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Faculty of Humanities

PhD Dissertation Summary

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SCHOLARSHIP HOLDERS IN THE SOVIET UNION

1945-1960

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History

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Summary

1. Preface

In Hungary, seeking higher education abroad has a several century-long tradition. So called "peregrination", a travelling student lifestyle, ensured that talented young people had the opportunity to study sciences that were not accessible in Hungary at other European universities. In the first half of the 20th century, scholarships were made available by the Hungarian state for those who, after completing their university degree at home, wished to pursue higher-degree studies at foreign universities.

The topic of this dissertation is the history of the initiation of post-secondary training for young Hungarians between 1945 and 1960 in the Soviet Union (USSR). Scholarships for Hungarian students in the Soviet Union existed until 1989 but the scope of this dissertation is limited to the initial period. Apart from a few exceptions the history of scholar training has practically no scientific literature. The research is based on primary sources in Hungarian and Russian archives.

There are many possible key aspects of educational programmes in the Soviet Union to consider. However, in order to present a clear structure, specific criteria had to be chosen and others omitted, limiting the scope of the research. Present thesis considers the scholarship programme for university level studies for Hungarian civilians in the Soviet Union. Neither does it consider programmes for military personnel or secret service agents, nor higher (PhD) or lower (high school) level educational programmes. Excluded aspects require further studies.

The Soviet Union's offer to central-eastern European governments of higher education for young people came at a time when it was suffering of financial hardship as a consequence of wartime destruction itself. It is shown that the Soviet scholarship programme for Hungarians was shaped by the interplay of aligning and opposing interests of Hungary and the Soviet Union.

2. Historical Introduction

Chapter 2 of the dissertation takes a somewhat long historical detour in order to illuminate why it was so important for the Soviet Union a year after the end of World War II to invite scholars from people's democracies to its universities. The establishment of an institution of higher education similar in its organisational structure to those in Europe, as well as the assembly of its teaching staff and the conception of its operating principles is owed to Peter the Great. During his reign, in the first quarter of the 18th century, as a result of the work of scientists called from Europe to Russia the first generation of Russian promoters of European sciences emerged in St. Petersburg. The initiative of Peter the Great started the convergence of Russian scientific work to that of Europe. From that time on representatives of the sciences in Russia kept in touch with European scientific institutions and cultivated personal relationships with European scholars of their individual disciplines. The Russian Academy of Sciences, the institution founded by Peter the Great, spearheaded the connection to European scientific life and initiated the continuous evolution and fostering of this relationship.

The scientific elite that had formed by the middle of the 18th century already took on the task of training a new generation of scholars. Russia contributed a number of influential scientists to the world by the beginning of the 20th century. The Russian Academy of Sciences kept its place as the centrepiece of Russian scientific work all along.

After the October Revolution, which had shaken Russia to the very foundations in 1917, the new Bolshevik leadership intended to restructure the previously existing Russian scientific culture thoroughly. Instead of the until then predominant religious convictions it pressed to impose a different, "rational" worldview upon broad masses of Russians.

The foundations of the new scientific worldview were laid down by the greatest ideologists of the labour movement. Lenin's works adapted the ideology to Russian circumstances. Apart from the framework of the new ideology a complete new scientific system based on it was devised that could reach every social class. In order to achieve this immense task a new scientific institution - also in charge of the training of new experts - had to be created with the participation of the most distinguished representatives of the new world view. The resolution for the formation of this new institution was adopted by the Council of People's Commissars

in 1918. From the outset the central function of the Socialist Academy of Social Sciences was education. In the initial years around 2.000 students attended academic presentations.

In the years following its establishment the elaboration and dissemination of the new Soviet scientific world view came to the fore. In the beginning (1920), working groups were created with the involvement of specialists of each field. In 1923 the congress of the Bolshevik party put the Socialist Academy in charge of directing the work and methodology of other institutions of higher education, making it the central scientific institution.

With the broadening of the field of activities of the Socialist Academy of Social Sciences and its new task of overseeing other institutions, the Soviet communist party accepted a resolution to change its designation. Thus, in 1925 it was renamed to "Communist Academy" (short: Comacademy). By this time it was comprised of departments and institutes instead of working groups. They covered different branches of science (natural sciences, law, political science, economics, literature, arts, etc.).

In 1921, the Council of People's Commissars decided to create an institution responsible for the formation of lecturers for universities and colleges capable of teaching material according to the scientific principles recognised by the Comacademy. This new institution was called the Red Professorate. At the time of its creation it was operating with three departments (economics, history, and philosophy). However, as the years passed by this institution was also expanded.

At the beginning of the twenties, new departments and institutions were added in both institutions whose functions were increasingly overlapping. For this reason, parts of the two institutions working on similar areas of research were merged, or similar specialties were moved from one institution to the other. Additionally, after a while multi-year party membership was necessary to gain acceptance into either institution.

In 1926, the Council of People's Commissars decided to rename the Academy of Sciences which had until then remained in St. Petersburg (later Leningrad) as "Soviet Academy of Sciences". In the second half of the twenties, upon pressure exerted by the Party, communist scientists were accepted as members. Prior members were discharged *en masse*, many

scientists were arrested. Finally, the Council of People's Commissars passed a resolution to relocate the Soviet Academy of Sciences to Moscow (1934).

In 1936, the Council of People's Commissars decided to dissolve the Communist Academy. In 1938 the Red Professorate was dissipated as well. These two institutions had executed the conversion of the entirety of Russian sciences to Soviet science according to the demands of the communist party. They trained the lecturers necessary for teaching sciences, participated in the creation of a web of institutions for science and education and prepared the principles of topics to be researched and taught, from universities down to primary schools.

From the 1920's many members of the Hungarian diaspora in the Soviet Union participated in the work of the Comacademy and the Red Professorate as lecturers and students (Jenő Varga, Sándor Varjas, Erzsébet Andics, Sándor Radó, Béla Fogarasi, and others).

At the time of WWII, schools were created for prisoners of war (POWs) in the Soviet Union. The objective of these was to grant POWs an education that they could utilise to spread leftist views once returning to their home countries. Hungarian emigrants participated in the training of Hungarian POWs.

The Hungarian communist leadership that had returned from the Soviet Union in 1945 and obtained political leadership roles from 1948 on was experimenting with the creation of institutions of higher education offering accelerated training, attempting to attenuate the shortage of cadres loyal to the party. These hastily created institutions with makeshift organisational structures, devoid of all professionalism, could not replace the high level of education still provided by Hungarian universities, even for the short time of their existence.

3. Negotiations about the education of Hungarian scholarship holders and the creation of a Hungarian Cultural Institute in the Soviet Union

The third chapter explores the initiation of the education of Hungarian students in the Soviet Union and the motivations of the Hungarian government to send scholarship holders to the Soviet Union, with which it had still been at war just one year earlier.

A plan of a Collegium Hungaricum in Moscow already surfaced on the Hungarian side in the summer of 1945 in a letter from a private individual (Tivadar Ács) to the Minister of External Affairs. Count Géza Teleki, the Minister for Religion and Education at that time, approached the Soviet government requesting the facilitation of the studies of a few Hungarians in the USSR for a period of one year. Early 1946 the Soviet government passed a bill on the acceptance of 500 foreign students, among them 15 Hungarians, in Soviet institutions of higher education.

According to the notions of Dezső Keresztury, Count Teleki's successor, a Collegium Hungaricum had to be founded and operated in Moscow analogously with the successful institutes in several European cities. The objectives of the planned institution were to make those interested acquainted with the Hungarian language and culture, and to prepare and guide the academic work of Hungarian researchers arriving to Moscow.

It is illustrated that, going into the negotiations, the Soviet partner offered to host scholarship holders, whereas the Hungarian minister for Religion and Education planned to create a Hungarian cultural institute on real estate to be offered by the Soviet partner. These plans were to be realised in the destroyed, post-war Soviet Union, with which Hungary had been at war a short time beforehand. Over the course of the negotiations it turned out that the Soviet partner did not understand what kind of institution the Hungarians wanted to create in the Soviet Union. Hungarian language courses and the familiarisation with Hungarian culture would not have evoked the interest of Soviet students in 1946. The long negotiations about the Collegium Hungaricum were fruitless. Finally the Hungarian Minister for Religion and Education signed the proposal on the participation of Hungarian students in Soviet higher education, the expenses of which were to be paid by the Hungarian partner.

In January 1948, Gyula Szekfű was authorised to sign the contract on the education of Hungarian students in the Soviet Union. However, before he had the opportunity to sign, he was recalled from his position as ambassador. The contract was finally signed by his successor.

4. The cost of the training of scholarship holders in the Soviet Union

The goal of chapter 4 is to examine the costs of scholarship holder training in the Soviet Union for the Hungarian state, as well as the technical difficulties the Hungarians faced regarding the payments to the Soviet partner and what other costs were incurred in addition to the already high tuition fees.

The expenses concerning the training in the USSR can be divided into two main groups (along with other minor expenses): firstly, the tuition set in the contract, and, secondly, a complementary stipend. The stipend was financed by the Ministry for Religion and Education from debt in the initial period, and formed part of the budget later.

The tuition to be paid to the Soviet partner was fixed between the two parties by the contract signed on 28 Oct 1948. How this sum compared with the actual cost requires further research. The contract contained errors which made it technically impossible to transfer the funds to the Soviet partner for a long time. The transfer of funds only became possible when an amendment to the trade and payments agreement was signed in 1950, which made rouble based transactions possible between the two countries.

The transfer of complementary stipends by the Ministry for Religion and Education and its legal successors for everyday expenses of the scholarship holders was plagued by difficulties as well. The Soviet Union was using two different exchange rates for roubles. One for trade and commerce, and another for transfers intended for expenses of diplomatic bodies. The Hungarian embassy attempted to transfer the sum intended for stipends to the embassy in Moscow "hidden" among the sum transferable using the more favourable diplomatic exchange rate. The issue of stipends was resolved after the signing of the aforementioned amendment.

In the beginning the studies of the scholarship holders in the Soviet Union were accompanied by other minor expenditures as well. The travel expenses of the students to Moscow (from there, the Soviet partner covered travel expenses to the location of their respective universities) and the costs of their return trips home each summer were also significant. As the majority of the students came from working-class families or from an agricultural background they simply did not have the attire required for student life in the Soviet Union.

Clothing had to be provided by the Ministry. Some of the students had to support their families financially at a young age already, aiding their widowed or invalid parents or orphaned siblings. Therefore, the Hungarian state had to offer benefits to the families staying behind.

5. The Oleg Koshevoy Soviet Scholarship School

The costs of the training in the Soviet Union were rather high. However, the students arrived at their respective institution of higher education with such a low level of education that they had to attend preparatory courses for a year in order to catch up. This increased the time of their studies and augmented the costs.

In order to reduce the cost of the often prolonged studies, in 1949 preparatory training camps were organised in Hungary (in Esztergom and Kecskemét) for students selected for Soviet scholarships. Finally, a one-year preparatory school was created late 1949. This was the Oleg Koshevoy Soviet Scholarship School, a special college which, through its curriculum, prepared students for studies in the USSR.

In the period following the establishment of the school the focus was on political education. Therefore, the target (to provide the basic knowledge required to study at Soviet universities) was not reached. The majority of students still arrived to the Soviet Union with poor skills and inadequate knowledge of the Russian language.

The initial failure can be attributed to several reasons. The education of technical subjects was carried out at a very low level due to the aimlessness, the initially ill-conceived curriculum, the lack of specialised teachers, the unreasonable design of syllabuses for teaching, as well as the lack of textbooks and other materials. The following year, these shortcomings were reflected in the performance of the Hungarian students arriving at Soviet institutions of higher education: many students were still rejected and sent to preparatory courses.

In the initial period the main goal of the directors and instructors of the Oleg Koshevoy Soviet Scholarship School was to select politically reliable students for the Soviet scholarships. However, after the failures of the first generation of graduates, the school's leaders were inclined to raise the level of education. Therefore, a permanent team of

specialised teachers was formed and professional supervision was implemented. The focus shifted from political education to specialised training.

During the short existence of the school governmental audits revealed severe financial violations. These could be traced back partly to an untrained financial management and careless handling of supplies. In the rest of the cases however, fraudulent activities of the school's director and management were uncovered.

The proposal on the school's teaching and educational work presented to the Political Committee of the Hungarian Working People's Party in the summer of 1953 suggested to discontinue the school's activity. After the 1953/54 school year the Oleg Koshevoy Soviet Scholarship School finished its operation. This was made possible by the fact that by 1953 Russian language was taught in all high schools, and the modified high school curriculum as well as the youth organisations already provided an adequate political training for the students. The Soviet scholarship candidates no longer needed to be given additional training.

6. Scholarship holders' life in the Soviet Union

During the initial period of scholarship holders' training in the USSR, students coming from the same country were sent to universities in geographically dispersed towns all over the Soviet Union. Inquiries made by embassy staff resulted in explanations by the Soviet Ministry of Higher Education that these universities were often even better than those in Moscow or Leningrad and students would be supervised by the leaders of their universities, making it unnecessary for the embassy to concern itself with them.

By spring of 1950 the increased number of scholarship holders necessitated the appointment of an embassy employee dedicated only to the administration of the students' affairs. The designated embassy staff needed special permissions to travel within the Soviet Union. Visiting students in remote towns was rarely possible.

As the information on the number of Hungarian scholarship holders in the Soviet Union and those completing their studies there each year found in the different sources in archival records differ from each other significantly, the exact number of students in the Soviet Union each year could be determined by extensive research only.

7. Employment of Soviet scholarship graduates

In this chapter the steps of the Hungarian political leadership are presented as to how they recognised that scholarship holders returning after an absence of five to six years were unfamiliar with domestic conditions and needed to be integrated into the Hungarian society so that a return could be achieved on the investments made into their education.

In 1953, scholarship holders who had completed their studies in the Soviet Union began to return home to Hungary in greater numbers. As a result of changes in the USSR after the death of Stalin, significant political transformations took place in Hungary as well. The cutting back of the development of heavy industries and the downsizing of an overgrown public administration followed. The majority of the public sector institutions were subject of this so called "rationalisation". The larger part of the graduates returning from the USSR during this period were heavy industry specialists.

In the year of the return of the first generation of graduates from the Soviet Union (1952) no state or party bodies were yet responsible for the "allocation" (centrally controlled placement into certain positions) of the scholarship holders.

However, the officials of the Hungarian Working People's Party and the ministries were quite aware that the employment of young people graduating from the Soviet Union is not only a labour market question, but also a political issue. Given the fact that the Soviet Union's educational system and curricula were different from those in Hungary, the "distribution" of the graduates was a difficult task. There was no accurate information about how the specialisations in the USSR corresponded to Hungarian university degrees and what type of work the graduates were qualified for. The Hungarian authorities and party bodies only realised these issues during the first Soviet scholarship graduates' repatriation.

In February of 1953, in accordance with the decision of the Secretariat of the Hungarian Working People's Party, the central distribution of former Soviet scholarship holders was to be organised. This resolution established the institution carrying out the allocation of the graduates, in which the relevant departments of the party and the representatives of the Prime Minister's Office and the Ministry of Higher Education were involved.

Finding adequate work for former scholarship holders in Hungary was complicated by the fact that the skills obtained in the USSR had been adapted to the work force and expertise needs of the Soviet Union. While the Hungarian higher education system provided transferable skills in a given field in its completeness to its students, those graduating from Soviet universities - which were highly specialised - became specialists of their respective, narrow fields only. Back at home it was difficult to use the skills obtained at the Soviet institutions of higher education differing strongly from those taught in Hungary. Graduates were faced with the fact that their qualifications could only be used in Hungary after further training or retraining. This led to feelings of desperation in many graduates.

Additionally, numerous former scholarship holders starting jobs in Hungary felt quite an opposition against them in their workplaces: tasks entrusted to them were bogus, they were never allowed close to the real goings-on in the factory, plant, or institution and there was a general feeling of mistrust towards them.

In early 1955, the Central Management and the Scientific and Cultural Department of the Hungarian Working People's Party made a joint proposal to create an interdepartmental committee for the coordination of the allocation of graduates from the Soviet Union. The committee was composed of representatives of ministries competent in the question, party representatives did not participate in it.

Additionally to placing graduates returning from the USSR into more appropriate positions, inquiries into the circumstances of students studying in the Soviet Union were initiated. Early 1955 a committee visited students in several towns of the Soviet Union. The results of the investigation (frequently poor performance, oppositional behaviour, alcoholism, indebtedness) were warning signs which signalled the need for changes to be made in the scholarship programme.

Since Hungarian students were placed separately in remote towns of the Soviet Union and the embassy employee responsible was not granted permission to visit them regularly, the embassy could not exert any influence on the students. During the five years of their studies the Hungarian students completely lost touch with the reality of Hungary. They were exposed

to different behaviours, handling everyday affairs in different ways. Therefore, after their return they had to get accustomed to the reality of Hungarian life again.

The young professionals returned home often with spouses and children. Since they had been chosen deliberately from the most disadvantaged classes of society they had no place to go to, no assets, struggling with serious financial problems after returning home.

In July 1956, a proposal formulated by Erzsébet Andics envisaged significant steps in order to reintegrate the returned former Soviet scholarship holders, who at that time counted around 1.000 graduates. The proposal clearly stated that the graduates did not constitute a separate group within the Hungarian society. They were all part of the new generation of young intellectuals which emerged after the war. The difficulties they faced were identical to those of their entire generation. Due to their absence for five or six years, former scholarship holders needed different treatment within this generation. In order to help their successful return and integration they had to be provided with additional support.

8. Changes in Soviet policy regarding scholarship holders

In 1954 the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) adopted a resolution about "the correction of the work concerning university students and doctoral candidates from people's democracies studying in the institutions of higher education of the Soviet Union". This resolution, one year after the Stalin's death, revealed with honesty the shortcomings of the scholarship programme, which resulted in foreign students completing their studies and returning to their home countries with a low level of training. Deeper studies of specialised subjects were often prevented by the lack of Russian language knowledge of the students. Requirements were lowered for foreign students with insufficient language skills. Thus, good performance did not necessarily reflect genuine knowledge.

Students wishing to return to the Soviet Union after summer holidays to continue their studies had to apply for an entry permit every year, which was never received on time. The scholarship holders could not return to their respective universities in time for the beginning of the semester. The 1954 resolution intended to take measures in order to improve this situation.

The resolution finally brought changes in the practice of distributing students in remote cities of the Soviet Union disputed by the Hungarian embassy from the start. The decision stated that scholarship holders must pursue degrees in the Soviet Union's highest ranked institutions of higher education and that students have to be placed in the biggest cities, where the highest-qualified instructors taught and the best equipment was available.

The need to ensure the conditions for effective learning of the Russian language for students was also confirmed. This was to be achieved through the formation of Russian language teachers with appropriate skills, as well as by the publication of textbooks of the Russian language designed for foreigners.

The decision of the Central Committee of the CPSU instructed other organisations to carry out more effective work with regards to foreign students in the USSR as well, including the Ministry of Higher Education, the Komsomol, and the Central Council of Federal Unions.

9. Personal files at the ministry

It was clear from the start, from the first scholarship holder's departure to the Soviet Union, that there was a need for some kind of a registry where the personal data of the students and information concerning their studies could be administered. Therefore, the Ministry for Religion and Education initiated the creation of a filing system which was harmonised and carefully maintained in the 1950's. Until now, these records can be found in the filing-cabinets of to the legal successor of the Ministry for Religion and Education (the respective education ministry). It has not been moved to the National Archives. Research of the material is possible only with a special permit.

Originally, the registry included the personal data files of all graduates with foreign diplomas and even those students who, for some reason, had interrupted their studies. Over the years, the data sheets of some former Soviet scholarship programme participants were removed from the cabinet and never returned. Some graduates retrieved their own files after the regime change. However, this filing system can be considered as an almost complete record which provides valuable information about the scholarship holders.

The files contain the personal data of the students and detailed information about their parents. Important details concerning the studies of the students are recorded. The institution they attended, its location, the exact designation of the faculty and department they studied at, as well as the dates of entry and graduation.

For this dissertation a database was constructed with the data of the remaining personal files with all relevant information concerning the scholarship holders. The database contains the data of 1499 former students who received degrees from the USSR, and the data of 420 students who dropped out of their institutions of higher education.

Analysis of the data reveals that about a third of the students chosen for scholarships were women. This ratio gradually declined after commencing their studies. The database also shows the changes in the graduates' residence after finishing their studies. This can be explained by their work assignments. It was an exception if a student returned to his parents' home town.

From the mid-1950's the institutions responsible for the allocation of the graduates tried to place former Soviet scholarship holders in priority areas of economic development. Thus, many of them were placed in the new mining districts (bauxite, petroleum, uranium) and industrial centres (Sztálinváros). Agricultural specialists were placed in large state conglomerates and centres for industrial farming considered at the time to be the most progressive environment. A set of graduates from the USSR were employed at newly established universities, colleges, and research institutes. Many entered into the apparatus of the Hungarian Working People's Party, their assignments ranging from the highest executive bodies to district party organisations.

10. Newspaper articles, memoirs

In the early 1950's (until 1953) the articles published in the Hungarian press about Soviet scholarship holders were telling a success story. They report on the most prominent institutions (the Lomonosov University in Moscow, the Saltykov-Shchedrin library in Leningrad) where it was a joy to be a student.

In 1955 reports on the disappointments of former scholarship holders upon their return home (the inappropriate work placements, etc.) were published - around the same time as the party and public institutions began to regulate their situation.

In 1970, the Sociological Research Group of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences conducted a study among the graduates of the Soviet scholarship programme. The results were published under the title "The integration of university graduates in the social division of labor. II. The former Soviet scholarship holders".

The data analysed in the study was collected via questionnaires completed by former scholarship holders who had graduated and returned from the Soviet Union. Some results of this comprehensive survey are significant in relation to present dissertation. The first important finding is that later generations of scholarship holders graduating from the USSR considered their studies more and more successful. One probable reason for this is that students sent to the Soviet Union after the initial period had a higher level of basic education, making it easier for them to overcome obstacles. Towards the end of the 1950's Soviet universities started to teach the Russian language in a more professional way, which helped foreign students in the pursuit of their degrees.

Part of the students involved in the survey said that they did not receive any special training in the Soviet Union that could not have been obtained at home. Only those with highly specialised degrees, or degrees not available in Hungary perceived it as useful to have studied abroad. The survey, although made with the intention to present a success story, brought results to light, which generated doubt in officials studying them carefully: is the large number of students in the USSR worth the invested energy and public funds?

In 1978 the Hungarian-Soviet Friendship Society released the book "Unforgettable years" for the 30th anniversary of the start of the scholarship programme in the USSR, which contained interviews with 25 former Soviet scholarship holders. Students of the first generation (who had started their studies at the end of the 1940's), as well as those who had become the most successful in the twenty years that had passed were asked to talk about and evaluate their careers. Through the interviews the book presents the educational programme in the Soviet Union as a success story and demonstrates that in addition to those interviewed, the life of the majority of the graduates was similarly successful.

11. Summary

The summary elaborates on the conclusions drawn from previous analysis. The education of scholarship holders was initiated by the Soviets. The aim was to train a new class of professionals for countries part of the Soviet sphere of influence. However, as time went by, the Hungarian political leadership tried to seize every opportunity to influence the young professionals trained in USSR to advance their own agenda, and to use their knowledge for the benefit of the country.

Graduates of the Soviet scholarship programme took part in the transformation of the socialist economy in the 1980's, and some even went on to become members of the generation of politicians after the regime change.