

The Issues – Background

“A constitutional state cannot preserve personal information collected through unconstitutional means, because these are the immoral documents of an immoral regime.”

-Bence Rétvári, Parliamentary Secretary of State (Ministry of Justice, Republic of Hungary)

How will the government’s decision to no longer preserve the “immoral documents of an immoral regime” impact historians and researchers?

The Government of Hungary announced that it will enact legislation by November 2011 allowing all those who were spied upon by the former communist regime’s secret police and Ministry of the Interior officials to remove files produced on their activities from the Historical Archives of Hungarian State Security. Those who were observed would have the right to destroy their files, resulting in the loss of irreplaceable archival documents on the history of communist Hungary and its state security agencies.

What will happen to archival files that are not collected by the victims of communist state security?

It is unclear as to what will happen to files that remain uncollected. Bence Rétvári’s statement on the “immorality” of a constitutional state preserving “immoral documents” collected through immoral means only makes sense if all remaining files are either destroyed or disposed of through other means. An inconsistent policy on how to handle archival documents represents a serious risk to the integrity of the primary sources on the history of communist Hungary. A random, completely haphazard group of documents might still be available to researchers despite their “immorality,” but so many pieces of the state security puzzle would be missing that the remaining collection ends up lacking any context and thus proves useless or misleading.

What are the broader implications of destroying archives due to the alleged immorality of the preserved documents?

Removing documents from archives and libraries because they are deemed to have been created by immoral authorities represents one of the most serious forms of censorship. While the proposed bill only targets documents stored at the Historical Archives of Hungarian State Security, the National Archives of Hungary preserves millions of documents produced by the communist regime’s Foreign Ministry, the Hungarian Socialist Workers’ Party and its communist predecessors.

Mr. Rétvári—and others in the ruling Fidesz-KDNP coalition—have only to take a cursory look at the nature of these documents—particularly in the foreign affairs collection—to discover that many of them are just as “immoral” and contain a significant amount of personal information on citizens as those found in the Historical Archives of State Security. The foreign affairs collection includes reports written by ambassadors and diplomats containing deeply inflammatory language and accusations about private citizens, as well as private addresses, dates of birth and data on their nationality and religion. If documents in the state security archives are deemed too immoral to be preserved by a democratic state, a consistent policy would also require the government to dispose of material held in other archives. Furthermore, government-financed archives would have no right to preserve material on any period in modern Hungarian history, including the interwar Miklós Horthy regime and the Nazi take-over of power in 1944-45, as well as material from the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

Permitting the destruction of documents because they are deemed to be “immoral” by party officials makes it nearly impossible for academic historians to research the country’s past, as scholars would have to rely exclusively on published primary sources (such as newspapers) and oral interviews.

What role did the recently disbanded Kenedi Committee play in this issue?

The Kenedi Committee (Kenedi Bizottság) was comprised of three non-partisan historians, led by scholar János Kenedi and was initially established in 2007. The committee functioned as a task force and its role was to sift through sensitive state security documents not yet deposited at the Historical Archives of Hungarian State Security. Many of the files containing the names of informants and employees of the state security agency were preserved by the Department of National Security (Nemzetbiztonsági Hivatal) on encoded tapes and are still waiting to be transcribed. More recently, the current three-member committee was created by former Prime Minister Gordon Bajnai and set up by Parliament on February 22, 2010. Other than János Kenedi, the task force’s members included historians Mária Palasik and Gergő Bendegúz Cseh. Dr. Palasik is a researcher at the Historical Archives of Hungarian State Security, while Dr. Cseh is the archive’s deputy head.

Now that the Kenedi Committee has been disbanded, who will be responsible for sifting through the classified state security documents and handing them over to the archives?

Mr. Rétvári has yet to give a clear answer as to who will be in charge of examining classified state security files. In an interview on ATV’s Egyenes Beszéd political television news broadcast, Mr. Rétvári would not provide the names and positions of the people selected to assume the tasks originally entrusted to the non-partisan historians on the Kenedi Committee. The best case scenario is that nameless bureaucrats may now sift through highly sensitive historical files from the pre-1989 period in an impartial–though possibly incompetent–manner. More troubling is the distinct possibility that documents will be examined and selected by party hacks affiliated with the governing Fidesz-KDNP alliance.

How did János Kenedi react to the government’s proposed legislation?

Kenedi indicated his committee faced delaying tactics and a lack of cooperation from government officials, ever since Fidesz-KDNP took power following the April 2010 parliamentary elections. Kenedi was not taken by surprise when the task force was disbanded on December 17, 2010, but he called the government’s decision to allow citizens to remove original archival documents “absurd.” The committee’s former head also suggested that the government’s proposed legislation was illegal, as removing, destroying or in any way defacing archival documents is prohibited by the regulations of all public archives as well as the National Széchenyi Library.



Scattered documents, throwing caution to the wind...
Tájkép a dossziétörvény elsikkasztásának korából



Parliamentary guards in Hungary | Photo credit: László Somorjai (*Hetek*)