
Interview: Dr. Laslo Varga

Hungary's files are still under wraps

Dr. Varga is an historian and director of the Budapest City Archive. He spoke with Angelika Beyreuther-Raimondi at the May 1-3 conference on "The Heritage of Dictatorship and Domestic Peace" in Berlin.

EIR: What is the City Archive? Do you manage the files from the old system?

Vargas: We have files which concern more than just the city. In a sense, we are a State Archive, because we have everything which pertains to Budapest, whether that is the city or the country. We store the files of the Budapest court, for example, where most of the political trials were prosecuted. That is one of the reasons I have been interested in this subject.

In 1995, a commission was constituted, with archivists and historians, whose task was to investigate just what still existed of the files of the Stasi [Hungary's communist secret police]. We found out what we know today about the Stasi files. We worked for four months and then offered our report, and only one book, as I said [in my conference speech], has been published on this subject in Hungary. The political parties had no interest in opening the files. Before the change in 1994, when the transparency law was passed [which allows "discovery" of party officials' political past and prohibits them from serving in political office], the Constitutional Court found parts of this law to be unconstitutional. At first, the Constitutional Court said that former victims, civilians, have a right to information. The discovery law had no provision for the concerned persons to have access to the files.

That is what the Constitutional Court demanded after the fact, and that was supposed to have been settled by September 1995, and then approved by Parliament. As it happened, it was only settled half a year later, long after the date set by the Constitutional Court. The Parliament is obligated to keep to the deadlines which are set by the Constitutional Court, but it often does not fulfill this obligation. That characterizes the situation: What happens in practice is often worse than whatever is written in the laws. If you look at how the Stasi files were treated, then you see that, to this day, everyone talks about how communism in Hungary was liberal: "gulash communism," you could travel, and so forth. But too little is said about the fact that it was the same system, the same Stasi, the same dictatorship.

Once we have investigated what was the same, then it makes sense to talk about the differences.

EIR: In Hungary, there were far fewer unofficial collaborators of the Stasi than in East Germany. But you said that the methods of Hungary's State Security were more effective and more modern than in East Germany.

Vargas: The Stasi in East Germany operated such, that they covered all areas, they observed everything, even if it was meaningless. The situation in Hungary up to 1956 and the beginning of the 1960s was similar, but it turned out that such an approach was not effective. Among us, there were some 1.2 million people targetted by the Stasi, but we have a population of only 10 million. It was perfectly clear that the Stasi could not possibly manage so many dossiers. And, they were repeatedly accused by the party of not taking on the right, or the real enemy thoroughly. So, they changed, and picked targets, where they knew exactly what to observe.

So, there are many people who were not under Stasi surveillance, and that naturally meant a certain freedom. If you didn't get into politics or otherwise make yourself prominent, then you could have a private life. To be sure, that was a big difference from East Germany, but there was no difference in the system. That is why I say that the Stasi in Hungary was more modern and much more effective.

EIR: In 1995, a law was passed to protect state secrets. The archive files, according to this law, were then sorted out by the successors of the Stasi, as to which were to remain secret, and the ones that were not then accessible. Is that right?

Vargas: The lawmakers have prescribed that all files which were established before 1980, have to be reviewed for a new classification within 12 months, and that deadline was passed in the summer of 1996. According to the law, all files which were not given a new classification, are open. But in practice, classifications are still being made by the National Security authority and other institutions.

EIR: Do citizens or do the victims have access to the files?

Vargas: Yes and no. Officially, they do have access, but this access is quite limited, because the files, which were compiled after 1980, are state secrets. If people are able to obtain anything at all, they are only allowed to read the files, but they cannot take notes or make copies. Since September, we have had an "Office for History," which was proposed by the Ministry. I wrote a report, or tried to write one, and I demanded that we establish a Hungarian "Gauck Authority"... [But] I would not compare Germany's "Gauck Authority" with [the Office for History], because our office has the opposite task in practice. It is supposed to release as little information as possible; yet it is in the Constitution, that everyone must have access to his own information. That was what the Constitutional Court demanded, but in practice, it is quite different. . . .