

Teaching Cold War History at New York University

Csaba Békés

.....
1956 Institute
Dobány u. 74
Budapest
H-1074
www.rev.hu
bek11339@belka.iif.hu

New York University
53 Washington Square South
New York,
N.Y. 10012
www.nyu.edu
Adviser: Michael Gomez,
Chair, Department of History

.....
In the 2006–2007 academic year, I taught undergraduate and graduate courses as a Fulbright visiting professor on the history of the Cold War at New York University in New York, N.Y. Also, as 2006 happened to be the 50th anniversary of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution, I participated actively in a great number of scholarly events connected with this anniversary both in the US and Canada.

1. Teaching

The Fulbright scholarship in 2006–2007 was my second year-long academic fellowship in the United States. In 2001–2002, I was a Center Fellow at the Project on the Cold War as Global Conflict, International Center for Advanced Studies, New York University, New York. At that time, I conducted research and participated in the regular Friday seminars where we discussed a paper of one of the fellows or some other scholar from NYU or another university. I was lucky to be selected for an international competition, without any previous connections with NYU, to be one of the five full time Center Fellows in the first year of this three-year project on the Cold War. That fellowship and the extremely intensive and very high level training process it demanded became

a very important stage in my career as a researcher in international relations and Cold War history.

My nine-month Fulbright scholarship in 2006-2007 was a similar turning point in my life, this time in my teaching career. Since the late 1980's I have occasionally taught Hungarian and English language history courses as a visiting lecturer at several universities, mostly in Hungary but also in Turku, Finland. Nevertheless, working in a research institute (the 1956 Institute), I had never taught a full academic year at an English language University before. At New York University I taught undergraduate and graduate courses on the history of the Cold War: The History of East-West Relations in Post World War II Europe and East Central Europe and the Cold War, 1945-1991.

These courses gave the students an opportunity to study the history of East-West relations in the Cold War period on the basis of recently declassified archival documents and with the help of an experienced researcher in the field from the former Soviet bloc.

The seminars were based predominantly on the findings of the so-called "new Cold War history" that emerged after 1989, with a special focus on the policy of the Eastern Bloc. Besides studying readings from the most up to date literature on the topic, during the courses students used and analyzed published and unpublished archival documents from the former Soviet Bloc states. Fortunately, many of these documents are now available in

English translation on the web sites of the National Security Archive, (<http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv>), the Woodrow Wilson Center's Cold War International History Project (www.cwihp.org), and the Parallel History Project on Cooperative Security (PHP) (formerly: Parallel History Project on NATO and the Warsaw Pact) (<http://www.php.isn.ethz.ch>), while many other such documents are in the possession of the Cold War History Research Center in Budapest (www.coldwar.hu).

The students were very open, and they were very much interested in the topic, especially since they found my approach revealing and remarkably different from the more American centred presentation of Cold War history they had been used to. Therefore, I enjoyed teaching at NYU a great deal and fortunately, according to the anonymous student evaluations of the courses and the instructor, they found my courses great, too. It was especially good to see that the students enjoyed working with a huge amount of primary source materials – and were very effective in doing so – as this was a special feature of my courses. I even had a very knowledgeable seventy year old as a guest student, a retired businessman very much interested in modern history, who previously had taken some courses on Eastern Europe with István Deák at Columbia University and Tony Judt at NYU.

The courses I developed for my Fulbright Fellowship at NYU now can be repeated at other schools both in Hungary and abroad. In fact, while still at NYU, I was invited to teach the same courses on Cold War History at Columbia University

as the István Deák Visiting Professor for East Central European History in the Fall of 2007, which I also enjoyed very much. I am sure that this unintended, but very much welcome, consequence would not have happened without my Fulbright fellowship at NYU.

During my fellowship, by special permission from CIES, I also taught one undergraduate course on the Cold War in both semesters at Empire State College in New York.

2. Other academic activities

Besides teaching, my main activity was to participate in scholarly events related to the 50th anniversary of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution. I attended five international conferences organized for the anniversary (at Case Western University in Cleveland, the University of Ottawa, Harvard University, Columbia University, and Bard College) – at three of these conferences I acted as a keynote speaker. In October 2006, I also participated in a lecture tour called the “Traveling scholars project” (*The 1956 Hungarian Revolution: Fifty Years On*) organized by the Hungarian Cultural Center in New York. Three leading students of the history of the revolution participated: Charles Gati from Johns Hopkins University, and both Attila Szakolczai and myself from the 1956 Institute in Budapest. Our team gave lectures at six universities on the East coast (the New School for Social Research in New York, New York University, the City University of New York, Princeton University in New

Jersey, George Washington University in Washington, D.C., and Harvard University in Cambridge, MA) as well as at the Hungarian Cultural Center in New York.

During my fellowship, I was also invited to give lectures on 1956 and on the Cold War at several universities: the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill, Montclair State University in New Jersey, and Empire State College in New York. In October 2006, I participated in a very interesting roundtable discussion at the Hungarian Cultural Center in New York, entitled ‘Revolution, Ideology and Memory’. The other two participants were Ágnes Heller and Paul Berman.

I participated regularly in the seminars of the Remarque Institute at NYU. The Institute was founded by NYU professor Tony Judt to study issues of European history, and the sessions I visited were all very interesting.

In 2006, because of the 50th anniversary of the 1956 Hungarian revolution, a new and very large special government fund became available for scholarly publications on 1956, an opportunity that few could resist. Not surprisingly, during that year some 300 (!) books (or rather: individual publications) were published on the revolution in Hungary.

I can proudly report that I produced 1% of that number: I have published three books about 1956, and the manuscripts of those volumes were all finalized between September and November of 2006. The first book is the second, revised and enlarged edition of my monograph on the

international context of the revolution, originally published in 1996. (*Az 1956-os magyar forradalom a világpolitikában [The 1956 Hungarian Revolution and World Politics]*. (Second enlarged edition) 1956-os Intézet, Budapest, 2006). The second book is a collection of essays by experts on the history of Hungarian foreign policy covering twelve bilateral relations in the era after Stalin's death (1953–1958). Besides editing the volume, I also wrote an introductory chapter and the chapters on US–Hungarian and British–Hungarian relations. (*Evolúció és revolúció. Magyarország és a nemzetközi politika 1956-ban. [Evolution and Revolution. Hungary and International Politics in 1956]* (Szerk.) Békés Csaba, Gondolat Kiadó–1956-os Intézet, 2006. The third book is a collection of documents on the Hungarian question in the United Nations (1956–1963). (*Az Egyesült Nemzetek Szervezete és a magyar forradalom, 1956–1963. Tanulmányok, dokumentumok és kronológia. [The United Nations and the 1956 Hungarian Revolution. Essays, Documents and Chronology.]* Szerk. Békés Csaba és Kecskés D. Gusztáv. Magyar ENSZ Társaság, 2006.) *The 1956 Hungarian Revolution and World Politics* is now being published in English by the Center for Hungarian Studies and Publications, Inc. (Social Science Monographs, Boulder, Colorado. Wayne, New Jersey). Also, *Evolution and Revolution* will be published in the Harvard Cold War Studies Book Series. For several years now I have been one of the contributors on the seventy-five

member team for the forthcoming (2009) 3 volume text, *The Cambridge History of the Cold War*. The last version of my chapter “East Central Europe in the Cold War, 1953–1960” was also finished during my Fulbright fellowship at NYU.

In the spring of 2007 I acted as the historical consultant for the 90-minute US documentary “Torn from the Flag” on the 1956 Hungarian Revolution, which was presented in Los Angeles in November of 2007. I also appear in the film, along with three US historians, talking about the revolution. During the same months I was the historical supervisor for Tibor Glant's manuscript: *Remember Hungary, 1956. Essays on the Hungarian Revolution and War of Independence in American Memory* (Social Science Monographs, Boulder, Colorado. Center for Hungarian Studies and Publications, Inc., Wayne, New Jersey, 2007.)

3. Housing

Housing for a foreign scholar is always a major problem, but this is especially so in New York City. Michael Gomez, the head of the History Department at NYU, was very supportive, especially in finding subsidized NYU housing for us. This was a crucial issue in a terribly expensive city like New York. I was there with my family: my wife, Melinda Kalmár, who is also a historian, and our then thirteen-year-old son, Gáspár. After quite some excitement and worrying, we were lucky to be offered a two-bedroom apartment approximately one week before our departure. The apartment was on the 9th floor of one of the

three thirty-story “Silver Towers” built for NYU faculty in the middle of Greenwich Village in the late nineteen-sixties, a truly great location. This was the good news; the bad news was that it was unfurnished. Personal connections helped us solve the problem: we received some surplus chairs and beds that were just about to be thrown away by the Hungarian Cultural Center in New York, and then we rented the rest of the furniture from a friend’s colleague. We had lived in the same building in 2001-2002 and had made friends with a nice family living in a neighboring NYU building. Alex was a mathematician who had emigrated from the Soviet Union, while his wife Shahana, who was from India, taught in the business school of a college in New Jersey. Their daughter, Aliya, our son, Gaspar, and Keyshav, the son of another NYU professor of Indian descent who also lived in our building, formed an inseparable group, playing together after school all the time on the small plaza in front of the towers or in one of the apartments, mostly ours as we lived on the ground floor. (A tragic experience from our previous stay in New York City was that we arrived in New York a week before 9-11, and we witnessed the attack and the collapse of the World Trade Center towers while standing on the corner of 6th avenue and 11th street, just after taking our son to school. It took us several months before we could more or less recover from the shock it caused us.)

So, now we approached Alex for help, and he asked around in his department

and found Victor, who was just about to leave for Lebanon for a year. That is how we were able to rent the furniture we needed, and while it was not an easy job to transport it from another NYU building into our neighborhood and then return it from a midtown location at the end of my fellowship in May of 2007, this was still a much better option than having to buy furniture and then sell it later on. Another complication on the housing front was that in mid-December we had to move to another NYU apartment, as the one we had in Silver Towers was available only for the first semester. Moving with all our stuff just before Christmas was neither easy nor inexpensive; nevertheless, we solved the problem and the new apartment even had some advantages, including having two bathrooms. Moreover, it was in Peter Cooper Village on the East side, a nice complex of apartment houses located in a green environment with playgrounds and basketball courts, etc. On top of all that, Gaspar’s school was a mere 2-minute walk from the apartment; previously, he had to take a long walk and then a bus to get to school. So, all in all, it was worth the change.

As a general comment on housing, in New York even the subsidized rent is quite expensive, as we had to pay about \$1,700 dollars a month for the first apartment and \$1,900 a month for the second apartment. I think I do not need to explain how difficult it was to survive from the rest of the scholarship with my wife and son for nine months. I know

this is a general problem, not specifically Hungarian: in New York I heard of an American Fulbright scholar who had to return with his family from London in the middle of his fellowship because of the same financial problem. Therefore, I think the Fulbright Commission should consider more seriously the cost of living in different cities when allocating personal funds in the future. In fact, the present system favors a “minimalist approach” for the grantees: the smaller the place you live in and the less prestigious the university you choose, the better your financial situation will be during your scholarship. You may even save some money.

And *vice versa*: if you are ambitious, brave, and successful enough to get a visiting position at a well known university located in an expensive city, you will have to pay a higher price for it. By adjusting the amount of the scholarship to the actual renting costs in particular cities, you could remedy this very important problem. As additional funds may not necessarily be available, cutting the number of grantees could resolve this problem.

4. Non-academic activities - social contacts

Because of the rather busy schedule I had on the “1956 front,” we could not take part in the numerous social events and excursions organized by the Fulbright management in the US. Nevertheless, we did visit the United Nations, and that was a great experience for us and especially for our son, who turned out to be the most active participant in a discussion

about environmental issues at the dinner table one night as we sat together with Fulbright scholars from Norway, the Philippines and other countries. We were also briefed by a high-ranking UN official about the relief work of the UN.

In late October we rented car to visit Boston, and that trip was a nice example of the combination of academic and non-academic activities. I was invited to a conference at Harvard University, and the organizers were kind enough to provide us with a larger room, so while I was attending the conference my lucky family could do some sight seeing. Since we arrived a day earlier, even I could see some of Boston, a city we really liked a lot. My son’s greatest experience, besides seeing the historical site of the “Boston tea party”, well known for him from history books, was that he was allowed to drive the “duck”, an amphibious tourist vehicle (true!) on the sea.

At the History Department at NYU I resumed my old contacts with several professors, and I made new friendships, as well. Marilyn Young, my former “boss” as head of the Project on the Cold War as Global Conflict at the International Center for Advanced Studies (ICAS) in 2001-2002, now over seventy, is a genuine mother-type mentor and is one of the most wonderful persons I have ever met. Tom Bender, director of ICAS for many years, Alan Hunter, co-director of the Cold War Project, and his wife Linda Gordon were all most supportive, too, and we enjoyed their company many

times. My wife, Melinda, attended Linda's outstanding lecture course on gender in American history.

Larry Wolf, an East-Central European history expert, who had just moved from Harvard to NYU at the time, as well as Jane Burbank, professor of Russian history, and her husband, Frederick Cooper, became good friends during my fellowship at NYU. Tom Gruenfeld at Empire State College, another old friend from the ICAS times, kindly arranged an invitation for me from his college to teach the same undergraduate course on the Cold War at his institution. The regular parties thrown by the History Department were also excellent opportunities to establish new personal contacts, which will surely be very useful in promoting academic cooperation in the future.

During my fellowship, I was a regular guest at the monthly meetings of the New York-based Hungarian professors' roundtable, held in a café called Pertutti and headed by István Deák, professor emeritus at Columbia University. The events at the Hungarian Cultural Center in New York were very interesting, so we visited most of them. Jakab Orsós, director of the center, and his small but enthusiastic staff have been doing an excellent job in promoting Hungarian culture in perhaps the most difficult cultural market in the World, the Big Apple. The events not only attract a full house, but more importantly, 30-40% of the audience are not Hungarian émigrés, but "indigenous" New Yorkers.

5. Schooling

Our son went to Simon Baruch junior high school, and he was fortunate enough to be admitted to a special mathematics class, similar to the one he attends here at home. Although previously we had often heard that primary school education is not as good in the US as it is in Hungary, we found that this is not exactly the case, at least not in that school. It seems to us that the major difference is not in the quality but in the content of the education. The American system offers much more practical knowledge, preparing children for real life much more than the Hungarian system. The teachers' attitude towards the pupils and toward the teaching process is serious and responsible; the regulations are binding not only on the kids but on the educators, as well. The teachers know and accept this situation; therefore, it was no wonder that we had not a single conflict with a teacher during the whole year. One teacher was even dismissed on the basis of the students' general negative evaluation, an unimaginable move in Hungary. Finally, the PTA (Parent Teacher Association) system is surely another very efficient "innovation" that should be adapted in our country.

6. Conclusion

My Fulbright scholarship in 2006-2007 was a real turning point in my career: the teaching experience I acquired at two leading American universities during one and a half academic years hopefully will help me to find opportunities for

teaching English language history courses at Hungarian universities as well as in other countries. I enjoyed teaching Cold War history in New York, our favorite city outside Hungary, very much, the materials developed for this purpose proved to be very useful and efficient, and the curricula can be used both in Hungary and abroad in the future. I have been an

internationally known researcher of Cold War history for quite some time, but now, thanks to my Fulbright scholarship, I have finally entered the world of international higher education. I only hope that the special East Central European approach to Cold War history that I presented to my classes was a partial compensation for all of the benefits I received in New York.