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Hungary's Archives—Solidarity from Overseas

More than one thousand Canadian, American, British and western European historians, archivists and other researchers have signed a petition, which protests the Government of Hungary's planned legislation that would have a profoundly negative impact on the country's archival heritage. If passed and enacted, the new law could lead to the destruction of primary source material currently preserved by the Historical Archives of Hungarian State Security. I launched the petition and the HungarianArchives.com website in the Canadian capital, following Hungarian State Secretary Bence Rétvári's ominous announcement concerning the "immorality" of secret police documents preserved by Hungarian archives. I also informed the Embassy of the Republic of Hungary in Ottawa that the mission could expect to receive a petition, which would include the support of prominent Canadian academics. At this time, there were serious doubts concerning the interest that such a petition might generate and this situation was highlighted by a Hungarian government official, who explained to me that the preservation of archival documents constitutes an entirely esoteric topic, which is of absolutely no interest to anyone, except perhaps a small handful of historians.

Yet the petition gathered steam fairly rapidly, primarily among university professors, departmental chairs, archivists and community activists who were not of Hungarian origin. These scholars understand just how dangerous a precedent the planned legislation can be, particularly when it originates from a European Union member state.

Canada's Ukrainian community played a key role in distributing this petition, particularly after Lubomyr Luciuk—a professor and historian at the Royal Military College in Kingston—wrote a letter of protest to the Hungarian Embassy's chargé d'affaires, Tamás Király. The subject of archival preservation is an especially important issue to the country's 1.2 million Ukrainian Canadians, as many still recall the Government of Canada's 1954 decision to destroy documents relating to the first national internment operations of 1914 to 1920, when Ukrainians and other Europeans—especially from the lands of the Austro-Hungarian Empire—were interned in 24 camps. The government attempted to erase some of the last remaining signs of World War I internment and, in many ways, this endeavour proved successful. When Mary Manko, one of the last survivors of Québec's Spirit Lake internment camp, first told her children and grandchildren about this devastating episode in Canadian history and her own experiences as an internee, even her own family found it difficult to believe her. Mrs. Manko could not even point out on a map where she had been interned, as Spirit Lake had since been re-named as Lac Beauchamp. Nearly all remaining signs of the Spirit Lake camp have disappeared and even the camp's internee cemetery has been all but overgrown by the surrounding forests.

More than 8,500 Ukrainians and other Europeans were interned between 1914 and 1920. They and their descendents had to wait for eight decades before the Government of Canada finally acknowledged that their internment and forced labour was nothing less than an historical injustice. In 2008, the federal government established a \$10 million endowment fund, which helps researchers and descendents from all effected communities commemorate and explore the injustice that took place.

Canadians of Ukrainian origin know very well that the destruction of archival documents is never an esoteric issue, as in every case such action on the part of politicians can lead people to forget the past and falsify the historical record.

Hungarian scholarly researcher János Kenedi's assistance in circulating this petition among other Hungarian researchers also made it obvious that this concern for the fate of Hungary's archives is shared by many. Letters of protest and concern written by Canadian historians and archivists were sent on a daily basis to the Hungarian embassy in Ottawa and this clearly demonstrates that those behind this petition see their role as extending well beyond simply adding their name to an online list, but rather also includes taking concrete steps and calling on the Hungarian government to take into consideration their dismay and opposition.

In addition to the hundreds of professors, departmental chairs and professional archivists, the Association of Canadian Archivists circulated the petition among its members and discussed it during their February meeting, deciding to write a letter addressed to László Pordány, Hungary's ambassador. The Canadian Historical Association helped spread the word by posting my letter calling attention to the petition on their website and the Association for Slavic, East European and Eurasian Studies wrote to the Hungarian ambassador in Washington, György Szapáry.

Bence Rétvári's line of argument—which claims that his government's planned legislation would benefit victims of the communist secret police—rests on completely flawed logic. A significant portion of the documents preserved by the Historical Archives of Hungarian State Security refer to groups of people, rather than simply to individuals. If, in fact, the proposed legislation allows for the removal of these files, who would take home documents pertaining to the activities of a Hungarian agent who spied on a United Church of Canada congregation in Toronto, as well as on the congregation's pastor and his family? Who would obtain the originals of documents produced by an agent who spied on his own uncle and on his uncle's circle of friends in Montreal's Hungarian community?

The more than one thousand scholars who signed the petition demonstrate that the state secretary's announcement on the removal of original archival material has led to much concern and dismay overseas and throughout Europe. Perhaps the Hungarian government really believed that the scattering of archival documents was nothing more than an esoteric topic, of interest to no one, but a few overly enthusiastic historians. Clearly, they did not anticipate that Canadian, American and European historians—including those who are not of Hungarian heritage—would recognize the danger behind these plans and would not hesitate to express their views openly and unequivocally.