Phantom Voices from the Past: Memory of the 1956 Revolution and Hungarian Audiences of Radio Free Europe

Gábor Danyi

Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest

Following the short period of consolidation under János Kádár in the immediate aftermath of the 1956 revolution, expressions of the legacy and memory of the uprising were no longer permitted in the public sphere and had to be confined to the private sphere. The activity of émigré actors and institutions, including the broadcasts of Western radio stations, played a crucial role in sustaining the memory and the mentality of the revolution. In 1986, thirty years after the national trauma of 1956, Radio Free Europe broadcasted an array of programs commemorating the revolution, while the official socialist media in Hungary contended again that what had happened in 1956 had been a counterrevolution. This study primarily investigates two questions. Firstly, it casts light on the importance of the RFE’s archival machinery, which recorded on magnetic tape the broadcasts of the Hungarian radio stations during the revolution in 1956. Sharing these audio-documents with audiences 30 years later, RFE could replay the revolution, significantly strengthening the interpretation of the events as a revolution. The idiosyncratic voices of the key figures of the revolution guaranteed the authenticity of the commemoration programs even for members of the younger generation among the audiences. Secondly, this study sheds light on the counter-cultural practices through which listeners tried to reconstruct the “body” of the “specters” of the suppressed cultural heritage and eliminate the asymmetry between the radio’s accessible voice and its non-accessible physical vehicle.

Keywords: communist historical representation, documentary programs, authenticity, “presence effects,” samizdat, radizdat, magnitizdat, counter-cultural practices

“October 23 passed in such utter silence that people did not even dare mention the date,”1 wrote a listener to Radio Free Europe on the 10th anniversary of the 1956 Revolution. According to this source, all traces of the “experience of togetherness forged by the revolution had been broken by then.”2 This was one of the consequences of the brutally violent policies carried out by János Kádár’s new regime, which imposed the Party’s official interpretation of counterrevolution on society following intervention by Soviet forces on

---

1 Observance on the 10th anniversary, Item no. 2303/66.; HU OSA 300-40-4 Box 9.
2 György, Néma bagyomány, 75.
November 4th. Expressions of the suppressed memory and mentality of the 1956 Revolution were no longer possible in the public sphere and had to be confined to the private sphere, creating a kind of “widespread national oblivion.”

Three decades later, however, expressions of an enduring collective memory of the revolution began to appear, and they came to play an important role in undermining the legitimacy of the one-party state.

While the narrative of the “counterrevolution” served as a means of legitimizing Kádár’s regime, any attempt to cultivate the memory of the 1956 Revolution belonged to the history of resistance. This history of political or artistic resistance not only included sporadic domestic manifestations originating from personal memory, but also the activity of the democratic opposition, present as of the late 1970s. The activity of émigré actors and institutions—including broadcasts from Western radio stations and émigré newspapers published abroad, but still resonating in Hungary—should also be taken into account, as they played a crucial role in counterbalancing the predominance of socialist propaganda by presenting an interpretation of the October events as a revolution.

In the West, stations such as Radio Free Europe (RFE) and the BBC regularly commemorated the revolution in Hungarian-language broadcasts transmitted from the far side of the Iron Curtain. “Even as we keep trying to forget the October events, we were pleased to listen to a proper commemoration of this national event,” wrote the previously cited listener to RFE in 1966. Twenty years later, on the 30th anniversary, between July 1 and December 31, 1986 a wide repertoire of commemorative programs was broadcast concerning the background, the events, and the aftermath of the 1956 Revolution.

Naturally, RFE’s commemorative programs ran parallel to those aired in the socialist mass media, so listeners had no choice but to question the authenticity of these contradictory sources. In 1986, authenticity was a crucial question, because the audiences for all of these commemorations included not only the generation which witnessed the events, but members of younger generations as well, i.e. people with no personal memories of 1956. This study investigates the struggle over interpretations of 1956’s meaning within the framework of the

3 Ibid., 100.
4 Ibid., 77.
5 Observance on the 10th anniversary, Item no. 2303/66.; HU OSA 300-40-4 Box 9.
6 Borbándi, Magyarok az Angol Kertben, 369.
attempts made by the two most important agents, the socialist mass media and RFE, to establish the authenticity of their own commemorations.

By the time of the 30th anniversary of 1956 in 1986, a struggle had begun for Kádár’s position as general secretary, and a period of economic stagnation was engendering increased expectations by society at large. In this regard, how the past surrounding 1956 was treated became a kind of “litmus test”7 for the Party’s ability to change and provide effective reforms. The question of whether 1956 could be given a new, official interpretation therefore became a key issue in Hungary.

“History belongs entirely to us”: The 30th Anniversary of 1956 in Official Socialist Media

While in the autumn of 1985 it may have seemed that the official interpretation of 1956 had shifted just in time for the 30th anniversary,8 events actually took another direction. At the 13th Congress of the Hungarian Socialist Workers’ Party (MSZMP), János Berecz was appointed Secretary of the Central Committee and Chief of the Agitprop Committee. The neo-dogmatic cultural policies of Berecz, who had been one of the major voices in the counterrevolutionary narrative,9 left their mark on the commemoration activities surrounding the 30th anniversary.

The aim to represent and again retell what had happened in the dramatic days of late October was motivated by at least two factors. Firstly, Berecz was attempting to gain power by extending Kádár’s offer one more time. This offer to Hungarian society was a promise to raise the standards of living in exchange for acceptance of the communist political system. Secondly, the socialist organs were conscious of the increase in activity by émigré organizations and their intensive relationships with Hungary’s internal opposition, which was eager to rehabilitate 1956 as a revolution. The Agitprop Committee therefore decided to counterbalance the effects of Western “propaganda” and unveil its alleged falsifications by cementing the official counterrevolutionary narrative. Thus, Hungary’s official commemoration of the revolution’s 30th anniversary resulted

---

7 I am grateful to András Mink for this metaphor and for his other critical comments.
8 Révész, Aczél és korunk, 359.
9 The third edition of Berecz’s book Ellenforradalom tollal és fegyverrel [Counterrevolution with pen and weapon] was actually published in 1986.
in propaganda activity that was more dogmatic in approach compared to that experienced five years before.

According to a statement by the Agitprop Committee made in March, 1986, “the propaganda connected to the 30th anniversary [had to] emphasize the unchanged, constant interpretation.” On November 4, 1986, at the “great celebration” of both the crushed counterrevolution and the establishment of Kádár’s counter-government, Berecz made the following statement in his speech: “Today there is no need to evaluate the events of 1956 and the processes that led to it in any other way than we did then, at the end of 1956.”

Berecz was referring to the party resolution issued on December 5, 1956, according to which the October events could only be classified as a total “counterrevolution.” The resolution confirmed that the counterrevolutionary forces had consisted of reactionaries—former land-owners, Horthy-fascists, etc.—aiming to crush socialist achievements and restore the partially capitalist, partially feudal system of an earlier era. The resolution stated that even if the majority of those who participated in the events had been honest socialist patriots, they inevitably had aided the counterrevolution. This was the authoritative interpretation held by the ideology of the Kádár regime over the course of the next three decades.

On the occasion of the 30th anniversary, in the official socialist media dominated by this neo-dogmatic cultural policy, several programs, articles, and reminiscences focused on the October events. Of these, the documentary series entitled Velünk élő történelem [Our living history], the chief editor of which was Berecz, reached the widest audience. The series was evidence of a search for a new narrative form and technological pathways that would convince society of the regime’s interpretation of 1956. On the one hand, the first three episodes each had the same form. Specifically, they all conjured the history of the counterrevolution by means of “talking-head” interviews with witnesses of the events at the time. The series therefore opened up the emotional dimensions of the counterrevolution by presenting personal testimonies.

11 „Ma is építünk a drágán szerzett, megszenvedett tapasztalatokra: Berecz János beszéde a Szolnok Megyei Tanács ünnepi ülésén” [Today we are still building on the dearly acquired experiences that we suffered: János Berecz’s speech on the ceremonial session of the Szolnok County Council], Népszabadság, November 5, 1986, 3.
12 “Az MSZMP Ideiglenes Központi Bizottságának határozata, 1956. december 5.”
13 Cf. László Rózsa, “Tragédiától sorsfordulóig” [From tragedy to a change of fortune], Népszabadság, November 1, 1986, 7.
The six episodes of Velünk élő történelem were aired on Hungarian Television beginning in the middle of October.\textsuperscript{14} On the day after the airing of the first episode, Pál Geszti, the cultural editor of the daily newspaper Magyar Hírlap, published an article about the series. This article’s aim was to smooth out the dissimilarities between this official representation of events and personal experiences of the history itself. For Geszti, it was clear that the experiences witnessed by the generation of the time did not correspond to the meanings fashioned in the official representations. “Yesterday evening,” he wrote, “the first episode shown on television certainly generated as many reactions, questions, memories, and emotions as there were viewers.” Geszti attempted to eliminate contradictions surrounding the episode’s reception by comparing a “complex, scientific, essential” representation of history to the contingency of lived history and personal experiences. “The individual experience is always contingent and depends on chance.” Therefore, “there is no certainty that what was lived by XY as a witness or a participant really represented (some kind of) truth.”\textsuperscript{15} Velünk élő történelem had to base its authenticity on the relationship between the official truth of the counterrevolution and a minority of thoroughly sifted, personal memories.

The director of the series, Mihály Mátray, divided the roughly one hundred individuals appearing on screen into two groups: the first included witnesses and 1956 participants, and the second consisted of historians presenting nothing beyond the results of their historical research.\textsuperscript{16} Berecz was part of this latter group, in the role of historian. Ervin Hollós, the most qualified expert on the counterrevolution and the author of several propaganda books, was also featured. Hollós’s objectivity, however, can be seriously questioned. As of April, 1957, in his role as deputy head and then chief of the sub-department for counterintelligence against internal reaction in the Ministry of Interior, Hollós took an active part in the retaliatory measures taken against alleged participants in the revolution.\textsuperscript{17} The backbone of the narratives consisted of reminiscences by the political elite of the Kádár regime. The reflections uttered by Antal

\textsuperscript{14} The first three episodes are available at Vera and Donald Blinken Open Society Archives, Budapest. Call no. 306-0-4:24/2–4.
\textsuperscript{16} Cf. G.I., “sÁz életem muszterjével dolgozom…s Hogyan látja a rendező a Velünk élő történelmet?” [“I work with rushes of my life…” How does the director see Our Living History?], Magyar Nemzet, October 16, 1986, 6.
\textsuperscript{17} Ungváry, “Egyenes út a csúcsra,” 30–31.
Apró, György Marosán, Valéria Benke, and Béla Biszku smoothly fitted into the “complex, scientific” picture of the counterrevolution, since these agents were among those who actively shaped the official genesis myth of the Kádár era. By simultaneously presenting reminiscences of others, including radio operators, workers’ militiamen, and university students, the series aimed to demonstrate that the counterrevolutionary narrative created and nurtured by a narrow political elite was actually “true” on the level of widespread social experience.

The first three episodes of *Velünk élő történelem* primarily illustrated the course of counterrevolutionary violence, depicting the process leading from the peaceful demonstration on October 23 to the siege of the headquarters of the Hungarian Radio and the tumultuous brutality committed by the counterrevolutionary rabble on Köztársaság [Republic] Square on October 30. When depicting how events unfolded at Köztársaság Square, the tale of violence came to a crescendo. From as early as November, 1956, the tragic and undoubtedly brutally violent siege of the Party house formed the hub of the image projected by the Kádár-regime concerning how events had occurred. Köztársaság Square was used as the most obvious evidence in support of the official characterization of events as an example of a counterrevolution and raging white terror. László Laboda, a member of Workers’ Council in Diósgyőr, offered the following recollection:

> Another trauma in my life was that […] next to the town hall of Ózd two men were hanging upside down, they had been… brutally stabbed with a pitchfork or I don’t know what kind of tool, their clothes had been torn off, they were hanging, covered in blood. It is not possible to forget that, even if one were to live a hundred years.

The dramatic atmosphere of this scene was guaranteed by the piercing sounds of a violin in the background and the sharply-focused camera shot which closed in on Laboda’s face while he was relaying the bloody details.

According to *Velünk élő történelem*, in contrast to the “passive route” taken by Imre Nagy in stemming the tide of the brutal counterrevolution, the members of the Kádárist political elite had been actively searching for the right solution. György Marosán repeatedly swore that—had it been given in time—the command to fire would have crushed the counterrevolution. This particular opinion from

---

18 Lénárt, “Az erőszak tere,” 81. For the Kádár era as a constant historiographical project and for the representation of counterrevolutionary violence see also Apor, “Spectacular History,” 337–62.

19 *Velünk élő történelem*, III. HU OSA Call no. 306-0-4:24/2–4.
the dogmatic politician, however, was not his reminiscence of the past so much as it was a revitalization of the offer of the Kádár regime and a justification of the brutal retaliations. According to the documentary series, Kádár’s counter-government, which was set up on November 4, provided the “real turn.” The last two episodes related the story of how society’s trust had been gained by the Revolutionary Workers’ Peasants’ Government and how socialist Hungary had been renewed.

In the actual political context of 1986, the configurations of “continuity” and “resumption” gained new meaning. In one of his articles, Berecz underscored the notion that, “as a consequence of the traditions of the Hungarian revolutionary labor movement, by necessity there were people who have accepted the break with the mistakes of the previous years, and meanwhile the continuity and the renewal in socialism.” Berecz summoned the last two nouns as a means of mobilizing the Party’s potential to resolve the actual upcoming problems. “Our Party has already many times given examples of this renewal”; “this time, the task ahead of us is to find new and necessary answers for any new and unresolved problems in society.”

Continuity—in the sense of expropriating the meaning of history—had to express the absolute right to do this: “the character of continuity is that history belongs entirely to us, together with its successes, its failures, and their lessons.”

The makers of the series did not properly assess the risks involved in demonstrating this absolute control over history by means of presenting the personal memories of the political elite. In Velünk élő történelem, the October events were represented within the framework of personal recollections, thereby implying that the reminiscences of the political elite were comparable to the memories of the television audiences. Velünk élő történelem definitely met with resistance on the part of viewers who remembered the events of 1956 differently. Imprisoned for counterrevolutionary activity at the end of 1956, Imre Simonyi listened to RFE’s commemorative programs while also viewing Velünk élő történelem. While Simonyi rated the RFE programs as “incredibly good,” the performance given by Marosán on television had him alternating between wild laughter and gripping the arms of his chair until his knuckles turned white.

---

21 Ibid.
22 Ibid.
23 Árpási, Költő, az innenső parton, 132–33.
Thus, *Velünk élő történelem* was not received entirely according to the official plan. This counter-productivity was due not only to the propagandistic nature of the series. In this period of increasing political-economic crisis and an emerging discussion among different dissident groups in Hungary, the reiteration of the old offer of the Kádár regime came off as anachronistic. Furthermore, if the issue of 1956 was the “litmus test” of the Party’s ability to change, this dogmatic restoration of the official interpretation of 1956 partially undermined any attempt by the Party to project an image of reform. The events held in memory of the 30th anniversary completely disappointed a society eagerly awaiting comprehensive reforms that were expected to offer a way out of a stagnating situation. In consequence, many people began looking for alternative ideas and information, while many more became interested in learning more about what had actually happened in 1956.24

Radio Free Europe and Warrants of Authenticity

In the aftermath of the 1956 Revolution, socialist propaganda made serious accusations against RFE, essentially laying blame for the tragic events on the radio station. These charges included statements that—among other transgressions—RFE had urged Hungarians to fight the Soviet army, promised Western assistance, and provoked Soviet intervention.25 While admittedly overestimating the radio’s role, socialist propaganda indirectly suggested that Western assistance was a vain hope and communism was there to stay. At the same time, “these historic events made clear both the importance and the responsibility of [RFE], and also proved that this venture would not be merely a temporary one.”26 Consequentially, RFE was forced to analyze and reorganize its attitudes concerning both program policies and its practices of information acquisition, including research and archival work.27 After 1956, RFE also undertook the mission of preserving the memory of the revolution, and during the decades of the Kádár regime it regularly broadcasted programs commemorating 1956.

Considering the reception of these programs, very limited feedback is available in the so-called “Information Items” gathered at RFE’s Munich headquarters as a means of reducing the state of isolation in which the radio

25 Johnson, “To the Barricades.”
26 Mink, “The Archives in Munich,” 45.
27 Ibid.
station found itself regarding information coming from the Eastern bloc. These
documents were generally based on correspondence conducted with anonymous
sources located within the bloc or interviews provided by Eastern emigrants
and defectors. Their reliability and credibility were carefully checked by various
filtering systems. Even if the items “later proved to be reliable historical data,”
they nonetheless must be interpreted with a due degree of circumspection, since
they may be the products of an interview situation filled with suspicion and ruled
by certain sets of presumptions. Concerning feedback provided by listeners on
the RFE commemorative programs, another source of evidence is also available:
the transcripts of messages recorded by the radio’s answering machine in the
second half of the 1980s.

Set up in 1985, the answering machine was intended to modernize the
communication channel between RFE and its audiences, while also replacing
correspondence. The answering machine recorded listeners’ calls and messages
in two-minute intervals, around the clock, 24 hours a day. While transcripts of
the calls were handed to editors, the most important and relevant messages
and questions were answered every week during a ten-minute long program
entitled Hallgatók Fóruma [Listeners’ forum]. In comparison to the items, these
telephone call transcripts have three advantages. Firstly, listeners called the
answering machine of their own volition, hence the suspicion and presumptions
that could eventually pervade interview situations were lacking. Secondly,
the transcripts—appended with additional comments only in extreme cases—
preserved the listeners’ views without any kind of distortion or condensing.
Finally, in contrast to the anonymous reports found in the Items, in certain and
limited cases it was possible to identify the callers; it is, however, true, that those
contacting the RFE from within the bloc characteristically used code names.

Hungarian listeners usually called the answering machine service in order to
comment on the programs, request that broadcasts be repeated, complain about
the signal’s frequently bad quality, share jokes on the current political situation,
etc. In the case of important public affairs—such as the Chernobyl nuclear
disaster, demonstrations against the Gabčíkovo–Nagymaros Waterworks, and

---

28 Szilágyi, “Records of the Hungarian Unit,” 55.
29 Answering machines were also set up in Bulgaria and Czechoslovakia. On the latter case see: Hagen,
“Calling Out to Tune in.”
31 “A question such as ‘What’s the news at home?’ and the intimidated tourist already suspects some
provocation” – a document casts light on the consequences of the socialist propaganda against RFE.
Reaction to anti-RFE propaganda campaign, Item no. 1228/69; HU OSA 300-40-4 Box 9.
the soccer match loss of 6:0 against the Soviets at the 1986 World Cup—the number of calls increased. In autumn, 1986, many callers discussed the merits of RFE programs commemorating the Hungarian revolution: “Great work, boys, great work, girls. I cannot say anything else. I haven’t heard for 30 years […] such a beautiful and touching […] commemoration. If the Hungarian soccer team had played like this, the net of the Soviets would have been worn out.”

Another listener left the following message:

First of all, I would like to say thank you for the carefully compiled documentary program which was broadcast these days on the occasion of the freedom fight. I myself, who am over 60 years old, took part in the 1956 events, and I can testify that the documentary is trustworthy down to its smallest detail.

Naturally, one could cite additional examples of this kind of feedback. In these comments, of the RFE’s rich selection of commemorative programs, the documentary programs edited by László Kasza (entitled Thirteen Days of the Revolution and Freedom Fight and The Decline of Freedom: The History of Twelve Days) was mentioned the most frequently. Following in the footsteps of previous RFE broadcasts, these two programs contained a chronological examination of the events leading to the victory of the revolution, piecing this historical episode together day by day. This was then followed by the history of the fight for freedom against Soviet intervention. These programs generally consisted of a well-edited montage of audio-recordings dating from the period of the revolution, as well as recollections by witnesses.

As a very characteristic feature of the feedback, listeners emphasized the role of the original audio-documents. “I spoke of this program to several acquaintances, and it was the general opinion that such programs are very necessary—with the help of original sound recordings—to refute the official lies that distort the past.” In 1986, in the Hallgatók Fóruma, some opinions were broadcast which, like the denouncements made by socialist propaganda, accused the radio of vulgar rabble-rousing. On the following day, many listeners

32 Telefonhívások 69, 8; HU OSA 300-40-14 Box 1.
33 Telefonhívások 68, 14; HU OSA 300-40-14 Box 1.
34 1956 – Napról napra. Szabad Európa Rádió, München, 1974, Petőfi Irodalmi Múzeum Médiatára, Saáry Éva hanggyűjteménye
called the answering machine to deny these charges indignantly. One such caller offered the following argument:

Did these listeners actually listen to the documentary serial or are they deaf? All right, if we want, we can give credence to László Kasza, if we don’t want to, we don’t have to. But I must ask whether these 50-minute programs consisted of only the voice of László Kasza? Like hell! They were filled with conclusive evidence, since they evoked programs broadcast at the time by Radio Free Kossuth.36

It is worth noting that RFE possessed the most complete archival collection of broadcasts made in Hungary at the time of the revolution. In addition to other techniques used to acquire information, RFE “closely followed the events in the so-called ‘target-countries’ by listening to and recording the official radio broadcasts coming through the air from the communist world.”37 During the revolution, the Hungarian Desk’s attention was focused entirely on the events unfolding in Hungary. At the time, Radio (Free) Kossuth and an increasing number of amateur, independent radio stations served as the main source of information. Throughout each day of the revolution, their broadcasts were being recorded on magnetic tape by RFE’s archival machinery. As a result, a unique collection of historical archives was created that served as a source of original audio-documents to be broadcast again and again into Hungary during Kádár’s regime.

To paraphrase Jacques Derrida, the various types of technological apparatuses used to record, store and replay sound allow phantoms from the past to come back and haunt us,38 thereby making an apparently absent entity present again. “The realm of the dead is as extensive as the storage and transmission capabilities of a given culture,”39 writes Friedrich Kittler. When replayed thirty years later, the audio-inserts originally recorded in 1956 resulted in the resurrection of both the martyrs of the revolution and the apparently dead revolution. When mapping this resurrection, this study turns to the thesis of Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, an author mostly interested in the “presentification of past worlds, that is the techniques that produce the impression (or, rather, the illusion) that worlds

---

36 Telefonhívások 72, 6–7; HU OSA 300-40-14 Box 1.
38 Cf. with Derrida’s words in Ken McMullen’s film entitled Ghost Dance from 1983.
39 Kittler, Gramophone, Film, Typewriter, 13.
of the past can become tangible again.”

Gumbrecht—while “challeng[ing] a broadly institutionalized tradition according to which interpretations, that is, the identification and/or attribution of meaning, is […] the exclusive core practice […] of the humanities”—suggests that we “conceive of aesthetic experience as an oscillation (and sometimes as an interference) between ‘presence effects’ and ‘meaning effects’.” When discussing the “production of presence,” Gumbrecht focuses on the materialities of communication. According to his definition, “to speak of ‘the production of presence’ implies that the (spatial) tangibility effect coming from the communication media is subjected, in space, to movement of greater or lesser proximity, and of greater or lesser intensity.”

When transmitting the memory of the revolution, the replayed original audio-recordings brought about these “presence effects,” thereby guaranteeing a high level of proximity and intensity, i.e., the “touching on the bodies” of listeners. Thus, the semantics of the RFE commemorative programs originated from the physical effects generating the illusion of presence. Divided by the generation gap into either witnesses or people with no personal memories of the revolution, listener groups perceived the “presence effects” according to different constellations.

First of all, throughout the 1986 commemorative programs, the “scene of radio listening” from 1956 was repeated, though it transmitted a different experience. In the 1950s, listeners had to become accustomed to the jamming against “enemy radio stations.” Jamming, however—as István Rév described the situation—“did not simply aim to make the enemy broadcasts inaudible.” Rather, “the noise also established and confirmed the presence of the Communist authorities in the air, and thus in the private sphere […] constantly remind[ing] the listener of the continuous surveillance.” When all jamming facilities were closed down on October 24, 1956, the lack of the deliberately generated noise transmitted a clear message: “We [the West] are here, and they [the Communists or the Soviets] have gone.” In this historic moment, media technology supported the collective imagination in the face of mere reality. Thirty years later, when listening to the original recordings, the same voices emerged from

40 Gumbrecht, Production of Presence, 94.
41 Ibid., 1–2.
42 Ibid., 17.
43 Ibid.
44 “Scene of listening” is used here in a way analogous to the term “scene of reading,” describing the objective complexity of the reading process. See Benne, “Gegenständlichkeitsszenen.”
45 Rév, “Just Noise?” 244.
46 Ibid., 244–45.
the same “box.” Conversely, in contrast to the original “scene of listening,” the replayed recordings came to represent quite the opposite meaning. On the one hand, the shredded, bad quality of the recordings underscored the fragility of traces of memory concerning the revolution. On the other hand, the majority of listeners—as a consequence of their social conditioning—attributed the bad reception not to atmospheric noise, but to the jamming that had actually been halted in 1972.47 Thus, the bad quality of the commemorative programs broadcasting original recordings once again signaled the presence of the repressive Communist authorities, albeit inadvertently.

Secondly, “reviving the already dim recollection with original recordings”48 also meant that the “scene of radio listening” was once more occupied by the main players in the revolution, brought back to life both through recordings and personal recollections. The interconnection between the replayed recordings and the stimulated development of memories offered the experience of reliving the events of the revolution all over again. One person, who accepted the broadcast programs as representations of her own memories, left the following message:

In 1956, I was a student in my first year at the University of Horticulture. On [October] 23, I was present at the general assembly at the Technical University, and afterward I was everywhere, wherever it was possible, until November 4. Now, as I listen to your reminiscences, I am reliving those minutes again and [I testify to] the credibility of the witness, declaring with absolute faith that everything happened exactly the way it was related. God bless you for these true words and for keeping the memory of the revolution alive.49

The program’s authenticity was based on the relationship between personal recollection and original recordings, which mutually legitimized each other. The “credibility of the witness” included the compatibility between these different perspectives: “those who listened to it were convinced that it was arranged by an editor who had been an eye-witness of the events in 1956.”50

In the case of the younger generation, the authenticity of these programs was established through recognition of the idiosyncratic nature of the recorded voices. Here, the reception process was situated within an acousmatic situation,

47 Ibid., 245.
49 Telephónubírások 68, 13; HU OSA 300-40-14 Box 1.
50 Opinion on RFE, Item no. 1977/69; HU OSA 300-40-4 Box 9.
since the proper source of the sound coming from the radio remained unseen.\textsuperscript{51} Listeners were therefore forced to confront both the phantom character of the voice as well as the unlocalizable character of the missing body. Consequently, the problem of identifying the two also arose. The rupture resulting from the separation of the voice from the body, however, was not complete, even in the cases of voices replayed in several transposals. The tone, the pitch and the volume of the speech sound attests to the build of the body which becomes the “organon” of the announcement.\textsuperscript{52} Following this train of thought, the speech sound of the revolutionary players—after being separated onto storage devices and transmission media—gave the impression that it was still permeated by the traces of the body. In other words, the recordings allowed listeners to recognize idiosyncratic voices belonging to identifiable bodies.

A listener who at the time of the revolution was eighteen months old referred to the idiosyncrasy of the voices coming from the radio. In certain cases—such as that of the well-known voice of the Communist Secretary—he could identify the speech sound based on his own experiences: “The audio-documents resembled a real experience for me, like the radio speeches of Imre Nagy or the radio speech of János Kádár, with the promises that he has not kept. \textit{If I had not heard it from his own mouth, I would have not believed it, really.}”\textsuperscript{53} For the younger generation, this type of identification could verify the authenticity of other documents as well.

This authenticity was crucial since the RFE commemorative programs drew on many historical sources that had been silenced by the one-party state system. In April, 1986, a listener thought it high time to wash Kádár’s dirty linen in public, especially for the sake of the younger generation.\textsuperscript{54} This listener’s request was granted.\textsuperscript{55} In Kasza’s program, Kádár’s speech—originally broadcast on November 1, 1956 by Radio Free Kossuth—was replayed. While also informing the public of the establishment of the new party, MSZMP, this speech included Kádár’s statement describing the events as “the people’s glorious uprising.”\textsuperscript{56} This document, which contradicted the official stance later adopted by Kádár

\textsuperscript{51} Chion, \textit{La voix au cinéma}, 29–41.
\textsuperscript{52} Krämer, “Negative Semiologie der Stimme,” 67.
\textsuperscript{53} Telefonhívások 72, 7; HU OSA 300-40-14 Box 1. Emphasis added.
\textsuperscript{54} Telefonhívások 37, 2; HU OSA 300-40-14 Box 1.
\textsuperscript{55} A szabadság kapujában, 213.
\textsuperscript{56} Of course, this was not the first time Kádár’s speech was replayed: “The Communists above all were affected by Kádár’s speech, which was a determined profession of faith in the armed revolution,” reported one listener in 1969. (\textit{Opinion on RFE}, Item no. 1977/69.; HU OSA 300-40-4 Box 9.)
as the head of the regime and thus raised significant questions concerning his character, was fully reviewed in the program.

The bad quality of the recording, however, meant that only a limited part of the tape could actually be replayed; the rest of the speech had to be read aloud. This excerpt was only a few seconds long and unfortunately did not contain the words “glorious uprising.” In spite of this technical difficulty, the recording still possessed the power to authenticate the essential standpoint of the program. The recording itself can be compared with an earlier published version of the speech found in the émigré journal *Magyar Füzetek* in 1981. The transcript of the speech was accompanied by the reproduced title page of *Népszabadság*—the newspaper in which the speech was originally published—bearing the date November 2, 1956. This reproduction served as a trace of the primary inscription of the actual events, a small, but significant detail that escaped the purges of the memory policies of the Kádár regime. The mere presence of the otherwise illegible reproduction was to verify the entire transcript of the text. This case of “iconic verification” can be compared to the “acoustic verification” accomplished through the partial replay of a recording that created an aura of authenticity for the entire broadcast. Thus, “presence effects” worked to strengthen “meaning effects” in the sense that perception of the physical characteristics of the original documents pervaded the semantic dimension of their reception.

Listeners could not avoid the influence of the intense interplay between “presence effects” and “meaning effects.” One of them swore never to forget the recording of Rákóczi Station broadcasting from the city of Sztalinváros in the days of Soviet intervention. In his call to the answering machine he retold what he had heard: “This is Rákóczi Station, Hungary, this is Rákóczi Station, Hungary! Free Europe, Munich, Free Europe, Munich! Help us, help us! Soviets have marched into Dunapentele. They are firing on our city. We beg you, help us, help us! Believe me, I am not a sentimental man, but my eyes filled with tears.”

In the case of both generations, the narratives of the revolution were created according to the listeners’ own past, “from within, not imported or imposed

57 *A szabadság kapujában*, 213.
59 Sztalinváros, the name of which meant “Stalin City,” was intended to be a model socialist city; it essentially replaced the village of Dunapentele and in 1961 was renamed Dunaújváros, which roughly means “new city on the Danube River.”
60 *Telefontávolságok* 72, 7; HU OSA 300-40-14 Box 1.

There was ample evidence attesting to their experiences of the revolution, which for them was historically verifiable and possessed great power to inspire. This was also reflected in the counter-cultural practices which accompanied the act of listening to Western radio stations, which from the socialist perspective represented the “enemy.”

**The Phantom Voice and the Body of the Text**

In October, 1985, an elderly woman left a message on the RFE’s answering machine. Her story was both typical and yet unique.

Good evening. Actually, I have been listening to the program by György Faludy on the radio. It recalls very, very beautiful memories of mine, because when I was young, we typed his poems and gave them to one another as a big, big present… […] I had quite a huge collection, but unfortunately my whole apartment burned down in 1956. I lived at the corner of Ferenc Avenue and Úllői Street. […] Well, these treasures of mine ceased to exist. How could I get access to the entire book?

It was unusual that a listener shared her personal story in such an open and direct tone while also relating details concerning the cultural resistance of the 1950s. Her description of collecting, typing and disseminating texts by a poet interned in 1949 serves as a very early example of samizdat literature circulating beyond the bounds of censorship in Hungary.

The localization of the apartment and the date of its destruction make it likely that this private samizdat collection disappeared during the Soviet intervention, in the course of the intense fighting that took place in the area around Corvin köz, not far from her apartment. This background information reveals the fragility of samizdat materials, showing that often it was difficult or impossible to preserve them for longer periods of time.

On the other hand, this story is also very characteristic in that it draws attention to the important role RFE played in transmitting cultural products that

---

63 Telefonhívások 12, 2; HU OSA 300-40-14 Box 1.
remained out of reach during the decades of communism. The radio station, however, could make these cultural products available through its “phantom voice,” which—like sound itself—“is more flux and fluid than material.”\textsuperscript{65} The dissolving, vanishing body of the radio’s phantom voice urged listeners to reconstruct this body physically, to transform the fluid voice into some form of hard copy. In the case of the RFE’s commemorative programs, generally three counter-cultural practices—recording or transcribing broadcasts (the phenomenon of so-called “radizdat” or “magnitizdat”),\textsuperscript{66} buying materials in the West, or acquiring samizdat texts from local sources—came into play.

Under the name “Hungarian October,” one of the most significant samizdat publishers during the 1980s, György Krassó published a 90-minute long audiocassette entitled \textit{The Voice of the Hungarian Revolution} as a means of marking the 26\textsuperscript{th} anniversary of the revolution.\textsuperscript{67} The cassette included recordings of broadcasts by Western radios. Since only a few hundred copies were made, the cassette soon became inaccessible, in spite of the fact that private exchanges obviously added to the number of copies that were made.

It therefore comes as no surprise that in 1986 many listeners made sure to record the commemorative programs. “On behalf of a small group of listeners, I turn to you with the following request. While we succeeded in recording the commemorative program, the jamming sometimes was so extensive that important parts were incomprehensible.”\textsuperscript{68} The members of this “small group” requesting that the programs edited by Kasza be repeated were most likely working together to copy and share materials among one another.

In 1987, another message providing evidence of one unique case of “radizdat” made its way to RFE’s answering machine. The listener—who was from the eastern side of the Iron Curtain, judging from the fact that he used a pseudonym—happily reported that on the occasion of the 31\textsuperscript{st} anniversary of the revolution, a 500-paged typewritten book had been prepared bearing the title, \textit{The Hungarian Revolution, 1956: Commemorative Radio Programs and Historical Series}.\textsuperscript{69} The ability to prepare such a typewritten book meant previous broadcasts had to have been recorded on magnetic tape. The whole year that passed between

\textsuperscript{65} Krämer, “Negative Semiologie der Stimme,” 67.
\textsuperscript{67} \textit{A magyar forradalom hangja}.
\textsuperscript{68} \textit{Telefonhívások} 68, 9–10; HU OSA 300-40-14 Box 1.
\textsuperscript{69} \textit{Telefonhívások} 118, 4; HU OSA 300-40-14 Box 2.
the recording process and the completion of the typewritten product shows the enormous effort made to create a hard copy of the “phantom voice.”

Including callers from both sides of the Iron Curtain, the largest number of messages was left for RFE by people who wanted to buy the commemorative programs in cassette form. While the radio workers felt it impossible to publish the programs in cassette form,\textsuperscript{70} the overwhelming interest and large number of requests eventually convinced them to publish the commemorative programs in book form. Published at the beginning of 1988, the book \textit{At the Doorstep of Freedom} could be ordered from France for 24 German marks.\textsuperscript{71} In September, 1988, during the program \textit{Hallgatók Fóruma}, Júlia Láng was able to point callers interested in the 1986 commemorative programs to Hungarian bookstores located in the West.\textsuperscript{72}

This RFE publication came to Krassó’s attention. Before his brother living in London died, Krassó was finally able to get a Western passport. In 1986 he established the “Hungarian October” independent news agency in London, although this did not mean that he abandoned his samizdat publication activities, especially in respect to the widespread practice of reprinting Western publications in samizdat form. After RFE’s book was published,\textsuperscript{73} Krassó organized its samizdat reprint in Hungary, including the original typeset and the logo of “Hungarian October” Publishing House. In this version, however, the paper displayed the poor quality and brown-black colors typical of samizdat editions.\textsuperscript{74} Thanks to the original and samizdat edition, the book \textit{At the Doorstep of Freedom} was available both in Hungary and the in West.

As a consequence of counter-cultural practices that arose as a result of the act of listening to radio broadcasts, materials concerning the Hungarian revolution were first stored and then broadcast by the radio stations, later entering the listeners’ private archives in some kind of a hard copy form. During this process, the materials that had been broadcasted changed their form and sometimes their media as well (e.g. from magnetic tape to another magnetic tape or a typescript, or from magnetic tape to a book, and then a samizdat

\textsuperscript{70} \textit{Telefonhívtások} 121, 11; HU OSA 300-40-14 Box 2.
\textsuperscript{73} The book’s cover design was made by Ágnes Háy, Krassó’s common-law wife.
reprint). Through these practices, listeners attempted to transform a past that they recognized as authentic into physical materials that were available within arm’s reach and beyond the limits imposed by time. Accompanied by an audio recording, a samizdat edition or book published in the West guaranteed that personal recollections could be revived, thereby allowing people to experience the events of the revolution again and again. The externalization of the memory of the revolution and the dissemination of the vessels in which this memory was preserved created little pockets of resistance to the memory politics of the Kádár regime.

Conclusion

While a vigorous attempt was made to reassert the legitimacy of the official assessment of the 1956 Revolution and the rhetoric of the official depictions of the events during the commemoration of its 30th anniversary, RFE’s commemorative programs broadcast from the West offered an alternative narrative that was accessible to a significant segment of Hungarian society. Velünk élő történelem, a re-projection of the counterrevolution rhetoric used by the political elite of the Kádár regime, exemplified and brought to the fore the profound discrepancies between the official historical abstraction and people’s personal memories. In the end, this official interpretation proved counterproductive. In contrast, RFE commemorative programs were successful in their presentation of the past on the basis of personal recollections, based in part on the approach according to which “understanding the past as history primarily happens in the course of memory, before historical abstraction can settle over it, generously obscuring the fact of this genesis.”

Within the process of these documentary strategies, the issue of authenticity underlies the question of how to create a representation of the historical events of 1956. In the case of RFE, the Gumbrechtian “presence effects” played an important role in creating a kind of authenticity rooted in archival practices and information acquisition, the media-technological conditions of recording and replaying human voices, as well as the listeners’ social conditioning and personal recollections. Last but not least, the programs’ narrative structure provided the appropriate vehicle for this process. The special configuration of these elements.

---
75 Gyáni, “Kollektív emlékezet és történetírás,” 75. The author reflects on a train of thought written by Patrick Hutton (History as an Art of Memory).
guaranteed the programs’ effectiveness, reviving memories of the revolution from the chronological distance of three decades. While in the case of Velünk élő történelem archival documents functioned only as illustrations of narrative, archival recordings took on lives of their own in the RFE broadcasts, serving as “presence effects.” From this perspective, it can be argued that the “practices of reconstructing” the “phantom voice” were motivated not only by the fluidity of the voice, but also by its “presence effects.” In other words, this phenomenon was influenced by the ephemeral character of the presence, i.e. the feeling “that we cannot hold on to those presence effects, that they […] are ephemeral.”

In the three-decade-long struggle over interpretations of 1956, the year 1986 brought a significant change. This change was brought about by the fact that RFE’s commemorative programs—in comparison to the influence of opposition groups active as of the late 1970s—created a far wider social basis for the interpretation according to which the October events constituted a revolution, not a counterrevolution. If “the first victory of the Kádár era was the successful transformation of shared silence into social oblivion,” RFE deserves credit for reviving and replaying the revolution in 1986, while attacking the Kádár regime at its weakest point: its genesis myth. By making voices travel through both time and space, RFE could bridge the gap between past and present, between different agents and distant parts of a divided Europe, obliterating the amnesia of the Kádár era, which had hampered listeners’ efforts to maintain their own personal recollections.

**Bibliography**

Petőfi Irodalmi Múzeum Médiatára, Saáry Éva hanggyűjteménye, Budapest [Media Archives of the Petőfi Literary Museum, Audio Collection of Éva Saáry].


76 Gumbrecht, Production of Presence, 111.
77 It is very hard to estimate the extent of radio audiences, listening habits, and the counter-cultural practices that evolved in connection with it. According to one estimate, about 23 percent of the adult population listened more or less regularly to the RFE in 1986-87, while the habit of listening to the radio was highly correlated to “word-of-mouth” communication, resulting in the wider dissemination of information (Hann, “Éteri verseny,” 47–50).
78 György, Női bagnomány, 76.
Magyar Távirati Iroda, Hírarchívum, Budapest [Hungarian News Agency, News Archives].

Vera & Donald Blinken Open Society Archives, Budapest
Reaction to anti-RFE propaganda campaign, Item No. 1228/69, August 1, 1969, HU OSA 300-40-4 Box 9 [RFE General, 1969–73]; Records of the Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty Research Institute (Fonds 300), Hungarian Unit (Subfonds 40), Information Items (Series 4).

Telefonhívások [Telephone Calls] 12. (Hungarian Service October 7, 1985), 2.; HU OSA 300-40-14 Box 1 [Telephone calls Aug – Oct 1985]; Records of RFE/RL Research Institut (Fonds 300), Hungarian Unit (Subfonds 40), Telephone Calls (Series 12).
Telefonhívások [Telephone Calls] 37. (Hungarian Service April 2, 1986); HU OSA 300-40-14 Box 1 [Telephone calls Apr – Jun 1986]; Records of RFE/RL Research Institut (Fonds 300), Hungarian Unit (Subfonds 40), Telephone Calls (Series 12).
Telefonhívások [Telephone Calls] 68. (Hungarian Service November 5, 1986); HU OSA 300-40-14 Box 1 [Telephone calls Nov – Dec 1986]; Records of RFE/RL Research Institut (Fonds 300), Hungarian Unit (Subfonds 40), Telephone Calls (Series 12).
Memory of 1956 and the Hungarian Audiences of Radio Free Europe

*Telefonhívások* [Telephone Calls] 69. (Hungarian Service November 12, 1986); HU OSA 300-40-14 Box 1 [Telephone calls Nov – Dec 1986]; Records of RFE/RL Research Institut (Fonds 300), Hungarian Unit (Subfonds 40), Telephone Calls (Series 12).

*Telefonhívások* [Telephone Calls] 72. (Hungarian Service December 3, 1986); HU OSA 300-40-14 Box 1 [Telephone calls Nov – Dec 1986]; Records of RFE/RL Research Institut (Fonds 300), Hungarian Unit (Subfonds 40), Telephone Calls (Series 12).

*Telefonhívások* [Telephone Calls] 118. (Hungarian Service October 28, 1987); HU OSA 300-40-14 Box 2 [Telephone calls Sep – Dec 1987]; Records of RFE/RL Research Institut (Fonds 300), Hungarian Unit (Subfonds 40), Telephone Calls (Series 12).

*Telefonhívások* [Telephone Calls] 121. (Hungarian Service November 19, 1987); HU OSA 300-40-14 Box 2 [Telephone calls Sep – Dec 1987]; Records of RFE/RL Research Institut (Fonds 300), Hungarian Unit (Subfonds 40), Telephone Calls (Series 12).


