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The Adriatic Path of the Eastern European Asylum Seekers During the Cold War

Visegrad Fellowship at OSA Archivum Report

Thanks to a Visegrad fellowship I have been able to spend two months at OSA Archivum from January 8th to March 8th, conducting archival research on refugee issues during the Cold War, with a particular attention for the role of both Italy and Yugoslavia as transit countries. My previous post-doctoral project – supported by the CMEPIUS (Slovenian Centre of the Republic of Slovenia for Mobility and Educational and Training Programmes), the Italian Institute for Historical Studies, the Centre for Southeast European Studies of the University of Graz and the project Marie-Curie/Newfelpro carried out at the University of Rijeka – focused on the topic of the Yugoslav asylum seekers in Italy, who represented the majority of the refugee population in the Western neighbouring country in the years from 1955 to 1965,

Currently, I would like to expand my project looking at the "Adriatic path" of Soviet bloc asylum seekers throughout the entire Cold War, shedding some light on the migration flows of the refugees escaping through Yugoslavia and Italy. Therefore, the focus will be mainly on the refugees from the Yugoslavia's neighbouring People's Republics. The archival research I conducted at OSA Archivum was the first step in this direction.

Innovative aspects of the project

The aim of this project is to shed some light on a topic which has been often overlooked – or completely neglected – by both international and national historiographies. As some studies repeatedly stated (Marfleet 2007; Gatrell 2016), the history of refugees is still lagging behind other disciplines and there is not enough communication between history and social sciences. Moreover, the majority of the studies on the refugee regime during the Cold War focuses on the post-WW2 displacement or on other emergency crises (such as the 1956 Soviet invasion of Hungary).

However, this might offer a misleading picture since the outflow of refugees from the Soviet bloc – at different extents – has been a constant throughout the entire Cold War even if until the 1980s it was limited in figures because of the strict border surveillance.

Furthermore, the topic of Italy as a transit country during the Cold War has also been neglected by historiography and it has started to be approached only in the last ten years by some studies focusing on post-WW2 displacement. (Ballinger 2007; Ballinger 2012; Panjek 2006). Despite the fact that more than 120,000 persons claimed asylum in Italy between 1954 and 1989, these refugees left no trace in the public memory, probably because they spent a limited amount of time in Italy – which however in some cases was even years – and had limited interactions with the Italian society. However, I think it is important to challenge the idea that Italy was exclusively a country of emigration until the mid 1970s, stressing the fact that an influx of foreign citizens never ceased during the Cold War, but rather a Balkan route has always been active.

In the last few years more and more studies have been focusing on the so-called "Yugoslav exceptionalism" but none of them has challenge the special position of the Balkan country in the international refugee regime: Yugoslavia was both a country whose citizens were claiming asylum in large numbers in Western countries (especially until the mid-1960s) but also the only socialist country which joined the 1951 Refugee Convention and – with a fluctuating and often unscrupulous attitude – acted both officially and unofficially as a transit country for Eastern European citizens.

One of the main challenges I am facing is the lack of a comprehensive history of the refugee regime during the Cold War, due to the fact that the majority of the studies dealing with this topic focuses on the early post-war years and the activities of the United Nation Relief and Rehabilitation Agency (UNRRA) and IRO (International Refugee Organization) (Marrus 1985; Salomon 1991). Although this early period can be regarded as crucial for the establishment of the foundations of the current refugee regime, I believe that a long-term perspective will allow an analysis of the interplay between the refugee regime and other elements such as the international balance of power and the wider framework of migration flows.

The archival research at OSA Archivum

My research stay at OSA Archivum provided me with a comprehensive picture of the main refugee flows in Cold War Europe. In fact, it has allowed me an insight into the collections of different countries affected by refugee flows as countries of origin, overcoming the language barrier. Moreover, it offered me the opportunity of conducting archival research on a time span

which includes the late 1980s, a decade for which both Italian and post-Yugoslav archives are not fully accessible.

Moreover, the OSA Archivum is a very important archive for any research dealing with refugee issues during the Cold War. In fact, while other international services active during the Cold War, such as BBC, Deutsche Welle and the Voice of America were providing more information on their own countries, Radio Free Europe focused on the internal situation of the target countries. Therefore, the exiles represented the only resource to draw on because they found themselves already abroad, some of them had been part of the intellectual *élite* of their countries before leaving, had previous experiences in the media and could produce contents in their native languages. At its very beginning of Radio Free Europe the role of the exiles was supposed to be even huger but within a couple of years it became evident that the management was going to stay in American hands. However, they continued acting as negotiators between the newsroom and their countries of origin, even if their role was later disregarded by historiography (Mikkonen 2015). Therefore, the issue of refugees was carefully followed at Radio Free Europe and approached from inside, also drawing on the personal experience of some of the journalists who themselves had left their countries.

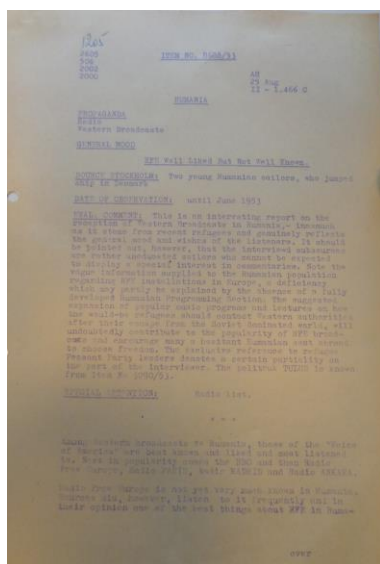
Moreover, one of the first stages of my research at OSA Archivum included a comprehensive research into the literature on Radio Free Europe and the Cold War broadcasting, in order to contextualise the funds I was going to look at. In particular I analysed how Yugoslavia's peculiar geopolitical position following the 1948 Tito-Stalin split was mirrored by Radio Free Europe's attitude towards the Balkan country. In the early 1950s there was even an attempt to open a branch of Radio Free Europe in Belgrade which proved to be unfeasible because of the rapprochement between Yugoslavia and the Soviet bloc in 1955. However, the example of Yugoslavia kept being regarded as an experiment, a really dangerous model for the other socialist countries.

During my stay at OSA Archivum I have looked at 6 different units of the fund Records of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (300): the East European Research and Analysis Department (300-2), the Balkan Section (Albanian and Yugoslav files - 300-10), the Bulgarian Unity (300-20), the Czechoslovak Unit (300-30), the Hungarian Unit (300-40) and the Romanian Unit (300-50).

The Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty fund is organized in units, boxes and folders which contain clippings from the press, research papers, background analyses, *émigré* publications, letters and information items. At the beginning of my research I located the units I wanted to look at and within them I searched the folders related to the topic of refugees. Some of the keywords were self-evident (such as refugees, emigration, exiles, escapes), some others provided a good example of the Cold War vocabulary (such as defections).

In particular, the information items proved to be very useful because they were both frequently dealing with refugee issues and drawing on refugees as informants. The perception of Radio Free Europe as a window open towards the West is often stressed in connection with escapes, being RFE one of the few sources of information regarded as reliable on the external world. I came across several important archival findings which allowed me to reposition my project, include or exclude some threads and made some elements clearer.

For instance, in the document below the source suggested that the radio should organize lectures on how the would-be refugees should have contacted Western authorities after their escape from the Soviet dominated-world, adding that this would contribute to the popularity of RFE broadcasts and encourage many hesitant Romanians to choose freedom. The report states that "Many Romanians would escape if they knew the technique of it".



[HU OSA 300-60-1, Romanian Unit, Subject Files, box 203]

Conclusion

The archival materials I have collected at OSA Archivum will contribute to my research projects in several ways:

- It will allow me to look transnationally on a wide phenomenon such as the Cold War refugee flows, going beyond the language barriers and the barriers in accessibility characterizing other archives;

- It offers an insight into the refugees' everyday life, making a biographical approach possible;
- Thanks to the presence of many information items drawing on refugees as informants, it provided me with an insight into the agency of the refugees, ranging from the strategies enacted to their practices of resistance and negotiation. This will strengthen my interpretation of refugees as active subjects rather than weak subjects needing care and help;
- Last but not least, the information items drawing on the refugees' experiences can be also regarded as "their story-telling". The way they were presenting themselves and narrating their refugee path doesn't have to stick necessarily to the reality but it is part of their new refugee identity created throughout the migration experience. Moreover, since in the framework of the 1951 Refugee Convention the asylum procedure was individual and based on interviews, the story-telling became crucial for the refugees, sometimes strongly affecting their possibilities of resettlement.

Therefore, I believe that my research stay at OSA Archivum has greatly contributed to my research project, helping me to give a voice to the refugees. Moreover, providing me with a general picture of the Cold War refugee regime, it will be of great help in planning my future research and narrowing or expanding my focus. Furthermore, the role of Radio Free Europe in fostering a "refugee identity" is yet to be studied and, drawing on other works released in the last few years and on the rich OSA Archivum, might provide a unique case study.

OSA Archivum - Consulted files

HU OSA 300 Records of Radio Free Europe - Radio Liberty

HU OSA 300-2 East European Research and Analysis Department: Bloc, box 13

HU OSA 300-2 East European Research and Analysis Department: Bloc, box 14

HU OSA 300-10 Balkan Section (Albanian and Yugoslav files)

HU OSA 300-10-2 Yugoslav Subject Files I, box 14

HU OSA 300-10-2 Yugoslav Subject Files I, box 17

HU OSA 300-10-2 Yugoslav Subject Files I, box 18

HU OSA 300-10-2 Yugoslav Subject Files I, box 44

HU OSA 300-10-2 Yugoslav Subject Files I, box 76
HU OSA 300-10-2 Yugoslav Subject Files I, box 77
HU OSA 300-10-2 Yugoslav Subject Files I, box 90
HU OSA 300-10-2 Yugoslav Subject Files I, box 143
HU OSA 300-10-2 Yugoslav Subject Files I, box 150
HU OSA 300-10-2 Yugoslav Subject Files I, box 151
HU OSA 300-10-2 Yugoslav Subject Files I, box 152
HU OSA 300-10-2 Yugoslav Subject Files I, box 153
HU OSA 300-10-2 Yugoslav Subject Files I, box 166
HU OSA 300-10-2 Yugoslav Subject Files I, box 221
HU OSA 300-10-2 Yugoslav Subject Files I, box 222
HU OSA 300-10-2 Yugoslav Subject Files I, box 239
HU OSA 300-10-2 Yugoslav Subject Files I, box 240
HU OSA 300-10-2 Yugoslav Subject Files I, box 241
HU OSA 300-10-2 Yugoslav Subject Files I, box 357
HU OSA 300-10-2 Yugoslav Subject Files I, box 397
HU OSA 300-10-2 Yugoslav Subject Files I, box 436
HU OSA 300-10-2 Yugoslav Subject Files I, box 449
HU-OSA-300-10-3 Yugoslav Subject Files II, box 3
HU-OSA-300-10-3 Yugoslav Subject Files II, box 29
HU-OSA-300-10-3 Yugoslav Subject Files II, box 30
HU-OSA-300-10-3 Yugoslav Subject Files II, box 31
HU-OSA-300-10-3 Yugoslav Subject Files II, box 85
HU-OSA-300-20 Bulgarian Unit
HU-OSA-300-20, Subject Files 1951-1995, box 67
HU-OSA-300-30 Czechoslovak Unit
HU-OSA-300-30-2 Old Code Subject Files I, box 76
HU-OSA-300-30-2 Old Code Subject Files III, box 71
HU-OSA-300-30-2 Old Code Subject Files III, box 72
HU-OSA-300-30-6 Old Code Subject Files V, box 70
HU-OSA-300-30-6 Old Code Subject File VI, box 276
HU-OSA-300-30-6 Old Code Subject File VI, box 277
HU-OSA-300-30-6 Old Code Subject File VI, box 278
HU-OSA-300-40 Hungarian Unit
HU-OSA-300-40-2 Subject Files in English, box 22

HU-OSA-300-40-2 Subject Files in English, box 23
HU-OSA-300-40-4 Information items, box 20
HU-OSA-300-40-4 Information items, box 21
HU-OSA-300-50 Romanian Unit
HU-OSA-300-50-1 Subject Files, box 197
HU-OSA-300-50-1 Subject Files, box 198
HU-OSA-300-50-1 Subject Files, box 199
HU-OSA-300-50-1 Subject Files, box 200
HU-OSA-300-50-1 Subject Files, box 201
HU-OSA-300-50-1 Subject Files, box 202
HU-OSA-300-50-1 Subject Files, box 203
HU-OSA-300-50-1 Subject Files, box 204
HU-OSA-300-50-1 Subject Files, box 205

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