skills to available employment opportunities was performed by the National Academy of Sciences and the US Employment Service. The processing and resettlement was handled with an amazing degree of efficiency, and the sympathetic attitude of the American people was so sustained that by early May it was possible to close Camp Kilmer. About 32,000 of the refugees had been dispersed to various parts of the country, and those remaining are being shuttled through the St. George Hotel in Brooklyn.

Lest the cursory nature of this account convey the idea that this was a simple and smooth process, remember that the operation involved the complete transplanting to the US of a large number of participants in a violent revolution who had lost most of their possessions and who had little or no knowledge of the English language. Only 6,500 of these could come under any available immigration quota. The rest were admitted under the Attorney General's discretionary authority, and the rules were established and changed several times. Indeed, methods and procedures were developed, abandoned, and reinstated many times in the early days of the operation. Also the prevailing attitudes, both official

and public, changed appreciably over the months. In the early days the primary concern was to provide a humanitarian welcome for the victimized Hungarian people. Every effort was made to avoid incidents which might cause unfavorable comment. This attitude was motivated by a genuine sympathy and admiration for Hungarians and a determination to take full advantage of the propaganda opportunity against the Soviet Bloc. As the spotlight of international interest turned elsewhere, concern for internal security and the collection of material bearing on motivations came to the fore.

A few statistics may help to give some idea of the scope of both the intelligence collection problem and the opportunities. Hungary is a nation with a population roughly equal to that of Pennsylvania and a land area just slightly smaller than that of Indiana. About 65 percent of the population was considered to be rural, and 16 percent was concentrated in Budapest and its environs. The 188,000 people who fled the country during the great exodus represented about 2 percent of the population. No age distribution is readily available for prerevolutionary Hungary, but 83 percent of the refugees received into the US were under 40 years of age, and approximately 64 percent of them were males. This is certainly not a typical slice from an old country in a near postwar period. Also despite the fact that Hungary is predominately rural, less than 1 percent of the group coming to the US admitted to being engaged in agricultural enterprises. This is probably easily explained on two counts: first, the land owners, even collective farmers, are less likely to leave than the landless; and second, those of rural background, faced with new opportunities and feeling that they have little prospect of owning land in the new country, are likely to follow the prevailing trend toward city occupations, even to the extent of falsifying their background statements. Another survey of the refugees who were over 16 years of age (excluding housewives) revealed that the average education of the group coming to the US was almost 10 years.

The fact that the refugees were young, well educated, male, and engaged primarily in nonagricultural enterprises is a happy one when we think of the group both as a national asset and as a positive foreign intelligence target. The additional fact that this predominately urban group formed about 1 percent of the total population of a small agricultural country should mean that not only every trade and industry but every major enterprise should be represented by a delegate in the US group. It is well recognized that a certain number of the Hungarians probably succumbed to the human tendency to exaggerate and alter

their backgrounds, but it is believed that the distortion is not significant for our purposes.

In November 1956 the intelligence community faced the problem of exploiting the Hungarians without the benefit of even the crude statistics presented in this article. The known facts were that tens of thousands of Hungarians were crossing the border to seek refuge in the Free World. Some were sincere patriots who had jeopardized their lives for their country in the revolution; some were opportunists seeking economic betterment; and some were intelligence agents with missions to collect intelligence, to establish nets or to report on the activities of Hungarians in the first two categories. Austria found its border area inundated with the Hungarians and could not screen them thoroughly with the resources at its disposal. At the same time the Austrian government did not wish to provoke the Soviet Union by allowing other Western nations to set up obvious intelligence procedures as a first step in the resettlement process. A number of the refugees were willing and even anxious to impart information of value to the Western powers, both for patriotic reasons and in order to secure more favorable treatment. The more enterprising of these found their way to one or another of the overt US or UK missions operating in Austria. Reports coming back from these missions were the first indications of the high caliber, intelligence-wise, of the refugee horde. It was impossible to begin the problem of cataloging the intelligence assets in Austria, so the next best thing seemed to be an attack on the same problem in the US. The NSCID #7 Committee has the responsibility for domestic exploitation. It was now faced with the problem of exploiting a large, but indefinite number of sources without any prospect of additional manpower to meet the vastly increased workload.

In casting about for a solution to such an undertaking, the training cadre of the Armed Services Prisoner Intelligence Committee (ASPIC) seemed best fitted for the mission in terms of qualifications and availability. This was an Army-Navy-Air Force-CIA unit which, in time of war, could be expanded to deal with certain aspects of the prisoner interrogation problem. At the time of the Hungarian eruption it consisted of a group of intelligence language experts furnished by the Army and Air Force as a basic cadre. Under the auspices of the NSCID #7 Committee, advanced units of ASPIC were sent to Camp Kilmer in December to establish a process for assessing the intelligence value of the refugees, in preparation for a full exploitation. At this time the prevailing sentiment among those responsible for "Operation Mercy" was a desire to extend

undiluted Western hospitality to the Hungarians. At this early stage there was an attitude of mild horror toward any intelligence activity. The advanced unit found it necessary, therefore, to act under a cover - the Historical and Statistical Survey Team (HSS). The activity of the unit was restricted to obtaining background information on the individual Hungarians and collecting such documents and possessions as could be pried loose without creating a furor. Through its own efforts and with the cooperation of the authorities who were processing the Hungarians, HSS was given ready access to the information which was available to all processing authorities. This information generally consisted of name, place of birth, former occupation, military service, and, in some cases, education and language capabilities. Because of language difficulties and a normal human desire to describe one's background in the best light, the education and occupation data were of limited value. With the permission of the authorities a certain number of the refugees were selected for extended interviews. Here again the prevailing sentiment toward humanitarianism, the complications of processing the many homeless, confused people in a humane and overt way presented an amazing number of difficulties for the surveying teams. Refugees were difficult to locate, suspicious, or overly garrulous. The intelligence operation was at the low end of the priority scale at the camp. There was inclement weather, a complicated system of drawing meal tickets, and the usual spate of unsettling rumors. Methods were developed by HSS on one day, altered the next, and discarded on the third day - all in response to the changing conditions and reactions. On the basis of the original inadequate information, about 6,000 refugees were selected for their intelligence potential and were asked to submit to an initial interview. Of these, about 3,600 complied with the request, and slightly more than 2,000 proved to have sufficient potential to justify recording a Preliminary Interrogation Report (PIR). These ranged from scientists or ministerial officials with detailed knowledge of intra-Bloc operations to private soldiers with knowledge of troop and supply locations in one limited area.

After it became apparent that the refugee flow was no longer the primary news topic in the country, it was decided that an effort would be made to carry on a more intensive intelligence collection effort at Camp Kilmer. This decision was based on the fact that an operation carried on there would catch the refugees before they became involved in the problems of adjusting to living conditions in their new environment and would entail much smaller cost to the US intelligence services. The fact that an individual's memory of a situation does not

improve with the passage of time was also a primary factor in this decision.

There was, of course, much thought given to the method for securing full cooperation of the refugees within the framework of the humanitarian effort. The refugees were usually willing and eager to impart all possible information. The common sense things were generally most efficacious in getting the cooperation. An interviewer competent in the refugee's field generally established satisfactory rapport rapidly. Cordiality, creature comforts, and a symbol of US Government officialdom were helpful. For instance, invitations carrying a large official looking stamp secured far better results than those merely stating that the US desired that the refugee report to a particular building. The air of uncertainty was also valuable. The refugees who were contacted soon after arrival were easier to work with than those who were around long enough to learn that they were safe and could extract favors in return for services or information. When the refugee reached his destination and was integrated in a community, protective relatives and friends frequently became a barrier or encouraged a suspicious attitude. Simply stated, the refugee, like a bewildered child in an unfamiliar situation, responds best to a friendly, solid person who understands him. As he becomes wise to the way of the new world these psychological factors favoring cooperation disappear. Then each case takes on more individuality and the treatment which has placed the refugee in this specific situation is the important thing to look into for any needed lever to cooperation.

It was decided that to take advantage of the situation the intensive intelligence exploitations should be carried out by a second interagency group with the cover name of US Sociological and Technical Research Unit (USSTRU). This unit was activated on 10 January 1957. While maintaining some semblance of separate operations, HSS and USSTRU cooperated fully; and when conditions permitted, sources were shuttled from one to the other. About ninety different individuals from CIA, comparable numbers from the Army and the Air Force, and a few from Navy and State participated in the USSTRU operation. No large portion of the group was there at any one time the ceiling at the peak of the operations was about 60 persons from all participating agencies. Because in the case of USSTRU the most effective collection could be done by analysts and intelligence officers having knowledge of the particular areas covered and gaps to be filled, specialists from all parts of the intelligence community were rotated to Camp Kilmer for time periods varying from a few days to several weeks. Members of both

intelligence units operated with a degree of dedication comparable to that shown by the people engaged in the processing and settling of Hungarians. For most of the period the work week consisted of seven 12- to 14-hour days.

Although the constant flow of experts through the intelligence operating units provided the best qualified interviewers, they also created continuing problems. The light cover required a certain degree of caution which was difficult to maintain under the circumstances. This mass participation method, however, had the added advantage of acquainting the whole intelligence community with the potential of the Hungarian refugees and the problems involved in exploiting this potential. Many of the large number of analysts involved were given their first experience in interviewing a source through the use of an interpreter and in reporting on information in which they were not expert. We have introduced the problem of interpreters, and this might be the place to say that early in the game two language factors came to light: (a) the intelligence community probably has fewer language specialists in Hungarian than in any other but the most exotic Eastern and Near Eastern languages, and (b) the Hungarians have a lower coefficient of second-language competence than any other civilized population except Americans. The shortage of competent Hungarian translators was a limiting factor in the size of the operation throughout its existence. Those who did come forward were used for long periods of time and were released only with great reluctance. Despite this serious handicap, USSTRU, from its inception to its demise on 1 May, produced about 1,500 intelligence reports covering all fields of interest. Hundreds of documents with accompanying stories, books, and other articles of possible future operational usefulness also were acquired.

The record keeping for the Hungarians was undertaken by CIA, under its responsibility for the exploitation of all private sources in the US. Because many of the sources were not available for any sort of an interview at the camp, many had their interviews shortened by resettlement opportunities; and because qualified experts were not available in all fields at all times, it was necessary to compile full records on the sources so that they might be located at a later date. Because of the confusion inherently attending the whole program, the job of compiling the records involved scooping up all available piles of paper not only from the intelligence components but also from all of the agencies participating in the resettlement program. Then followed many hours of coding, recording, sorting, discarding, and requesting bits and

pieces of data to fill the gaps. The resulting compilation proved of great use not only to all components of the intelligence community but, also on a number of occasions, to other Government agencies. By utilizing these records and its complete field force, supplemented by Air Force and Army units, CIA produced almost 3,000 reports by 1 September and has many more to come. This part of the collection operation faced many of the difficulties encountered at Camp Kilmer, with some new ones added.

Principal among these was the fact that the Hungarians, finding themselves free to move about as they pleased, changed locations with amazing frequency and rapidity without bothering in many cases to comply with the US regulations which require that aliens register changes of address with the Bureau of Immigration and Naturalization. Many field collectors had the disillusioning experience of tracing a Hungarian refugee believed to have potential for giving worthwhile information only to find after knocking on many doors that the source had considerably overstated his experience and qualifications.

The total result of the effort seemed to be that the overwhelming majority of the gaps in intelligence information on pre-revolutionary Hungary were filled. When the intelligence analysts are able to collate and digest the mountain of information resulting from the program, the records and facilities available should enable the collectors to fill all but a minuscule number of gaps. In addition the many intelligence officers who participated in the interviewing gained not only experience in the techniques involved but also a certain area familiarity. It would be impossible for an interested, informed person to talk to about forty or fifty Hungarians from all walks of life for a total of about 200 hours without acquiring a useful knowledge of the country and the people. When you add the thousands of reports and items to the training and area familiarization and divide it by the cost (Army food and quarters were provided, and no additional personnel were hired) you find that the intelligence community has made a bargain purchase. The Hungarian exploitation effort, American domestic style, will be a source of example and anecdote for some time to come.

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