

Christopher Adam

Canadian petition to save the Historical Archives of Hungarian State Security

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The Government of Hungary faced widespread international criticism last December, after it introduced legislation that curtailed press freedoms. The outcry came from all corners of Europe and North America, and Budapest had little choice but to bow to European Union pressure and amend the ominous law. But journalists, political analysts and foreign politicians paid far less attention to an announcement by Bence Rétvári, the secretary of state at the Ministry of Justice, when he noted that his government would enact legislation leading to the removal and possible destruction of original archival documents currently stored at the Historical Archives of Hungarian State Security (ÁBTL).

According to Mr. Rétvári, “a constitutional state cannot preserve personal information collected through unconstitutional means, because these are the immoral documents of an immoral regime.” The proposed legislation, scheduled to be drafted by November 2011, would allow for victims of the country’s former communist political police to remove files that include information on their activities and then do as they please with them, including either selling these documents online or destroying them at home.

These secret police files have been available to researchers, as well as to victims, since 2003, but as with any archive, only copies of these original documents may be removed from the reading room. Professional historians conducting research at the ÁBTL are also bound by ethical considerations when it comes to releasing names or personal information discovered in these files.

By proposing legislation that would lead to the destruction of archival material, the Hungarian government not only demonstrates a complete lack of concern for preserving and safeguarding the country’s national archival heritage, but is also clueless as to the nature of the documents that they seem willing to scatter. In many cases, the secret police files that form the ÁBTL’s collection refer to groups of people who were spied upon by communist state security, raising the question of who would actually obtain originals of individual files containing sensitive data on others and whether citizens could simply walk away with Hungary’s archival heritage on a first-come-first-served basis.

Even the ÁBTL’s files pertaining to the activities of Hungarian agents in Canada during the Cold War generally make references to groups of people, whether they be to a United Church minister (and his congregation), who was perceived as partial to developing closer ties with the Eastern bloc, or the Hungarian agent who visited Montreal to spy on his elderly uncle, and his uncle’s circle of politically active friends in the city’s Hungarian community.

The Hungarian government’s begrudging willingness to bow to international pressure and change its controversial media laws suggests that a similar outcry from historians, archivists, other academics, community activists and concerned citizens from around the world may have a similar impact and could help save irreplaceable archival documents from impending destruction.

A petition launched in Canada will be submitted to the Embassy of the Republic of Hungary in Ottawa at the end of February, in order to show the government the extent of overseas concern. Before I launched the petition, a Hungarian civil servant told me in a private discussion that only a small handful of enthusiastic historians really cared about such “esoteric” issues. But with enough support, the government and those indifferent to the fate of historical archives might just come to see how much they underestimated the concern among people around the world when politicians try to erase the records of the past.

