DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

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What are the capabilities of the culture and propaganda during the Cold War?

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Choice of subject

The opposite political and military blocks on both sides of the Iron Curtain cannot be separated from each other in strict sense: this is partly due to the cross-border cooperation and the various cross-cultural exchanges, especially in times of relative détente; but also to the fact, that the power formations were not indifferent to each other's cultural and scientific results. During the Cold War years the culture was capable to form a bridge between two opposing wing states, but it also could allow to use different tools and cultural institutions to map, and if needed, to influence the thinking of the enemy country. In the Cold War the cultural contact network in many areas, supplemented, or even sometimes superseded the political manoeuvres. For the West it created certain kinds of opportunities, which have contributed significantly to mapping of the Soviet bloc and to the more successful implementation of infiltration; of course this was also true vice versa, as it provided infiltration points also for the East. In this paper we are dealing only with this small – but unavoidable – area, we are intending to introduce the relationship of the British diplomacy with one of the Central and Eastern European
countries in the system of cultural relations in a period between 1953/1956 and 1970.

This paper undertakes to show – after outlining the history of the period between 1945 and 1953 – the history of a period in terms of the British–Hungarian relations, about which there have not been comprehensive works so far. The history of the British–Hungarian relations between 1953/56–1970 is accessible on several criteria, from a number of directions. In this study we chose a path which will describes the relationship of the two countries to each other, chronologically but through thematic blocks. We put our emphasis around three main subject groups, namely we analysed the British–Hungarian cultural negotiations, the situation of the British Council in Hungary and the role of the education in the Cold War on the basis of specific examples. In our study the first and most important aspect was to fill the gap that still exists in the history of the British–Hungarian cultural relations in the second half the 1950s and the 1960s. This is partly due to the fact that so far it was not possible to obtain a number of those papers of the British archives, which have been put the events into perspective more accurately. On the other hand, the post-1956 history of the British–Hungarian cultural relations has not been addressed in depth – most of the studies have been
described the events of the pre-1956 period in the forms of source collections, theses, studies or study volumes which showed, however, this kind of relationship between the two countries sometimes detailed, sometimes tangentially only. This paper complements the works published in previous years and decades in a way that it illustrates and colorizes the history of cultural relations with materials from so far unknown sources, as well as highlights links not shown so far and presents the story of the various organizations, about which earlier could not be read in English. The paper tries to bring out again and emphasize, if needed supplement and enrich this way the Cold War history of the reduced to a second-rank power United Kingdom and Hungary of the Soviet sphere of interest with new information.

The objectives of the dissertation

In our dissertation the first thematic but at the same time a chronological block is the description of the process of cultural negotiations. It is important for us to demonstrate the intensity and results of the cultural negotiations and how they ended in a kind of system of relations in the reviewed period. In what extent prevailed the principle of the one step forward, two steps
backward in the establishment of diplomatic contacts? When did the turn come and from when did the relationship become tighter which took shape in the form of various treaties? It was necessary to present the discussions and meetings detailed and enriched with specific details of the sources, because one sentence or even a several times dropped statement shaped the relationship between the two countries openly or in a veiled form. Stalin's death and the start of relative détente resulting in 1953, made it possible for the Brits to dust the old files off, and once again look forward to the Hungarian foreign and domestic events. But three years later they collided with the wall again. The Suez crisis, which established a turning point in the life of the United Kingdom and the breaking out of the Hungarian revolution and independence war against the repression and the subsequent retaliation removed the two countries from each other both politically and culturally again. We describe the events of this year only briefly: we discuss the British difficulties caused by the Suez crisis, Britain's role in the Hungarian revolution – correctly according to the "global political realities" – all this in a way that we draw a parallel between the distanced behaviour experienced in the high level politics and the role of the BBC as a counter-example. Then, a couple of years had to pass in order to sit the
partners of at one negotiating table once again. This détente was greatly helped by the fact that the Brits and the Soviets signed their first joint cultural agreement. For Hungary this meant that the Brits were now willing to change making the initially tangential cultural relations more and more intense – but not so smoothly – in the previously laid out framework of the positions and commitments and in form of exchange programs and later a two-year period encompassing agreements.

The main unit of the dissertation is based on the demonstration of this process, while we describe the following examined topic in separate subsections, thus the rejection of return of the British Council (BC), then its bumpy path of its partial re-acceptance. After the forced closure of the Budapest office of the British Council, one of the most important culture distributor institutions of the UK, by a strong Hungarian political pressure, the British–Hungarian cultural relations fell to lows. From 1950 the mentioning of BC's name almost appeared awkward moments in the course of negotiations, and the Hungarian side consistently tried to avoid and actually refuse the – direct – cooperation with the institution even in spite of the British special request and sometimes almost exaggerated claims in the light of the international situation.
At the beginning of each chapter in each case we are going to discuss the cultural dimension changes which took place between the East and the West, especially between the United Kingdom and the Soviet Union. It is important to examine how the British cultural propaganda policy toward the Soviet bloc could be considered. How could the United Kingdom take an effective role against the Soviet Union and countries under Soviet influence such as Hungary? What was the type of the propaganda "black", "gray" or "white"; how did the organization look like; what degree and level of performance did it achieve in practice? We describe only the opportunities of the British propaganda policy and the circumstances of creation, diversity of tasks and some phases of operation of some propaganda organizations – in this regard particularly the Information Research Department (IRD) and the Cultural Relations Department (CRD) – in details. The first exchange program concluded with the Soviets and the subsequent cultural events indirectly but influenced also the British–Hungarian cultural relations. The dissertation is not intended to examine comprehensively these issues, it only undertakes to provide – with the help of the dropped crumbs – a more nuanced picture of the Cold War cultural relations.
The last major caesura of the timeline between 1953/1956–1970 is the moment of the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968. Hungary's participation resulted in a new "question marks" in the actually quite good bilateral relations, but this uncertainty just moved in theoretical point of view, because the British leadership considered if the contact would have discontinued with the Hungarians, it would have had unforeseeable consequences. We evaluated and discussed the 1968 event only in terms how it influenced the relationship between the two countries, so we did not make attempt to analyse the intervention itself, its history and its impact on international life in details. The closing date of our analysis is 1970 – although there was no major change in relationships at this time, but this was the first year which produced an encouraging attitude towards both the British–Hungarian general cultural contact and both the British Council. Accordingly, the presentation of the 1968–1970 period shows the phases of loss of confidence, the consideration and the restoration.

The last chapter of the dissertation discusses the importance third stage of the research. In certain aspects it is different from the train of thought followed until now, it is a kind of outlook, yet at the same time it is an integral part of the examination, whether
or not it closes the treatise as a stand alone unit. For the United Kingdom, the country we studied, the cultural aspect of the Cold War was a priority in the mid-1950s and this country tried to build a wider range of contact system and information base in this respect and invested large amounts of capital into the project, which sought to exploit the opportunities mainly in the education. The final chapter unfolds through two concrete examples and answers the idea whether if it is true that the British intelligence used the education and culture to train spies in an institutionalized framework and send them to a new post in the Soviet block countries or this was just one element of the political "scare-mongering"? According to the Hungarian intelligence information the School of Slavonic and East European Studies (SSEES) of the University of London and the Joint Service School for Linguists (JSSL) were two institutions as such which made and bear more activities and tasks than what from this the outside world probably experienced.

In the dissertation we try to answer these questions, and we try to meet these objectives, proving our allegation that the role of the culture, the cultural policy and the cultural propaganda was not/is not negligible not in the least in the world of political games.
The results of the dissertation

In this paper we sought to answer the main question, what kind of role was played by cultural relations in building relations between ideologically and politically sharply contrasting blocks, in reducing or possibly in strengthening the distrust between them during the Cold War. In the context of the Cold War the motivation and the role of cultural contact was different from country to country, but at some point we can observe similarities. East and West were both trying to apply certain kinds of solutions and steps, through which they can achieve more profitable results for themselves. Think here for example of the British–Hungarian cultural conventions and the set out – sometimes implemented, sometimes faltering – reciprocities. The principle of reciprocity was important for both countries, since the representation and presence all were intended to support and strengthen the importance, the level of quality of the country and also the mutual intent. All in all, it can be stated that in the studied period extraordinary results were achieved, unexpectedly good personal relationships were created which brought the two countries closer to each other, and high-demand programs, lectures and exhibitions were organized, which were intended to promote the
right knowledge and to breakdown the "false" notions. Indeed, it has paramount importance, however, in the Cold War - and as in the history in general – nothing was that simple and predictable, black or white. The culture in this respect – skipping informing the public in details of course – received political overtones, it became a tool that could be used to weaken and shape the enemy. From all of these visible that the cultural relationship is not just about that two countries exchange exhibits with each other or demonstrate each other's books, films and theatre pieces. This can be interpreted as a much more complex and significant political area which is more sensitive to political impacts, shaping of propaganda policy and strategy and changes in the international situation. Therefore the analysis and keynote presentation of the cultural contact between countries being on contrary side becomes important.

This dissertation outlines strictly only the curve of the development of cultural relations – dotted with ups and downs – from the years after 1945. The development of the British–Hungarian relations were affected by the political relationship between the two countries, the British–Soviet relations and the changes in the international situation. Convincing example of this is the year 1958, which brought the Brits and the Soviets closer
to each other in cultural fields. The problems, however, were not solved, in fact, in some ways the closer cooperation created more conflicts. However, the approach opened up new doors which affected also the attitude and the possibilities of the countries of the Soviet bloc. For this reason, we constantly monitored how the East–West relations – and the relationship between the United Kingdom and the Soviet Union within – changed until the 1960s. We must emphasize, however, that in this dissertation we could not undertake to introduce the British–Soviet relations comprehensively and in details – we were able to outline just some nucleation points, some sources of problems and some – from the viewpoint of our topic – outstandingly significant events of the opening policy, without the claim of the completeness.

In the dissertation we focused our analysis on three main topics. The first described the slowly forward pointing - sometimes entangled and in tactical elements abounding - story of the British–Hungarian cultural negotiations. We can conclude that the British–Hungarian cultural negotiations started from 1953/54 developed this relation between the two countries step by step. When the negotiations stalled on the ("great") political scene and the communication ceased, the cultural exchange opened a possibility, you could say a side door, on which the
parties were able to pass more easily. What does all this mean? The cultural negotiations, the exchange programs resultant along these, as well as the short- and long-term agreements, although marginally in some respect, helped the conflicting parties to "communicate with each other". Although we tried to show the ambiguous atmosphere of the talks – with the help of source details – comprehensive, accurate answers cannot be given what, why and how happened on each occasion, as the reports in many cases probably do not reflect the real events. But the fact is that the United Kingdom and Hungary sought to contact each other and the meetings and the discussions and negotiations for written agreements concluded by cultural delegations, the implemented programs and exchange visits underpin this. The British and Hungarian source disclosures presented in this dissertation are all evidence that the "opposing" two countries – with deepening the cultural relations, believing in their improvement and making them more practical – did not undertake less than strengthening their interests, influencing the image of the mass media, creating opportunity for the intelligence in providing the flow of information and the political, military and ideological mapping. All this supports our assertion that the role of the culture, the cultural policy and cultural propaganda meant not at all negligible
terrain and it is so until nowadays also in the world of political games.

The second area of research described in this dissertation was the presentation of the British Council's situation in Hungary. It is important to elude in a few sentences why we have invested so much emphasis on the role of the British Council – as separate theme – in every major chapter. We have to see that the description of the history of the BC after World War II and the circumstances of its closure in Hungary is important because without it we cannot interpret why the constant mentioning of the BC appeared almost embarrassing turnaround during the British-Hungarian cultural talks, why it was not possible to deepen and formalize the relations from British point of view. We have seen that the constant neglection of the British Council by the Hungarians resulted tension, sometimes high words during the negotiations – and thus the first two topics we have shown actually related beyond any doubt. In the case of the British Council we are talking about an organization which has had paramount importance in the operating system of the cultural contact since the 1930s. The cold war tensions and some hysteria "soiled" this coordinate system even if the measures of the Hungarians were not necessarily inconsistent in 1950. The
Hungarian sample around the closure of the BC paralyzed the British political leadership for a short time, because it could not find an answer on the basis of the documents described in the UK, why Hungary chose this way and why she had to confront the BC with such a force. However, we shouldn't have illusions about the British policy and strategy: the role of the British Council in the context of the Cold War was not only to promote certain products of the culture in the Soviet bloc. Easy to understand that the laundering of BC's name and firm rejection of the Hungarian claims occurred each time as natural reaction, with the exception of some cases when it could be heard that maybe there were some members of the organization whose conduct left something to be desired. In this atmosphere it was a must to move from one to two, to take decisions which promote the cultural relations between the two countries.

The third thematic unit of the dissertation discussed the role of education in the Cold War through the presentation of the history of two organizations. Hopefully it is highlighted in the chapter that the fact cannot let ignored that the culture served not necessarily only the mutual awareness and relationship building in these years: each block used this area in the context of the political and military goals. Referring back to the history of the
SSEES and JSSL the cultural invasion appeared extremely important for the British political leadership as an opportunity in mapping of the Soviet bloc countries and it worked vice versa. This tactic can be captured especially in the history of the JSSL in the global political relations system of the 1950s and 1960s. However, in this respect the role of the SSEES becomes questionable because of the unilateral nature of the sources, but the fact is that the story of the two bodies intertwined in a short period of time suggests that the extensive role is not so far from reality.

The chapters of the dissertation form an integrated whole this way. Without a description of the history and the broader relationship it could not have been possible to paint a detailed picture that why and what changes have taken place in the cultural contacts of the two countries after 1956. In our view via the presentation of this period, namely, via the analysis of the bilateral cultural diplomacy in the period prior to 1970 in the Cold War we can contribute to the interpretation of the role of culture of the post-70s and to the demonstration of its impact generating social changes. All in all it can be stated that the relationship between two countries, which were diametrically opposite to each other in thinking and in political system in the decades of the Cold
War, can be construed as an untapped area of research to the present day for historians dealing with this period. Each sub-areas, such as, in this case, the period of the British–Hungarian contact of cultural relevance between 1956–1970 has not been comprehensively examined. This dissertation was designated – beyond the questions raised – to bridge over this gap.

The author's publications appeared in the topic


