

Europe Throws a Picnic: The Pan-European Picnic and the End of the Cold War

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Research Aim:

My proposed project for the fellowship period, *Europe Throws a Picnic*, is one part of a larger project on the peace movement during the Cold War. It is intended to be a graphic history and primary source collection aimed for use by undergraduate and graduate students studying East Central European history and the history of the Cold War. It uses the Pan-European Picnic, a 19 August 1989 peace demonstration and border opening on the frontier of Austria and Hungary, to explore the diverse history of political, economic, and social transition in the European socialist space starting in 1989. In so doing, it uses a lesser-known event in the history of post-socialist transition, but one that connects to an incident much more familiar to the non-specialist, namely the *Mauerfall*, to engage students in critical literacy and interpretation and help them build core disciplinary skills in history.

The Pan-European Picnic was planned by various actors including the Debrecen branch of the Hungarian Democratic Forum (MDF) for the summer of 1989. It was held a day before St. Stephen's Day, a national holiday commemorating Hungary's patron saint who converted the country to Christianity, thereby symbolically marking the country's belonging in Europe. The event included a picnic in a field outside of Sopron, a city of great historical significance for Austrian and Hungarian historical and diplomatic relations, which would include speakers and

informal discussions related to a united Europe. The event would also be marked by a brief opening of the border between Austria and Hungary, commemorating the historical ties between the two countries and the ideal of a borderless Europe. During the event, several hundred citizens of the German Democratic Republic (GDR), many of whom had come to Hungary on vacation and then became refugees, broke through the border with the goal of making their way to West Germany. Today the picnic is best known as the first step in the fall of the Berlin Wall, but in addition to explaining this “breakthrough,” by placing the Picnic in its broader context, the event provides an opportunity to explore the interplay of the national and international, the West and the East, the symbolic and the social history of the end of socialism.

The graphic history of the picnic emphasizes three primary themes: the relationship between socialist countries and between the “East” and “West” during the socialist era and after; different conceptualizations of European identity and freedom; and the roles of both state and opposition actors in the events most closely associated with the end of the Cold War division of Europe. These interpretive themes provide a gateway into core debates in the historiography of post-socialist transition, primarily the role of civil society and the party-state in transition, which is a core aim of the graphic history series to which this book will contribute. They also help illuminate the political diversity of opposition parties and groups and the different futures they envisioned, and the changing relationship between post-socialist states and western European countries in the first (roughly) decade of transition. These themes are also designed to address some of the challenges

associated with teaching the end of the Cold War in Europe (especially in the United States): the diversity of experiences of socialism; the diversity of political goals among newly established or emerging political parties; and relationships among socialist states and between “Eastern” and “Western” Europe.

Research Materials Consulted

The graphic and pedagogical nature of the project required engaging sources with three different aims in mind: constructing a scientific narrative, including appropriate periodization, context, key actors and concepts; constructing a set of cohesive primary sources and supplementary materials (glossaries, maps, etc.) that help students build core historical thinking and analytical skills; and collecting a corpus of visual materials for reference for the graphic narrative.

A history of the Pan-European Picnic raises a number of core issues, including opposition politics, refugee rights and human rights, freedom of movement, economic problems, and conceptualizations of European and both Hungarian and German national identity. Furthermore, the demonstration included letters of support from persons involved in opposition activities in Poland and Romania, and the larger diplomatic context connected to opposition and asylum is important for properly positioning the event and understanding Hungary’s—and Germany’s—experience of regime change in both national and international perspective. Consequently, my original focus was on three primary collections: the Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Records, including situation reports and the

clippings collections; the International Helsinki Federation Records; and the Gábor Demszky collection, which includes samizdat materials and (Hungarian) State Security files.

Upon consultation with archival staff, I also reviewed materials from the Fekete Doboz Alapítvány Video Archive, which included both documentaries generally related to the regime change in Hungary, as well as hours of unedited footage taken during protests and reportage. These were beneficial for shoring up the visual and social historical dimension of the project, as footage included interviews with and comments from a number of different perspectives including persons from East Germany and Romania seeking asylum, Hungarian and foreign aid workers, and others. I also consulted the film collection of the Hungarian Ministry of the Interior, which included films related to the training of border guards and officials, photographic images of demonstrations by the non-state peace organization Dialogus a Békéért, and the OSA's holdings of the magazine *Nők Lapja*.

In addition to these archival holdings, staff provided me with access to materials from their personal libraries and made recommendations of several digital collections including the 1989 collection of artifacts available through Europeana.eu and Historypin (which involved the OSA).

The holdings of the OSA and discussions with the staff have been instrumental in the further development of *Europe Throws a Picnic* and my larger research on the peace movement. The fellowship period also provided me with an opportunity to consider the themes and disciplinary skills (for students) that may be developed through this project and elements that such a book requires to make it as

effective as possible for students at a variety of stages in their academic careers. This included a consideration of possibly refocusing the project on another symbolic event: the reburial of Imre Nagy, although at this time, I have decided to continue to pursue the Picnic.

I would like to sincerely thank the staff of the archive for sharing their expertise and making my fellowship period extraordinarily productive. This includes my research mentor András Mink and Csaba Szilágyi, who provided invaluable guidance regarding digitized materials and collections. Judit Hegedűs and Robert Parnica were patient guides who helped me navigate the archives and also provided me with insights and suggestions that will be invaluable as I continue to develop this project. The recommendations and commentary of István Rév, Oksana Sarkisova, Zsuzsa Zádori, Nóra Ungar, have opened new avenues of theoretical and historical inquiry, and I am grateful for the assistance of Katalin Gadoros and Nóra Ungár, who helped me organize this visit.

List of Materials

HU OSA 300-8-47-RFE/RL Research Institute, Publications Department,
Situation Reports
Boxes 23-27 on Hungary from 1979-1989

HU OSA 318-0-5 International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights
Country Files
Boxes 9–11 Austria
Boxes 47–49 Czechoslovakia
Boxes 62 East Germany
Boxes 68–71 Hungary
Box 111 Romania

HU-OSA-302 Gábor Demszky Personal Papers
Sub-fond 2, Boxes 1 & 2 Hungarian State Security and Legal Files

HU OSA 305 Fekete Doboz Alapítvány Video Archive

Sub-fond 2- Documentary films

305-0-2:1/1 Civil technikák. Fidesz

305-0-2:3/1 *A 301-es parcella*

305-0-2:5/1 *Újmagyar siralom*

305-0-2:8/1 *Harangszó fél egykor*

305-0-2:10/1 *Két október*

305-0-2:12/1 *Duna-gate*

305-0-2:14/1 *Magyar változások*

Sub-fond 3-Unedited Video Materials

305-0-3:76/1 Interview with Ethnic Hungarian Refugees from Romania

305-0-3:76/2 Interview with a Hungarian Refugee Couple from Transylvania

305-0-3:77/2 Interview with an Ethnic Hungarian Refugee from Transylvania

305-0-3:841/1 or 305-0-3.1989-086_89-108 Refugees from East Germany, Opening the Austro-Hungarian Border

305-0-3:842/1 or 305-0-3.1989-087_89-109 Refugees from East Germany, Opening the Austro-Hungarian Border

HU OSA 394 Records of the Film Studio of the Hungarian Ministry of the Interior

394-0-1:7/1 If You Cross the Border / Ha átléped a határt

394-0-1:9/4 Law and Conscience / Törvény és lelkiismeret

394-0-1:14/1 Border Violators / Határsértők

394-0-1:14/2 Organizing the Daily Duty of Border Guards / A határőrs napi szolgálat megszervezése

394-0-1:14/5 The Technical Equipment of Border Control Points / A FEP technikai rendszere

394-0-1:15/1 Methods Used by Violators at Border Control Points / Határsértők által alkalmazott módszerek a FEP-eken

394-0-1:15/2 Violent Methods Used by Border Violators / Határsértési kísérletek erőszakos módszerekkel

394-0-1:15/3 Activities of the Border Guard Unit / A határőr őrs tevékenysége

394-0-1:15/4 Roundup at the Border / Razzia a határon

394-0-1:15/5 Border Guard on Duty / Az őrs határőrizeti ügyeletese szolgálatban

394-0-1:16/1 Activity of Border Guards in Search Groups / Határőrök tevékenysége zárócsoporthban és kutatócsoporthban

394-0-1:16/3 1/2 Guarding of Narrow Borderline Territories / A keskeny határsávi területek őrzése I.

394-0-1:16/4 2/2 Guarding of narrow borderline territories / A keskeny határsávi területek őrzése II.

394-0-1:16/5 Investigating Border Incidents / Határesemények
kivizsgálása

Nők Lapja Holdings (not catalogued)

Photos Related to *Dialogus a Békeért* (not catalogued)