

Setting the Record Straight:  
Role of Radio Free Europe in the Hungarian Revolution of 1956

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<sup>1</sup> Senior Scholar, Woodrow Wilson Center and Research Fellow, Hoover Institution. Full disclosure is in order. I have spent nearly half of my professional career working for RFE and RFE/RL and remain a consultant to the organization. I had no connection whatsoever with RFE or Hungary in 1956. For an expanded discussion of the 1956 RFE Hungarian broadcasts based on additional source material, see A. Ross Johnson, *Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty; the CIA Years and Beyond*. Wilson Center Press and Stanford University Press, 2010, Chapter Three, "Two Octobers in 1956," pp. 79-130.

## Introduction

Many Hungarians have testified to the positive role played by Radio Free Europe (RFE) for over 40 years in helping Hungary return to the community of free nations. Prime Minister Antal wrote to Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) in June 1990: "Radio Free Europe has ... given us the gift of truth about our own country and the world at large, and has done so at a time when telling the truth was counted as a crime against the state." President Gombos wrote to RFE/RL in 1991: "one of the important possibilities of expression for those in Hungary who raised their voices for changes was Radio Free Europe." Just as for Lech Walesa in Poland and Vaclav Havel in Czechoslovakia, RFE served as a megaphone by which independent figures in Hungary, denied access to local media, could speak to their fellow citizens. Former Hungarian Party ideological chief Janos Berecz said he "became convinced that Western broadcasts were among the accepted sources of information among the youth." The Hungarian Government honored RFE Hungarian broadcasters for their service to the nation in a ceremony in Budapest in 2000.<sup>2</sup>

While Hungarians of all political persuasions credit Radio Free Europe with helping to bring about the end of the Communist system, RFE's role during the 1956 Hungarian Revolution is the issue most cited, along with RFE's original CIA sponsorship, in the literature on the Cold War. This paper, part of a longer study of the history of RFE and RL, attempts to set the record straight. It first lists the principal criticisms in the literature concerning RFE's role in Hungary in 1956. It then tests these criticisms against the evidence, as we best know it today, and offers judgments about the soundness of the assertions. The "facts" emerge from documents in the RFE/RL archives, now at the Hoover Institution and the Open Society Archives, from declassified State Department and German Foreign Office records, and from memoirs of and interviews with participants. The most important archival source is the RFE/RL Collection at the Hoover Archives, which includes the RFE corporate records, the texts (scripts) of most Hungarian broadcasts, and the audio recordings of all Hungarian broadcasts during most of this

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<sup>2</sup> Johnson, 2001; *Cold War Broadcasting Impact*, 2005. Full citations are given in the References.

period. Finally, drawing on the experience of 1956, the paper suggests some dilemmas and lessons that arise for external communicators into crisis areas.

A major deficiency of this paper is the absence of comparative analysis of the performance of the three major Western broadcasters to Hungary in 1956 – RFE, the Voice of America (VOA), and the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). While there have been numerous examinations of RFE's 1956 Hungarian-language broadcasts, there are no comparable studies of VOA and BBC programs.<sup>3</sup> The attention paid to the 1956 RFE broadcasts, then and subsequently, is a remarkable tribute to the impact of a radio station that was then only five years old. But VOA and BBC, too, deserve some of the credit or blame. Relevant BBC archives evidently exist; comparable VOA archives have not been located.<sup>4</sup>

I am indebted to Robert Gillette, Paul Henze, Gene Parta, William Rademaekers, and Ralph Walter for comments on an earlier draft and to Margit Grigory for assistance with Hungarian-language materials.

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<sup>3</sup> A useful introduction is Rawnsley, 1996.

<sup>4</sup>See the references to BBC records in Urban, 1997. Urban worked at the BBC during the Hungarian Revolution. Copies of the BBC Hungarian broadcasts have been deposited in the National Szechenyi Library and Hungarian Radio in Budapest. The BBC Written Archives Centre, Redding, contains texts of 1956 BBC Hungarian broadcasts (as cited in Rawnsley, 1996). A BBC commentary on October 26 sympathized with the Hungarian Revolution but excluded Western military support. Another BBC commentary on October 27 denounced the Nagy government (Rawnsley, 1996, pp. 89, 92). A VOA review is cited in *FRUS*, XXV, p. 437; VOA Hungarian Munich chief Boros' emotional commentaries were not broadcast (Rawnsley, 1996, p. 79).

## The Charges

The literature on the role of RFE in the 1956 Hungarian Revolution contains six principal critiques:

1) RFE incited the Hungarian Revolution. “We are convinced that ... RFE’s aggressive propaganda is responsible to a large extent for the blood-bath which has occurred in Hungary...”<sup>5</sup>

2) RFE both urged Hungarians to fight the Soviet army and promised the insurgents<sup>6</sup> Western assistance that was never in prospect, raising false hopes among Hungarians, encouraging them to continue the uprising, and contributing to a bloodbath when the Soviet Union cracked down. “[RFE] encouraged the hapless insurgents to go all the way against the Kremlin and even broadcast lessons on how to make molotov cocktails.”<sup>7</sup> “... a review of American-sponsored Radio Free Europe’s broadcasts shows that the station cavalierly suggested that Western military assistance might be forthcoming if the rebels held out.”<sup>8</sup> “[RFE] encouraged [the Hungarians] with promises that the U.S. military would rush to their aid.”<sup>9</sup> Communist propaganda at the time played this theme endlessly.<sup>10</sup>

3) RFE broadcasts were a significant factor in the Soviet decision to crush the Revolution. “[RFE’s] ‘informational activities’ and broadcasts in the 1950s probably precipitated...the Soviet crackdown on Hungary on November 3-4, as well as increased the number of casualties.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> *Freies Wort*, organ of the West German Free Democratic Party, November 9, 1956.

<sup>6</sup> The literature and contemporary documents use various terms: revolutionaries, patriots, freedom fighters, rebels, nationalists, and insurgents.

<sup>7</sup> Charles Gati, “Come Clean in Hungary,” *Washington Post*, June 21, 2006. He does not suggest that RFE promised Western military assistance.

<sup>8</sup> *New York Times* editorial, November 3, 1996.

<sup>9</sup> *Sueddeutsche Zeitung*, Munich, June 23, 2006.

<sup>10</sup> For example in the Kadar regime’s White Book, *The Counter-Revolutionary Forces in the October Events in Hungary*, as cited in Michie, 1963, p. 249.

<sup>11</sup> Granville, 2005, p. 811.

4) RFE undermined through both personal invective and amplification of radical indigenous political demands the position of Imre Nagy. It thus weakened the only Hungarian politician who might have consolidated a government cohesive and popular enough to enforce internal and external policy limitations sufficient for the Kremlin to tolerate a less repressive but still Communist “Nagyism.” “[RFE broadcast] a massive hate campaign (*Hetze*) against Prime Minister Imre Nagy, the one individual for whom unconditional support in those days might have meant success for the Hungarian struggle for freedom.”<sup>12</sup> Relatedly, RFE reduced the chances of formation of a limited-reform government that might have been tolerated by the USSR through over-reporting maximalist demands of Hungarian insurgents for domestic freedoms and national independence. “[RFE] egged on the most radical insurgent groups to fight on until all of their demands were met.”<sup>13</sup>

5) RFE broadcasts were highly emotional, included tactical advice, and otherwise fell short of normal standards of journalism. “[While RFE broadcasts were generally in line with Western policy] what was absent was an understanding [of the situation in Hungary] ... and professionalism in daily work.”<sup>14</sup>

6) RFE was out of control, pursuing a policy divergent from that of the U.S. Government. “The problem was not that the CIA was pursuing its own policy ... there was also the problem of the control of the Hungarian desk in Munich.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> *SPD-Pressedienst*, organ of the West German Social Democratic Party, May 29, 1957.

<sup>13</sup> Gati, 2006, p. 6.

<sup>14</sup> Paul Lendvai, in Schmidl, 2003, p. 13.

<sup>15</sup> Nelson, 1997, p. 81.

## Evidence and Judgments

What does the historical record, as best we know it today, tell us about the validity of these criticisms? Certainly the documentary record is not complete, the broadcast recordings themselves await comprehensive contemporary review, and different conclusions may be drawn from the same body of evidence. What follows are my interpretations and conclusions.

### 1) Incitement of Revolution?

The RFE Hungarian Service (like the Czechoslovak, Polish, Romanian, and Bulgarian Services) began broadcasting in the early 1950s to counter the Communist information monopoly, as part of the U.S. effort to constrain Soviet power (without provoking suicidal revolt), keep alive hope of a better future, limit tyranny, and broaden the boundaries of internal debate, all in order to make the Soviet empire a less formidable adversary. RFE covered the declarations of the first Eisenhower presidency on liberation of Eastern Europe (always seen as a political and not military goal). In practice, RFE's broadcasts were generally more moderate than the slogan "liberation" implied. RFE's *Policy Handbook* issued in November 1951 had cautioned against broadcasting any promises of Western intervention. When "liberation" of the "captive peoples" was raised in 1952 Presidential campaign speeches, RFE issued a "Special Guidance on Liberation" dated September 2, 1952, which cautioned that "not one word in these [campaign] statements (on liberation) can be used to encourage militant anti-Communists to go over from passive to active resistance in the expectation that such resistance will be supported by Western elements." The most extreme 1952 presidential campaign rhetoric on "liberation" was kept off the air on the grounds that it could be misinterpreted in Eastern Europe.<sup>16</sup>

The crushing of the 1953 East German uprising and Pilsen revolt further sobered RFE

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<sup>16</sup> All RFE documents cited are located in the RFE/RL Collection, Hoover Archives.

management and the Free Europe Committee (FEC), to which it was subordinate, as to the limited possibilities for far-reaching political change in Eastern Europe. RFE viewed the “New Course” of limited reforms introduced in Eastern Europe after Stalin’s death as a sign of Communist regime weakness and an opportunity to reinforce limited popular opposition to Communist rule. Analyzing the Third Hungarian Party Congress of May 1954, RFE Munich policy advisor William E. Griffith drew this conclusion: “As long as the policy of the changed atmosphere continues, as long as the Communists continue their actual or false concession policies in the fields of [local] councils, the People’s Front, and intellectual life, we must play the role of an inner opposition radio. By airing newer and newer demands, we must force the government further and further along the concessionary road.”<sup>17</sup>

This was the genesis of “Operation Focus,” a media campaign which urged Hungarians through radio broadcasts and balloon-launched leaflets to endorse twelve specific demands – none of them explicitly political or challenging one-Party rule or Soviet presence -- aimed at converting regime mass institutions such as the People’s Front into instrumentalities of popular opposition that could pressure the Communist regime into gradual reforms. The basic “Operation Focus” policy guidance stated: “Our primary purpose is to focus the attention of the Hungarian people upon certain legitimate means by which they can continue to battle, thwart, and wrench concessions from the regime.”<sup>18</sup> “Operation Focus” ended in March 1955 after only six months, as its effectiveness was questioned within FEC and the State Department. Hungarian broadcasts continued thereafter without this particular prescriptive edge, and leaflets became mini-newspapers with more informational content. 350,000 such leaflets were delivered by balloon to Hungary on October 18 and 20, 1956 – the last such deliveries.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> RFE Office of the Political Advisor, “Hungarian Target H-6,” June 14, 1954.

<sup>18</sup> “Hungarian Guidance No. 15 on Operation Focus,” September 3, 1954; Also “Hungarian Guidance No. 16, Continuation of Operation Focus,” January 5, 1955; Free Europe Press, “Operation Focus, September 15 – December 31 1954.” The radio broadcasts were part of the regular programming of the RFE Hungarian Service. The leaflets were the responsibility of the Free Europe Press, a separate sub-organization of the Free Europe Committee. Over 100 million copies of 29 different leaflets were dropped over Hungary between March 1954 and March 1956 (only a part of them connected with the Focus campaign). For an overview of FEC balloon-leaflet operations, see Cummings, 1999.

<sup>19</sup> RFE Memorandum from William E. Griffith to Lewis Galantiere [FEC Counselor in New York], September 28, 1956; “Summary Report on Munich Free Europe Press Operations from October 1 – December 1, 1956”; External Review of balloon operations by Hugh Seton-Watson, October 3, 1956; Free Europe Press, “Effectiveness of FEC Leaflet Operations,” undated.

1956 was a year of ferment throughout the Communist world. RFE covered that ferment comprehensively in all its broadcast languages. It reported in March the initial Western press accounts of Khrushchev's February "Secret Speech"; in June both the full text of the speech as published in the *New York Times* and coverage of the Poznan riots; and in the fall the events of the "Polish October." It reported the developing ferment in Hungary in the summer and fall of 1956, including discussions in the reformist Petofi Circle. It continued to report on developments in Austria after Hungary's neighbor regained its sovereignty and freedom in 1955.

RFE's basic approach to this ferment in the Communist world was outlined in several "guidances" or statements of editorial policy<sup>20</sup> issued throughout 1956. Special Guidance No. 26 of March 27, addressing the emerging ferment in the Communist world, cautioned, "There is no likelihood of military action by the West to liberate [the East European] peoples." Special Guidance No. 27 of July 9 foresaw gradual, in-system change:

We must expect ... that no reforms can take place ... except under the aegis of the [Communist] party in power and under the guise of the new "benevolence" announced by the 20<sup>th</sup> CPSU Congress. ... While national communism cannot be our goal, we ignore the label attached to a successful movement for reforms ("Titoist," "national communist," etc.); we judge the specific instance accordingly as it does or does not lighten our people's burden, take them along the path to democracy.

Drawing on this basic guidance in a policy memorandum dated September 26, 1956, policy advisor Griffith defined RFE's task as "assist[ing] and prolonging and extending the thaw" and promoting liberalization even under conditions of continued Communist rule.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> See the References for a more detailed explanation of RFE "guidances."

<sup>21</sup> As cited in Puddington, 2000, p.97. These RFE guidances were in the spirit of USG policy guidances at the time. The Operations Coordinating Board's Special Working Group on Stalinism, the responsible inter-agency staff committee, defined the aim of U.S. policy and the task of "unattributable propaganda", i.e., RFE and RL, as "a loosening of the ties binding the satellites to Moscow and creation of conditions that will permit the satellites to evolve toward independence of Moscow." ("Summary of U.S. Policy Guidance and Actions Taken to Exploit the Campaign," May 17, 1956, *FRUS*, XXV, pp. 99ff.) An NSC staff study defined the task of RFE, RL, and VOA as "avoiding, on the one hand, any commitments regarding the time and means of achieving freedom from Soviet domination and any incitement to premature revolt, and, on the other hand, seeing to maintain faith in the eventual restoration of freedom." ("NSC Staff Study Annex to NSC 5608, July 7, 1956, *FRUS*, XXV, p. 208.)

RFE Hungarian broadcasts<sup>22</sup> prior to the outbreak of the Revolution conformed to these policy guidelines. Examples of such Hungarian broadcasts in the months prior to the Revolution (all objective and dispassionate by any standard) are a July 3 program directed to Hungarian Communists on anti-Stalin ferment in the CPSU;<sup>23</sup> a program on August 10 suggesting to the Hungarian Communist leadership that it study the lessons drawn by the Polish Communists after the Poznan uprising about the need for reform;<sup>24</sup> a program on October 6 stressing the need for an independent judiciary;<sup>25</sup> and a program on October 11 devoted to the initial purges in the secret police.<sup>26</sup> There were *no* broadcasts prior to outbreak of the Revolution calling for insurrection, urging violent confrontation of the Communist authorities, or advocating a maximalist anti-Communist platform.

The assertion that RFE incited the Hungarian Revolution is on its face absurd; uprisings and revolutions have internal causes and dynamics and have never been sparked by external media. In any case, RFE Hungarian broadcasts in the months leading up to mid-October 1956 were generally dispassionate and espoused gradual reform – not “liberation” but what would later commonly be labeled “liberalization.”<sup>27</sup>

## **2) Encouragement of Resistance and Promise of Western Aid?**

Did RFE Hungarian broadcasts urge Hungarians to fight the Soviet Army? Certainly the thrust

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<sup>22</sup> The RFE Hungarian Service, then called the Voice of Free Hungary, was a full service “surrogate” or substitute home-service broadcaster. As such it was on the air most of the day with top-of-the-hour news, field reports from correspondents in RFE’s news bureaus in 18 West European cities and the U.S., reviews of the Western press, features on subjects ranging from music to religion to sports, and political, economic, and social commentaries. All controversial RFE Hungarian programs in 1956 were political commentaries.

<sup>23</sup> Calling Communists No. C-291, “About the Consequences of the Personality Cult,” by Sandor Kirosi-Krizsan, July 3, 1956, original and translation on Microfilm Reel 147. All program texts (scripts) cited are located in the RFE/RL Collection, Hoover Archives.

<sup>24</sup> Reflector No. C-381, “Ochab, Gero, and the Poznan Events,” by Andrew Kazincczy, August 10, 1956, original and translation on microfilm reel 180.

<sup>25</sup> Reflector C-430, “On the Independence of Judges,” by Imre Mikes, October 6, 1956, original and translation on microfilm reel 180.

<sup>26</sup> Reflector No. C-434, “The State Security Department in its Own Shackles,” by Imre Mikes, October 11, 1956, original and translation on microfilm reel 180.

<sup>27</sup> My understanding of RFE Hungarian program policy between 1953 and October 1956 differs from that in Gati, 2006, Chapter 3.

of all commentary was solidarity with the Revolution. On October 24 the Hungarian Service appealed repeatedly to the Hungarian army and police not to fire on the insurgents and to regime judges not to impose summary death sentences.<sup>28</sup> Many programs relayed with approval domestic Hungarian voices calling for continuation of the Revolution and resistance to efforts to suppress it, for example a report on “the unanimous, brave, and heroic strike of the workers.”<sup>29</sup> A program on October 28 said that the Nagy government’s appeal for a cease-fire had to be respected by the Soviet Army to have any meaning.<sup>30</sup> Several programs aired on October 30 (after most fighting had temporarily stopped) offered tactical military advice and claimed that the Hungarian fighters were stronger than the Soviet army.<sup>31</sup> A November 1 commentary called on Hungarians to keep their weapons as a guarantee of the freedoms and independence that had been won. “To be clear, we only said ... do not give up your weapons. We did not say use them when there is no purpose and no sense in it.”<sup>32</sup> Once the second Soviet intervention began on November 4, a commentary declared that Hungary was at war.<sup>33</sup> A second emotional commentary that day said that “we, a small people in numbers but a great nation, are fighting against the despotism of the Muscovites... the barricades on which we are shedding our blood will be remembered for centuries to come.”<sup>34</sup> A commentary on November 6 said, “the fight of the Hungarian people has not yet ended.”<sup>35</sup> A second commentary on that date said that “the fight continues ... [it is the workers that] are fighting the terrible, overwhelming Soviet forces the longest, most desperately and unmindful of the lives sacrificed ...”<sup>36</sup> These programs and others indicate admiration for the insurgents and solidarity with resistance to the Soviet Army. As such they could easily have been interpreted by the listeners as encouraging resistance. But *no* RFE Hungarian broadcast appealed to the Hungarian people to continue armed struggle against the Soviet Army.

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<sup>28</sup> Quoted in Urban, 1997, p. 215-216.

<sup>29</sup> Special Workers Commentary, by Joszef Molnar, October 30, 1956.

<sup>30</sup> Short Commentary, by Imre Vamos, October 28, 1956

<sup>31</sup> “Armed Forces Special” programs by Julian Borsanyi and Gyula Litterati-Loodz. It was the latter, a free-lance contributor, and not Borsanyi (pseudonym Col. Bell) who famously described on October 30 how a “Molotov cocktail” was made (a translation is included, but with the incorrect broadcast date of October 28, in Bekes, 2002).

<sup>32</sup> Special Reflector F-1, by Imre Mikes, November 1, 1956.

<sup>33</sup> Special Short Commentary, by Laszlo Bery, November 4, 1956

<sup>34</sup> Special Short Reflector No I-1, by Imre Mikes, November 4, 1956

<sup>35</sup> Special Short Commentary No. K-1, by Laszlo Bery, November 6, 1956

Did RFE Hungarian broadcasts promise military assistance from the West? Cold War histories often cite the single clear-cut case of an RFE broadcast that suggested Western military assistance would be forthcoming if the Hungarian revolutionaries held out once the Soviet attacks resumed on November 4 – a press review of an article in the London *Observer* dated November 4 predicting that “pressure upon the government of the United States to send military help to the Freedom Fighters will become inevitable,” with Hungarian Service editor Zoltan Thury’s editorial conclusion: “The reports from London, Paris, the U.S. and other Western reports show that the world’s reaction to Hungarian events surpasses every imagination. In the Western capitals, a practical manifestation of Western sympathy is expected at any hour.”<sup>37</sup> This was the only such program identified in the many internal and external reviews of RFE programming listed in the References. It is the *only* such program cited in the critical Cold War literature on the subject.<sup>38</sup>

RFE, VOA, and BBC were the dominant Western Hungarian-language broadcasters during this period, but many other foreign radio stations continued or initiated broadcasts to Hungary in Hungarian during the Revolution. Two of these stations explicitly mentioned military assistance from the West. Radio Madrid, staffed by right-wing exiles in the Franco era, urged Hungarians to keep fighting because Western volunteers were massing on the Hungarian border. The Russian-émigré NTS radio operating out of Germany claimed that the “Association of Former Hungarian Servicemen” in the West was preparing to aid the insurgent forces.<sup>39</sup> Given the babble of tens of foreign and domestic Hungarian-language broadcasters during this period and the difficulties of reception through jamming for part of the time, listeners could easily but incorrectly have attributed such broadcasts to RFE and assumed that it was RFE that was urging

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<sup>36</sup> Special Short Commentary K-2, by Imre Mikes, November 6, 1956

<sup>37</sup> Special Short World Press No. 1-2, November 4, 1956, by Zoltan Thury, translation on microfilm reel 189. The original Hungarian text was not preserved, but the translation was checked against the original broadcast audio in 1956 and found to be accurate. (Griffith Memorandum, 1956). A review of the Italian press broadcast a few hours earlier on November 4 concluded on a slightly softer note: “it will come to declarations of sympathy and to manifestation of Western public feelings within a very short time.” (Special Short World Press No. 1-1, November 4, 1956, by Zoltan Thury, original and translation on microfilm reel 189).

<sup>38</sup> Including the Discovery Channel documentary on the Hungarian Revolution, *Betrayal at Budapest*, which ends with an account of the broadcast of the November 4 *Observer* press item against the visual backdrop of RFE studios.

<sup>39</sup> NTS-sponsored Radio Free Russia in Hungarian at 1005 GMT, October 30, 1956, as monitored by FBIS; Kagan dispatch, *New York Post*, November 26, 1956; RFE New York teletype NYC 223, November 26, 1956; Michie, 1963, p. 281.

Hungarians to hold out until Western military assistance arrived.<sup>40</sup>

The November 4 *Observer* item should not have been broadcast. But it was one program in a critical month of nearly round-the-clock RFE Hungarian broadcasting of over 500 programs and was not a significant programming theme. To be sure, many or even most Hungarians caught up in the Revolution did come to believe that the West would support them, one way or another, and Western radio broadcasts encouraged them in that belief. This perception is discussed further below. But that was not because of the content of one RFE program, which arguably had little impact. And, as noted, no program advocated continued military resistance. Hungarian listeners may have drawn encouragement from RFE broadcasts both to keep fighting and to expect Western aid – but these were actions the programs themselves neither advocated nor promised.

### 3) Catalyst of Soviet Suppression?

This charge requires little discussion.<sup>41</sup> RFE figures marginally, if at all, in the ample archival documentation on Soviet decision-making in 1956.<sup>42</sup> Khrushchev and the Soviet Politburo rationally foresaw the consequences for the Soviet Bloc if the Hungarian Revolution were to succeed and, however reluctantly, used military force to defeat it. They received ample reporting directly from Foreign Ministry, KGB, and military command representatives in Hungary, and special representatives sent from Moscow, about the reemerging multi-Party system and Hungarian determination to leave the Warsaw Pact. They did not need RFE broadcasts as status reports or evidence of Western anti-Communism.

### 4) Undermining Imre Nagy and Fostering Radicalism?

This critique (two separate but interrelated charges) goes to the heart of RFE's mission and

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<sup>40</sup>An example is the recollection of Zoltan Benko, in *Valosag*, no. 5, 1993, p. 83, cited in Urban, 1997, p. 238.

<sup>41</sup> Granville, the sole advocate of this argument, correlates specific RFE broadcasts with Soviet actions and asserts but offers no evidence of causality. "By doing so, we can see how NCFE/RFE operations most likely influenced both the Soviet and U.S. decision-making synergistically on the eve of, and during, the Hungarian crisis." (p. 817).

<sup>42</sup> As ably surveyed in Kramer, 1996-97.

performance during the Hungarian Revolution. RFE policy guidelines for treatment of Imre Nagy written in New York and Munich embodied skepticism about and generally directed a “wait and see” attitude toward Nagy, as they generally did about the Polish leader Wladyslaw Gomulka. New York Daily Guidance of October 23 drew parallels between Nagy and Gomulka. Daily Guidance of October 24 said “The fact that Nagy called upon foreign troops to restore ‘order’ [which was not the case, but was believed by all observers at the time] is a fact he will have to live down. He will live it down by keeping his promises [for reform].” An RFE New York guidance of October 28 stated that it was up to the Hungarian revolutionary groups to decide on their leaders: “Radio Free Europe will avoid to the utmost extent any explicit or implicit support of individual personalities in a temporary government – especially of communist personalities such as Imre Nagy or Kadar... It will be for the patriot groups (many of whom seem to believe that Imre Nagy can and will further their wishes) to decide whether any individual should stay or go, under developing conditions.”<sup>43</sup> RFE Munich agreed in a teletype response: “Concur entirely RFE avoiding support individual personalities.”<sup>44</sup>

RFE Hungarian commentaries, by and large, did not observe these guidelines (which implied but admittedly could have more explicitly cautioned against undue criticism as well as support). There was a role for sober critical analysis of Nagy’s past record, sources of current support, and choices ahead. Instead, many RFE Hungarian commentaries were blanket condemnations of Nagy, sometimes in personal, emotional, and vituperative tones.<sup>45</sup> RFE’s New York Headquarters first registered concern about the anti-Nagy commentaries and communicated this concern to Munich on November 2, directing that broadcasts “must not at any time – directly or indirectly - take RFE positions for or against individual personalities in the temporary government.”<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> RFE New York teletype PREB 15, October 28, 1956.

<sup>44</sup> RFE Munich teletype MUN 292, October 29, 1956. Then, as later, some USG and RFE officials evidently had a lower opinion of Nagy than Gomulka. “Gomulka was a skilled, ruthless apparatchik, while Nagy was a naïve populist utopian, even worse at Realpolitik than Dubcek in 1968.” (Griffith, 1996)

<sup>45</sup> Many of these anti-Nagy broadcasts are reprinted in Katona and Vamos, 2003, and some are quoted in Urban, 1997, pp. 221-222.

<sup>46</sup> RFE teletype NYC 28, November 2, 1956; RFE memorandum of November 2 telephone call between RFE Director Egan (in New York) and RFE European Director Condon (in Munich). RFE’s New York headquarters evidently focused on the derogatory commentaries only after USG involvement (“Yugoslav intervention vis-à-vis the State Department,” RFE letter from Condon to Egan, November 3, 1956) and after review of the New York-

While RFE Hungarian broadcasts are properly faulted for their derogatory treatment of Imre Nagy, they cannot be faulted – as a number of sources have done<sup>47</sup> – for advocating Cardinal Mindszenty as an alternative political leader. Several programs written and aired by the Hungarian Service’s staff priest called for Cardinal Mindszenty’s release from prison “to be permitted to return to Esztergom in order to take over there the *governance of the Hungarian Catholic Church*.”<sup>48</sup> Another commentary welcomed emotionally his release from prison on October 31: “Hungary ... expressed the demand, ‘Free Mindszenty and *put him back in his lawful position as Primate*.’”<sup>49</sup> While RFE commentaries urged and then welcomed Mindszenty’s release from prison, and celebrated his moral authority (as did RFE Polish broadcasts with regard to Cardinal Wyszynski), no RFE broadcast treated Mindszenty as a *political* alternative to Nagy.

RFE Hungarian broadcasts also included treatment of Nagy in unedited rebroadcast of reports and commentaries of the “Freedom Radios” (local regime radio stations taken over by the insurgents) around Hungary. Some of these local radios also carried reviews of the many newly established independent newspapers around the country. These independent radio and newspaper accounts included a variety of views on Nagy, both supportive and critical. They generally became more critical of Nagy’s leadership in late October (before he clearly distanced himself from the October 24 crackdown and included non-Communists in his government), shifting to full support for him on November 1 when he promised free elections and international

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based Broadcast Review Staff’s content report dated October 29, 1956, which summarized some of the anti-Nagy commentaries. A Yugoslav foreign ministry official complained to a U.S. Embassy officer on October 31 about RFE broadcasts (admitting he had not listened since October 29) as “incitement” to “wipe out completely all communism, not even recognize Nagy.” (Department of State telegram. Belgrade No. 584, October 31, 1956, declassified September 12, 1996, NARA 764.00/10-3166). Yet a day earlier, another Yugoslav official had criticized Nagy for failing to make a clean break with Hungarian Stalinists. (Department of State telegram. Belgrade No. 570, October 30, 1956, declassified September 12, 1996, NARA 764.00/10-3056).

<sup>47</sup> E.g., Bekes, 2003, p. 6; McCargar, 1996; Urban, 1997, p. 308, note 11, a mischaracterization of Griffith’s October 31 Daily Analysis (cited below), which neither warned against a “Finnish-type solution” nor (while acknowledging the Cardinal’s “prestige,”) advocated promotion of Mindszenty as an alternative to Nagy.

Puddington, 2000, p. 108, quotes Borbandi as telling him a Munich guidance urged favorable coverage of Cardinal Mindszenty as a future replacement for Nagy. The complete record of guidances contains no such instruction.

<sup>48</sup> E.g., Special Mindszenty Program, by Karoly Fabian (the Catholic priest on the Hungarian Service staff), October 26, 1956. Emphasis added. This was one of a series of such programs by Father Fabian.

<sup>49</sup> Special Commentary, by Laslo Bery, October 31, 1956. Emphasis added. This emotional commentary is

neutrality.<sup>50</sup>

RFE's treatment of Imre Nagy in its Hungarian broadcasts is explained in part by the fact that there was almost no independent information from Hungary during the first days of the Revolution, when international communications were blocked. RFE (as others in the West) labored under the misconception spread by Communist Party chief Gero that Nagy shared responsibility for the initial decision to "request" Soviet military assistance against the rebels and impose martial law. It was only on October 28 that Nagy acknowledged that the uprising was "a broad democratic mass movement" and not a "counterrevolution." It was only on October 30 that he endorsed a return to a multi-Party political system and made clear that the imposition of martial law and initial call for Soviet troops had been taken without his knowledge. These circumstances notwithstanding, the many derogatory and vituperative RFE Hungarian broadcasts about Nagy cannot be justified by any standard. They deviated from both U.S. Government policies at the time (as discussed below) and from written RFE policy guidances. These broadcasts should not have been aired.

On the other hand, it is difficult to accept the argument of Charles Gati, Jan Nowak, and others<sup>51</sup> that in October 1956 RFE should have backed Nagy, as it did implicitly at a critical juncture with Gomulka in Poland.<sup>52</sup> or, even more ambitiously, actively promoted a national, reformist, but still Communist "Nagyism." Simply stated, Hungary was not Poland. In Poland in October 1956 power resided in Party and government offices, with the levers of Communist power intact and the danger of future mass protests and future armed conflict between Soviet and Polish military units the backdrop for the confrontation between the Soviet and Polish Party leaderships that resulted in Soviet acceptance of Gomulka. In Hungary, in contrast, an insurgency had begun, the Soviet army and Hungarian Communist forces had already killed hundreds, the institutions of repression and control were crumbling, and power was shifting to the streets.

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mischaracterized by Granville, 2005, p. 832, as praising Mindszenty as an alternative to Nagy.

<sup>50</sup> Excerpts in *The Revolt in Hungary* (1957); Griffith Memorandum, 1956.

<sup>51</sup> Nowak, 1996; Nowak, 2000. "[RFE] should have enthusiastically, and with great effect, supported Nagy during the second week of the revolt, but it did not." (Gati, 2006, p. 6).

<sup>52</sup> RFE's backing of Gomulka is often overstated; it was implicit, limited to his defense of Polish interests vis a vis Moscow in fall 1956, and short-lived.

In short, a national anti-Communist and anti-Soviet revolution was underway.

Let us imagine a different Hungarian scenario, a “Polish” scenario. A peaceful student protest in Miskolc is broken up by the AVH (internal security forces) and tens of students are killed. Responding to ferment outside and within the Party, Nagy replaces Gero as Communist Party chief and purges the leadership of the worst Stalinists. He gains control of the internal security apparatus while acknowledging the legitimate reform demands of students and others, so long as Communist Party rule is not threatened. He quickly releases Cardinal Mindszenty from prison. He vows to defend Hungarian national interests, while urging all Hungarians to acknowledge the geopolitical reality of Soviet influence, including continued membership in the Warsaw Pact. In such a scenario, RFE’s Hungarian Service would have done well to broadcast commentary along the lines of Polish Service director Jan Nowak’s 1956 commentaries:

Incidents like [the Poznan revolt in June 1956] play into the hands of ...[the] Stalinist clique, who want the return of terror and oppression. The struggle for freedom must end in victory, for no regime based on repression can last. But in that struggle prudence is necessary. And therefore in the name of the ardent desire, common to us all, for Poland’s freedom, we must call on the people to preserve calm and refrain from acts of despair. (June 29)

The Communist program will never be our Polish program ... [but] whoever acts to defend the independence of his country will have the support of the entire society, without regard to his political outlook or party affiliation. (October 23).

Poland remains in the Soviet embrace ... Russia with its enormous military might is near, and the United States is too far away to effectively protect Poland from Soviet attack. (November 9)<sup>53</sup>

But of course Hungarian developments took a different, accelerated, and more violent turn.

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<sup>53</sup> Nowak, 2000, pp 241-242, 264, 290; Puddington, p. 93.

Nagy was not Gomulka. He was often indecisive. He issued contradictory statements, initially condemning insurgents and justifying the Soviet intervention, and then saying the opposite.<sup>54</sup> He was not Communist Party chief but prime minister with uncertain powers. He could not oppose Soviet intervention; it had already occurred. He could not avert violence; it was increasing daily. He could not win support by endorsing limited in-system reform; popular demands for decollectivization of agriculture, reestablishment of non-Communist parties, free elections, and withdrawal from the Warsaw Pact were escalating. Under these circumstances, RFE's proper role was not to condemn or endorse Nagy (or Nagyism), but rather to report the range of domestic and international opinion about him and refrain from original commentary.<sup>55</sup>

RFE's coverage of Imre Nagy in its Hungarian broadcasts is closely linked with its broadcast treatment of radical political (meaning anti-Communist) demands by Hungarian insurgents. RFE could hardly ignore these demands, just as it could not ignore the calls of the Poznan demonstrators in June for freedoms as well as bread. RFE relayed (with explicit U.S. Government authorization, discussed below) reports of the many, now non-Communist domestic radios that conveyed demands for radical political change on the part of the non-Communist revolutionary councils and other independent organizations and media that mushroomed around Hungary after October 23.<sup>56</sup> One such RFE program of November 1 carried (by then non-Communist) Radio Budapest and Radio Gyor reports on the newly-formed National Council of Transdanubia's decision to support continued labor strikes, a report from Radio Szombathely on the local Bishop's prayers for fallen Freedom Fighters, and additional reports from Radio Budapest on popular demands for withdrawal from the Warsaw Pact, purge of Communist leaders from the Smallholders' Party, and peasant demands for economic and political freedoms.<sup>57</sup> Judging by a sample of several of these rebroadcasts (all of which were re-voiced,

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<sup>54</sup> Gati, 2006, Chapter 5, provides a masterful reconstruction and interpretation of Nagy's political life.

<sup>55</sup> Nelson, 1997, p. 72 says the BBC avoided criticism of Nagy. Urban, 1997, p. 231, claims that BBC Hungarian broadcasts "backed [Nagy] without hesitation throughout the revolution." BBC programs did not feature political commentaries as did RFE, and review of the record of BBC broadcasts is needed to validate this claim. One evident BBC criticism of Nagy is cited in Note 4 above. VOA's approach to this issue is not known.

<sup>56</sup> By October 30, the Communist media-control system had disintegrated. Radio Budapest became Radio Free Kossuth after October 30. Debrecen, Dunapentele, Eger, Gyor, Kaposvar, Miskolc, Nyiregyhaza, Pecs, and Szombathely also operated as Free Radios. RFE established a special unit in Vienna to monitor these Free Radios, most of which had low transmitter power.

<sup>57</sup> Special Gyor Report F1, by Emil Czonka, November 1, 1956.

not the replay of the original sound), RFE limited itself to relaying the substantive information they contained without undue emotion or third-party editorial comment. For example, RFE reported the 18-point demand of Miskolc students issued over Radio Free Miskolc on October 26.<sup>58</sup>

Once the Revolution began, RFE policy officials foresaw – like the leading Hungarian insurgents – the consolidation of a post-Communist system that would be tolerated by the Soviet Union. The RFE New York guidance of October 28 previously cited (PREB 15) defined RFE’s task as associating itself with the far-reaching demands of the “patriot groups” in order to promote democratic freedoms and avoid a Communist counterrevolution. By October 31, policy advisor Griffith saw as likely (albeit not inevitable) continued withdrawal of Soviet forces and “establishment [of a] western-type democracy, with Hungary either neutral like Austria (or at worst, from our viewpoint) a Finnish-type solution. “[The] Nagy ‘government’ [is] surely more and more in [the] hands of [the] Revolutionary Council, which must have the real power in its hands by now.”<sup>59</sup> By that early date, RFE Munich management raised the possibility that, once free elections were held and a free government established, the “essential mission of RFE in respect to Hungary will be completed.”<sup>60</sup>

RFE Hungarian broadcasts both improperly denigrated Imre Nagy and properly reported the far-reaching demands from newly formed independent groups and independent media around the country for basic freedoms and democratic change. Given the nature and pace of the Revolution, it is difficult to imagine that an opposite approach on either count – active support of Nagy and active downplaying of popular demands for system change --could have significantly increased the chances of the emergence of a reform Communist “Nagyism.” It was not, in any case, RFE’s function to do either.

## 5) Bad Journalism?

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<sup>58</sup> As cited in Michie, 1963, pp. 225-227.

<sup>59</sup> RFE Munich Office of the Political Advisor, Daily Analyses of Developments in Hungary, October 31, Part I.

<sup>60</sup> RFE Munich teletype MUN 330, October 31, 1956.

By all accounts, both contemporaneous reviews and current sampling, the quality of many – but certainly not most -- RFE Hungarian broadcasts during the Revolution was poor. The December 1956 internal RFE policy review found many good programs; 171 of 308 programs were rated excellent or good. But the remainder were rated mediocre or worse, and Griffith concluded that the bad and mediocre programs overshadowed the many outstandingly good ones. (It is an open question how these proportions would compare with review of other RFE broadcast services except the Polish Service, and of VOA and BBC, in the same period.) The top-of-the-hour newscasts (always a mainstay of programming, and not examined in any of the post-mortems) were (judging by a few that I have sampled) dispassionate, objective, and professionally competent by any standard.<sup>61</sup> Field correspondent reports from European capitals and the United States were factual. It was the series of political commentaries that all too often failed to meet minimum journalistic standards, since they included far too much emotion, preaching, unsubstantiated opinion, condescension, vituperation, and tactical advice. These failings characterized most of the programs graded as “D” or “F” in the December 1956 Griffith review. Additionally, as noted above, four programs egregiously disregarded policy guidelines by offering tactical military advice (3)<sup>62</sup> and suggesting Western assistance (1).

Perhaps the worst aspect of RFE Hungarian programming during this period was periodic anonymous exhortations injected into the broadcasts, such as “Safeguard Revolutionary Unity!” and “With Murderers There is No Peace. Repeal Martial Law Immediately!”

RFE Hungarian programs improved in November. Broadcasters who had aired overly emotional and prescriptive commentaries during the heady days prior to November 4 now broadcast perfectly acceptable programs (as they had prior to October 23). An example is Laszlo Bery’s November 20 commentary on deportations of prominent revolutionaries and UN and Red Cross activities to assist Hungary.<sup>63</sup> After the Revolution was crushed, RFE began a daily series of

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<sup>61</sup> E.g., the 17:00 (Budapest time) newscast on October 25, CD from original Reel 1884, Track 11, Hoover Archives. It covered fighting in Budapest, factory strikes, the curfew, closed schools, chaotic transportation, anti-Soviet placards, appointment of Kadar as Party Secretary, Nagy’s speech that day, a fire in the National Museum, and reactions abroad from London, New York, Warsaw, the Council of Europe, etc.

<sup>62</sup> Borhi, 2003, p. 143, incorrectly attributes the idea for such programs to Griffith.

<sup>63</sup> Special Commentary A-2, by Laszlo Bery, original text and translation on microfilm reel 156.

special programs devoted to personal messages from refugees to relatives back in Hungary reporting (with first names or pseudonyms) their safe arrival in the West.<sup>64</sup> Some 200,000 messages of this kind were broadcast, a major public service.

If RFE Hungarian broadcasts were the most problematical of the RFE programs in 1956, RFE Polish broadcasts received the most praise. An internal review concluded, after examining 200 program texts in translation and another 55 in the original: “Programs show constant evidence of skillful, imaginative, and effective policy implementation. The Voice of Free Poland responded to the crisis with discipline, reserve, and a soundly intelligent approach that reflects the highest credit on the desk as a whole.”<sup>65</sup> Looking back at 1956 with the hindsight of thirty years, Griffith found the overall tone of the Hungarian broadcasts to have been “insufficiently professional, too emotional, and too didactic. They transgressed against the overriding importance of objectivity and therefore of credibility.”<sup>66</sup>

The performance of the RFE Polish Service in October 1956 indicated that RFE as an organization understood and was capable of producing responsible, unemotional, high-quality broadcasts. But it failed to do this in the Hungarian case, admittedly a far greater challenge, and that failure was an important negative lesson for the future.

## 6) A Rogue Broadcaster?

Were the RFE broadcasts to Hungary in 1956 in conformity with or at odds with U.S. policy at the time? The answer requires examination of U.S. Government policy discussions and USG guidance to RFE. The USG, like RFE, carefully followed (and sought to encourage) the ferment that spread throughout the Communist world in the wake of Khrushchev’s denunciation of Stalin at the 20<sup>th</sup> CPSU Congress. It tracked the critical Hungarian discussions in the Petofi Circle, in part through the reports of journalist Simon Bourgin, who observed the discussions and privately debriefed RFE about them. The Budapest Legation reported the October 16 meeting of a

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<sup>64</sup> E.g., Special Messages H-3 by Katalin Hunyadi, November 9, 1956, text on microfilm reel no. 165.

<sup>65</sup> RFE Memorandum to Richard Condon from William E. Griffith, “Policy Review of Voice of Free Poland Programming – 1 October – 30 November 1956,” December 8, 1956.

<sup>66</sup> Griffith, 1996.

thousand people in Győr, presided over by prominent writer Gyula Hay, which heard demands for a public trial of the head of the secret police, introduction of a multi-party system, a freer press, and withdrawal of Soviet forces.<sup>67</sup>

Encouraged by the ferment in Poland (conveyed in some domestic media and in Western broadcasts), Budapest students demonstrated peacefully on October 23. The regime response was a bitter denunciation by Party leader Gero, use of live ammunition by the AVO (internal security force), and then as violence spread employment of the Soviet army – which escalated the violence. In this situation, RFE, along with VOA, was one of the few instruments the USG could use to try to affect the course of events. While suspicious of Imre Nagy, the USG refrained (as stated in a State Department circular dispatch of October 30) from taking a position on him one way or another in what was seen as an unclear and ambiguous situation.<sup>68</sup> Hence the extreme negativism about Nagy in the RFE Hungarian broadcasts, described above, cannot be attributed (as Katona and Vámos, for example, do) to USG direction.<sup>69</sup>

Viewing the insurgents as authentic representatives of the Hungarian people, the USG specifically authorized RFE to serve as a “communications center” for the emerging independent media in Hungary and to rebroadcast reports of the “Freedom Radios” around Hungary. This was one policy discussed on October 26 at an inter-agency Special Committee chaired by Jacob Beam of the State Department.<sup>70</sup> Three days later, the Special Committee cautioned against any tactical advice in RFE Hungarian broadcasts.<sup>71</sup>

RFE Hungarian commentaries did not, as noted earlier, observe the policy cautions about treatment of Imre Nagy. The anti-Nagy commentaries were evidently first flagged to the State

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<sup>67</sup> Budapest Legation dispatch No. 151, October 23, 1956, *FRUS*, XXV, pp. 260-263.

<sup>68</sup> State Department Circular Telegram No. 332, October 30, 1956, *FRUS*, XXV, pp. 344-345. The U.S. Legation in Budapest urged VOA and RFE to avoid “taking any kind of stand on Imre Nagy for time being” (Dispatch 154, October 23, 1956, midnight, *FRUS* XXV, p. 264).

<sup>69</sup> Katona and Vámos, 2002.

<sup>70</sup> 39<sup>th</sup> meeting of the Special Committee on October 26, *FRUS*, XXV, pp. 300-303

<sup>71</sup> 40<sup>th</sup> meeting of the Special Committee on October 29, *FRUS*, XXV, pp. 322-325. The meeting summary includes this dialogue: Cox (CIA) “should we tell the rebels not to demobilize?” McKisson (State): We should report that there is no evidence that the Soviets are moving out, but we should not be in the position of telling the insurgents what to do.” Ernst (DOD): “What do we say to the insurgents?” Beam (State): “we keep them informed. That is

Department by the Yugoslav Foreign Ministry on October 31 and became evident from review of the RFE New York Broadcast Review Staff's content report dated October 29 with summarized some of the anti-Nagy commentaries. On November 2, as noted above, RFE New York management communicated to Munich its concern about the anti-Nagy commentaries.

After the Revolution was crushed and criticisms of RFE's role multiplied, RFE Hungarian broadcast policy became an issue of review and some contention within the USG. Allen Dulles strongly defended RFE's broadcasts at a meeting of the inter-agency Operations Coordination Board on November 21.<sup>72</sup>

The available record of USG deliberations in October-November 1956 indicates that, however one judges U.S. policy at the time, RFE's written policy guidances conformed to that policy, while many Hungarian broadcasts did not. There was a breakdown of control, but it was not between the USG and RFE, but rather within RFE itself. Internal friction began while the Revolution was underway. RFE Director Egan (in New York), following up his communications on the treatment of Nagy the previous day cited above, conveyed on November 3 to RFE European Director Condon criticism of the Hungarian broadcasts for "serious if not flagrant violations" of policy and directed pre-broadcast review of programming by the American management and limitation of commentary.<sup>73</sup> The Munich management defended its approach, while granting that a few inadvisable programs had been broadcast, in a letter from Condon to Egan dated November 5. Egan's strong language notwithstanding, the four programs previously cited and negative treatment of Nagy were the only real departures from specific policy guidances at this point, although the emotionalism and vituperation of many commentaries were at odds with overall RFE broadcasting policy and standards.

The breakdown of control within RFE had many causes: a new FEC President, retired General Crittenberger, who assumed office on the eve of the Revolution; longstanding bureaucratic conflict between the FEC and RFE New York, on one hand, and RFE Munich on the other;<sup>74</sup>

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about as far as you can go."

<sup>72</sup>FRIS, XXV, p. 469ff.

<sup>73</sup> RFE New York teletype, NYC 39, November 3, 1956.

<sup>74</sup> FEC Counselor Gallantiere (in New York) wrote to then FEC President Shepardson in June: "I am very sorry the

divided responsibilities between the policy and program departments in Munich (the program department hired and fired the Hungarian and all other broadcasters); insufficient discussion between the American policy staff and the Hungarian broadcasting management of key programs prior to broadcast;<sup>75</sup> and poor internal organization of the Hungarian Service.

The breakdown of control also involved personnel failures, specifically a Hungarian Service director, Andor Gellert, who performed poorly (a problem exacerbated by his illness)<sup>76</sup> and a Hungarian broadcast staff that was on balance more “rightist” than opinion in Hungary, demoralized to some extent by recent history (Hungary was truncated after World War I and an Axis-allied power in World War II), and lacking the discipline engendered by past military resistance. This was in contrast to the Polish Service staff, no less anti-Communist but more in tune with local conditions, veterans of the protracted Warsaw Uprising, and able to maintain discipline in a crisis. Perhaps the fatal flaw was that Gellert’s deputies performed abysmally; the worst programs – those that were overly emotional, offering tactical advice, vituperative --were written by the senior editors of the Service, whose job should have been to set a model of good programming and require it from others. These senior editors were not primitive propagandists. In normal circumstances, they were capable of airing good programs. For example, Laszlo Berry and Imre Mikes, whose programs were rated in the December 1956 Griffith review as the poorest of all (with an average grade of D+) wrote good commentaries both before and after the Revolution. They were evidently overcome by emotion and unrealistic expectations with the unexpected outbreak and violent turn of the Revolution. This may help explain their poor performance; but it does not excuse it.

To be sure, under the very best of circumstances, the RFE Hungarian Service would have faced

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way matters ... are going in RFE. There is a deep gulf between Munich and New York. Whereas Munich is in the stream of the wise and tactful tradition built up these past six years, and handles East European problems with a judicious admixture of regard for the American interest and respect for the political realities and for the exile’s feelings and point of view, RFE/New York is deserting RFE traditions and turning the organization into a shrill-voiced USIA.” FEC Memorandum, June 26, 1956.

<sup>75</sup> Editorial responsibility within RFE always rested with the respective Broadcasting Service directors. Broadcasts were never (with a minor exception in August 1968) pre-approved by American management. This issue is discussed further below.

<sup>76</sup>Jan Nowak’s impression after talking to Gellert during the height of the crisis was that he was very sick and had lost contact with his staff (Nowak, 2000, p. 284).

an enormous challenge in 1956. Outbreak of the Hungarian Revolution surprised everyone, not least everyone at RFE. Gyula Borbandi (at the time a young broadcaster; later deputy director) recalled that the Hungarian Service was unprepared, stunned, excited, lacking in supervision because of Director Gellert's illness, and overwhelmed by the quantity of information pouring in.<sup>77</sup> The fact remains that, as an internal review concluded: "The chain of command within the [Hungarian] Desk broke down, and discipline was not enforced."<sup>78</sup> RFE Munich leadership acknowledged problems with the Hungarian Service later in November, noting that while the Hungarian revolution was generally "leftist," RFE Hungarian broadcasters were generally "'rightist' in political orientation and they tended over the years to become more and more shrill, emotional and over general in tone, to an extent where we have for some time felt that rather drastic measures are needed to de-emotionalize their scripts."<sup>79</sup>

In retrospect, it is clear that the American management at RFE Munich devoted insufficient attention to the content of the Hungarian broadcasts in the crisis period, in part because it assumed a common understanding of broadcast policy from and expected discipline within the Hungarian Service (both of which, unlike the Polish Service, did not exist) and because it lacked the monitoring, linguistic, and translation capabilities necessary for critical pre-broadcast discussion, real-time broadcast monitoring, and speedy post-broadcast review. Some existing capabilities were diverted to providing New York and Washington with translations of the extensive broadcasts of the Hungarian Freedom Radios.<sup>80</sup> Some of management's attention was diverted by what seem in retrospect to have been secondary concerns.<sup>81</sup>

There was an alternative model. Radio Liberty Russian broadcasts during this period (some directed specifically to Soviet forces in Hungary) were much more tightly controlled and

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<sup>77</sup> Borbandi, pp. 205-277.

<sup>78</sup> Walker Memorandum, 1956.

<sup>79</sup> RFE Munich teletype to New York, MUN 236, November 20, 1956.

<sup>80</sup> Communication from William Rademaekers to the author. Rademaekers was the only Hungarian speaker in the RFE American management in 1956.

<sup>81</sup> Part of October 29 and 30 was devoted to general round table discussions with outside experts, including Peter Wiles, Franz Borkenau, and Edmond Taylor. (RFE Munich, Office of the Political Advisor, Background Information USSR, October 1956). Political Advisor Griffith was absent for several days, having been ordered by the FEC to travel to Paris for consultations with CIA deputy director Frank Wisner (RFE Munich teletype MUN 336, October 31, 1956; McCargar, 1996; personal interview with Griffith, 1992).

restrained. RL President Howland Sargeant, based in New York, directed early in the crisis that the RL broadcasts limit themselves to news reporting and abstain from rebroadcasting both opinion pieces from international media and especially original commentary. RL broadcasters and American management in Munich strongly resented these limitations, but adhered to them while arguing for their relaxation.<sup>82</sup>

In early 1957 the Hungarian Service was reorganized. A new director, Istvan Bede, replaced Gellert (who moved to the New York office) and a new deputy director, Karoly Andras, replaced Viktor Matjas, who was terminated, along with twelve other staff members, including Zoltan Thury (responsible for the November 4 *Observer* broadcast). Imre Mikes's commentaries were suspended until mid-1957. The new Hungarian Service team proved to be effective professional broadcasters in the 1960s and beyond. Most FEC and RFE management also changed; by the end of 1958, Crittenberger, Egan, Condon, Griffith, Henze, and others were gone. Their immediate successors were less knowledgeable about Eastern Europe and less capable managers, a deficit overcome only in the early 1960s with the appointments of John Richardson as FEC President, Rodney Smith as RFE Director, and Richard Burks and then Ralph Walter as RFE Policy Directors.

RFE Hungarian broadcasts departed from U.S. Government and RFE policy and standards in their emotional commentaries, their negative treatment of Imre Nagy, and their clear violation of policy in four programs on tactical military advice and suggestion of Western assistance. These failures were primarily the responsibility of the Hungarian Service director and his senior staff, who enjoyed great autonomy and trust in the RFE structure and were assumed to be the best judges, within overall RFE policy, of what was and was not responsible and effective broadcasting. These failures were ultimately the responsibility of the American FEC and RFE management as a whole that had hired the Hungarian Service directorate and failed to monitor closely enough and then stop its faulty broadcasts.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Munich Consulate General Dispatch, *FRUS*, XXV, pp 343-344; RL [Munich] Weekly Airgram Report, November 2 and 16, 1956, Hoover Archives.

<sup>83</sup> RFE management's unfamiliarity with the content of the Hungarian broadcasts is evident in the RFE Munich dispatch to RFE New York of November 5, 1956, cited above, which praised director Gellert, minimized the problems within the Hungarian Service, downplayed the significance of condemnations of Nagy, and ignored the

### The Dilemma of Crisis Influence

An RFE-commissioned survey of one thousand Hungarian refugees in Austria published in February 1957 concluded that foreign radio had been their major source of information during the Revolution on both domestic and foreign developments. Ninety percent had listened to foreign radio, and of these, 81 percent listened to RFE frequently and 67 percent listened to both VOA and BBC frequently. Radio Vienna, RIAS, and Radio Vatican also had significant listenerships.<sup>84</sup> A separate survey of Hungarian refugees by the Austrian Institut fuer Markt-und Meinungsforschung found that 72 percent of interviewed refugees listened to Western radio daily, with the highest percentage tuning in to RFE.<sup>85</sup> Anecdotal evidence of listening to RFE in Hungary abounds.

RFE unquestionably had large audiences in Hungary during the 1956 Revolution. It also had great impact. But that impact is often exaggerated and mischaracterized. Many foreign stations broadcast in Hungarian, and even after radio jamming (temporarily) ended on October 24, listeners sometimes could not determine which station they heard. In the aftermath of the crushed revolution, feelings of collective Western guilt developed, along with a search for scapegoats. Western journalists in Hungary focused disproportionately on RFE to the exclusion of other stations; the reports and later book of Leslie Bain<sup>86</sup> were perhaps most influential in this context. All the Western broadcasters shared in some proportion the credit or blame for the impact of the broadcasts in 1956.<sup>87</sup>

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emotional content of broadcasts.

<sup>84</sup> "Hungary and the 1956 Uprising. Personal Interviews with 1000 Hungarian Refugees in Austria," International Research Associates, Inc., February 1957, summarized in RFE Audience Analysis Section, Special Report No. 12, March 1957.

<sup>85</sup> RFE press release, December 23, 1957.

<sup>86</sup> *The Reluctant Satellite*, 1960.

<sup>87</sup> And in crises key actors are not necessarily listeners. As one Freedom Fighter told me "We were fighting in the streets; we did not have time to listen to radio stations."

It has been argued above that RFE's (negative) impact during the Revolution, in terms of the influence of the content of the few most-cited programs that were clear policy violations, has been greatly exaggerated. RFE Hungarian broadcasts nonetheless evidently contributed to the belief among Hungarians that, one way or another, the West would support them in securing a triumph of the Revolution. The RFE-commissioned survey of refugees in Austria indicated that half the respondents thought that American broadcasts had given the impression that the United States was willing to fight to save Hungary. That was not because of the explicit content of programs; as noted, only one program during the critical month could be interpreted as suggesting Western assistance. It was rather because RFE projected to Hungary the sympathy and moral and humanitarian support of the entire Western world for the Hungarian cause. If this is judged to have been counterproductive, causing Hungarian listeners to over-interpret the messages and overestimate Western support, then the problem with the 1956 RFE Hungarian programs was not primarily with the bad programs (those contrary to policy or overly emotional). The problem was, rather, with the good programs (of which there were many).

After the Soviet crushing of the revolution, Western journalists, State Department officials, and several émigré interview projects reported a variety of views about RFE held by Hungarian émigrés, including criticism of the RFE Hungarian broadcasts from Hungarians prominent in the revolution.<sup>88</sup> Hungarians were understandably encouraged and emboldened by the broadcast of Western press reviews and correspondent reports that conveyed accurately the widespread sympathy – as much in Western Europe as in the United States – for their cause. The Hungarian Service broadcast the passages of the Republican and Democratic Party election platforms, a Senate Resolution, and the remarks of American politicians across the political spectrum supporting eventual freedom of the captive peoples. These sentiments were by no means confined to the United States. On the eve of the Revolution, RFE reported from Strasbourg on Council of Europe discussions about the “captive nations,” concluding with the words of Chairman De la Pussin from Belgium: “Today we are only speaking, but tomorrow we will have to act. History is marching along at increased speed. The rigidity of the Soviet system is not the same as before. Let the unity and determined attitude of the West be the answer. Only thus can

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<sup>88</sup> Bela Kovacs' resentment of RFE was reported by the American Legation in Budapest on November 19 (*FRUS*,

we solve the essence of the question: the problem of the united, indivisible, and free Europe.”<sup>89</sup>

And after October 23, RFE reported the outpouring of support for the cause of the Revolution across the political spectrum in Western Europe as well as in the United States, including the non-Communist European Left. Press reviews ranged from *Observatore Romano* to the *Daily Worker* in London and New York. Correspondent reports covered demonstrations and relief efforts around the world. For example, an RFE Hungarian broadcast on October 29 included correspondent reports on solidarity with Hungary at “an enormous New York manifestation in favor of the Hungarian cause [outside the UN],” on a demonstration of five thousand in Cleveland which proclaimed “Long Live Hungary! Help for the Hungarian People,” and on a statement of the Social Democratic Party of Sweden proclaiming that “in a country whose people wish to live in freedom, all attempts to perpetuate the rule of oppressors over small nations must remain unsuccessful.”<sup>90</sup> Another correspondent report from Vienna described the relief efforts of the International Red Cross, collection of food and medicine in Dublin, the arrival in Vienna of food, clothing, and blood from the Finnish Red Cross, and the donations of food, clothing, and blood in West Berlin and Munich.<sup>91</sup> Hungarians could be further encouraged by RFE reports (which were dispassionate and noted Soviet objections, although perhaps not often enough) on Western diplomatic efforts on their behalf, such as U.S. Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge’s appeals at the United Nations beginning on October 29 first to forestall Soviet suppression of the uprising and then to legitimize the Nagy government.<sup>92</sup>

It is this international reporting, all good journalism, that poses the dilemma of undue influence. As George Urban wrote: “Supposing. that Radio Free Europe *had confined* itself to bland observations through the period – the perceptions in the minds of listeners would still not have

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XXV, p. 472.).

<sup>89</sup>From Our Correspondent No. C-14, “Report from Strasbourg,” by Szapolcs Vajay, original and translation on microfilm reel 153.

<sup>90</sup> Special Report C-2, by Katalin Huniadi, original and translation on microfilm reel 185.

<sup>91</sup> Special Red Cross Vienna Report, by Jozef Koble, Hungarian text on microfilm reel 187, translation by Margit Grigory, Hoover Archives.

<sup>92</sup> Special UNO Program No. C-1, October 29, 1956, by Laszlo Mezofy, original and translation on microfilm reel 187.

been very different. Given Radio Free Europe's mandate – and a similar mentality which informed the broadcasts of the Central European Service of the BBC – a 'positional' kind of incitement was inevitable. Surrogate broadcasting from Munich and BBC broadcasting in the languages of Central and Eastern Europe from London were a form of encouragement simply because they, and the sentiments they reflected, existed."<sup>93</sup> The same applied to the Voice of America.

Listening to the emotional personal commentaries of Hungarian broadcasters, the Hungarian audience could think they heard the voice of the West.<sup>94</sup> Listening to objective reports of declarations of moral and economic support in the 1956 U.S. electoral campaign and declarations and demonstrations of support and relief efforts around the world after October 23, the Hungarian audience heard widespread support for their cause. Knowing that RFE broadcast almost around the clock in Hungarian and viewing it – program content totally aside – as an authoritative voice from the United States, the Hungarian audience could easily conclude that, somehow, Hungary would not be abandoned by the West to a Soviet fate.

This then is the dilemma – relevant today, just as in 1956 – of an external communicator who accurately conveys news and information into a crisis region but risks its misinterpretation by the audience as signifying outside support for a particular cause when that is not the case.

Responsible journalism can become inadvertent incitement. It was not specific promises or advocacy by RFE Hungarian broadcasters, but rather the emotional tone of some commentaries, the accurate reporting of Western solidarity with the Hungarian cause, and the very existence of RFE that evidently led many Hungarians to the conclusion that the United States supported the Revolution (which was true) and would not let it fail (which was false). This is testimony to the exaggerated influence that RFE came to assume in Hungary – exaggerated because it vastly overrated RFE's authority and ability to affect the course of events and encouraged illusions of Western support of the Hungarian insurgents that was never in prospect.

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<sup>93</sup> Urban, 1997, p. 219.

<sup>94</sup> Katona and Vamos, 2002. A Hungarian-American who left Hungary in 1945 and who sampled some of the broadcasts in 2006 commented: "I can see how possible interpretations that help is somehow coming could have been deduced from the totally empathetic, emotional tone and delivery."

## Lessons of 1956

In his excellent chapter on RFE and Hungary in 1956, Arch Puddington concluded:

Hungary presented RFE with a more formidable challenge than did Poland. RFE did not have the option of encouraging the people to remain in their homes and avoid bloodshed. Hungary was at war; thus the challenge for RFE was to support the goals of the revolution through honest, non-polemical reporting, to provide a realistic evaluation of the international response to Hungary's plight, and to avoid becoming a participant in the upheaval. Unfortunately, RFE fell short on all three goals.<sup>95</sup>

RFE Hungarian broadcasting in 1956 is sometimes considered the watershed in the history of Radio Free Europe. This is only partly true. If some founders of the Free Europe Committee and some broadcasters initially expected a quick, albeit peaceful liberation of Eastern Europe from Soviet rule, those hopes had been dashed by Soviet suppression of the East German uprising (and more limited Pilsen unrest) in 1953 and further cooled by the perception of Soviet-American nuclear balance and Soviet-American "thaw" of 1955. Programming had focused on gradual change since 1953, and this approach was reemphasized in 1957:

RFE's broad role would appear to be to keep alive the pressure for freedom among our peoples, supplying them with the facts, the comprehension of free democratic methods, and the inspiration of free-world achievements which will enable them to chart effectively their own course toward freedom. In determining action and tactics, the captive peoples must run their own show and choose their own leaders, methods, and times ... "Gradualism" is the situation in which we work ... the reality which we accept as the only foreseeable course toward freedom ... It is not a goal or a strategy for RFE's work; it is a practical fact of life with which our strategy must deal. Our goal remains ultimate democratic freedom (the only acceptable goal of the captive peoples); our strategy is to help the captive peoples to keep gradualism in motion, to find and use the successive vulnerabilities and possibilities for action which unfold as gradualism proceeds ... For example, we neither "accept" nor "reject" Gomulka. Like the Polish people themselves, we identify the reduction of Soviet influence in Poland as a real gain, and we emphasize the caution and patience needed to consolidate that gain. But like the Polish people again, we make no brief for modified Communism as such, we calmly but consistently point always beyond it.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Puddington, 2000, p. 160.

<sup>96</sup> RFE memorandum, "Summary of Accomplishments and Findings," RFE Staff Conference at Princeton, N.J., January 3-5, 1957, dated January 7, 1957.

On October 23, 1956, RFE found itself broadcasting, without warning or preparation, into a country undergoing radical anti-Communist change and large-scale violence. A number of conclusions were drawn from this experience, some immediately, and others in the course of time. Lessons were learned – arguably, in some cases over-learned – that subsequently guided RFE (and RL) broadcasting. These lessons remain relevant today – both in the traditional RFE/RL broadcast region and in other countries with repressive political systems such as Cuba, Iran, and North Korea.

A first lesson is that choice of specific forms of government and leaders is a domestic matter. In 1956, RFE should have reported a range of domestic and international opinion about Imre Nagy but refrained from its own commentary. In a situation of ferment, when information is still artificially limited, an external “surrogate” media can provide information and facilitate internal communications fostering democratic change. It cannot responsibly presume to tell its audience what it should do and whom among contending leaders it should favor. No foreign organization or group, however well informed, can or should substitute for the knowledge and judgments of people on the scene. Émigrés, no matter how recent, can provide useful information and amplification but can never speak *for* those at home.

A second lesson is that authentic demands for greater freedoms must be reported, along with significant international reactions to those demands - but external communicators must limit themselves to reporting. In 1956, RFE properly reported the freedom demands of the various individuals and newly formed organizations and independent media around Hungary. At times it erred in provided its own synthesis or platform or manifestos based on these demands. If external media such as RFE are to serve their purpose and retain their credibility, they are obligated to report demands for freedom and democracy from internal sources and especially from internal media -- even if the outside observer thinks it may all end badly. To do otherwise is to substitute external for internal judgments and to replace credible communication with manipulative propaganda.

In 1956 RFE also properly reported on the widespread declarations, demonstrations, and relief efforts in the West in support of the Hungarian Revolution. It did not “spin” this information. In so doing, it carried out its mission as a “surrogate” home service, giving Hungarians crucial information they would not otherwise have, and doing this in a generally dispassionate manner. Yet these very reports fueled unrealistic expectations on the part of the insurgents and the Hungarian nation. It is sometimes suggested, as it was by some refugees at the time, “ that RFE would have better served Hungary’s cause by frankly informing the Hungarian people that the only aid the West are able to supply was food and medicine.”<sup>97</sup> That is imputing to RFE an importance and authority it did not have and a role it could not play. Doubtless some of the international news reporting could have had more cautionary context, such as devoting more attention to Soviet veto power at the UN. Sophisticated commentaries could have indicated the unlikelihood of Western military action.<sup>98</sup> But RFE could not on its own speak for Washington. Only if U.S. or other Western leaders had told the world and Hungarians clearly that, whatever happened, there would be no Western military involvement in Hungary could RFE have broadcast that message. In that case, it should have done so clearly and often.

The 1956 Hungarian case points up the most serious dilemma that can face international broadcasters or other external communicators. In crisis conditions, the most dispassionate and objective reporting of domestic and foreign news can be over-interpreted by the listener as encouragement and amount to unintended incitement. This cannot be an argument for omitting coverage of key developments on the grounds that they may be misunderstood.<sup>99</sup> It is an argument for detached, sober, and modest coverage of events.

The third lesson is that indigenous calls for violence are a red line that cannot be crossed.

The one caveat to the above precept is that authentic indigenous demands covered by external communicators must be limited to calls for non-violent change. Indigenous appeals for violent

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<sup>97</sup> AmconGen Frankfurt dispatch, January 3, 1957, NARA, RG 59, 764.00/1-357, as cited in Borhi, 2003, p. 143.

<sup>98</sup> A model for such programming was the BBC commentary in English and Hungarian by its Head of European Services, Maurice Latey, quoted in Rawnsley, 1996, p. 92. “We cannot intervene directly in the battle because that would mean World War... [the Hungarian people] are fighting for the values and freedoms which we enjoy ... We are bound therefore to applaud their heroism, but we here on the sidelines cannot encourage one man to shed his blood since we ourselves can take no part.”

opposition to repression are certainly legitimate, but external media cannot report such calls – let alone comment favorably on them--without being perceived as themselves advocating violence while assuming none of the risks that this may involve. In this situation, comprehensiveness and credibility of reporting take second place to the special responsibility of an external actor. That choice can be made easily in a non-revolutionary situation prior to outbreak of violence (and it is to RFE's credit that it broadcast responsibly in the Czechoslovak Crisis of 1968, refraining from reporting the occasional internal calls for violent resistance to Soviet intervention, even when these were reported in the Western press). Outbreak of large-scale violence changes everything. As Hungarian Service broadcaster Borbandi said much later: "We couldn't say to the Hungarians: 'Please be moderate,' The Soviet army was in Budapest."<sup>100</sup> However professional and dispassionate had been the broadcasts to Hungary in 1956, RFE would doubtless have been faulted for acts of commission or omission that encouraged (or alternatively cavalierly ignored) what became a doomed revolution. In such a situation, an external communicator can do little more than apply the precepts cited from Puddington above – and above all say less rather than more.

The fourth lesson is that organizational discipline is crucial in crises. In 1956 the RFE Hungarian Service was out of control. The lesson was more attention to keeping the right balance between American oversight and émigré expertise. The operative word here is balance. Home service or "surrogate" broadcasting succeeds or fails on the proper role of the émigré broadcasters. It is they who have the specialized knowledge of and "feel" for their countries. They must have editorial autonomy and be significant if not full management partners while operating within overall organizational guidelines.<sup>101</sup> After 1956 RFE wisely resisted calls for prior management clearance of all programs, which would have been both impractical and fatal

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<sup>99</sup> A point also made by Urban, 1997, p. 240.

<sup>100</sup> Puddington, 2000, p. 108.

<sup>101</sup> This bedrock principle was established early in both RFE and RL. "...every effort must be made to create in the minds of the exile staffs the feeling that they are being treated by the Americans as equal partners and, indeed, in respect to most problems concerning their countries, that the Americans regard them as mature and patriotic men who by necessity know more about how to talk to their own people than do the Americans themselves." (William E. Griffith, "RFE – Four Essential Ingredients of Its Success," RFE Memorandum, February 15, 1952; "[The American Senior Program Advisor] should be able to obtain desired results on a partnership or a 'fluid drive' rather than 'direct drive' basis; i.e., with the [broadcast services] following freely under the pressure of persuasion alone, logical persuasion based on solid information" (Letter from Howland Sargeant to Robert F. Kelley, May 15, 1955.)

to the effectiveness of the broadcasts. On the other hand, it made staff changes in the Hungarian Service and devoted more resources to post-broadcast review and to pre-broadcast discussion of key programs in periods of crisis. This system functioned well during the Czechoslovak Crisis of 1968 and the Polish Crisis of 1980-1981.

The fifth lesson is that responsible external communication abjures emotionalism and tactical advice. Much good RFE Hungarian programming in 1956 was tainted by other broadcasts with considerable emotionalism and some invective and tactical advice. The lesson was to avoid these pitfalls, and especially to ensure that commentaries – which remained important in RFE and RL broadcasting – were fact-based and dispassionate. By and large, RFE succeeded in doing this after 1956, although there was constant internal discussion, for example about what was and was not proper personal criticism of Communist leaders. Most importantly, RFE avoided offering tactical advice. RFE came to understand it is the function of an external communicator to tell people what they should know when they do not otherwise have access to relevant information. It is never its function to tell people what they should do – and least of all under conditions of violent upheaval.

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### RFE Broadcasts

Copies of the authentic “logging” tapes (the programs recorded as broadcast over the transmitters at Biblis Germany) of RFE Hungarian broadcasts for the period October 19-November 13, 1956, are available at the Hoover Institution Archives, the National Szechenyi Library and Hungarian Radio in Budapest, and the Federal German Archives in Koblenz. These tapes were preserved in the Federal German Archives after 1956 and copies were retrieved from archaic media recently through cooperation between the Federal German Archives, Hungarian Radio, and RFE/RL. Only a few audio recordings of RFE Hungarian broadcast for the years before and after these dates (until the 1960s) have been preserved. Copies of many program texts (scripts) for the period, organized by subject and not chronologically, are available on preservation microfilm at the Hoover Archives and the National Szechenyi Library, through cooperation between those two institutions and RFE/RL. Some of the program texts are accompanied by English translations. The Hoover Archives contains a set of (unfortunately, often inaccurate) summaries, in English, of the major programs for the period. While some Cold War literature treats the texts as newly available, they have always been available at RFE and were regularly used by the Hungarian Service in its anniversary programming on the events of 1956.

Several series of RFE “guidances” – i.e., written statements of policy – were intended to set major themes of editorial policy, but not details of programs (which were the responsibility of the country broadcasting services). “Special [i.e., strategic] Guidances” during this period were written by Lewis Galantiere, FEC Counselor in New York. “Daily Guidances” were written by Ruben Nathan, policy advisor to the RFE Director (both stationed in New York). RFE New York – RFE Munich encrypted teletype messages (PREB and NYC series, from New York, and MUN series, from Munich) and the RFE Munich Political Advisor’s Office Daily Summaries

provided further guidance. All these policy documents are preserved in the Hoover Archives.

Useful in interpreting the 1956 Hungarian broadcasts are the following RFE documents, all in the Hoover Archives:

*Daily Analysis of Developments in Hungary*, October 24-November 2, 1956, November 3 – November 9, 1956, and November 10 – November 16, 1956.

*Outline of Events and RFE Guidances up to and during the Hungarian Revolution of October-November 1956.*

Broadcast Review Staff [New York], *Political content report* for weeks of October 20-26, October 27-November 2, and November 3-November 9, 1956.

#### RFE Internal Post-Mortems

*Program Department Report* for the Period 1 October – 1 December 1956 [Wright Memorandum], December 3, 1956. “It is concluded from the facts as stated that discipline was maintained in the Polish Desk and that it was slack in the Hungarian.”

*Review of RFE and FEP Operations to Hungary and Poland, October 1 – December 1, 1956* [Walker Memorandum], December 7, 1956. Walker and co-author Delgado were officials of the Free Europe Press, a subdivision of the Free Europe Committee parallel to and thus organizationally distinct from Radio Free Europe. Their report characterized the Hungarian broadcasts as “inexpert due to poor content, emotional tone, and inadequate programming techniques” in contrast to the Polish broadcasts, which they found to be “consistently excellent, showing restraint, strict adherence to policy, and masterful programming techniques.” They described the Hungarian Service senior editors as “out of touch with the situation in their

country, inadequately trained in professional radio techniques, and politically out of tune with the patriots. The chain of command within the Desk broke down, and discipline was not enforced.”

*Policy Review of Voice of Free Hungary Programming, 23 October – 23 November 1956*  
[Griffith Memorandum], December 5, 1956, reprinted (without supporting appendices) in Bekes, 2002. Appendix I contains the summary evaluation of each program. Appendix II evaluates the performance of the individual Hungarian Service broadcasters. Appendix III contains excerpts of the written RFE policy guidances for the period. The review covered 308 programs or 70 percent of all non-news broadcast coverage during the period. It assigned letter grades to the programs as follows: A-78; B-93; C-81; D-37; F-19. This meant that 171 of the 308 programs were judged to be at the “A” or “B” level, while 56 programs were judged to be at the “D” or “F” level. It also assigned letter grades to the programs of the 26 principal broadcast editors; only 12 of the 26 were at the “A” or “B” level, while 3 senior editors were at the “D” level. The report concluded that in the first two weeks after October 23 “although there were few genuine violations of policy ... the application of policy lines was more often than not crude and unimaginative. Many of the rules of effective broadcasting technique were violated. The tone of the broadcasts was overexcited. There was too much rhetoric, too much emotionalism, and too much generalization. The great majority of programs were lacking in humility and subtlety. [Hungarian Service] output for the first two-week period in particular had a distinct ‘émigré’ tone; too little specific reference was made to the desires and demands of the people in the country. An improvement is discernible toward the end of this first two-week period. By the first days of November considerably more frequent reference was made to the ‘freedom stations’ in Hungary and the demands of the local revolutionary councils, and policy guidance on key questions such as the role of Imre Nagy was applied with greater refinement.”

In retrospect, it is puzzling that this “sober and balanced internal report” (Nelson, 1997, p. 74) did not consider the derogatory personal attacks on Nagy as policy violations. They were. This deficiency does not justify a general characterization of the report – the most critical of all the post-mortems – as “but an attempt to cover up [RFE’s] historic error” of not promoting a “Nagy

‘Titoist’ alternative.” (Charles Gati, Forward, in Bekes, 2002, p. XVII). Organizational performance is judged against mission, and that was never RFE’s mission in any country.

*Lessons of the Polish and Hungarian Revolutions.* Memorandum from William E. Griffith to Lewis Galantiere, 11 March 1957, Office of the Political Advisor Political Report RFE/M (57) 4. Griffith concluded: “[RFE’s] role in respect to creating exaggerated ideas of Western aid was primarily one of reflecting Western statements rather than what it said itself.”

### External Post-Mortems

The CIA commissioned its own review from a set of RFE transmitter tapes. Allen Dulles later summarized this review as follows: “I had three Hungarian-speaking employees of ours listen to all the tapes of broadcasts during the period of October 23 to November 4, 1956. They found that Radio Free Europe neither incited the Hungarian people to revolution nor promised outside military intervention.” (Letter to Harlow Curtice, Chairman of the Crusade for Freedom, November 16, 1957, Hoover Archives; also Meyer, 1980, p. 126). Earlier, on November 20, 1956, and prior to systematic review, Dulles wrote to President Eisenhower that RFE broadcasts had been generally consistent with U.S. policies but that RFE “went somewhat beyond specific guidances in identifying itself with Hungarian patriot aims, and in offering certain tactical advice to the patriots.” (*FRUS*, XXV, pp. 473-475).

The German Foreign Office borrowed a set of RFE recordings for the period from the RFE transmitters in Biblis -- the set preserved later in the Federal German Archives -- and conducted its own review. Preliminary results were discussed with RFE management in Munich on November 27 (RFE Munich teletype MUN 321, November 27, 1956) and communicated to the U.S. Government via the Bonn Embassy on December 20. (*FRUS*, XXV, Editorial Note 228, pp. 556-557) The helpful efforts of the archive staff notwithstanding, I could not locate the review itself in the German Foreign Office Political Archive. The review reportedly cleared RFE of the charge of promising military help to the Revolution but criticized some programs on lesser grounds. Asked about this by an East Berlin journalist at a press conference on January 25,

1957, Chancellor Adenauer said that press reports that “Radio Free Europe had promised armed support of the West to the Hungarians is not in conformity with the facts.” He added that some of the broadcasts had contained “remarks ... subject to misinterpretation.” (*New York Times*, January 26, 1957) The main criticism at the time of RFE’s treatment of Nagy came from German Social Democrats, who viewed the German Government review as insufficiently critical of RFE and ignoring its attacks on Nagy. (*SPD-Pressdienst*, May 29, 1957, quoting excerpts of RFE criticisms of Nagy.)

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