

*Stalinization and its Discontents:*  
**Subcultures and Opposition  
in Hungary, 1948-1956**

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*In the 1950s, Hungary was a state of iron and steel ruled by terror. The Rákosi regime utilized a combination of oppression, censorship, and surveillance in order to maintain its stranglehold on the Hungarian populace. Open political opposition was impossible. However, the state's power was also limited in a number of significant aspects, especially in the countryside. Policemen and party secretaries were often attacked; collectivization in the Soviet model was problematic and to a large degree unsuccessful. . In both the cities and the countryside, buying and selling products and labor on the black market—often even while at one's regular day job—was a means of both evading the state's economic control and using state materials for private profit. Even in the cities, where the state's power was significantly stronger, zoot-suited hooligans (*jampecek*), roamed the streets. They dominated the suburbs of Budapest and, via lurid portrayals of their exploits in the press, theater, and film, the popular imagination as well. Jazz, that debased product of American imperialism, was prevalent and popular despite its banned status; listening and dancing to jazz was a means of maintaining contact with Western culture, defying the state, and individual expression.*

*Although none of these strategies of everyday life provided the opportunity for direct political opposition, they illumine the range of independent activity and agency possible for Hungarians throughout this period.*

## 1. Introduction

Immediately upon attaining power in 1949, Mátyás Rákosi and his cohort embarked on an ambitious program to reinvent Hungary as the ideal socialist state—"a country of iron and steel." They promised Hungarians equality in both society and law and peace and prosperity for all. After the devastation wrought by World War II, Budapest and the other major cities were practically depopulated. Hungarians made their way by the hundreds of thousands into the cities to begin new lives as urban workers as peasants, benefiting from the breakup of large estates, set about renewing their newly-acquired farms and gardens.

The new regime failed miserably to live up to its promises. Hungarians were forced to work long hours for unlivable wages; housing was scarce and overcrowded; collectivization was carried out in an arbitrary and unfair manner; advancement in the party and society were nearly impossible. The regime tried to control every element of Hungarian life; but Hungarians adopted a number of tactics to elude, avoid, or outright ignore the state's diktat.

To date the historiography on communist Hungary has been dominated by the totalitarian paradigm. In essence, this school of thought holds that all political, social and cultural activity and organization were firmly subordinated to the state's political control.<sup>97</sup> The 1956 revolution—which necessarily occupies center stage in any discussion of 1950s Hungary—has therefore been explained as primarily a function of destalinization under Imre Nagy's new course of 1953-55: rebellious students, the party leadership's intransigence and the "Writer's Revolt" are commonly cited as the primary causes of the revolution.<sup>98</sup> These elements of the revolution are indeed important. However, the net effect of the overemphasis on these groups has been to relegate normal Hungarians to anonymity, and to rob them of agency.<sup>99</sup> To the extent that the Hungarian masses have found themselves the object of historical inquiry, they have for the most part been objectified as a quirky but predictable *deus ex societas*, adroitly springing forth when called upon by unruly intelligentsia and retreating just as swiftly into the wings as the revolution is crushed by Soviet armor.

97 See for instance Tamás Aczél, editor, *Ten years after: a commemoration of the tenth anniversary of the Hungarian revolution* (London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1966), Ferenc Fehér and Ágnes Heller, *Hungary 1956 Revisited: The Message of a Revolution - a Quarter of a Century After* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1983), Ferenc Albert Váli. *Rift and Revolt in Hungary: Nationalism Versus Communism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press - London: Oxford University Press, 1961. The best and most recent overview of the 1956 revolution is György Litván, editor, *The Hungarian Revolution of 1956* (New York: Longman, 1996).

98 For a long time, Paul Kecskemeti's *The Unexpected Revolution: Social Forces In the Hungarian Uprising* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1961) and Bill Lomax's *Hungary 1956* (London: Allison and Busby, 1976) were practically the only exceptions to this rule of thumb.

99 Michel de Certeau, Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (translated by Steven Rendall, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p. 40, xiv. Ibid., p. xv.

100 The "Evaluation Items Master File" at the Open Society Archives/Archives of Radio Free Europe consists of reports written by Radio Free Europe staff members and based on recent émigrés and in-country sources from late 1951 until early 1971. They provide a remarkable and kaleidoscopic account of contemporary Hungarian life "from the ground up" as it were. The Items provided content and context for programming and broadcasting choices and served as a bellwether of RFE's success in reaching the inhabitants of the satellite nations. In the early 1970s Senator William J. Fulbright spearheaded a U.S. government inquiry into Radio Free Europe's praxis and CIA funding; panicking, RFE staffers destroyed the original Items master files along with numerous other documents. Incomplete box files (archived as fond HU-300-40-4), arranged thematically, were all that remained until these 70 microfilm rolls—shot in 1957 and covering the years 1951 to 1956—were recently unearthed. The staff of the Open Society Archives is currently engaged in the process of building an index to the microfilm record—see <http://www.osa.ceu.hu/> for more information. I owe this background on the fascinating history of the RFE Items to Pavol Salomon, the OSA supervisory archivist.

When observed through the prism of everyday life, however, the totalitarian thesis becomes untenable. As Michel de Certeau notes, subjects of oppressive systems have at their disposal a broad range of tactics—“clever tricks of the ‘weak’ within the order established by the ‘strong,’ an art of putting one over on the adversary on his own turf, hunter’s tricks, maneuverable, polymorph mobilities, jubilant, poetic, and warlike discoveries”—drawn from the practices of everyday life. “These ‘ways of operating’ constitute the innumerable practices by means of which users reappropriate the space organized by techniques of social reproduction.” Thus, for the historian, “The goal is ... to bring to light the clandestine forms taken by the dispersed, tactical, and makeshift creativity of groups or individuals already caught in the nets of ‘discipline.’”<sup>100</sup> For the historian of early-communist Hungary, this task is drastically simplified by the rich documentary evidence provided by the Radio Free Europe archives.<sup>101</sup>

It is apparent that Hungarians never meekly toed the party line. In the countryside, “black” (illegal) harvesting, cheating on quotas, and other subversions were rampant; overbearing party functionaries who tried too hard to enforce the state’s decisions were beaten—sometimes even killed. In the cities, workers adopted a number of tactics in their battle to control the shopfloor; when pushed too far, they took to the streets in riots and demonstrations against the regime. Black

marketeting was rampant; jazz, that debased product of western imperialism, was popular in both the cities and the countryside; and youthful disenchantment with the regime coalesced around the colorful figure of the *jampec*, or “hooligan.” By redefining “opposition” to include the innumerable tactics of everyday life seized upon by ordinary people trying to cope with extraordinary times, a very different picture of Rákosi’s Hungary emerges.

## 2. A Country of Iron, Steel, and Oppression

Stalinist industrialization and collectivization in the years 1948 to 1956 wrought drastic changes on the Budapest cityscape. The Soviet model was transplanted to Hungary wholesale even as the country rebuilt after the devastation caused by the Second World War. The First Five-Year Plan (1950-54) called for increasing industrial output by 204 percent; this was raised to a staggering 380 percent at the 1951 party congress. This project of breakneck industrialization resulted in nothing less than the conversion of a primarily rural and agricultural country into an urban and industrial one.<sup>102</sup> All major enterprises were nationalized in March of 1948, after which fully 84% of all workers were employed by the state; nationalization

The Hungarian Items were recorded in a hodgepodge of Hungarian, English, and German. All translations from Hungarian and German are my own except where noted.

On Radio Free Europe, see Arch Puddington, *Broadcasting Freedom: The Cold War triumph of Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty* (Lexington: The University of Kentucky Press, 2000) and Michael Nelson, *War of The Black Heavens: The Battles of Western Broadcasting in the Cold War* (London: Brassey’s, 1997). For a case study on Hungarian reception, see Mark Pittaway, “The Education of Dissent: The Reception of the Voice of Free Hungary, 1951-1956,” *Cold War History*, Vol. 4 No. 1, pp 97-116, October 2003.

101 During the period 1949-1953, the percentage of population involved in agriculture fell from 55% to 44% even as the percentage involved in industry rose from 20% to 28%. Ignacs Romsics, *Magyar Története a XX Században*, pp. 290-91.

102 Ivan T. Berend, *Evolution of the Hungarian Economy 1848-1998*, Boulder: Social Science Monographs, 2000), pp. 283, 285.

was further expanded in December of 1949 to include all enterprises employing more than ten people. According to official statistics, industrial output grew by 20% annually during this period.<sup>103</sup>

Although the success of this pell-mell industrialization is a matter of some debate, its demographic impact was undeniable. (See Chart 1.) Families packed up and moved to the cities in droves. 150,000 peasants left the countryside for the city in the period 1949-1953; over 300,000 artisans and small craftsmen and 75,000 ex-military, bureaucrats, and entrepreneurs were likewise forcibly channeled into the new urban proletariat. The number of women in the workforce doubled, reaching 371,000 by 1953.<sup>104</sup> The bulk of these transients found themselves in Budapest, which swelled in size to become the third largest city in the Soviet Bloc. They settled primarily in the working-class suburbs of Újpest and Angyalföld in the north, Kőbánya in the southeast, and Csepel and its surrounding districts.<sup>105</sup>

Both this burgeoning urban working class and the peasantry in the surrounding countryside lived a hard life. Despite the forcible resettlement of 100,000 bourgeois souls in the countryside, housing availability in Budapest lagged far behind demand. 650,000 new apartments would have been required to address this shortfall, but only

14,000 were built every year; moreover, according to a 1954 survey fully 1/5 of the available housing was structurally dangerous or in need of total renewal.<sup>106</sup> Real wages fell by 22 percent between 1949 and 1953; grocery rationing was reintroduced from 1951 to 1953.<sup>107</sup> Driven off the farm and out of smaller industrial schemes into huge factories, the new urbanites had to deal with underpaid jobs, unrealistic norms, recurrent shortages of substandard food, and utility outages. Those that remained in the countryside were subject to a succession of collectivization drives, an unrealistic quota system, and the threat of being labeled a “kulak” and therefore subject to imprisonment or property loss. In all, Hungarians in both city and countryside were forced into a radically new mode of labor and existence.

They were kept there with state terror and surveillance. Between 1948 and 1956 the hated *Államvédelmi Osztály* (ÁVO), or Office of State Security, initiated 1,017, 698 cases against “enemies of the people,” “wreckers,” and so forth; penalties were imposed in 571, 270 of them. 30,000 were imprisoned, and another 30-40,000 interned under circumstances of varying duress. 70,000 richer peasants in the countryside were branded “kulaks” and suffered egregious taxation and other Stalinist excesses. State oppression affected one in three families altogether.<sup>108</sup>

103 Ibid, p. 285.

104 See Imre Bencze and Erszébet Tájti, *Budapest: An Industrial-Geographical Approach*, (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiado, 1972), p. 135.

105 Ignác Romsics, *Hungary in the Twentieth Century* (Budapest: Corvina, 1999), pp.280-81.

106 Litván, *The Hungarian Revolution of 1956*, pp. 20, 22.

107 Romsics, p. 293. The ÁVO later changed its name to *Államvédelmi Hatóság*, but the nickname “Ávo” for its members stuck.

See also Open Society Archives/Radio Free Europe Evaluation Items Master File (hereafter OSA/RFE Items), Item 9814/53 (roll 29), for a firsthand account of the conditions in the ÁVH prison in Fő street.

108 These terms translate to “people’s educator” and “[person responsible for] peace,” respectively. See OSA/RFE Item 13489/52 (roll 15) and OSA/RFE Item 10057/53 (roll 29) on recruiting police informers, OSA/RFE Item 1659/52 (roll 7) for surveillance tactics in hotels, and OSA/RFE Item 12954/52 (roll 15) on the system of agents and informers. See OSA/RFE Item 13494/52 (roll 15), on the *népnevelők* system, and OSA/RFE Item 13589/52 (roll 15) on *békefelelősök*.

109 On sabotage, see OSA/RFE Item 6442/51 (roll 3), OSA/RFE Item 6692/51 (roll 15), and OSA/RFE Item 13285/51 (roll 6); on strikes and demonstrations, OSA/RFE Item 7249/51 (roll 3), OSA/RFE Item 13/52, (misdated 1951) (roll 6), and OSA/RFE Items 204/52 and 205/52 (both roll 6).

Hungarians were bribed, cajoled, or threatened into acting as informers; *nepnevelők* and *békefelelősök* could knock on the door at any time inquiring into a family's finances or personal life.<sup>109</sup> Hungarians had much to protest long before 1956, but it seemed that their opportunities for evading the state's authoritative gaze were so limited as to be inconsequential.

### 3. Unusual and Everyday Resistance

Indeed, the Rákosi police state allowed Hungarians no real opportunity to politically organize against the state. However, at times "passive resistance" snowballed into riots, strikes, and demonstrations—and the social and cultural spheres were another matter entirely. As the political arena was hopeless, Hungarians shifted their activity to these latter realms, responding to the statist strategies of surveillance and control with the tactics of everyday life.

Despite their alleged status as the backbone of communist power, industrial workers proved to be some of the most unmanageable subjects of the state. Sabotage was common, and 1950 and 1951 saw significant strike activity in the industrial suburbs of Csepel and Kispest.<sup>110</sup> In 1954, miners at Varpalota went on strike for rubber boots, norm reductions, and safety regulations; their demands were met.<sup>111</sup> At times strikes became violent, such as the 23 December 1951 riot at the Ikarusz bus factory in which 8 were killed

and 120 wounded after the ÁVO intervened. Mass actions also occurred outside the workplace, as workers beat up the members of disciplinary courts, set upon groups of ÁVO men in restaurants, and participated in other incidences of outright defiance.<sup>112</sup>

Communist power was much weaker in the countryside. Due to widespread and unrelenting resistance to collectivization, in the early 1950s less than one fifth of the country's arable land was collectivized.<sup>113</sup> Riots and demonstrations in the countryside were a regular occurrence.<sup>114</sup> Most of the time, however, peasants opted for traditional, effective, and less dangerous means of resistance. Caught between unrealistic expectations from Budapest on the one hand and recalcitrant peasants on the other, most party representatives in the countryside opted for the path of least resistance by falsifying reports and turning a blind eye to the peasants' evasive tactics. As Istvan Rev states,

»Those [party functionaries] who really cooperated with the peasantry had the best chances. They allowed the peasants to sell their cows on the black market and reported the sudden loss of animals in the village; helped the peasants falsify their birth certificates so that the population suddenly grew old, and those above 65 years of age could qualify for quota reductions; shut their eyes when the peasants organized pseudocooperatives; tolerated the division of land on paper among family members; contributed

110 OSA/RFE Items 2911/54 (roll 36).

111 On the Tököl disciplinary court brawl, see OSA/RFE Item 1779/52 (roll 7); on the ÁVH restaurant fight, see OSA/RFE Item 10065/51 (roll 4).

112 Charles Gati, "From Liberation to Revolution, 1945-1956," in *A History of Hungary*, Peter F. Sugar, Péter Hanák, Tibor Frank, editors (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), p. 373.

113 See, for instance, OSA/RFE Item 6849/51 (roll 3), OSA/RFE Item 679/52 (roll 6), OSA/RFE Item 3658/52 (roll 8), and OSA/RFE 12693/53 (roll 32).

114 Istvan Rev, "The Advantages of Being Atomized," *Dissent*, Summer 1987, p. 339. For examples of copacetic party officials in the countryside, see OSA/RFE Item 7578/54 (roll 42),

to hiding animals in the woods or grain under the ground. . . . For the members of the apparatus to survive, the survival methods of the producers were indispensable.«<sup>115</sup>

Overzealous party members were sometimes waylaid and beaten by groups of peasants, as happened to Lajos Nagy on the night of 28 August 1951 in the village of Bánréve.<sup>116</sup> Even the rural party elite were not invulnerable to the peasants' wrath, as evinced by the 17 October 1951 murder of the leader of a collective farm near Nyiregiháza.<sup>117</sup>

Despite their socially- and economically-disadvantaged position, women also actively opposed the regime at times.<sup>118</sup> Constituting a significant percentage of the workforce—as much as 70% of some enterprises—they participated in these riots and strikes as well. As the market was their only sanctioned gathering space outside the home under the patriarchal system, it was also the site of numerous demonstrations and riots—for instance, at the Csepel Közert store in November and again in December of 1951.<sup>119</sup> Although women were often the ones saddled with the unwanted responsibilities of *nepnevelő* and *békefelelős*; they would subvert these roles by falsifying reports on a regular basis.<sup>120</sup>

This sort of subterfuge and a simple refusal to play by the rules—tactics of noncompliance, rather than outright defiance—was likewise the rule in many industries. In many factories, the shortage of skilled labor allowed trained workers the necessary leeway to stage slowdowns, negotiate norms, and if necessary switch jobs.<sup>121</sup> Construction workers in Budapest were able to browbeat their foremen into crediting them with extra hours worked.<sup>122</sup> Absenteeism at the Csepel Ironworks reached 688 workers per day in September 1950 and 1674 per day in February 1951; by early 1952, seven to nine percent of the workforce failed to show up on any given day.<sup>123</sup> Called upon to do extra labor on a Sunday in 1951, a group of women simply refused *en masse* to show up.<sup>124</sup> In January 1956, an analysis by U.S. government intelligence contractors from Georgetown University found that “Passive resistance is perhaps more common in Hungary than [sic] in any other European satellite.”<sup>125</sup>

Perhaps the most widespread means of manipulating the shortcomings of the system to one's advantage was the black market. The control economy was notoriously inefficient: basic necessities, much less luxury items were in short supply throughout the period, and the state's “campaigns” to raise

115 OSA/RFE Item 7668/51 (roll 3). A similar incident takes place in Vönök in early 1953—see OSA/RFE Item 5049/53 (roll 23).

116 OSA/RFE Item 675/52 (roll 6). Also, Rev recounts the following story: “In 1954 in a small country town the peasants put a delivery officer's eyes out, cut off his nose and ears, and broke his head.” Rev, “Advantages,” p. 342.

117 The best analysis to date on gender and socialism in Hungary is Joanna Goven, *The Gendered Foundations of Hungarian Socialism: State, Society, and the Anti-politics of Anti-feminism 1948-1990* (unpublished dissertation, University of California at Berkeley, 1993).

118 OSA/RFE Item 11239/51 (roll 2) and OSA/RFE Item 13405/51 (roll 6).

119 OSA/RFE Item 13494/52 (roll 15), OSA/RFE Item 13589/52 (roll 15).

120 Mark Pittaway, “Social Limits,” p. 3. See also OSA/RFE Item 13302/51 (roll 6).

121 OSA/RFE Item 8040 (roll 43).

122 László Varga, *Budapest: A History from its Beginnings to 1998* (Boulder: Social Science Monographs, 1997), pp.201-202.

123 OSA/RFE Item 4109/51 (roll 2).

124 “Document No. 8. Study Prepared For U.S. Army Intelligence, ‘Hungary: resistance Activities and potentials,’” Csaba Békés, Malcolm Byrne and János M. Rainer, editors, *The 1956 Hungarian Revolution: A History in Documents* (Budapest: CEU, 2002), p. 89.

125 Rev, “Advantages,” pp. 339-340.

production of any given commodity would inevitably lead to shortages in other productive fields.<sup>126</sup> In a system widely perceived as unjust, blackmarketeering and smuggling lost much of their prior opprobrium. Interviewed in 1955, one informant stated that

»Today, smuggling is not identical with moral turpitude and is regarded by society as almost a good deed. ... Every regime persecutes the smugglers; in the past the population agreed with the law and consequently condemned them. The present regime also persecutes the smugglers but the population sympathizes with the things the regime persecutes, and is an enemy of all that the regime demands.«<sup>127</sup>

Peasants and citydwellers alike were firmly enmeshed in an illicit economic web: an entire second economy of contraband goods and services. A brisk trade ensued in not only food, clothing, and other necessities but also coffee, jewelry, alcohol, and Western novels and jazz LPs. Albeit born out of scarcity and desperation, black marketeering could be a remarkably profitable enterprise for bold entrepreneurs.

The most precocious informant in the RFE archives was one "Janos," from Ajak. Ostensibly a butcher, he supplemented his meager income by illegally buying calves from farmers outside the village proper for 150-300 forints, slaughtering them, and selling the meat for 12 to 16 forints per kilo. Not satisfied with his illegal meat income, Janos branched out into firewood: via the son of a

local forestry official, he acquired between 15 and 18 tons of wood in a few weeks in 1954. After paying his supplier 500 forints and his uncle 150 forint for transporting the wood, Janos still made 200 forints profit on every 1.5 ton load. He was eventually reported to the police and had to flee; however, having earned 3000-4000 forints per month from his illegal activities (roughly three times the wage of a skilled worker), he was able to bankroll his 7 December 1954 escape to the west with relative ease.<sup>128</sup>

As the state was uniformly disliked and viewed as illegitimate, stealing from it was a natural response. Workers would regularly appropriate materials, tools, and time from their day jobs in order to make much better money on the side. Building contractors would steal parts and equipment from their jobs, and even work on private projects when they were allegedly at work. Women who rented looms from cooperatives would use them to make socks (from black market materials) they would then sell for ten times what they made on the socks they produced for the state. One engineer, dismissed from his job in 1948 for his Social Democrat tendencies, made a neat profit from 1950 to 1952 by building transformers. He obtained all the necessary materials on the black market (from workers who had stolen them from the factories they worked at), hired other skilled workers to assemble all but the final product, and always kept 20-30,000 forint in reserve for bribing state officials.<sup>129</sup> It seems likely that many of those who aspired to jobs in the state and party apparatus did so not

126 OSA/RFE Item 4785/55, English translation (roll 54).

127 Unlike many of these anonymous sources, his interviewer provided an extensive character sketch: "Suubsource [Janos] is the type of a buccaneer in the 20<sup>th</sup> century version, not without some knightly traits. . . . The Robin Hood of AJAK is not too good an observer where money is not involved. But he is clever and quick-tongued, frank in his answers and makes no bones about what he thinks." OSA/RFE 1370/55 (roll 50); see also OSA/RFE Item 2743/55 (roll 52) on meat and OSA/RFE Item 3534/55 (roll 53) on firewood.

128 OSA/RFE Item 8111/53 (roll 27).

129 See OSA/RFE Item 5604/53 (roll 24), for Győr, and OSA/RFE Item 12231/53 (roll 31), for Hegyeshalom.

out of conviction, but a desire for increased opportunities to skim profits.

Perhaps the only thing better than cheating the state was making money off the Russians. Soviet soldiers traveling from occupied Austria through Győr were eager to convert goods into cash, which they could smuggle back into the USSR. Black marketers could buy cocoa from them for 100 to 150 forint per kilo, and resell it at 200 to 220 forint; nylon stockings, bought at 100 to 120 forint, resold at 180 to 200 forint. Western watches, the commodity of choice for black marketers, could be had for 100 forint and then resold for 400-500 forint. Similar exchanges took place at Hegyeshalom and elsewhere along the railway line to the USSR and in Budapest and other major cities.<sup>130</sup>

Finally, as part of the communists' scheme to rebuild Hungary in their own image was predicated on the symbolic refashioning of the built world,<sup>131</sup> so were the symbols of the new regime targets of subversion and inversion. Statues and other monumental sculptures celebrating the stalinist regime were regularly defaced.<sup>132</sup> Almost as soon as

the Stalin statue was erected in 1951, it required a 24-hour ÁVH guard to combat this almost inherent tendency towards vandalism and symbolic warfare.<sup>133</sup> Despite the difficulties of printing texts without state sanction, anonymously-circulated pamphlets—publicizing the labor camps, advocating sabotage, urging the dissolution of the collective farms—cropped up intermittently throughout this period.<sup>134</sup> Wearing their religious sentiments on their chests, if not their sleeves, many Hungarians chose to wear crosses even though it was obviously coded “subversive” by the state; some Hungarian Jews, drawing on the oppressive symbolism of World War II, wore yellow stars to signify the Rákosi regime’s retrogression to Nazi praxis during the deportations of the summer of 1951.<sup>135</sup>

However, these are largely atomized and localized incidents and practices. Although disenchantment with the regime obviously constitutes a “structure of feeling,”<sup>136</sup> none of these divergent impulses are indicative of a subculture proper. For this we must look to hooliganism and jazz.

130 See Reuben Fowkes, “The Role of Monumental Architecture in the Construction of Soviet Space in Stalinist Hungary,” in David Crowley and Susan E. Reid, editors, *Socialist Spaces: Sites of everyday Life in the Eastern Bloc* (Oxford: Berg, 2002).

131 OSA/RFE Item 6753/51 (roll 3).

132 On the posting of the ÁVH guards, see OSA/RFE Item 13411/51 (roll 6). One contemporaneous joke about the Stalin statue tells the story of a dumb kulak asking the ÁVH guard why constant surveillance is necessary. The ÁVH guard replies that his presence there is necessary to prevent the statue being defaced. The peasant asks who would do such a thing, to which the guard replies, “Well, me for one, if I wasn’t on duty.” OSA/RFE Item 13401/52 (roll 15).

133 OSA/RFE Item 6971/51 (roll 3), OSA/RFE Item 9842/53 (roll 29).

134 On crosses, see OSA/RFE Item 5658/51 (roll 2); on Stars of David, see OSA/RFE Item 1738/51 (roll 1).

135 I borrow this nebulous term from Raymond Williams to denote “the generative border country between the lived and the fully articulated as a structured social experience in solution.” Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977).

136 “Az egykori Budapest-i ‘vagányok’ ma mint jampecek ismertek. ...Szűk nadrágot, kockás kabátot és tarka, diszített nyakkendőt viselnek. ...A kávéházakból és kulturbetyiségekből kitiltottak őket, mivel csak nyugati táncokat, samba-t, boogie-woogie-t táncolnak.” *Vagány* was the term used to denote, in the words of one RFE researcher, the “old-time periphery scum;” *jampec* means approximately “spiv” or “dude.” After about 1959 they are referred to as *huligan*, which is most likely borrowed from English via Russian. OSA/RFE Item 12594/52 (roll 14). For the origins of the term and social phenomenon in late tsarist Russia, see Joan Neuberger, *Hooliganism: Crime, Culture, and Power in St. Petersburg, 1900-1914* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); for the Soviet adaptation of “hooliganism,” see Anne Gorsuch, “Smashing Chairs at the Local Club: Discipline, Disorder, and Soviet Youth,” <http://depts.washington.edu/reecas/nwscolars/gorsuch.pdf>.

## 4. Hooligans and all that Jazz

»The one-time *vagányok* are now known as *jampecek*. ...They wear tight trousers, checkered coats, and colorfully-decorated neckties. ...The coffeehouses and dancehalls have banished them, who only dance the western dances—the samba, the boogie-woogie.«<sup>137</sup>

The *jampecek*, or hooligans—sporting zoot suits, “three-story” (platform) shoes, and other garish items of western apparel—made their appearance in the streets on Budapest and other major cities in the early 1950s.<sup>138</sup> They called each other by odd-sounding nicknames like “Kiri” and “Guca;” they spoke their own language, an odd mishmash of criminal slang and parodic riffs on communist culture in which the police were “wooden coats,” Budapest was “the big village,” Jászai Mari square was “ÁVÓ Mária” Square, and so forth.<sup>139</sup> These unruly youths roamed the streets in gangs: they assaulted women, beat up policemen, and generally ran amok. Some even carried pistols.<sup>140</sup> Perhaps worst of all, they danced Western dances to American jazz.

Although banned since 1949, jazz was quite popular in Hungary. Theoretically, one was subject to fines or even imprisonment if caught playing, listening to, or especially dancing to jazz—but these regulations were regularly flaunted. Numerous reports from both native Hungarians and travelers suggest that anyone who went out in Budapest looking for jazz could find it at espressos and dancehalls like the Pipacs, Moskva, or Budapest.<sup>141</sup> Farther out in the suburbs, there were bars like the Vince-Vendeglő, where according to one boastful informant “even Americans could learn a thing or two about dancing,” and the police stayed away for fear of being beaten by the rough crowd.<sup>142</sup> In the small village of Fertőszentmiklós, firemen danced *only* to jazz at their annual ball.<sup>143</sup> In one of the small towns near the Oroszlány mines, jazz was unavailable only because the musicians didn’t know any American dance tunes.<sup>144</sup> During the week or other times it might be inconvenient to hear live jazz, there were always Radio Free Europe, Voice of America, and the BBC, and a host of other stations—and by the mid-1950s, radios were no longer in short supply.<sup>145</sup> Like all Western—and especially

137 On zoot suits and “*barom emeletes cipő*” [literally, ‘three-story shoes’], see OSA/RFE HU 300-40-4, Item 6797/56 (5 July 1956), box 7, folder 142.01.

138 The first two terms are *fakabát* and *nagyfalu* in Hungarian. The last example is a darkly-humorous pun based on the location of the ÁVO headquarters at Jászai Mari square: once taken there, one would be forced to “sing”—thus “Ávo [Ave] Maria.” For a remarkable dictionary of *jampec* slang, see the appendix to OSA/RFE HU 300-40-4, Item 2619/55 (4 April 1955), box 7, folder 142.01; on nicknames, see OSA/RFE HU 300-40-4, Item 8491/56 (5 September 1956), box 4, folder 131.4.

139 For an incident involving a jampec with a firearm, see OSA/RFE Item 12594/52 (roll 14).

140 For reports on jazz in Budapest, see OSA/RFE Item 3308/51 (roll 2), Item 166/52 (roll 6), Item 6733/52 (roll 10), Item 10343/52 (roll 13), Item 11951/52 (roll 14), Item 7544/53 (roll 26), Item 9166/53 (9 September 1953), OSA/RFE HU-300-40-4, Item 1380/56 (8 February 1956), box 24, folder 875, OSA/RFE Item 1769/55 (roll 50).

141 “*Az amerikaiak pedig elmebetnének ide figurákat tanulni.*” OSA/RFE Item 710/55 (1 February 1955), box 4, folder 131.4.

142 OSA/RFE Item 1896/53 (roll 19).

143 “...itt csak a polkát, foxtrottot és tangót lehet járni. A Swing természetesen tilos, bár az ilyenmire nem nagyon adnak a bányásfiatalok, csak az az egy baj, hogy a zenészek nem ismerik a nyugati táncszámokat. [“Here it is only possible to dance to polka, foxtrot, or tango. Swing is of course forbidden, but the young miners don’t care about that—the only problem is that the musicians don’t know any Western dance numbers.”] OSA/RFE 5741/52 (roll 10).

144 Note that in 1949 there were only 162,000 radio licenses in Hungary, but 957,000 in 1959 (*Népszabadság* 12 May 1960).

Anecdotal evidence from the village of Vámosgyörk suggests that a quarter of its 2000 inhabitants had radios even as early as 1953 (OSA/RFE Item 10200/53 (roll 29)).

American-culture, jazz was perceived as a threat to the socialist project.<sup>146</sup> But however subversive its influence, jazz was only in bars and on the airwaves; the hooligans were in the streets themselves.

The *jampecek* gatecrashed the public consciousness. The newspapers first decry their presence in summer 1952 and continue to do so periodically into the early 1960s.<sup>147</sup> The police introduced a number of strict measures in an attempt to control the hooligans: cracking down on Budapest dancehall bands, packing cafés and bars with informants, and jamming Radio Free Europe and other foreign stations.<sup>148</sup> In more than one instance, plainclothes Ávos beat up a student for dancing “American style.”<sup>149</sup> One dancehall, the Vasas in Pestszenterzsébet (a working-class district), banned zoot suits in March of 1956—by this time “*jampi tanc*” [*jampec* dance] had entered the slang lexicon as well.<sup>150</sup> *Jampecek* found their way into the popular imagination not only in the press but also on stage and even in film, as the archetypal Rabelaisian bad guy “Swing Toni” the 1951 movie *Life is Beautiful When You Sing*.<sup>151</sup>

## 5. Conclusion

It is difficult to read the truth between these lines. Radio Free Europe’s overly optimistic assessment—“It can however be assumed that many “jampec”-s are courageous [sic] “die-hard”-youngsters who dare defy the Communists even risking the inevitable consequences which may go from a thorough beating up to jail”—is probably as mistaken as the socialist press, which invariably portrayed them as rapists and murderers.<sup>152</sup> Most of them were probably just kids out looking for a good time—but in utter contempt of the bland, orthodox amusements offered by the state. By doing so, hooligans and jazz-lovers created an alternate social and cultural sphere. This constituted a distinct subculture *at the very height of stalinist rule*. Nothing could be farther from the totalitarian paradigm. Not as dramatically, but more effectively in terms of concretely bettering their economic positions, workers and peasants engaged in a number of practices frowned upon by the state.

Hooligans, the jazz subculture, and the other innumerable practices of dissent and

145 Western movies were fantastically more popular than Soviet ones, western dress styles were the height of cultural self-presentation of wealth, schoolchildren traded western literature on the sly—there is enough data on the attraction to Western culture, and the regime’s attempts to quash it, to justify a dissertation in and of itself. The most fascinating example I’ve found so far is an “orthodox” Hungarian Tarzan novel published in early 1953. This attempt to piggyback on the longtime success of the hirsute Western hero was unsuccessful: Hungarian readers did not care for the ending, in which Tarzan realized that he could only be happy in the USSR and moves there to live. See OSA/RFE Item 11083/53 (roll 30). On the subversive effects of jazz in socialist systems, see S. Frederick Starr, *Red and Hot: The Fate of Jazz in the Soviet Union* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

146 Albeit doubtless also active beforehand, hooligans were first discussed in the press in late summer 1952. See *Szabad Ifjúság* [*Free Youth*] 3 August 1952, *Esti Budapest* [*Budapest at Night*] 11 August 1952, *Szabad Ifjúság* 4 September 1952, and *Szabad Ifjúság* 11 September 1952 for examples. See OSA/RFE Background Reports, Hungary, “The Hooligan Problem in Hungary” (24 February 1961) Microfilm 37, for a rundown of post-1956 hooliganism.

147 For a remarkable dictionary of jampec slang, see the appendix to OSA/RFE HU 300-40-4, Item 2619/55 (4 April 1955), box 7, folder 142.01.

148 OSA/RFE Item 5565/51 (roll 2), OSA/RFE Item 6782/51 (roll 3), and Arch Puddington, *Broadcasting Freedom*, pp.214–218.

149 OSA/RFE Item 7041/51 (roll 3).

150 OSA/RFE Item 12594/52 (roll 14).

151 On *Life is Beautiful When You Sing* (1951) see J. Hoberman, *The Red Atlantis: Communist Culture in the Absence of Communism* (Philadelphia: Temple University, 1999).

resistance outlined above suggest the relative inability of the communist regime to dominate society. At all levels of society—male and female, urban and rural, old and young—resistance to stalinist rule was the rule and not the exception. Power and agency in stalinist Hungary was not a one-way street: Hungarians invented or adapted a new means of opposition for practically every new regulation or attempt at

control by the nascent socialist state, and even created their own subcultures in the interstices of the oppressive state structure. In light of this new evidence, we must interpret 1956 not as an anomaly in an otherwise strictly-controlled and repressive environment, but as the logical culmination of years of subversive opposition.

*Chart 1: Number of Industrial Workers in Budapest, 1939-58*<sup>153</sup>

152 See evaluation comments in OSA/RFE Item 12594/52 (roll 14).

153 *Ibid.*, pp 26-27. Note that 100,000 denizens of Budapest fled in November 1956. See Appendix I for data.