Research in Hungarian Archives on Post-1945 History

Introduction

Since 1989, research on the post-1945 period has been transformed. Access for all scholars has greatly improved over the past decade. The collapse of state socialism and growing distance even from the Kádár era means that the post-1945 period can be investigated as history. A large number of historians—both Hungarian and international—have taken advantage of the new climate to reshape our understanding of the period. Research into the politics of the Rákosi and early Kádár years have proved popular, as have investigations into the 1956 Revolution, and cultural policy. Much less work has been done that takes advantage of newly available materials to produce much-needed studies in the fields of social history, economic history, or the history of policy making by the party-state. Although there are incredible opportunities for the historian seeking to work in Hungarian archives to consult materials generated in the post-1945 period, there are a number of pitfalls and problems. I aim to provide a brief survey of some of the most important obstacles confronting the researcher based on my own experience—gathered during the last five years—of research in Hungarian public collections.

A Brief Description of the Kinds of Holdings

The most important public collections dealing with the post-1945 period are now open to research, with some restrictions. National level materials of the MDP and MSZP are held by the National Archives of Hungary (Magyar Országos Leveltár, MOL), as are most of the materials generated by state bodies. The Ministry of the Interior has a separate archive—most recent information suggests that it is possible to gain access. The records of the post-1945 trade unions are held by the small Central Archives of Trade Unions (Szakszervezetek * Originally published in Mark Pittaway 2000, ‘Research in Hungarian Archives on Post-1945 History’, Austrian Studies Newsletter, 12, 1: 18–20.
Központi Levéltára, szKL), which is currently maintained by the major post-Communist trade-union confederation, the National Confederation of Hungarian Trade Unions (Magyar Szakszervezetek Országos Szövetsége, MSZOSZ). The situation with the records of former state enterprises is more complicated. Some holdings, most from the late 1940s and early 1950s, are deposited in public archives at both national and county levels. The majority of the holdings are still in the possession of the enterprises themselves. Some of the wealthier companies, like MOL (the former state oil company), fund archives and make some of their records available to researchers; in others, access is much more difficult. As companies go bankrupt, the law states that the local public archive has to take the records. State-funded archives do not always have the resources to do this, and there is serious cause for concern about what will happen to these records. The records of local public administration and local party organisations are held at county level, and in the case of some local government records they are held at city level. Some museums – most notably the former National Museum of Labour Movement History, now the Contemporary History Department of the Hungarian National Museum – have important holdings of interest to the historian.

Legal Issues Relating to Access

The 1995 Archive Act regulates access to public collections. It stipulates that materials are to be made freely available to Hungarian and non-Hungarian researchers alike. With reference to the socialist period, government and party documents generated prior to 1990 are subject to a fifteen-year embargo. A researcher wishing to work on documents still subject to the embargo has the right to petition a supervisory body for archival research (Levéltári Kutatások Kuratóriuma, LKK) for privileged access to such sources. Private archives can impose similar conditions – the former Communist trade unions place their documents under a ten-year embargo. There are, however, two other acts that further regulate access. The first are state secrecy provisions. Although most Communist-era documents were declassified in a process designed to liberalise access that was completed in 1996, some information remains classified. The second provision is the 1992 Privacy Act. This directly contradicts the 1995 Archive Act, in that it subjects all documents that contain the personal data of a given individual – including party-political or religious affiliation – to a sixty-year embargo. To the extent that it fails to make any distinction between private citizens and those who held public positions, the Act can cause serious