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### Journal Item

How to cite:

Pittaway, Mark (2003). The Education of dissent: the reception of the Voice of Free Hungary, 1951-1956. *Cold War History*, 4(1) pp. 97-116.

For guidance on citations see [FAQs](#).

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Version: Proof

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:  
<http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1080/14682740312331391754>

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# The Education of Dissent: The Reception of the Voice of Free Hungary, 1951–56

MARK PITTAWAY

In Budapest's Chinoin Pharmaceuticals Factory an extraordinary incident took place in August 1952. It was precipitated by a programme called the 'Black Book' on the Voice of Free Hungary, one of the American-backed 'free radios' that was broadcast into the country from Munich. The programme, which could best be described as black propaganda, broadcast information collected from escapees about party members and others sympathetic to the regime. The individuals targeted were presented as being part of a rogues' gallery of individuals, who supposedly acted in the interests of the regime against the people. One female Stakhanovite in the factory had learned through work-mates and relatives who listened to the station that she was mentioned on this programme, and had taken it to mean that 'she was described on a list as an exploiter of the workers'. As a result she had begun to hold back her production, and had stopped working as a Stakhanovite.<sup>1</sup> The ability of the Voice of Free Hungary to disturb the functioning of Stakhanovite labour competition on Budapest shop-floors was a mark of the extraordinary impact of an unusual broadcasting experiment. The station had begun broadcasting on 6 October 1951 as the Hungarian arm of the broadcasting operations of Radio Free Europe (RFE). RFE was a key plank of attempts by the United States to use the medium in an unprecedented programme of psychological warfare in Central and Eastern Europe during the early part of the Cold War.<sup>2</sup>

The historiography of the Voice of Free Hungary has centred on its controversial role during the 1956 Revolution. In the West the controversy began almost immediately after the Soviet intervention and the subsequent suppression of the revolution; a process completed by early 1957. Accusations centred on 'irresponsible' broadcasts to Hungary, supposed to have emanated from Munich, that incited violence in the country during late October. Others pointed to the mistaken suggestion that revolt in Hungary would be

supported by Western military intervention, while other critics attacked the radio station's failure to back the reform communist Prime Minister, Imre Nagy.<sup>3</sup> Behind the Iron Curtain, in Hungary itself, the restored socialist regime blamed the broadcasts of Radio Free Europe for the events of 1956. For regime propagandists the assumed role of Radio Free Europe played a central role in the myth of 1956 as a 'counter-revolution' that formed an important pillar of the regime's legitimacy right down to 1989.<sup>4</sup>

While Kádárist accounts of Radio Free Europe's role can be dismissed as a gross distortion of the available evidence, the 'Western' accusations against the station are not so easily dismissable. Although recent scholarship has criticized the 'irresponsible' nature of some of the Voice of Free Hungary's broadcasting during the revolution, it has absolved the station of the damaging charge that it bore some of the moral responsibility for the events of October 1956.<sup>5</sup> In concentrating on the controversies that surround the station's output during the 1956 revolution, one absolutely crucial issue in assessing the role of the Voice of Free Hungary has been missed. All observers are united on the question of the influence of the Voice of Free Hungary on large numbers of radio listeners in Hungary both during the events of the revolution and the events that preceded it. During the early 1950s one Hungarian government official had remarked in a confidential report that 'the most dangerous effect of RFE's activities is that it results not in organized resistance, which is easily defeated and suppressed, but in atomized resistance, which is more difficult to control'.<sup>6</sup> Yet despite this recognition there has been no attempt to show how the broadcasts of the Voice of Free Hungary, and by extension other Western radio stations broadcasting to the country, managed to gain such a following.

Such an evaluation would have a relevance that goes beyond Hungary. In recent years, with the growth of interest in both the culture of the Cold War and in the techniques of psychological warfare employed by the United States in particular during the early 1950s, there has been considerable interest in the use of radio as a propaganda tool.<sup>7</sup> To date, work has focused on the politics of culture, through analyses of the policies of those controlling or seeking to control the relevant radio stations. Fewer analyses have sought to examine the content of broadcasting. Furthermore, despite its potential to reveal much about the development of popular political attitudes in the states that were targeted by radio stations there have been no studies of the actual reception of such radio stations.

This article, with its narrow focus on the social role of Western radio stations, and particularly the Voice of Free Hungary, within Hungarian society, does not pretend to fill this gap. It instead seeks to highlight some of the issues that a truly comparative social history of Western broadcasting aimed at societies behind the Iron Curtain should consider. It argues that in the Hungarian case the Voice of Free Hungary's success stems from its role in the social history of Hungarian broadcasting. When it began to broadcast in October 1951, it broadcast to a country in which there was a strong tradition of listening to foreign radio broadcasts, particularly the Voice of America. This trend had been intensified by the Stalinization of domestic radio programming that followed the imposition of socialist dictatorship in the country between 1947 and 1949. The beginning of the Voice of Free Hungary also coincided with the explosive growth of ownership of radio sets, which formed one of the few successful planks of the regime's policy in relation to the provision of consumer goods. The number of radio licence holders increased from 539,000 to 1,270,000 between 1951 and 1954. A representative statistical survey of household budgets and living conditions in the same year found that 66.1 per cent of 'working class' families owned a radio, and noted that 'the vast majority of urban families have a radio. In the villages the supply of electricity is the only thing in some places that prevents the use of radio'.<sup>8</sup> The Western radio stations, especially Radio Free Europe could be easily received on the People's Radio (*Néprádió*), the standard radio set owned by Hungarian households in this period; though in certain areas and at certain times – particularly where jamming was effective – technical help was needed to ensure good reception.<sup>9</sup> Ironically one of the few successes of the Stalinist regime's policy towards consumer goods created a mass audience for Western radio propaganda.

The Voice of Free Hungary, it is argued here, had an important role in shaping political attitudes, especially among the urban working class, towards the socialist regime. It built on the success of the Voice of America in particular in articulating and shaping pre-existing popular discontent with poor living standards and the lack of political freedom. This process, described here as 'the education of dissent', was probably the most important political role played by the Voice of Free Hungary during the early 1950s. The impact of Western radio's 'education of dissent' was clearly visible in the internal reports of the climate of opinion (*hangulatjelentés*) prepared by the internal security services, party and trade unions during the

period by the middle of the 1950s. Certainly such sources should be treated with caution, given the fact that Stalinist propaganda frequently blamed Western radio stations for inciting popular opposition. Yet this does not mean that the incidents and the attitudes that underpin them can be easily dismissed as Stalinist fantasy. The reports clearly reveal the traces of pre-existing attitudes that were partially shaped and educated by Western radio broadcasts. It is particularly noteworthy that identical attitudes can be discerned in the statements of those who escaped before and after the revolution of 1956, collected by Western investigators (including those employed by the Research Department of the Hungarian section of Radio Free Europe).

The argument of this article is developed by first setting the Voice of Free Hungary within the broader context of the social history of Hungarian broadcasting, paying particular attention to the late 1940s and early 1950s. It then examines the policy of the Voice of Free Hungary itself and how it was able to articulate patterns of discontent in Hungarian society during the early 1950s. Following that, the effect of Western radio and the Voice of Free Hungary on patterns of public opinion in the country will be considered.

### **Broadcasting, Listening and Hungarian Society to 1951**

It is impossible to write the history of the popular reception of the programming of the Voice of Free Hungary without situating it within the broader context of the social history of Hungarian broadcasting during the mid-twentieth century. This in itself is a difficult task simply because of the lack of real work done at all on the social history of broadcasting in the country. Much of the work that exists either consists of technological or institutional histories, which contain only fragmentary information on patterns of listening and issues of reception. Furthermore their frames of reference are almost entirely the national context, thus tending to ignore the vital issues of the role foreign broadcasters have played in reaching the Hungarian public.<sup>10</sup>

The history of domestic broadcasting in Hungary began in December 1925 with the first broadcast of the Budapest station of Hungarian radio to 16,927 registered listeners, who paid a regular licence fee to receive radio signals. The total number of licence fee payers increased dramatically throughout the inter-war years reaching a total of 383,505 by 1937. Radio throughout the inter-war

years was overwhelmingly a preserve of the urban middle class; residents of Budapest, who at the time made up around 12 per cent of the population,<sup>11</sup> accounted for just over 35 per cent of all licence fee payers by 1937. One sociological survey of radio licence fee payers from 1933 revealed that only 4.8 per cent of listeners came from the rural population and 8.2 per cent from the ranks of industrial workers. Members of the 'intelligentsia', however, accounted for 52.6 per cent of listeners while independent businessmen and artisans made up another 24.1 per cent.<sup>12</sup> For much of the 1930s, radio was a favoured method of relaxation for large sections of the urban middle class, though the 'National Christian' regime then in power in Budapest sought to use radio as an instrument for shoring up its power among the population. This began a process by which the Hungarian state came to see radio as a tool of propaganda.<sup>13</sup>

During the Second World War, Hungarian radio functioned as a state radio, reflecting and representing the policies of the various governments that held power during the period.<sup>14</sup> By the early 1940s large sections of the Hungarian radio-owning public listened to foreign broadcasts, most notably those of the BBC Hungarian service. Around 40 per cent of radio listeners were believed to tune in to foreign broadcasts regularly in 1943. The BBC had a large share of this audience in the country at this time.<sup>15</sup> The Nazi occupation of the country on 19 March 1944 represented a turning point, in that in crucial respects Hungarian radio began to distribute the propaganda of the occupying forces.<sup>16</sup> Despite the official bans on listening to foreign stations, this practice continued; in August 1944 it was still estimated that the BBC 'had a large audience' in the country.<sup>17</sup> As Hungary turned into a theatre of military conflict with the arrival of the Red Army, this continued. There is much anecdotal evidence that as Soviet troops approached Budapest larger proportions of the population tuned into Kossuth Rádió, the service of the Hungarian Communist Party broadcast from Moscow.<sup>18</sup>

With the end of the Second World War, occupying forces in Hungary installed a 'popular front' coalition government which at first uneasily united the communist left and conservative right. While the events of 1945 led to something close to outright social revolution in the country, the Right were able to triumph in elections at the end of that year, capitalizing on discontent with the behaviour of the Red Army and a backlash among middle-class Hungarians. Hyperinflation in the first half of 1946, deep-seated class tensions,

and bitter political struggle between Left and Right marked the period of rule by the 'popular front' coalition. Despite these tensions, the period of 'popular front' government between the end of the Second World War and the creation of socialist dictatorship between 1947 and 1949 saw real reform of many public institutions, including Hungarian national radio. Some three months after the 'liberation' of Budapest in April 1945 the new Budapest stations began their first 'experimental' transmissions, resuming regular programming on May Day 1945.<sup>19</sup> Although the listeners still remained overwhelmingly middle-class, much of the programming of the new radio reflected the hegemony enjoyed by the left-wing parties following the 'liberation'. It also reflected the 'democratic' ideology of post-war reconstruction that was prevalent in the country. Radio programming was markedly democratized, with the voices of the rural poor and industrial labour being given a marked prominence in much of the new programming.<sup>20</sup>

With the gradual recovery of the economy during the later part of the popular front era, the first real attempts were made to expand radio ownership beyond its urban, middle-class, Budapest-centred base. In early 1947 Hungarian radio launched the 'village radio' (*falurádió*) programme. A package was put together for rural dwellers that would allow them to buy both an inexpensive radio set and a licence together, in order to expand access. Its aim, proclaimed the periodical that was sent out to all licence fee payers, was to 'close the gap between town and country'. According to the director of the radio, quoted in a subsequent issue, its role was to 'quickly inform, educate and entertain the Hungarian village and the Hungarian peasantry'.<sup>21</sup> The way in which the management of Hungarian radio saw the radio as a tool to forge a new, egalitarian sense of Hungarian nationhood that accommodated traditionally subordinate groups such as industrial labour and the rural poor, looked forward to the policies of the socialist dictatorship. Its programming was a mix of the innovative and the traditional. Alongside programming aimed explicitly at workers and peasants there was a more traditional diet of light and folk music aimed at the still predominantly middle-class audience. The director of the drama division both pronounced on the need and conceded the failure of radio to 'escape from the social exclusiveness of much of our programming'.<sup>22</sup> In order to cater to the tastes of younger listeners, a considerable amount of air-time had been given over to jazz and other forms of contemporary dance music.<sup>23</sup>

Though there are no reliable figures of how many Hungarian listeners tuned into foreign broadcasts, the circumstantial evidence suggests that this tendency had not diminished with the end of the Second World War. In part this perhaps reflected perceptions among middle-class listeners that Hungarian radio formed a mouthpiece for the increasingly left-wing government and continuing uncertainty about the political situation in the country. Whatever the cause, official radio listings carried the frequencies of all Hungarian language broadcasts by foreign stations until 1948. In spring 1947 this consisted not only of limited programming carried by state radio stations in Belgrade, Bucharest and Vienna aimed at domestic Hungarian minorities, but also by the BBC, the Voice of America and Radio Moscow.<sup>24</sup> In addition the programme listings are also suggestive of some demand for radio programming in languages other than Hungarian, providing programme information for English language services from the BBC and the Czech language programming of Radio Prague.<sup>25</sup>

By the end of 1947 the era of popular front rule in the country was coming to an end with the onset of the Cold War. Over the next two years a single-party dictatorship came to power in the country. One of the key policies of the dictatorship was to increase radio ownership in absolute terms and also to increase the access of poorer social groups to radio ownership. By the end of 1947 the number of radio licence holders stood at approximately 385,000. A sociological survey that broke down licence fee payers by socio-economic group demonstrated that the middle-class preponderance among the listeners had been significantly eroded by May 1948. 30 per cent were described as members of the 'intelligentsia', 25 per cent as industrial workers, 2.5 per cent as miners, 22 per cent as belonging to 'other middle class groups', 7 per cent as the peasantry, with the remainder belonging to the category 'unspecified'.<sup>26</sup> In April 1949 the state began an explicit drive to expand radio ownership with the 'radio to the workers' (*Rádiót a dolgozóknak*) campaign. Its target was explicitly to expand radio ownership among the urban working class, with campaigns to popularize the notion of radio with a series of events in factories and communities across the country with live broadcasts at their centre. More practically the state cut the prices of radios and with a wave of publicity launched the *népszuper akció*, a straightforward promotional campaign designed to ensure that at least 20,000 people would be able to obtain radio sets cheaply.<sup>27</sup> By the end of 1949 the number of radio licence payers had risen to



539,000.<sup>28</sup> Campaigns of promotion continued into 1950 with attempts to install radios in schools, factories, workers' hostels and in other community buildings. Furthermore in May the ruling Hungarian Workers' Party initiated a campaign to 'recruit licence fee payers'. Party activists were organized in many communities and work-places to persuade people to purchase radios. Within the postal service, signing up new radio licence holders was identified as one of the targets that workers were to reach in their labour competitions. The campaign to expand radio ownership was one of the most visible signs of a distinctively Stalinist consumerism in 1950.<sup>29</sup> Those that signed up for new radios under the auspices of these campaigns during the first nine months of 1950 were not fully representative of the population. 40 per cent identified themselves as industrial workers, thus demonstrating the increasing popularity of the radio in industrial communities. The 'working peasantry' – the regime's term for all those living from agriculture except those identified as *kulaks* – continued to be under-represented, making up only 12.3 per cent of new subscribers. Though their under-representation was corrected by the mid-1950s, it was still marked in the early years of the decade.<sup>30</sup>

The late 1940s saw the programme content of domestic Hungarian radio change significantly, as the dictatorship sought to use radio as a propaganda instrument. Hungarian Radio's two Budapest stations were re-named Kossuth (evoking memories of wartime Hungarian Communist broadcasts from Moscow) and Petöfi (after the nineteenth-century revolutionary poet). By the early part of 1950 the programme content of the two radio stations had been thoroughly Stalinized. The amount of light music broadcast was cut back radically, while the jazz and dance music that had characterized programming in 1947 disappeared altogether with a series of programme changes completed at the end of October 1949.<sup>31</sup> The musical content of radio broadcasts consisted of folk music and work-place choruses. Clear weight was given to the explicit promotion of Russian culture. Air-time was given on a weekly basis to programmes supporting those learning the Russian language. Heavy emphasis was placed on general cultural and scientific education in programming, while the tradition of broadcasting aimed explicitly at the industrial working class and agricultural population continued. More traditional news items were supplemented with other programmes such as 'news from the production front', which ensured that radio programming reflected the productivist culture of

the dictatorship.<sup>32</sup> A limited amount of the programming was not designed to be listened to by the individual or family within the home, but was broadcast to support group activities in the party seminar room or the work-place. Increasingly time was given over to programming aimed at the army, at those studying for party examinations, for party activists in factories and communities, as well as for those participating in labour competitions in industry.<sup>33</sup>

The expansion of radio ownership, particularly within the industrial working class, and the Stalinization of domestic radio programming occurred when certain 'American' cultural forms heavily discouraged by the new regime enjoyed popularity among Hungarian youth. The extent to which certain aspects of 'American' popular culture were able to permeate Hungarian society during the late 1940s, often as a consequence of earlier patterns of emigration, were revealed by social observers writing about poor rural communities.<sup>34</sup> The continued popularity of 'American' popular culture under the dictatorship continued to provide the basis for sub-cultures within working-class youth to emerge that were based on resistant identities. One worker in the early 1950s remembered that 'the young people who dressed in modern, Western style ... were called "imperialists", "agents of the West", etc. They liked dancing, especially American jazz music. There were many young people like this'.<sup>35</sup> Combined with the growth of censorship that the onset of dictatorship represented, this meant that the technically illegal practice of listening to foreign radio stations was widespread among those who had only recently gained access to a radio. This category included many working-class listeners, despite continual attempts to jam the signals by the Hungarian authorities. One worker who escaped the country in 1956 described his own listening habits in the early part of the decade:

I only listened to the Hungarian news broadcasts on these radios. Usually from 8 p.m. to 10 p.m. I listened regularly to the 8.30 p.m. London news broadcasts and to the 9 p.m. VOA [Voice of America] program. Both of these programs were in Hungarian. What we heard over the radio, we usually discussed among friends if friends were reliable.

I listened to our own radio, usually the whole family listened to the programme together. Sometimes we would have friends staying with us who also listened to the broadcasts. We were always careful not to tune the radio too loud ... Very often, I would be informed about the contents of foreign radio

broadcasts when I had been unable to listen. If there was some sensational news over the radio, we immediately told each other and asked each other's views.<sup>36</sup>

During the years of the early 1950s the state seems to have been unable to prevent individuals tuning into foreign broadcasts and does not seem to have made much effort to enforce rules against listening to them. One worker from the Budapest suburb of Ferencváros remembered that 'no special precautions were taken when the radios were tuned in. The neighbor kept his radio blaring even when the windows were open'.<sup>37</sup> This practice seems to have been exceptional; while the state seemed powerless to prevent people tuning into to Western radio within the confines of the home, such practices were effectively criminalized. Despite this, even in common spaces in communal hostels residents used radios to tune in to foreign broadcasts. According to one miner, resident in a workers' hostel in Tatabánya in the early 1950s, 'listening to western radio often formed a kind of initiation into the culture of the hostel'. Yet even here listeners took care to ensure that the authorities, either within the hostel or more broadly, would not learn about their listening habits.<sup>38</sup>

Attempts by the state to jam transmissions formed a more serious obstacle to those seeking to listen to foreign radio broadcasts in Hungarian than did the threat of arrest or other forms of retribution by the authorities. According to one working-class listener in the west of the country:

Reception of these programmes depended upon what kind of radio a person had and where the jamming stations were situated. Sometimes the same program would be jammed on five wavelengths and of these, four would be jammed and one would receive excellent reception. In general the reception of the VOA broadcasts were excellent. BBC programmes' reception was fair, but only on short wave. It was very difficult to get Rome. With the exception of the Hungarian news broadcasts from Radio Moscow and from other radio stations behind the iron curtain, all foreign broadcasts in Hungarian were jammed.<sup>39</sup>

The recourse of the Hungarian regime to jamming foreign stations broadcasting to the country draws attention to the fact that, as radio ownership was increasing inside Hungary, Western powers and

especially the United States used radio as an instrument of propaganda. The Voice of America seems to have been particularly effective during this period.<sup>40</sup> This may have, in part, been due to the disappearance of ‘American’ popular music from Hungarian radio as a result of the programming changes of 1949. It also reflected the deep political divisions inside the country as the institutions of socialist dictatorship were built and consolidated in the country. This political division created a demand for a source of news other than that approved by the party and state in Budapest. Reports prepared by the internal security services during 1949 demonstrate the clear nervousness of the regime about the effect of VOA propaganda on public opinion. VOA reporting was blamed for fuelling rumours of imminent war between the West and Hungary. According to many opponents of the new regime such a war would lead to the ‘liberation’ of the country.<sup>41</sup>

### Reaching the Population: the Voice of Free Hungary in its Hungarian Context

The Hungarian state was permanently worried about the effect on the population of listening to foreign radio throughout the 1950s. The figure of the ‘spreader of rumours’, who disrupted either production or consumption after listening to Western radio broadcasts figured prominently in regime propaganda during the early 1950s and in early Stalinist culture more generally. One example of this was the 1952 comic drama entitled ‘The State Department Store’ (*Állami Áruház*), which was filmed in 1953. The drama pitted the honest workers of one Budapest department store, led by a managing director promoted from the shop-floor, against a band of individuals who bought up and hoarded goods. In both play and film the hoarders of goods responded to messages of incitement broadcast over the airwaves by the Voice of America.<sup>42</sup> By the time the film version was released it was in danger of becoming outdated even as propaganda. Increasingly the Voice of Free Hungary replaced the Voice of America as the foreign radio station whose broadcasts most worried the Hungarian authorities. Events in 1953 were to demonstrate why this was the case.

1953 was a dramatic turning point both in Hungary specifically and in Central and Eastern Europe more generally. The death of Stalin in March and later the events of June in the German Democratic Republic shook the bloc. Furthermore they were marked in Hungary in June and July by a change of both government and

direction. After meetings between the Hungarian and Soviet party leaderships in Moscow in June, Imre Nagy became Prime Minister and announced the beginning of a 'New Course'. The Voice of Free Hungary was able to score a number of coups. As Hungarian Radio waited for an announcement from TASS, the Soviet news agency, to break the news of the death of Stalin in March 1953, the Voice of Free Hungary was the first to announce Stalin's death to the Hungarian population. Likewise its coverage of the events in Berlin in June provided the population with a counterpoint to the official view broadcast on Hungarian radio and printed in the press.<sup>43</sup>

In the climate of uncertainty that events both internationally and domestically had created, it became clear to the regime that Western radio stations and particularly the Voice of Free Hungary were shaping public opinion in the country. This was made apparent by incidents where the contents of reports from the Voice of Free Hungary provided material for anti-communist rumour-mongering amongst the population. In June 1953 Radio Free Europe reported that 28,000 workers in Csepel had gone on strike and that 600 had been interned by the ÁVH<sup>44</sup> in order to suppress the open expression of discontent. This was widely repeated by industrial workers: in the Zala oil fields, for example, it caused both excitement and consternation. The authorities were so concerned that they issued a strong denial through official media channels.<sup>45</sup> Opinions reported by the internal security services in the factories after the June events in Berlin heightened the sense of insecurity felt by the regime about the effects of the reporting of Western radio stations on public opinion. Whilst the events in the GDR did not lead to open mass protest in Hungary, they had an electrifying effect on the shop-floor. The notion that a population could express its discontent openly in a socialist state began, albeit slowly, to lift the lid on a well of discontent. Industrial workers in Budapest openly stated that 'the Hungarian party can learn from the German party that it is not correct to apply pressure all the time through the norms'. In one industrial suburb in the capital one party secretary reported that people were calling on the workers in Hungary to strike and follow the example of the GDR.<sup>46</sup>

The events of 1953 made the regime painfully aware of the impact of the Voice of Free Hungary domestically. It had begun to have an effect, however, as much as a year before, as the incident in the Chinoin Pharmaceuticals Factory in August 1952 described in the introduction to this article, attests. During campaigns to increase

production norms in the factories in June 1952, some of the opposition expressed demonstrated the effect of Western radio and the propaganda of the Voice of Free Hungary in particular on public opinion. An example of this was when one worker in the city of Pécs linked the dispute over wages explicitly to the difference between the political systems on either side of the Iron Curtain. He argued that ‘the American example’ should be followed in order to guarantee Hungarian workers a better life.<sup>47</sup> Throughout 1952 in reports dealing with the climate of opinion compiled by the internal security services, party activists and social organizations, explicit references to stations such as the Voice of America disappeared to be replaced almost exclusively by references to the Voice of Free Hungary.

The Voice of Free Hungary began broadcasting to the country at a time of deep discontent with the socialist regime as it pressed on with a policy of forced industrialization. Industrial workers bore the brunt of policies to speed up production through labour competition, while they experienced raised production targets and falling wages from 1950 onwards.<sup>48</sup> The rural population suffered the effects of an ill-thought out collectivization drive, punitive taxation and widespread requisitioning of agricultural produce as the state sought to feed the cities.<sup>49</sup> Living standards fell dramatically during the early 1950s; according to trade union figures real wages were some 16.6 per cent lower in 1953 than in 1949, whilst the average income of households living from wages and salaries had fallen by 8 per cent over the same period. The consequences of declining living standards could be seen through the share of household budgets devoted to the consumption of certain categories of goods. Groceries accounted for 45.9 per cent of the budget of an average household in 1949, a figure that had risen to 58.8 per cent by 1953, whilst the share of expenditure on clothing had fallen from 18.2 per cent to 10.4 per cent. Furthermore the average household’s consumption of meat, fat and milk was lower in 1953 than in 1938.<sup>50</sup> Popular discontent with the regime created the backdrop to the success of the Voice of Free Hungary in generating an atmosphere in which all sections of the population, including the traditionally left-wing industrial working class, were willing to listen to an anti-regime message.

From the beginning of broadcasting in late 1951, the Voice of Free Hungary placed particular emphasis on news, broadcasting news reports of ten minutes in length every hour. Its early programming consisted of propaganda programming aimed at target groups like the industrial working class and the peasantry; early programme titles

included 'Views from the Life of the Western Worker' or 'The Small Farm in the West' that sought to contrast the lives of certain social groups with those on the other side of the Iron Curtain. The party membership was also targeted in an attempt to de-motivate ordinary party activists with the 'Call to the Communist Party'. There was also the 'Black Book', which created the incident in the Chinoin Pharmaceuticals Factory, that was broadcast briefly and then abandoned due to the early difficulties in securing reliable information on individuals. 'Reflektor', fronted by the journalist Imre Mikes who broadcast under the pseudonym Gallicus, provided anti-communist commentary on events inside Hungary. Others were fictionalized programmes such as that centred on the character of Bálint Bóda, who was supposed to have entered Hungary secretly to report on conditions in the country.<sup>51</sup>

To produce programming capable of targeting the working-class and peasant audiences that had just acquired radio sets and licences inside Hungary not only required good ideas but accurate information on the conditions and opinions of target groups. In Spring 1952, the staff of the Hungarian Department of Radio Free Europe sought contact with the refugee camp in Wels in Austria that received refugees that crossed the border from Hungary and into Austria.<sup>52</sup> Little is known about patterns of illegal emigration from Hungary between 1948 and 1956, except that it provided the Voice of Free Hungary with an invaluable pool of information that still forms one of the best collections of contemporary personal accounts of daily life in Hungary during the period.<sup>53</sup> Staff based in Linz and later in Vienna and Graz would interview escapees from Hungary; examining the transcripts of the interviews they would often ask for personal information on party officials and first of all, for considerable information on their work-place or community. They would then be asked about living conditions, working conditions and political opinions; interviewers seem mostly to have been interested in specific information about wages, the supply of goods in shops and conditions. Transcripts of interviews would be typed up in Hungarian and then they would be evaluated for accuracy. Evaluations would typically include some comment of the original interviewers; a typical comment placed on the transcript of one subject included the phrase 'a 19-year-old, intelligent factory hand who escaped in late November 1955. He reported his own experiences'.<sup>54</sup> Evaluation would often consist of attempting to cross-check facts on specific places or people referred to in the transcripts, often using an

extensive library of clippings from the official Hungarian press. They would also point to interesting information and points that had clear propaganda value; in almost all cases the evaluators' focus on attempting to gain an accurate picture of patterns of daily life was striking. An example of this might be the comment of one evaluator on the transcript of an interview with a young woman who crossed the border in autumn 1954: 'the statements about the poor quality of preserved foodstuffs should be noted particularly. The regime makes a point of advertising preserved foods which should make life easier for those women who have little time for household duties. It appears from this report that this preserved food is simply uneatable.'<sup>55</sup> At the end of the evaluation process a new typescript would be prepared including the original Hungarian text, an English or German summary and the evaluator's comment. The typescript would be filed under a subject heading and an extensive collection of, largely, accurate information was created about living and working conditions in the country that could then be used in programming.

Popular discontent with the regime thus created the atmosphere in which the Voice of Free Hungary was able to succeed, providing it with an audience receptive to its propaganda. It also provided it with the small stream of escapees during the mid-1950s who provided much of the information that lay behind programmes aimed at particular social groups within Hungarian society. Programming such as 'Workers behind the Iron Curtain' drew attention to low living standards, restrictive labour legislation, poor working conditions and the lack of independent trade unions in the factories. These experiences were contrasted with what was reported in a programme like 'Workers in the West'.<sup>56</sup> In this way the broadcasts of the Voice of Free Hungary were to make use of information that came from the small number of escapees to support its propaganda, thus enabling it to play an active part in the education of the widespread pre-existing dissent that existed in Hungarian society during the mid-1950s in the run-up to the 1956 revolution.

### **An Education of Dissent?**

A young miner from rural western Hungary remembered that in 1954: 'in general there was a great deal of discontent among the miners, they denounced the system, grumbled, because in spite of the difficult work their pay was low'. Such a climate in a Hungarian work-place was common from 1950 onwards and could be discerned



as much from party or internal security service reports as from interviews with escapees collected by a Western radio station in an Austrian refugee camp. What was new in his account that would not have been found in a report on popular attitudes in the work-place three years earlier in 1951 was a willingness among working-class Hungarians positively to evaluate the situation of workers in the West in relation to their own. The same miner recounted one conversation with a work-mate who asked him where he came from. When he replied that he came from a village along Hungary's border with Austria the work-mate replied: 'If I was in your place I wouldn't stay here for a minute ... I'd go to the West where at least you are valued for as long as you can work, here you are just treated like a dog to whom they occasionally throw a bone so you don't starve.'<sup>57</sup>

It is difficult to say how far such a positive evaluation of the West during the mid-1950s was a direct result of the increasing popularity and influence of the Voice of Free Hungary in the country. Hungarians did have other means of evaluating the relative difference between living conditions at home and in the West. Traditional correspondence by letter with Western relatives continued, though this was closely-controlled and impacted on a relatively small number of people. There are very good reasons, however, for viewing such attitudes, at least in part, as the result of the interaction between extensive popular discontent with the regime and the broadcast output of the station. There is considerable, albeit anecdotal evidence of the considerable popularity of the Voice of Free Hungary within the country during the mid-1950s, some of which has already been cited within the body of this article. This is backed up by the various unrepresentative surveys that attempted, however unreliably, to estimate the size of the Voice of Free Hungary's audience inside the country. Between April and October 1952 the Information Department of Radio Free Europe conducted a survey of an unrepresentative sample of refugees from Hungary and those who had been granted official permission to leave. They found that of their sample, 69 per cent regularly tuned into the Voice of Free Hungary while 22 per cent listened occasionally. Some 48 per cent of the sample relied on the Voice of Free Hungary for information on world events as opposed to 19 per cent who relied on official Hungarian radio.<sup>58</sup> Though for obvious reasons the figures should be treated with considerable care, they nevertheless point to the popularity of the station in the country and a reputation for factual reporting – all gained within the first year of its operation.

Furthermore the traces of the political views promoted by the Voice of Free Hungary can be discerned in statements of popular attitudes towards events inside Hungary, whether these were recorded in official reports or interviews conducted after a successful escape from Hungary. In direct contrast to official propaganda that drew unfavourable comparisons between the living conditions of workers in Western and socialist countries, workers began to see the West in an increasingly positive light.<sup>59</sup> This had a direct effect on the nature and extent of worker opinions.

Programming like 'Reflektor', broadcast by the Voice of Free Hungary, explicitly linked anti-communism to working-class welfare throughout the mid-1950s. One programme broadcast on May Day 1956 was representative of much of this kind of propaganda:

What would be the fate of an unfortunate progressive on this May Day, who either wrote or spoke out against piece rates, stating that they were damaging to the person ... Or for that matter someone who called for popular rule, with independent political parties, free elections, clean counting of votes and a sovereign national assembly?<sup>60</sup>

The link between working-class welfare and political democracy had been articulated by the Voice of Free Hungary throughout the mid-1950s. This link emerged in working-class opinion from 1953 onwards, in a way that seems to be direct testimony of its growing influence on public opinion in the country's factories and industrial communities. In the United Lighting and Electrics Factory, in the run-up to the 1953 parliamentary elections, workers were strongly opposed to the existence of only one list in the election stating that 'there will be voting, but no election'. These workers were hopeful that 'a bourgeois democracy will be created through a bourgeois revolution', thus contrasting the political system of the capitalist states with the repression on the socialist side of the Iron Curtain; an opinion that would never have been recorded two years earlier.<sup>61</sup> Propaganda that described the 'good life' that apparently existed in the United States by the mid-1950s also shaped workers' opinions and focused their anger about their low standard of living in socialist Hungary. In March 1954 one younger miner who was to escape to the West overheard a conversation among four or five older work-mates who had been communists six years earlier. One miner stated that:

I don't understand why we work so much in Hungary and we work for nothing and with absolutely no outlook. We have to struggle and endanger our lives in the mines for just a small amount of daily bread. A worker can't give his family the comfort that a western worker enjoys, as they have to work much less than we do. In the United States they only have to work four hours and they earn enough to have their own property in their old age, their own car and house.<sup>62</sup>

The frequency with which such opinions appeared in reports from the mid-1950s onwards suggests that they were not entirely unrepresentative and that the Voice of Free Hungary in particular was relatively successful in educating pre-existing discontent with the socialist regime. This account therefore suggests that for a variety of reasons the propaganda of Western radio stations and particularly the Voice of Free Hungary was relatively successful in permeating Hungarian society. The account presented here has been less than comprehensive and can only be said to represent a first word on the subject of how the propaganda of Western radio stations was received. The relative success of the Voice of Free Hungary was based upon the way it was able to articulate pre-existing popular discontent in the country during the mid-1950s. This conclusion plainly does not answer the charge made that the station incited revolt in 1956, but it does explain the station's popularity and why its appeal to the population was credible during 1956. An answer to the question of whether the Voice of Free Hungary behaved irresponsibly during the events of 1956 is beyond the scope of this article.

#### NOTES

1. Magyar Országos Levéltár – Hungarian National Archive (hereafter MOL) M-Bp.-176f.2/184/4ö.e., p.213.
2. For a history of the Hungarian service of Radio Free Europe, see Gyula Borbándi, *Magyarok az Angol Kértben: A Szabad Európa Rádió Története* (Budapest: Európa Könyvkiadó, 1996); for general histories of Radio Free Europe, see Arch Puddington, *Broadcasting Freedom: The Cold War Triumph of Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2000); Robert T. Holt, *Radio Free Europe* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1958); Sig Mickelson, *America's Other Voice: The Story of Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1983); K.R.M. Short (ed.), *Western Broadcasting over the Iron Curtain* (London: Croom Helm, 1986); for studies that place Radio Free Europe in the context of the broader 'cultural Cold War', see Frances Stonor Saunders, *Who Paid the Piper? The CIA and the Cultural Cold War* (Granta, London, 1999); Walter L. Hixson, *Parting the Curtain: Propaganda, Culture and the Cold War 1945–1961* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997).
3. For the most recent evaluation of RFE's role in 1956, written from the perspective of the western controversy of the radio's role see Anne-Chantal Lepeuple, "Radio Europe

- Libre” et le Soulèvement Hongrois de 1956’, *Revue d’histoire moderne et contemporaine* 47/1 (2000), pp.177–95; Puddington, *Broadcasting Freedom*, pp.89–114; Borbándi, *Magyarok az Angol Kértben*, especially ch.5.
4. For perhaps the most notorious statement of this view, see János Berecz, *Ellenforradalom tollal és fegyverrel 1956* (Budapest: Kossuth Könyvkiadó, 1986), especially pp.7–47.
  5. See Lepeuple, “Radio Europe Libre” et le Soulèvement Hongrois”; and Gyula Borbándi ‘Magyarok felelőssége a Szabad Európa Rádió 1956-os üsörpolitikájáért’, in András B. Hegedüs *et al.* (eds.), *1956 Évkönyv 1966/1997* (Budapest: 1956-os Intézet, 1997), pp.281–3.
  6. Quoted in Hixson, *Parting the Curtain*, p.63.
  7. Hixson, *Parting the Curtain*; Stonor Saunders, *Who Paid the Piper?*; for the use of radio in the battle for hearts and minds in early Cold War Austria, see Reinhold Wagenleitner, *Coca-Colonization and the Cold War: The Cultural Mission of the United States in Austria after the Second World War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), pp.108–27.
  8. *Statistikai Szemle*, May 1955, p.466.
  9. Personal interview with B. P-né, Dunaújváros, 9 Feb. 1995.
  10. The two studies on which I have been heavily reliant are Tibor Frank (ed.), *Tanulmányok a Magyar Rádió Történetéből 1925–1945* (Budapest: A Tömegkommunikációs Kutatóközpont kiadása, 1975); and Béla Levai, *A rádió és a televízió krónikája 1945–1978* (Budapest: A Tömegkommunikációs Kutatóközpont kiadása, 1980).
  11. This was prior to the expansion of Budapest in 1950 to include the industrial suburbs that surrounded the capital.
  12. Ferenc Glatz, ‘Kultúrpolitika, hivatalos ideológia és Rádió (1927–1937)’, in Frank (ed.), *Tanulmányok a Magyar Rádió Történetéből*, pp.85–90.
  13. *Ibid.*, pp.49–77.
  14. See Zoltán Szász ‘A Magyar Rádió a második világháborúban (1939–1944)’, in Frank (ed.), *Tanulmányok a Magyar Rádió Történetéből*, pp.149–202.
  15. Gabriel Milland, ‘The BBC Hungarian Service and the Final Solution in Hungary’, *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 18/3 (1998), p.355.
  16. Zsuzsa Boros, ‘A Magyar Rádió a német megszállás és a nyilas uralom idején (1944)’, in Frank (ed.), *Tanulmányok a Magyar Rádió Történetéből*, pp.203–42.
  17. Milland, ‘The BBC Hungarian Service’, p.355.
  18. Interview with Sz. J., Budapest, 9 April 1996.
  19. István Vida, ‘A demokratikus Magyar Rádió megteremtése és a Magyar Központi Híradó Rt megalakulása (1945)’, in Frank (ed.), *Tanulmányok a Magyar Rádió Történetéből*, pp.239–86.
  20. For an idea of the kinds of programming included see Levai, *A rádió és a televízió krónikája*, pp.19–22.
  21. *Magyar Rádió*, 28 Feb. 1947; *Magyar Rádió*, 16 May 1947.
  22. *Magyar Rádió*, 1 Aug. 1947.
  23. For a sample of the kind of programming involved see *Magyar Rádió*, 18 July 1947.
  24. *Magyar Rádió*, 24 Oct. 1947.
  25. *Magyar Rádió*, 5 Dec. 1947.
  26. Levai, *A rádió és a televízió krónikája* (note 10), pp.53–60.
  27. *Ibid.*, pp.72–3.
  28. *Statistikai Szemle*, Dec. 1950, p.866.
  29. Levai, *A rádió és a televízió krónikája*, pp.92–3.
  30. *Statistikai Szemle*, Dec. 1950, p.866.
  31. Levai, *A rádió és a televízió krónikája*, p.82.
  32. For a sample of radio programming in early 1950 see *Szabad Nép*, 5 Feb. 1950.
  33. Levai, *A rádió és a televízió krónikája*, pp.82–9.
  34. See István Markus, ‘Egyszerű Feljegyzések 1947-ből’, reprinted in his *Az Ismeretlen Főszereplő* (Budapest: Szépirodalmi Könyvkiadó, 1991), pp.109–10.
  35. Columbia University Libraries, Bakhtmetoff Archive, Hungarian Refugees Project Archive (hereafter CUL BAR CURPH) Box.1, Interview No. 2 – M, p.VI/3.

36. CUL BAR CURPH Box 2, Interview No. 8 – M, p.64.
37. CUL BAR CURPH Box 4, Interview No. 59 – M, p.XIX/1.
38. Mark Pittaway, 'Stalinism, Working-Class Housing and Individual Autonomy: The Encouragement of Private House Building in Hungary's Mining Areas, 1950–4', in Susan E. Reid and David Crowley (eds.), *Style and Socialism: Modernity and Material Culture in Post-War Eastern Europe* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2000), p.56.
39. CUL BAR CURPH Box.2, Interview No. 8 – M, p.64.
40. On the role of the VOA in Central and Eastern Europe more generally during this period, see Hixson, *Parting the Curtain*, ch. 4.
41. See the reports contained in Zala Megyei Levéltár – Zala County Archive (hereafter ZML) MSZMP ZMBA ir. 57f.1/71 ö.e.
42. For a review of the film made of the original play, see *Esti Budapest*, 4 Feb. 1953.
43. For the role of the Voice of Free Hungary in 1953, see Borbándi, *Magyarok az Angol Kértben*, pp.129–31.
44. *Az Államvédelmi Hatóság* (Authority for the Defence of State), the Hungarian political police from 1949 until the 1956 Revolution.
45. ZML MSZMP ZMBA ir.57f.1/80ö.e., p.55; for the denial see *BBC Summary of World Broadcasts*, 29 June 1953, p.25.
46. MOL M-Bp.-95f.2/215ö.e., pp.54–5.
47. Politikátörténeti és Szakszervezeti Levéltár – Archive of Political History and Trade Unions (hereafter PtSzL) SZKL SZOT Közgazdaság/13d./1952; *Feljegyzés a normarendezéssel kapcsolatos problémákról 1952. május 31*, pp.1–2
48. For industrial policy in the country and its impact on industrial workers during the early 1950s, see Mark Pittaway, 'The Social Limits of State Control: Time, the Industrial Wage Relation and Social Identity in Stalinist Hungary, 1948–1953', *Journal of Historical Sociology* 12/3 (1999), pp.271–301; Mark Pittaway, 'The Reproduction of Hierarchy: Skill, Working-Class Culture and the State in Early Socialist Hungary', *Journal of Modern History* 74/4 (2002).
49. Mark Pittaway, 'Retreat from Collective Protest: Household, Gender, Work and Popular Opposition in Stalinist Hungary', in Jan Kok (ed.), *Rebellious Families. Household Strategies and Collective Action in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Berghahn, 2002), especially pp.218–20; István Rév, 'The Advantages of Being Atomized: How Hungarian Peasants Coped with Collectivization', *Dissent* 44 (1987), pp.335–50.
50. PtSzL SZKL SZOT Szociálpolitika/13d./1953; *Adatok és példák a Szakszervezetek Országos Tanácsa III. Teljes Ülésének beszámolóhoz*, pp.1–5.
51. Borbándi, *Magyarok az Angol Kértben*, pp.54–6; Irén Simándi, *A Magyar gazdaság a Szabad Európa Reflektorában (1951–1956)*, mss., Budapest, 1998.
52. Borbándi, *Magyarok az Angol Kértben*, p.93.
53. The collection of interviews and transcripts has been available freely to researchers since 1996. It is housed, along with the research records (though not the management information which has gone to the Hoover Institution and is expected to become available to researchers in late 2003), of the national departments of RFE in the Open Society Archives in the Central European University in Budapest.
54. Open Society Archives (hereafter OSA) RFE Magyar Gy.6/Item No. 11555/55, cover page.
55. OSA RFE Magyar Gy.6/Item No. 10820/54, p.1.
56. Borbándi, *Magyarok az Angol Kértben*, p.138.
57. OSA RFE Magyar Gy.6/Item No. 8083/54, p.12.
58. Borbándi, *Magyarok az Angol Kértben*, p.148.
59. For an example of this kind of official propaganda, see *Népi Demokráciánk Eredményei* (Budapest: Magyar Dolgozók Pártja Központi Vezetősége Agitációs- és Propaganda Osztály, 1955), pp.19–23.
60. Quoted in Imre Mikes (Gallicus), *Reflektor* (Munich: Újváry 'GRIFF' Verlag, 1977), p.88.
61. MOL M-Bp.-95f.2/77ö.e., pp.10–12.
62. OSA RFE Magyar Gy.6/Item No. 8083, pp.12–13.