

Soporific Bombs and American Flying Discs: War Fantasies in East-Central Europe, 1948-1956

by
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During the first years of the Cold War, the Soviet satellite countries of East-Central Europe were fearful places. Some of this fear was instigated by the region's own Communist governments. As part of the consolidation of power under Stalinism, Communist regimes in the so-called People's Democracies worked hard to try to create certain kinds of fear in their populations. At work, in school, and on the street, people were told to be afraid—afraid of the imperialist war-mongering West, afraid of its spies and saboteurs who could be anywhere, and afraid of its nefarious plans to colonize and impoverish the socialist world or destroy it in another war. Eastern Europe's Communist leaders hoped that this fear would motivate people to work harder for the socialist cause, to join in extra work brigades and work weekend shifts to meet production targets—but they also hoped that fear would enable people to disassociate themselves from their new enemies in the West, to see themselves differently in the world, united in their difference from and opposition to the West. Fear would be the mechanism that would create a new socialist community and a new socialist citizen in Eastern Europe.¹

But the fears that residents of this region actually experienced did not always correspond to the ones their governments tried to manufacture. Instead of fearing the West and its war-mongering, many people became afraid of their own increasingly dictatorial governments. In 1952, an unnamed Czech correspondent wrote in a letter to Radio Free Europe (RFE) that the experience of identity card checks on the trains created “an atmosphere of fear that envelops everything. You must feel it for yourself and then you know there is no escaping it.” Although this young man did not have any particular reason to believe the police were looking for him, he remembered, “I felt the fear creeping up my back, a funny feeling of weakness and helplessness [...] You see, you never know if they are not just looking for you.”² He experienced

¹ For more on this argument, see MELISSA FEINBERG: *Die Durchsetzung einer neuen Welt. Politische Prozesse in Osteuropa, 1948-1954*, in: BERND GREINER, CHRISTIAN TH. MÜLLER et al. (eds.): *Angst im Kalten Krieg*, Hamburg 2009, pp. 190-219. A useful collection of essays that deals with the cultural and emotional consolidation of East-Central European Communist regimes is BALÁZS APOR, JAN C. BEHRENDIS et al. (eds.): *The Leader Cult in Communist Dictatorships. Stalin and the Eastern Bloc*, London 2004.

² Selected quotations from this letter (including the ones used here) appeared in special report #53, *Letters from Czechoslovakia* (1.12.1952), in: Open Society Archive (OSA), Budapest, fond 300-7-7, box 24.

fear as a powerful sense of uncertainty, underscored by what he perceived as a fundamental lack of control over his own fate. He felt unable to predict whether or not his train journey would end in arrest and powerless to affect the outcome. How he acted or even whether he acted at all, he believed, had no bearing on what would actually happen. Indeed, this upset him so much he vowed in his letter to flee the country, even if he had to resort to violence to get away.

Such feelings of uncertainty and powerlessness were endemic in East-Central Europe during the period of Communist entrenchment and Stalinist dictatorship, from roughly 1948 to 1956. During this period, Communist regimes instituted policies that kept many on tenterhooks. Large enterprises were nationalized, farmers were pressed to join collective farms, and thousands were arrested for oppositional activities. Many worried about their livelihood or their freedom and did not know how to protect either of those things.³ Purges within the Communist Parties meant that not even those loyal to the regime escaped such fears. The experience of a 49 year old ethnic German and owner of a tiny vineyard near the Hungarian city of Sopron was emblematic of this rampant uncertainty. As he told an interviewer in 1951, he had been arrested in 1949 and briefly imprisoned for spreading rumors after being overheard discussing population exchanges across the Austrian-Hungarian border. He then lost control of his vineyard and finally had two Communist families settled in his two-room house. It is perhaps no wonder that he remarked, "When one goes home in Hungary nowadays, he hears only that one or another had been carried off, and further that this or that is to be taken away [sic]. One was scarcely in [a] mood to work."⁴ Life seemed like nothing more than a series of unpleasant incidents, all out of his control. Refugee accounts like this one make it clear that powerlessness became an everyday emotion in East-Central Europe. People like this interviewee were constantly reminded that they had no control over many of life's essentials—including who went to jail, what was available on store shelves and for what price, the amount one was paid for one's work, whether or not one's property would be confiscated and who was in charge of their government.

In this essay I examine these feelings of uncertainty and helplessness, particularly among those who were not active supporters of local Communist regimes in East-Central Europe. I consider these emotions as a common phenomenon across the Soviet satellite countries (also known as the People's Democracies): Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria. East Germany was not included in the sources I consulted for this project and

³ For a good survey of this period from a social history perspective, see MARK PITTAWAY: *Eastern Europe 1939-2000*, London 2004.

⁴ Interview #010, L.J., 12.11.1951, in: National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, MD, Record Group 59: Department of State, International Information Administration / International Evaluation Staff, Iron Curtain Interviews, 1951-1952 (in the following: NARA, Iron Curtain Interviews), box 1.

it is not part of my analysis for this reason. I argue that, among opponents of communism, the pervasive feeling of powerlessness made war an object of fantasy and wish fulfillment. Instead of fearing war, many East-Central Europeans desired it, believing it would liberate them from Communist dictatorship. These war dreams were present across the entire region with remarkably little variation. War fantasies offered anti-Communists a way to imagine a future in which agency was miraculously returned to them. In the safe arena of dream and fantasy, war could bring liberation rather than chaos and carnage.

This argument emphasizes the self-perception of refugees and other anti-Communists. As in the examples above, the way in which these individuals perceived their situation conformed to a totalitarian model. They imagined, and indeed I will argue they wanted to imagine, an all-powerful regime that rendered them helpless. This does not mean these regimes actually were as omnipotent as they believed. Recent scholarship on Stalinist-era East-Central Europe has challenged the idea of the totalitarian state. In this research, we find a subtle picture of the constant negotiation that took place between regime and society and see how different groups were able, under certain circumstances, to assert agency in a variety of ways.⁵ I am not arguing against such scholarship. My subject here is simply different. Whether or not East-Central Europeans really lacked agency, many experienced a feeling of powerlessness and fantasized that war would enable them to vanquish their enemies. I examine this feeling and the fantasies that developed around it as a cultural phenomenon peculiar to the Stalinist era in East-Central Europe.

This article is based on two sets of sources. The first consists of interviews and other information collected on an on-going basis by the research arm of RFE. At RFE, country-specific research bureaus gathered information from across East-Central Europe in order to prepare broadcasts.⁶ RFE researchers tracked the region's newspapers and monitored its domestic radio stations, corresponded with sources behind the Iron Curtain and conducted interviews

⁵ For example, MARK PITTAWAY: *The Workers' State. Industrial Labor and the Making of Socialist Hungary, 1944-1958*, Pittsburgh 2012; IDEM: *Control and Consent in Eastern Europe's Workers' States, 1945-1989. Some Reflections on Totalitarianism, Social Organization, and Social Control*, in: CLIVE EMSLEY, ERIC JOHNSON et al. (eds.): *Social Control in Europe, 1800-2000*, Columbus 2004, pp. 343-367; MALGORZATA FIDELIS: *Women, Communism and Industrialization in Postwar Poland*, Cambridge 2010; ULF BRUNNBAUER: *Die sozialistische Lebensweise. Ideologie, Gesellschaft, Familie und Politik in Bulgarien (1944-1989)*, Wien 2007; KARL WILLIAM BROWN: *Regulating Bodies. Everyday Crime and Popular Resistance in Communist Hungary, 1948-1956*, Ph.D. dissertation, University of Texas at Austin 2007.

⁶ RFE broadcast to Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria during this period. On the history of RFE, see A. ROSS JOHNSON: *Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty. The CIA Years and Beyond*, Stanford 2010; ARCH PUDDINGTON: *Broadcasting Freedom. The Cold War Triumph of Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty*, Lexington 2000.

with travelers and people who had fled to the West. Initially, RFE's interviews seem to have been carried out on an ad hoc basis, but they became more systematic with time. By 1954 they were conducted according to a standard script and often ran to fifteen or more pages of transcribed text.

My second set of sources is the transcripts of interviews carried out with refugees from Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia in 1951-1952. These interviews were conducted by International Policy and Opinion Research, Inc. under the auspices of the United States Information Agency.⁷ Most of the interviews took place in refugee camps and at least some of the interviewers themselves were refugees, employed for this purpose and given an extensive list of questions. The purpose of these interviews was to provide audience research for the Voice of America (VOA) broadcasting service.⁸ The interview questions focused on radio-listening habits and perceptions of the United States, but also asked about the respondent's views on current events and their experiences at home. Most of the interviews are from fifteen to forty pages in length.⁹ As was typical of the refugee population, a majority of the respondents were men between the ages of 18 and 30. In both sets of sources, interviewees or correspondents were often anonymous, identified by their initials and (for the VOA interviews) their date of birth. It is possible that some respondents spoke with both services, although most of the RFE sources used here are from later years.¹⁰

This kind of source base has certain limitations. Refugees, hoping to emigrate, might say the kind of thing they thought would appeal to their interlocutors, even when their interviewers openly said their responses would not af-

⁷ CHARLTON PRICE: *Listening to the Voice of America and Other Foreign Broadcasts in the Soviet Satellites*, New York 1954. The Bureau of Applied Social Research at Columbia University was given the task of analyzing the interviews. In addition to this survey report, it published individual reports on Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, Romania and Yugoslavia.

⁸ On the VOA, see MICHAEL NELSON: *War of the Black Heavens. The Battles of Western Broadcasting in the Cold War*, Syracuse 1997; DAVID F. KRUGLER: *The Voice of America and the Domestic Propaganda Battles, 1945-1953*, Columbia/MO 2000.

⁹ The full transcripts are found in: NARA, *Iron Curtain Interviews*, boxes 1-7. The transcripts are all in English only. For some reason, no interviews with Bulgarians or Romanians are present in the archives, although these countries were included in the project. Romanian and Bulgarian interviews were used in CHARLTON PRICE: *Listening to the Voice of America and Other Foreign Broadcasts in Satellite Romania*, New York 1953, and IDEM: *Listening to the Voice of America and Other Foreign Broadcasts in Satellite Bulgaria*, New York 1953.

¹⁰ A few VOA interviewees specifically mentioned giving interviews to other groups, such as the BBC, West German radio, and American counter-intelligence (CIC). See Interview #080 Mieczyslaw Ghyllinski (4.12.1951, Berlin) and Interview #084 Bogusława Smolka-Bauer (5-6 December 1951, Berlin), in: NARA, *Iron Curtain Interviews*, box 3.

fect their chances for a visa.¹¹ Even without such considerations, these interviews privileged an anti-Communist perspective. Interviewers did try to get respondents to articulate their sense of the general mood in their former home. But a respondent's own views would invariably color their sense of what the population generally believed or experienced. East-Central European refugees in the 1950s were often, although not always, opposed to the regimes they left behind, whether for material or ideological reasons. The interviewers or researchers themselves, whether from RFE or VOA, were also often fellow exiles with similar views. RFE and VOA as institutions had a strongly anti-Communist orientation. It was these institutions that chose the topics of conversation, and, in the case of RFE, RFE researchers who selected which sources to translate into English (I relied on their translations for Polish, Hungarian, Bulgarian and Romanian sources). Yet, while the avowed anti-Communist perspective of these sources may render them problematic for getting at some issues, it does not preclude their usefulness—if they are treated carefully.¹² In this essay I never take refugees' assertions that "everyone" did or thought something at face value. But I also argue that we can use their testimonies to point to significant trends within the Soviet Bloc, at least among those portions of the population that opposed communism.

We Are Only Waiting for Liberation: Fantasies of Western Intervention

Refugees and other anti-Communist sources from the first years of the Cold War constantly emphasized the inability of East-Central Europeans to fight Communist dictatorship. Respondents claimed that many people disliked their governments, but they believed the Communists were too powerful to oppose openly. The fear of arrest and punishment made even committed anti-Communists inert, and continued inaction only bred more intense feelings of hopelessness and powerlessness. This attitude was eloquently expressed by a 27 year old Bulgarian pharmacist, presumably Jewish, interviewed by RFE in Italy on his way to Israel in 1953. He claimed that "the more that is being exacted from the people, the more they seem to accept it." They worked overtime shifts, stood in endless lines without complaint, contributed when asked to the peace campaign, and tolerated any amount of interference into their daily lives. Inside, he claimed, Bulgarians disagreed with the regime on every point, but outside, they simply acted as they knew they should, in quiet

¹¹ Occasionally, VOA interviewers noted a case in which they thought a respondent might be editing their answers to make them more politically acceptable. Both radio stations were funded by the United States government, although listeners may not have been aware that RFE had any official American sponsorship (the source of its funding was not public knowledge until the 1980s).

¹² MARK PITTAWAY: *The Education of Dissent. The Reception of the Voice of Free Hungary, 1951-56*, in: *Cold War History* 4 (2003), 1, pp. 97-116, reached a similar conclusion about RFE sources. See also BROWN (as in footnote 5), pp. 23-24.

resignation. They had realized, he said, that “one cannot kick against a God. It is utterly useless to resist and attempt to upset the regime from within.”¹³ Anti-Communists were like tiny gnats buzzing around a giant. Lacking even a sting, they were completely insignificant.

Feelings of powerlessness like this were often characterized by émigrés themselves as manifestations of apathy. For those who fled, apathy was a way of explaining the lack of organized resistance at home to the West, and also to themselves. While the idea of an apathetic population was not exactly comforting, it was preferable to the idea that those left behind might be accommodating themselves to life under socialism. Those at home, informants and refugees asserted, did not act in any meaningful way; they did not engage with the regime at all. All they did was wait and hope that change would come to them from abroad. One report from Czechoslovakia was tellingly titled “How Gottwaldov’s Population is Waiting for Liberation.” The source, a 31 year old refugee who spoke to RFE in Salzburg, claimed that most of the city was against the regime. They were all “waiting from one year to the next for the liberation, in the way in which a prisoner waits for the day in which he will be released from prison.”¹⁴

Some refugees saw their situation as more akin to slavery than prison. Janos Jasko, a worker at the Rákosi Matyas factory in Hungary, was interviewed for the VOA in September 1951 at Camp Asten, near Linz, Austria. Jasko had fled Hungary a few weeks before the interview, when police discovered that he had been living under an assumed name since a fracas with the police in 1945.¹⁵ For Jasko, slavery was an appropriate word to describe the condition of Hungarian workers in several respects. They could not freely decide how to spend their time, just as they were not free to speak their minds, lest an informer be lurking to report them to state security. They were forced to work long hours, meet impossible quotas and were not paid enough to maintain a decent standard of living. Hungarians also qualified as slaves because they were under the control of the Soviet Union. The “Russians” (as he called them) provided raw materials but then took away the finished goods “and even the machine that was needed for the manufacturing,” all without paying “even a kopek” to the Hungarians.¹⁶ As slaves, Hungarians had surrendered control over their own destiny. Whipped and starved into submission,

¹³ Refugees Give Assorted Interpretations of Life in Communist Bulgaria, (10.02.1953), in: OSA, fond 300-7-4, box 7. This refugee, of course, was also giving an uncanny description of Ketman, the practice of dissembling made famous in CZESLAW MIŁOŚ: *The Captive Mind*, New York 1990.

¹⁴ How Gottwaldov’s Population Is Waiting for Liberation, Item #2451/54, in: OSA, fond 300-30-2, reel 136.

¹⁵ He claimed the police had tried to confiscate his father’s grain. Interview #016, Janos (Tokar) Jasko, 17.-18.09.1951, Camp Asten, in: NARA, Iron Curtain Interviews, box 1, p. 2.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 15.

they could never rise up against their masters. Jasko admitted Hungarian powerlessness as he welcomed intervention from an American-led United Nations (perhaps imagining a situation analogous to the Korean War). "The work of the sons of the little nations has no result," he said, "there is not even anything to eat if Communist violence holds sway over them. We wait for the United Nations to free Hungary from this desperate situation."¹⁷

The idea that waiting for liberation to arrive from the West was all that was left to East-Central Europeans is a common theme in refugee reports from 1951 to 1956. L.J., the above-mentioned ethnic German vineyard worker from Sopron, believed that only military intervention by the United States could change the situation in Hungary. He remarked, "[i]f the Americans were to occupy Hungary then we would return to the old conditions as they were before. That would be very good. Hungary is not able to do that. Hungary alone is not able to change the situation; they are not capable to do it."¹⁸ L.J. undoubtedly hoped to convince American interrogators to intervene in Hungary. But it is striking that he emphasized the inability of his compatriots to act in any meaningful fashion. Only the United States was capable of making change. The Hungarians could only hope and wait.

For those who opposed communism during this period, the hope of liberation became inextricably linked with the possibility of war. Few imagined that change would come via diplomacy or negotiation. When a Polish plumber told RFE in 1952 that "everyone is waiting for liberation," he assumed it would come through war and even asked when the attack would come.¹⁹ The VOA interview routinely included a question about the likelihood of another war. Respondents consistently replied that they believed war would break out soon in Europe and claimed they longed for war as the vehicle of liberation. This desire for war was independent of gender, age, education, or country of origin. For example, L.P., a 28 year old female sculptor from Czechoslovakia who fled the country because she abhorred socialist realism, remarked "In my opinion, World War III cannot be prevented [...] The Czechoslovaks certainly want a war."²⁰ The Polish lawyer Bogumil Brydak, explained, "you've got to understand the state of minds [sic] prevailing in Poland. For the Polish nation, a (major) war is the only chance of putting an end to the Communist regime [...] Everyone realized that, without a war, the situation in Poland is likely to get but worse [sic]" Brydak believed that "many Poles, especially among [sic] simple men" were convinced that the West regretted selling Poland out at Yalta and planned a war specifically to save Poland from the Soviets. Brydak himself was more cynical and did not imagine that the United

¹⁷ Ibidem, p. 16. The interviewers specifically asked about the respondent's views of the United Nations.

¹⁸ Interview #010, L.J., 12.11.1951, Camp Asten, (as in footnote 4), p. 11.

¹⁹ Politische Meinung, Item #5560/52 (30.04.1952), in: OSA, fond, 300-1-2, reel 10.

²⁰ Interview #007, L.P., 8.10.1951, Camp Asten, in: NARA, Iron Curtain Interviews, box 2, p. 21.

States or its allies cared much about Poland particularly. But he still believed a war was imminent and that it would result in an “independent Poland,” even if he did not think this would be a specific American war aim.²¹

RFE and VOA interviewees and correspondents often claimed that “most people” or “everyone” in their home countries looked forward to a war between the West and the East. There is no way to provide evidence for such a claim and we should be skeptical of such blanket statements. What we can say, however, is that this attitude was extremely common among anti-Communists and refugees, particularly in the early 1950s. Only a small minority of the interviewees from the VOA project registered doubts about the desirability of war. Stefan Birlet, a 28 year old Pole, was one of them. Birlet claimed that Poles did not want another war, given their suffering in the Second World War and the death of millions during the German occupation.²² The surprising thing about this sentiment is not that Birlet expressed it, but that so many of his compatriots did not.²³ Even Birlet, however, was not consistent. After stating that Poles did not want more violence and death, he declared later in the interview that people realized “their slavery will not end” without a war to destroy Russia. While he did not explicitly say that Poles actively wanted such a liberating war, he certainly implied that many would see it as beneficial (and indeed, necessary), despite its costs.

Most did not have Birlet’s qualms. They told researchers unambiguously that they hoped for war. But their hope did not translate into action. Refugees might see war as desirable, but they also believed that it was largely outside their control. War might decide the destiny of East-Central Europe, but the war itself would be started by others—presumably one of the superpowers. When asked what he would like to hear on VOA, Polish farmer Alexander Polosak replied, “I would like to hear more news about the next war and the preparations for it. Poles would like to know if the moment is close or distant when they will have to organize themselves for the liberation and for fighting the Reds.”²⁴ While comments like these might seem incredibly naïve, they were common among the refugees. Such remarks undoubtedly sprang partly from wishful thinking, but were also not inconsistent with what refugees had heard in both domestic and foreign media sources at home. As the interviews made clear, East European governments in this period emphasized Western bellicosity and “war-mongering imperialism” in their press and propaganda,

²¹ Interview #088 Bogumil Brydak, 7.-9.12.1951, Berlin, *ibidem*, box 3, p. 21. None of the interview transcripts included diacritical marks of any sort, so I have not used them in this essay, even when the correct Polish form of the name would seem to require it (as in Bogumił rather than Bogumil).

²² Interview #086 Stefan Birlet, 7.12.1951, Berlin, *ibidem*, p. 17.

²³ No other interviews specifically mentioned the number of Polish deaths from the Second World War.

²⁴ Interview #005, Alexander Polosak, 23.-24.08.1951, Zeilsheim, in: NARA, Iron Curtain Interviews, box 3, p. 3.

giving credence to beliefs about the immanence of war. And Western radio stations that broadcast to the Soviet Bloc, such as RFE, often stoked local hopes of Western intervention.²⁵

Polosak, like many other refugees, thought liberation would have to come from the West. He believed that Poles would help their liberators, but not that they could determine the course of events. They would simply wait until called. This attitude seemed to hold even during moments of great dissatisfaction with the Communist regime. In 1953, the Czechoslovak government instituted a currency reform that wiped out many people's savings overnight. One Czech, an unskilled laborer from Břeclav who left the Czechoslovakia in 1954, claimed that just after the currency reform was announced, "we were all waiting to see if we would get the smallest stimulus, so we could rise up, that help would come to us, but we waited in vain."²⁶ This respondent declared that Czechoslovaks would fight to end communism, but it seemed that they would only do so if the West led them in that fight. Until that happened, the right course of action was to wait, safely cocooned in passivity until the moment that liberation arrived.²⁷

Several Poles believed that fleeing would be their personal way out of passivity. They intended, they claimed, to join "the Polish army in the West." They wrongly assumed that the impossibility of resistance at home had not negated the possibility for exiles and imagined a Polish émigré army training for the inevitable moment when war would break out between communism and capitalism. They were saddened to discover that the only thing that awaited them in exile was a refugee camp. One of these men, Ryszard Rekowski, had been a member of the Polish Home Army (*Armia Krajowa*, AK) during the Second World War. His wartime experience may have been the reason he thought he would find a Polish army to join after he fled to Germany to escape the security police. Instead, he told the VOA, "I was very disappointed when I came to the West. I thought, when I was in Poland, that here in the West exist very strong anti-Communist movements which fight against the Red [sic]." Like some of the other Poles interviewed by the VOA, he was dissatisfied with conditions in German refugee camps and had begun to wonder if leaving Poland had been the right choice. Even the Polish émigré organiza-

²⁵ The most famous example of this is RFE's role in the 1956 Hungarian revolution. See JOHANNA GRANVILLE: "Caught With Jam on Our Fingers". *Radio Free Europe and the Hungarian Revolution of 1956*, in: *Diplomatic History* 29 (2005), 5, pp. 811-839. For a different perspective, see JOHNSON (as in footnote 6).

²⁶ Attitude Research Survey with an Unskilled Laborer, Item #1874/55 (15.03.1955), in: OSA, fond 300-1-2, reel 51.

²⁷ There was an uprising in the Czechoslovak city of Plzeň (Pilsen) in 1953, but it was quickly suppressed. While the sources do not mention it, it is possible that the failure of this uprising to result in any meaningful change added to the conviction that liberation had to come from the West. For a recent examination of the Plzeň riots, see KEVIN MCDERMOTT: Popular Resistance in Communist Czechoslovakia. The Plzeň Uprising, June 1953, in: *Contemporary European History* 19 (2010), 4, pp. 287-307.

tions, he complained, did not really want to help their compatriots, or arm them, but only to interview them for “informations [sic] about life in Poland”. Rekowski ended his interview by stating his disgust with the lack of preparations for war and assistance for the refugees, saying “I personally and all the persons I spoke to were very disappointed with the existing situation.”²⁸ Rekowski and others like him had hoped to find new agency in exile; they imagined that as armed soldiers they would be able to determine their own destiny. But instead, they found only a different kind of powerlessness. As refugees, they had few rights. No one met them with open arms, offering jobs, apartments and citizenship status. Not officially allowed to work, most wound up in refugee camps. There they sat, also marking time, waiting for the visas that would allow them to start new lives.²⁹

In these sources, the prevailing fear was not that war would break out but that peace would be maintained. People who had convinced themselves that their only path to happiness and freedom was to wait for a war that would remove the Communists from power worried constantly that this liberating war would never come. Z.H., who escaped from Hungary to Austria, was shocked to discover that war plans were not as imminent as he had believed. Although he did not say it, he and other refugees may have imagined exile to be a temporary rather than a permanent solution. But without war, it was not clear how they would ever be able to return home. Z.H. told the VOA, “Now that I am in Austria I am afraid that everything will stay as it is” because liberation for Hungary (and therefore also his own return home) seemed so far away. He lamented the complacency of both Austrians and Americans and hoped they would soon realize the danger communism posed even to them.³⁰

For anti-Communists, time was of the essence. They wanted war quickly. War was an attractive solution because it promised to be a fast, efficient, and relatively easy way of removing the Communists from power. Those who believed in war as the best means of liberation needed to be able to see it in these terms. Many cautioned their interviewers that it would be better to start the war sooner rather than later, while the Americans might still have a military advantage. The passage of time made it more difficult to believe that war would magically return their country to the place it had been in some mythical pre-Communist (and perhaps also pre-war) past. An older Bulgarian woman, a successful restaurant owner before communism, expressed the fear that war would arrive too late to matter. She lamented to RFE, “I think that if

²⁸ Interview #001, Ryszard Rekowski, 18.08.1951, Berlin, in: NARA, Iron Curtain Interviews, box 5, p. 9. Similar comments were made in Interview #002 Tadeusz Zielinski, 22.08.1951, Mannheim, and Interview #004, Włodzimierz Malekiewicz, 20.08.1952, Rowne, France, *ibidem*, box 5.

²⁹ On life for Polish refugees, see in addition to footnote 28 above, Interview #080, Mieczysław Ghylinski, 4.12.1951, Berlin, Interview #086 Stefan Birlet, 7.12.1951, Berlin, and Interview #087, Antoni Twardzik, 7.12.1951, Frankfurt-Zeilsheim, in: NARA, Iron Curtain Interviews, box 3.

³⁰ Interview #002, Z.H., 18.09.1951, Camp Astén, *ibidem*, box 1, p. 8.

Bulgaria has to wait ten years to be liberated it will be too late, as by then all the old anti-Communists will be dead, the middle-aged people will have become inert, and the young people communized.”³¹ If the war did not come soon, she implied, it might as well not come at all.

But even this feeling of urgency did not change the common assumption that true liberation could only come from abroad. Active resistance, explained Jaroslav Salivar, a bookseller from Prague, was futile under the current circumstances. He told the VOA “We do not see any other way out of the Bolshevik yoke, except by war.” The Communist regime was too effective at infiltrating the opposition or co-opting its members with promises of jobs, material advantages or simply protection from arrest. Resistance crumbled from inside as people became convinced that informers lurked everywhere and no one could be trusted. As Salivar explained, “In the interior we are weak, partly because we do not have arms and partly due to the fact that we are morally undermined. Experiences with resistance groups are bad, because there have always been traitors in individual groups. For this reason no new groups are being established for fear of betrayal.” He also cited the effectiveness of arrests and trials in making people feel as if overt opposition was useless, noting that “the best people have either been put in jail or have been executed.” Although Salivar spoke only a few years after the Communists had taken over the government, he firmly believed that the regime had already completely obliterated the possibility of domestic resistance. Active involvement in oppositional activities paradoxically only gave the Communists the opportunity to gain informers by threatening people with the choice of cooperation or jail. It was better to sit tight and hope for American intervention. As Salivar declared to VOA, “We are only waiting for help from the outside.”³²

However, to claim an inability to control the means of liberation did not mean that liberation would come easily and without cost. Several respondents declared they were willing to suffer for their liberation, if someone else started the war. A Slovak housewife from Michalovce told VOA “I don’t think that war should be prevented, because the Communists must be liquidated, or there will never be peace, and without war this is impossible. We reckon that there will be war in Slovakia too, that our property will be destroyed, but all the same, it has to be [...] it’s better to have a war than Russians in the country.”³³ Many RFE and VOA sources claim that they would welcome war, no matter the consequences. They believed that a war would be won by the West and that the defeat of Communist governments was worth the cost. An RFE informant interviewing Bulgarian refugees who fled Bulgaria in October 1951 emphasized their willingness to accept death as the price of freedom. “They

³¹ Attitude and Research Interview, Item #1531/55 (28.02.1955), in: OSA, fond 300-1-2, reel 50.

³² Interview #022, Jaroslav Salivar, Linz (no date), in: NARA, Iron Curtain Interviews, box 4, p. 49.

³³ Interview #024, Slovak (no initials), 17.10.1951, Linz, *ibidem*, p. 24.

fully realize the catastrophic consequences a new world war would bring to the whole of humanity,” the informant reported, “but they consider that this would be less harmful than the unending suffering imposed by the present tyrannical regime.”³⁴ These refugees, who had all experienced war before, did not believe war was glamorous or an opportunity for glory. But they did recognize its potential to circumvent the wishes of smaller nations, overturn their governments and rearrange the balance of power in the region, as had occurred already during their lifetimes. As war had enabled the Communist takeovers in Eastern Europe, they hoped it would enable the destruction of those same Communist regimes.³⁵

One letter written to RFE in 1951 from someone in Czechoslovakia who claimed to be part of a tiny resistance group registered disgust at the belief that effective change had to come from abroad. The author contrasted the small numbers of the opposition to the experience of German occupation during the Second World War, when, he claimed, everyone was willing to support the resistance. Now, he said, “80% of the people would like a reversal, but easily, without their own effort. They wait for a miracle in comfort, pandering and showing off, even if that is out of fear and disinclination.” The source warned that RFE should not think they could ever recreate the old interwar Czechoslovak Republic. If the regime should ever fall, he said, “you will find us tainted by socialism.”³⁶ This man was, however, in the minority for demanding that the people who opposed communism should actually do something other than simply wait for Western warplanes to bring their salvation, as well as for his conviction that a war would not miraculously wipe away the recent past, making it as if the Communist regime had never occurred. This informant’s comments point to why others emphasized waiting rather than acting. Acting implied negotiating with the regime, whereas waiting could be conceived as a form of stasis, an imagined holding pattern that would keep people the same until the regime fell. This was the key to the fantasy of liberation, that war would wipe away the Communists to reveal a society that had remained unchanged by their presence.

Taming Nuclear War: Soporific Bombs and American Flying Discs

We are used to thinking about the Cold War as being dominated by war fears, not war fantasies. In her book on fear, the historian Joanna Bourke sees

³⁴ Bulgaria. Communist Propaganda, Item #2472/52 (22.02.1952), in: OSA, fond 300-1-2, reel 7.

³⁵ BRADLEY F. ABRAMS: *The Second World War and the East European Revolutions*, in: *East European Politics and Societies* 16 (2002), 3, pp. 623-664; JAN GROSS: *The Social Consequences of War. Preliminaries of the Study of the Imposition of Communist Regimes in East-Central Europe*, in: *East European Politics and Societies* 3 (1989), 2, pp. 198-214.

³⁶ Item #3484/51 (20.07.1951), in: OSA, fond 300-30-2, reel 141.

the fear of nuclear war as the characteristic or motivating fear of the Cold War in the United States and the United Kingdom. The fear of nuclear war was so overwhelming, she claims, that it evoked only passivity—people could not imagine being able to alleviate the destruction and so they simply did not do anything (like build bomb shelters, prepare for an attack, etc.).³⁷ For anti-Communists in the People's Democracies, however, war was the only way out of passivity. War was the precondition for regaining agency and asserting control over their lives. As refugees imagined it, the chaos of war would sweep away the Soviets and allow domestic anti-Communists to take power. But fears of nuclear war had the potential to change this equation. It was hard to eagerly await destruction on the scale of Hiroshima or Nagasaki. After the development of the hydrogen bomb in 1953, the potential for devastation increased exponentially. Some claimed that even this was not a valid deterrent for war. An RFE report from 1952 based on interviews with 18 Bulgarian Jewish refugees sojourning in Naples on their way to Haifa claimed that Bulgarians were "reconciled to atom bombing if it will deliver them from the Communist yoke. At least the survivors will have a decent life."³⁸ Another report based on conversations with these same Bulgarian refugees remarked that although they knew another World War would be "catastrophic," they considered it no more dangerous than the policies of the Communist regime, which they claimed "does not hesitate to sacrifice whole generations" in its relentless pursuit of utopia.³⁹

Most respondents did not like to even imagine that war could have these kinds of consequences. Their fantasy of a liberating war tended to underplay the role of atomic weapons in any future conflict. Many simply did not mention the potential dangers of a nuclear conflict, choosing to focus on the expected positive results of a war, rather than any potentially dangerous consequences.⁴⁰ Others reckoned with the possibility of atomic weapons, but tried to minimize the impact they might have on the satellite countries. A young Czech air force pilot who had dramatically commandeered a plane to flee the country told RFE, "No one in the ČSR [Czechoslovak Republic] is afraid of atomic bombs. They think that if war broke out the ČSR would not be the main battlefield, because German soldiers would occupy it so quickly that in a few days it would be practically the hinterland [...] In the ČSR people ex-

³⁷ JOANNA BOURKE: *Fear. A Cultural History*, Emeryville 2006, pp. 255-285. American reactions to the atomic bomb were not always consistent during this period: there was a complicated mix of fear and nonchalance, so that fear rarely translated into political action. See PAUL BOYER: *By the Bomb's Early Light. American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age*, Chapel Hill 1994; LAURA MCENANEY: *Civil Defense Begins at Home*, Princeton 2000.

³⁸ Item #2734/52 (February 1952), in: OSA, fond 300-1-2, reel 7.

³⁹ Bulgaria, Communist Propaganda, Item # 2472/52 (February 1952), *ibidem*.

⁴⁰ For example, Interview #065 K.J., 2.01.1952, Munich, in: NARA, Iron Curtain Interviews, box 2, or Interview #082 Mieczysław Surowiecki, 4.12.1951, Frankfurt, or Interview #030, Marian Stefanski, 10.10.1951, both *ibidem*, box 3.

pect war as a sure thing.”⁴¹ One could also simply refuse to think about the consequences of war entirely. A British woman who fled Prague in 1955 after becoming estranged from her Czech husband claimed, “People constantly talk of ‘when we’re free.’ They don’t speak of how they will be freed and don’t really care [...] There is little mention of the A-bomb or the H-bomb and possibly people don’t even think of such things. The whole problem is to be free.”⁴² This source actually thought that war would create the backdrop against which a complete rejection of the regime would be possible. At the same time, she preferred to discount the thought of actual bloodshed, reducing the problem to one of finding elusive freedom, and not actually fighting or dying for it.

Many insisted that the Americans would not waste atomic or nuclear weapons on the countries of East-Central Europe. They created a fantasy of atomic bombs as miracle weapons that could instantaneously destroy Soviet power while leaving its satellites untouched. The Soviets would suffer a bloody defeat, but East-Central Europe would simply become free. American atomic bombs could thus be imagined as vehicles of liberation rather than destruction. Boguslawa Smolka-Bauer, a university-educated high school teacher from Poland, believed this fantasy was common among Poles. As she told a VOA interviewer, “People think that America will, first of all, hit Russia with atomic bombs, while U.S. armies will immediately invade the satellite countries.” Power would pass easily from the Soviets to the West, with all of the real damage occurring in the Soviet Union itself.⁴³ A Romanian student in 1956 had a similar fantasy. He told RFE: “The Americans will not bother throwing hydrogen bombs over Bucharest or Rumania, where people are ready to fight against Communism, as to launch a few over Russia will be sufficient to sow terror and panic not only in the USSR, but also among the satellite armies. People also say that a war of any sort is to be preferred to continuing to live in terror and misery; at least those who survive will live better.”⁴⁴ In this optimistic dream, there was no need to worry about the dangers of fallout or any other ramifications from nuclear devastation just to the east. Indeed, some openly relished the idea that atomic bombs would kill Soviets while sparing their own friends and family. N.Z., a 19 year old Hungarian refugee, asserted that Hungarians dreamed of war and not only because it might dislodge the Hungarian Worker’s Party from power. They fantasized about

⁴¹ Item #5782/54 (7.07.1954), in: OSA, fond 300-30-2, reel 141.

⁴² A British Woman’s Experiences As Housewife in Prague, Item #4677/56 (5.05.1956), *ibidem*, reel 136.

⁴³ Interview #084 Boguslawa Smolka-Bauer (as in footnote 10), p. 14.

⁴⁴ A Young Rumanian Views His Country and the West, Item #5603/56 (1.06.1956), in: OSA, fond 300-1-2, reel 69. Another example of this attitude is A Polish Refugee Eyes the World Around Him, Item #1459/54 (17.02.1954), *ibidem*, reel 34.

the effects war would have on the Soviets. "They hope, though, that maybe an atomic bomb will be dropped on the Russians on Russian territory."⁴⁵

In order for war to serve as a fantasy of liberation, the Americans had to win. Few refugees could picture a Soviet victory in the war they were sure would break out soon. They simply assumed that any war, no matter how arduous, would end in Soviet defeat. Most preferred to think, like M.V., a Czech student of viticulture from Humpolec, who said that "in case a third world war should start, we think that Russia will be eliminated by an atom bomb with lightning speed."⁴⁶ Refugees consistently asserted that the Soviets were no match for the Americans. Czechoslovak refugee P., a supervisor at the Jachymov uranium mine, claimed that the Soviet Union was a "giant on earthen feet."⁴⁷ In the event of a war, P. claimed, the Soviets would face internal revolt and would be forced to give in to the Americans. Others refused to believe that the Soviets could match American military technology. They fantasized that Soviet claims of developing atomic or hydrogen bombs were just lies. A Hungarian merchant who fled Budapest for Austria in 1954 told RFE that the "Soviet statement of possessing atomic bombs and plants is certainly only an [sic] empty propaganda. The Soviets have nothing; they want to steal the secret from the Americans."⁴⁸ In a similar fashion, a Czechoslovak sculptor declared the "Soviet Union is considered strong in manpower, weak in quality." If the Soviets had made a hydrogen bomb, he said, Czechoslovaks doubted they had the capability to drop it on New York.⁴⁹ The belief that the Soviets did not really possess nuclear technology or that even if they did, it would not work well (like other shoddy Soviet products, some claimed), served to create an entirely different vision of atomic or thermonuclear warfare. This wishful (or willful) thinking turned atomic bombs into the vehicle for refugee hopes and dreams instead of the stuff of nightmares.

This need to believe that atomic weapons could somehow be used to destroy the Soviets without also destroying their satellites had its echo in many other far-fetched rumors about mysterious and miraculous American war machines. These fantastic weapons would make it possible to get rid of Communist regimes without any loss of life, or loss of life only among the Communists. One Czech source to RFE reported a rumor in 1952 that the Americans had developed a "soporific bomb" that would put everyone not wearing a special mask to sleep; those spared the sudden nap could then easily cut the throats of the comatose Communists.⁵⁰ This particular rumor had legs. An

⁴⁵ Interview #023, N.Z., 10.10.1951, Camp Asten, in: NARA, Iron Curtain Interviews, box 1, p. 19.

⁴⁶ Interview #064 M.V., 2.-3.01.1952, *ibidem*, box 2, p. 20.

⁴⁷ Interview #053, P., 14.12.1951, Linz/Asten, *ibidem*, p. 27.

⁴⁸ Source's Attitude to Various Problems, Item #1110/55 (10.03.1955), in: OSA, fond 300-1-2, reel 49.

⁴⁹ Audience Analysis Interview with a Sculptor, Item #6431/56 (26.06.1956), *ibidem*, reel 70, 16.

⁵⁰ Item #15580/52 (20.12.1952), *ibidem*, reel 136.

émigré who illegally visited Czechoslovakia two years after this report was made claimed that several people he met had told him in all earnestness that the Americans had developed a special powder they could drop from planes that would put everyone to sleep and enable a clean and bloodless removal of the Communists.⁵¹ Nor was this idea limited to Czechoslovakia. A middle-aged Hungarian intellectual and author of a book entitled *The Consolation of Philosophy* claimed such rumors were cherished by Hungarians who wanted to believe that liberation could come without a war and its attendant costs. He said “spoiled beauties and so-called bel esprits [...] believe in a wonder-bomb with narcotic effects. One talked and dreamed of it in Hungary in the past. It is supposed to make enemies sleep for a couple of hours, during which the defenders of Western civilization could conquer their enemies behind the Iron Curtain without the use of destroying [sic] weapons.”⁵² While he scoffed at such people, his characterization of them shows the very real psychological need beliefs such as these addressed. They allowed for hope and optimism in a climate that otherwise provided scant fodder for either.

A Romanian student claimed that, during the summer of 1951, Romanians were convinced that they had spotted American “flying discs,” a new secret weapon that would be used to drop “atomic powder.”⁵³ It was not clear from this report what “atomic powder” would achieve, but the implication was that it would be a fast and painless way to liberation. Like the soporific bomb, flying discs and atomic powders were not simply miraculous. They bore a strong resemblance to the magical elements in fairy tales, like a bag of magic beans or a lamp that contained a genie. Provided by a benevolent if not always trustworthy source (here, the Americans) these magical objects could solve the problem of dictatorship in an instant. The popularity of these wild rumors, which flew in the face of any established scientific knowledge, reveals a population that was desperate for something that could completely reshape local conditions from afar. While those who spread these rumors may, in their heart of hearts, have questioned their authenticity, they wanted more than anything to believe that they could be true.

The reliance on fantasy as a coping mechanism also provided a ready and willing audience for other kinds of wild rumors. One 54 year old refugee from Czechoslovakia claimed that many people were turning to superstition. She related a rumor from Žilina, in Slovakia, where three men who had each been assigned in turn to remove a statue of the Virgin Mary all died under mysterious circumstances. She claimed “the majority of the population is greatly interested in all varieties of prophecy, horoscopes, spiritist [sic] sé-

⁵¹ General Mood in Czechoslovakia, Item #6995/54 (13.08.1954), *ibidem*.

⁵² Interview #001, Hungarian, 14.-15.09.1951, Salzburg, in: NARA, Iron Curtain Interviews, box 1, p. 9.

⁵³ People Believe In American Flying Discs, Item #4160/53 (17.04.1953), in: OSA, fond 300-1-2, reel 22.

ances, etc.”⁵⁴ Another source told RFE that he was well acquainted with Catholic mysticism and astrology and the signs had told him that the situation in Czechoslovakia would improve within two years.⁵⁵ The desire to predict the future also made its way into the above-mentioned report from Gottwaldov about how its population was waiting for liberation. Its author noted that there were many theories going around that purported to predict the fall of the regime. Some were Christian and based on using passages in the Bible as prophecies. Others were mystical and referred to sources as varied as the Egyptian pyramids and the Titanic to supposedly prove the exact date on which the regime was destined to fall.⁵⁶ Even official sources in Czechoslovakia make note of similar rumors. Reports from the Czechoslovak security services on the mood of the population from this period do not mention war fantasies or dates that people thought the regime would fall, but they do refer to various kinds of wild rumors that quickly spread through the population. Most spectacularly, one Czechoslovak secret police agent reported in April 1955 that rumors were rife among Protestant clergy that UFOs from Mars had landed in South America and parts of Scandinavia, and one pastor, Bohumil Mikulecký, apparently believed that UFOs from Mars had landed in Moravia.⁵⁷ The common denominator in all of these rumors was a willingness to believe anything that could grant access to new, privileged knowledge. To see something in a crystal ball or find evidence of extra-terrestrial life was to access a form of truth that contradicted official sources and gave its possessor a kind of control. The UFO phenomenon was, of course, not limited to East-Central Europe. UFO sightings became widespread in the United States at the beginning of the Cold War and spread from there around the world, although the specific resonances of such sightings necessarily owed much to local conditions.⁵⁸

War fantasies also provided a means of self-assertion and a way of combating the feeling of powerlessness. In these daydreams, people imagined what would happen once they could shed their protective passivity and internally enacted their revenge on the Communist regime. This was the case in the Kilian György Apprentices Home in Hungary. The source, a 16 year old who worked as a glass technician apprentice from 1952 to 1954, described how the apprentices used to while away their free time in the evenings Fantasizing about what they would do if a war broke out. They waited for it, the source said, in eager anticipation. It was not surprising that the apprentices would fantasize about an event that might improve their condition: their lives

⁵⁴ Revival of Superstition in ČSR, Item #8373/53 (15.08.1953), *ibidem*, reel 27.

⁵⁵ Item #2060/55, *ibidem*, reel 51.

⁵⁶ How Gottwaldov's Population (as in footnote 14).

⁵⁷ Hlášení o poznatcích k oslavám 1. a 9. máje a I.CS. (první (I.) celostátní spartakiáda) [Report on Findings for the Celebrations of 1 and 9 May and I.CS (First All-State Spartakiad)], (26.04.1955), in: Archiv Bezpečnostních Složek [Archive of the Security Services], Prague, Historický Fond [Historical Fond] aj. H-191/2.

⁵⁸ ALEXANDER C.T. GEPPERT: Extraterrestrial Encounters. UFOs, Science and the Quest for Transcendence, 1947-1972, in: *History and Technology* 8 (2012), 3, pp. 335-362.

were hard, food was scarce and their hostel was poorly heated. The apprentices clearly saw war as a means of taking control over their lives. They dreamed about how they would be able to use their military training to fight the Russians. They imagined escaping to join the Americans, not simply to be able to leave their troubles behind, but because this might enable their revenge fantasies against the Soviet troops.⁵⁹

The dream of another young Hungarian man, S.M., who fled the country to avoid military service, is a telling example of how fantasies of liberation related to domestic circumstances. S.M. imagined that after American forces routed the Communists, Hungary would become a colony of the United States. S.M.'s vision of this future American regime in Hungary provides insight into his perception of the Communist-led Hungarian state. Under American rule, "people would not be oppressed [...] Nothing would be taken away from them by confiscation. Maybe some of the wheat would be taken to the US" but, unlike the Soviets, the Americans would compensate the Hungarians. S.M. painted a lovely picture of happy Hungarian workers who willingly worked for an American occupation because they were paid like American workers, which made it possible for them to acquire houses and automobiles. But his prosperous, capitalist (and dependent) Hungary also included the possibility of revenge. He told the VOA, "Those who deserved it would be deported, but the thousands of innocent people would not have to fear deportation nor bear its burden." In S.M.'s fantasy of liberation, the Communists would pay for their past deeds by suffering the fates of those they had persecuted.⁶⁰

Political transformation and retribution were also themes in Mieczysław Surowiecki's vision of his native Poland after liberation. Surowiecki was 19 when he was interviewed by the VOA in Frankfurt. Before fleeing Poland he had been a high school student in Jarosław. He told his interviewer that he emigrated because he did not want to join the Communist youth organization ZMP. According to Surowiecki, war was a common theme in the Polish press. The media tried to stoke war fears to create support for the Communist regime and its Soviet allies, claiming that the Soviet Union would protect the peace that American war-mongers threatened.⁶¹ Surowiecki took the opposite approach and hoped that the war-mongers would do their work, which he believed would "bring freedom to Poland." While his sketch of the postwar Polish state was vague, he knew it would adhere to "the principles of American

⁵⁹ Life in the Kilian György Apprentices Home, Item # 3982/54 (10.04.1954), in: OSA, fond 300-1-2, reel 36.

⁶⁰ Interview # 022, S.M., 8.10.1951, Camp Asten, in: NARA, Iron Curtain Interviews, box 1, p. 12.

⁶¹ On the peace movement as a means of mobilization, see JAN C. BEHREND: Vom Pan-slawismus zum "Friedenskampf". Außenpolitik, Herrschaftslegitimation und Massenmobilisierung im sowjetischen Nachkriegsimperium (1944-1953), in: *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 56 (2008), pp. 27-53.

freedom,” allow Poles complete national sovereignty, and punish the Communists for their actions.⁶²

Epilogue: You Can’t Wait Out Socialism

Like all fantasies, war fantasies could not be sustained indefinitely. These dreams of armed Western intervention were the product of a particular time when East-Central Europeans struggled to adapt to the new reality of living under state socialism. Strongest in the period before Stalin’s death in 1953, war fantasies gradually lost their emotional power as it became more and more apparent that they would never come true. A report from a Czech official with the agricultural department of the Karlovy Vary National Committee claimed that in previous years people had often been convinced that the regime was about to fall—it would be by the next “spring or Christmas or October 28.” But now, he said, no one believed a war or foreign intervention was imminent. They did not think that any local action would matter, as lasting change could only occur if Communists lost power in the Soviet Union and all of its satellites, something they considered unlikely.⁶³

By 1955 or 1956, refugee sources began to contain more overt fears of nuclear war, undoubtedly a result of the development of more sobering and destructive weapons and also perhaps a reaction to the liberalizing policies of de-Stalinization. Several RFE interviews from 1956 express new doubts about the use of atomic bombs. A Bulgarian physician who fled Sofia in early 1956 told RFE he thought that the Bulgarian Communist regime was there to stay unless the international situation changed drastically. Many Bulgarians, he said, hoped for a war to dislodge them. But he was not so sure. As he told the interviewer, “I have no doubt about the horrible effects of nuclear weapons and realize that in a possible atomic war there will be no victor, there will only be defeated countries.” For this doctor, the probable realities of nuclear war had made the once easy question of whether or not there should be a war into an intractable dilemma.⁶⁴ A Hungarian peasant interviewed at around the same time had similar convictions. He said, “I know nothing about the effect of atomic weapons, except that they would ruin the non-fighting people too and that whole countries would be contaminated.” He claimed that “people” still wanted war, but that they “would prefer the future war to be fought with the ‘old’ weapons.”⁶⁵ This was perhaps not entirely ridiculous, given the model of the “limited” Korean War. But it was nonetheless the product of wishful

⁶² Interview #082 Mieczyslaw Surowiecki, 4.12.1951, Frankfurt, in: NARA, Iron Curtain Interviews, box 3, p. 16.

⁶³ Current Topics and How the Czechs Feel about Them, According to a KNV Official, Item #4219/54 (2.06.1954), in: OSA, fond 300-1-2, reel 38.

⁶⁴ A Bulgarian Physician Answers the Audience Analysis Schedule, Item #3882/56 (14.04.1956), *ibidem*, reel 67.

⁶⁵ Audience Analysis Interview with a Peasant Lad, Item #6570/56 (28.06.1956), *ibidem*, reel 70, p. 5.

thinking to dream that the Soviet Union would relinquish its European satellites in a war without touching its nuclear arsenal.

And for some, war itself began to look less attractive as time passed and lives settled into new routines. Even with the material shortages of the Stalinist period, people began to build homes and existences that they did not want to see destroyed. One émigré, a Pole who had been a member of the AK during the Second World War (and therefore not averse to a fight) claimed in 1954 that another war would be devastating for Poland. Even though he disagreed with the regime enough to flee the country, he did not want to see a newly rebuilt Warsaw flattened. As he said “[I]f a new war destroys everything again, no one will have enough strength to rebuild. No one will have enough energy to begin again as before.” He maintained that the impetus for change would have to come from somewhere besides war.⁶⁶ This position was articulated even more forcefully by a Polish woman visiting London in April of 1956. She claimed that after the death of Poland’s Stalinist leader Bolesław Bierut, Poles had lost their taste for war. Five or six years ago, she said, people would have welcomed military solutions, but now they realized how much destruction that would mean and how much they actually had to lose. Émigrés might still want war, but, at least according to this woman, that feeling was not shared by their compatriots at home.⁶⁷ Finally, the Polish October of 1956 allowed many in that country to believe that war was no longer necessary, even if it had been possible.⁶⁸

Elsewhere, after the failed Hungarian revolution of 1956, where the only foreign intervention came from the Soviets, few in Eastern Europe could still fantasize about wars of liberation.⁶⁹ But if there would be no hero riding in on his mythical white horse (or parachuting in from his silvery airplane) to save the day, what would happen to the residents of East-Central Europe? The fantasy of a liberating war had enabled anti-Communists to believe that they could wait out socialism. The idea of waiting became a coping mechanism that allowed many people to live their daily lives in a socialist system while imagining themselves to be somehow fundamentally apart from that system, even if the process of everyday life required ideological and moral compromises. The Bulgarian refugee pharmacist quoted at the beginning of this essay held firmly to the belief that when his neighbors marched and cheered for communism, they did so only outwardly. As he told RFE, “the general ap-

⁶⁶ A Polish Refugee Eyes the World Around Him (as in footnote 44).

⁶⁷ Poland after Bierut’s Death, Item #3913/56 (16.04.1956), in: OSA, fond 300-1-2, reel 67. This particular respondent was a traveler, not an émigré. She was quite critical of Polish émigré leaders in London.

⁶⁸ An Optimist’s View of Poland’s Future, Item #11364/56 (20.12.1956), *ibidem*, reel 76. Also see PAWEŁ MACHCEWICZ: *Rebellious Satellite. Poland 1956*, Washington, D.C. 2009.

⁶⁹ For example: We Shall Be Liberated Only When Communism Disappears in Russia, Item #11068/56 (18.12.1956), in: OSA, fond 300-1-2, reel 76.

pearance of surrender is only superficial.”⁷⁰ Whether or not this was actually the case, he was comforted by this belief. Indeed, the idea that one could wall oneself off from the regime and not be affected by it was the most compelling fantasy of all. But as the possibility of Western intervention faded from even remote possibility, this dream would also have to die.

The feelings of powerlessness and uncertainty that sparked these war fantasies were the product of the Stalinist system, with its mass arrests, strict work rules, and limited access to consumer goods. During the period of de-Stalinization it became apparent that change was possible from within, albeit within strictly defined limits. Many harsh policies were ameliorated and new opportunities beckoned the citizens of the People’s Democracies. As prisons opened and the threat of arrest receded, feelings of fear and helplessness also faded, if they did not completely disappear. It became possible for East-Central Europeans to imagine, and achieve, a more livable socialism.⁷¹ These gains undermined the very essence of the war fantasies. To affect change within the socialist system, East-Central Europeans had to stop waiting and start acting. They could no longer adhere to the fantasy of their own passivity or believe that communism itself might suddenly, and miraculously, vanish.

Zusammenfassung

Schlafbomben und fliegende Untertassen aus Amerika. Kriegsfantasien in Ostmitteleuropa, 1948-1956

In Interviews, die 1948-1956 von den Radiosendern Voice of America und Radio Free Europe geführt wurden, äußerten Flüchtlinge und Berichterstatter häufig den Wunsch nach einem Krieg. Sie hofften auf einen vom Westen angeführten Feldzug, der ihre Länder von der kommunistischen Diktatur befreien würde. Der vorliegende Beitrag untersucht diese Kriegsfantasien, indem Quellen aus Polen, Ungarn, der Tschechoslowakei, Rumänien und Bulgarien analysiert werden. Es soll gezeigt werden, dass diese Kriegsträume dazu dienten, mit dem Gefühl der Machtlosigkeit zurechtzukommen, das in der Region nach der Errichtung der kommunistischen Regime um sich gegriffen hatte. Zwar waren die Flüchtlinge – angesichts der Ausnahmesituation, in der sie sich befanden, und ihrer politischen Voreingenommenheit – keinesfalls repräsentativ für die Gesamtbevölkerung, doch lassen sich aus ihren Aussagen dennoch wichtige Stimmungen und Trends ablesen.

Die Interviewten wiesen immer wieder darauf hin, dass sie selbst unfähig seien zu handeln. Sie charakterisierten sich als Gefangene oder Sklaven, die nichts anderes tun konnten, als auf den Moment zu warten, in dem der Westen sie befreien würde. Doch diese angeblich aufgezwungene Passivität war selbst auch eine Fantasie. Sie bewahrte den Respondenten die Vorstellung, sie selbst und diejenigen, die sie zurückgelassen hatten, seien von den örtlichen kommunistischen Regimen vollkommen getrennt. Eingehüllt in ihren siche-

⁷⁰ Refugees Give Assorted Interpretations of Life in Communist Bulgaria (as in footnote 13).

⁷¹ This is true even in Hungary, despite the failed revolution of 1956. It could easily be argued that by the 1970’s, the Kádár regime had created the most livable socialism of them all.

ren Kokon der Passivität blieben sie von den Wechselwirkungen und Aushandlungsprozessen mit dem sozialistischen Staat unberührt. Indem die Interviewten behaupteten, dass nur eine bewaffnete Intervention von außen ihnen ihre verloren gegangene Kraft zurückgeben könne, sprachen sie sich selbst von dem Bedürfnis nach tatkräftigem Handeln frei. Einige erklärten, dass die Gewalt und die Zerstörung eines weiteren Krieges ein Preis sei, den zu zahlen es lohne, um die Kommunisten loszuwerden. Aber häufiger noch kam es vor, dass Befragte die potenziellen Zerstörungen einfach abtaten. Sie malten sich aus, dass ein Krieg auf leichte und saubere Art und Weise den Kommunisten die Macht entreißen und ihre Länder in eine mythische Vorkriegszeit zurückversetzen würde. Sie ließen die zerstörerische Kraft atomarer Waffen unberücksichtigt oder behaupteten, dass sie nur gegen die Sowjetunion und nicht gegen Ostmitteleuropa eingesetzt werden würden. Andere glaubten, dass die Amerikaner Waffen wie z.B. Schlafbomben entwickelt hätten, die die Kommunisten – nicht jedoch ihre Gegner – in einen tiefen Schlaf versetzen würden. Hier wurde Krieg als eine Art *deus ex machina* betrachtet, eine hilfreiche und gänzlich unrealistische Apparatur, die auf magische Weise all ihre Probleme lösen würde. Diese Kriegsfantasien begannen nach 1956 zu schwinden, als es mehr und mehr offensichtlich wurde, dass der Westen wohl kaum im Ostblock intervenieren würde.