

Decision-making in the Rockefeller Foundation's Projects in Hungary

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After the first World War, Rockefeller philanthropies extended their activities to Eastern Europe, including Hungary. Their support significantly contributed to the improvement of public health in Hungary, a field which had remained backward even during the vigorous economic development of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy in the latter 1800s. Indeed, the Rockefeller Foundation helped to establish various public health institutions in Czechoslovakia, Poland, Yugoslavia and attempted to take some initial steps to do the same in other countries in the area, like Bulgaria and Rumania. The outlines of this RF project have been given in an earlier paper by Paul Weindling.

The motives of the RF, however, remained largely unknown. In my research I assumed that the RF made a strategic decision to include Eastern Europe in its programs. This supposed decision and its reasons could have justified the RF actions and could throw light on the possibly hidden political goal of constructing a neutral zone between the Russian Communism and the German Nazism, the contours of which had already emerged on the horizon.

The logic of starting the RF East European Project

The archival material of the International Health Board and of the Program and Policy folders, complemented by some officer's diaries, seem to prove that a particular strategic decision to go to Eastern Europe was never made. Rather, the extension might have been a logical step in a gradual, not planned development.

This development has been outlined in several documents. Already in 1913, it was stated that "the eradication of the hookworm disease, to be permanently effective, must not stop in one country but be carried straight around the world. . . . The trustees have established an organization with the comprehensive title of International Health Commission (IHC) and have delegated to it the immediate task of attacking the hookworm in foreign countries always with the active support and cooperation of the local authorities." This decision was preceded by an extension of the scope of activity from one specific epidemic disease, the hookworm disease, to an other one, malaria, and later to many others, including tuberculosis. Simultaneously, a territorial enlargement was introduced which led first to Asia, primarily to China, then to Europe. This is a key document for understanding RF's motives to step onto the international stage.

The first European experience, beginning with a large project in France, led the Rockefeller philanthropic activities to newer areas. It was Frederick Gates' far-reaching idea to establish a large health organization, which, according to officer Greene, needed "the better education of public health officers." Following this, in 1916 the International Health Board (IHB) of the Rockefeller Foundation took over the role of IHC, supplemented by rights to initiate philanthropic health programs on an international scale. This organizational precondition contributed to the increasing RF activity after the First World War.

When the RF established itself in Europe, it soon turned toward the eastern part of the continent. Right after the end of World War I, in 1918, the RF recognized that, though the armies were withdrawn, "the frightful prevalence" of epidemics was still present and "disease recognizes no international borders." The next year, the domains of the desired programs were pinpointed: "medical information, country units of public health demonstrations, urban health surveys, study of possible aid to dispensaries of New York City, training of public health nurses, aid to school hygiene in foreign countries, study of public health organization and administration in Europe and America, aid in developing of the public health laboratories."

The first surveys made in Eastern Europe were administered by the RF's Paris office, which had been set up in 1919 to direct the first major European program, the fight against tuberculosis in France. In 1920 IHB director Wickliffe Rose summarized the East European situation in a letter to RF President Vincent: "We feel heavy responsibility for the European situation, we ought not to overlook any opportunity which offers fair chance of successful aid, are inclined to send unostentatiously small commissions to Eastern Europe and Balkans to inquire into industrial education and health conditions." Rose cited a cable written by an officer: "Conditions in Eastern Europe most unstable; needs great; situation calls primarily for emergency relief; despite unpromising outlook advise sending commission; it could gather information for future use; probable work in more favorable countries might begin near future." Rose's letter offered bits of information concerning Serbia, Austria, Hungary, Rumania, Bulgaria, Poland, "Tcheko-Slovakia," Montenegro, Albania. This may well be the first sign of the RF's intention to extend its supporting activity toward Eastern Europe. Undoubtedly, this was due to the unlucky postwar situation of these countries and to the RF's recognition of the economic

and health hardships that existed in the area. Indeed, Hungary was considered as one of the countries in the region which needed help after its defeat in the war.

RF personnel made regular reports on the results achieved by the RF's activities and on the actual situation in Eastern Europe. In 1921 Rose summarized the results of the international actions: "we now have a body of solid achievement upon which to base our plans for the future." From the records the gradual progress of the projects in the various countries can be tracked. As early as 1924, one report noted that in Hungary "the situation looks distinctly hopeful."

The RF seemed to follow the same logic from country to country. After establishing initial contacts, a survey was made about the health situation. Then the actions changed somewhat depending on the actual need of the given country, depending, for instance, on what kind of serious epidemic diseases endangered that country. In Eastern Europe public health was the RF's main concern. The RF helped to establish public health institutes and, starting from there, to organize demonstrations and set up health stations. This could not work without the support of experts. Therefore, the RF instituted a program of fellowships to help establish a circle of experts trained in the U.S. or in a Western country. The careers of these people after their return to their homeland were followed and sometimes promoted by the RF. Through these activities RF gained a strong foothold in these countries and became committed to some people and institutes, though these commitments never led to subjective judgments. Yet the personal relationships made it possible for some former fellows to apply successfully for research grants when the RF's policy turned to favor research after 1928.

According to my latest findings, all these ramifications followed from the RF's policy and changing goals, probably without a general political framework - at least the archival material I studied did not show explicit political decisions. It is interesting, however, to follow the lines of the internal logic of an activity that began from the defense against one epidemic disease and developed into a complicated structure that included the support of many branches of science, including medical and biological sciences, but also other natural and social sciences. This latter has not yet been studied as extensively as life sciences.

The Work of RF in Hungary

While the policy records show the actual states of the general framework, the Hungarian case illustrates how it worked in reality. While my earlier studies explored the outlines of the RF's activity in Hungary, in my latest research I tried to look "behind the scenes" with the help of the officer's diaries. In their diary entries Rose, Tisdale, L.W. Jones, and Warren Weaver detailed their experiences in the various ministries and institutions as well as their impressions of people. They vividly depicted some scenes of the contemporary Hungary, including Budapest, Szeged, Pecs, Debrecen, Tihany and some smaller villages. Their words painted portraits of politicians, like ministers Klebelsberg and Vass; undersecretaries, Magyary and Schandl; professors of medicine, Nekam and Verzar; professors of science, Zemplen and Schmid. An example is the characterization of Kuno Klebelsberg, Minister of Religion and Public Instruction, a historic figure, given

by Rose: "Young man, perhaps not more than 45, fine appearance; intellectually keen; apparently much in earnest in service to cause of education in Hungary." These kinds of impressions cannot be found in the Hungarian sources. About a professor of theoretical physics, Isidor Frolich, Rose noticed that "apparently doing little at present time, no promise for future." Rose was certainly right.

The diaries describe the buildings, the labs, the equipment, and the subjects at various university departments at the Budapest Technical University, University of Budapest, and other schools. Tisdale, for example, listed every laboratory device that he saw in the labs of the Technical University in 1930. All these are important sources for better understanding the situation of science in Hungary in the interwar period.

Rose met the representatives of a movement called "Falu," which aimed at raising the cultural level of the small Hungarian villages. When he was hosted in a private village house, he found it "most interesting to observe that many of crafts of former times are still living in this land -- such cottage industries as mat-making, basketry, flax-spinning, lace embroidery . . ." The records prove that the RF had an interest in various aspects of agricultural life, though the support finally granted to it was not substantial. Hungary was an agricultural country, after all.

These details become meaningful in the light of the RF's support policy. The officers' impressions were vital to the success of a particular application. The officers learned that research had deep roots in Hungary. There were very good and sometimes brilliant experts who worked in nice buildings but mostly with few and backward devices. Since the RF usually gave grants for limited periods of time, it was often questionable whether, when considering to fund the purchase of an expensive and important instrument, future governmental support could cover the cost of keeping it in operation. This was the problem of "maintenance money," which pervaded many discussions about applications for RF support.

Adaptation Problems of the Refugee Hungarians in the Diaries

In their diaries, RF officers recounted their meetings with Hungarian scientists living in foreign countries, mostly Germany. The later Nobel Laureate George Hevesy and the physical chemist Michael Polanyi were visited several times. They apparently were regarded very highly among the scientists who might be supported.

The diaries maintained by the RF officers provide readers not only with a portrait of the scientists mentioned in the text but also a better understanding of the circumstances of their daily lives working in science. From the point of view of the Hungarians working in Germany, the history of German science in the late 1920s and 1930s seemed just background, yet, in the general history of science the developments of these decades were of great importance. At the beginning, to the RF officers Hevesy appeared to be a vigorous professor in Freiburg with a good chance of becoming a leading figure in German chemistry. His department was expanded with new buildings and the RF supported its acquisition of new equipment. Later Hevesy became uncertain about his future because of the Nazification of the university. After 1933 he decided to leave

Freiburg and asked the RF to continue his support in Copenhagen, where he settled. This continuation resulted in a large grant given to Niels Bohr, the head of the institute. Another leading chemist, the Nobel Laureate Fritz Haber, Michael Polanyi's boss, first seemed a major power in his field in Germany. Then he gradually lost his power and finally was fired from his job. Polanyi first appeared to be a young scientist with a bright future in Germany, but when his perspectives turned gloomy, he accepted a job at the University of Manchester, where his contact with the RF continued.

While making efforts to help the scientists fleeing from Nazi Germany in and after 1933, the officers mapped the opportunities in England. The turmoil which was caused in Britain by this flow of migrating scientists is described in the pages of the RF officers' diaries. The RF was looking for organizations with which it could cooperate in rescuing many former RF fellows. The Academic Assistance Council was the most important early organization for this. One of its initiators was the Hungarian physicist Leo Szilard, whose role seemed obscure to the officers. But they wanted to help those young scientists, like the Hungarian Farkas brothers, who were considered very gifted but whose academic record did not show great results. Finally they found refuge in Israel. The RF officers' diaries are exceptionally rich in these kinds of stories, which are dispersed throughout the thick volumes.

The story of Laszlo Zechmeister, professor of organic chemistry, also began in Britain. The RF was trying to find an expert for a project being conducted at Caltech in Pasadena, under the direction of Linus Pauling. The goal of the project was to establish the field of biological chemistry (not biochemistry as such) at the university and the project needed an expert of natural products. The RF officers had negotiations with chemists in England and they found Niemann, who joined the faculty at Caltech; but they also found Zechmeister, professor of organic chemistry at the University of Pecs in southern Hungary. His move to the U.S. and first experiences with American science can be reconstructed from the diaries.

These accounts show the cultural gap that an emigre scientist had to bridge. One of these differences was related to the role of research assistants. During his first visit, in 1938, Zechmeister had noticed that American science lacked the atmosphere of a creative group. American scientists worked individually without rationally dividing the tasks of their research. He definitely needed to take at least one assistant with him to Pasadena from Hungary. This could have been managed, though not without resentment from the American side.

Albert Szent-Gyorgyi's RF Connections after World War II

An interesting example of this kind of difficulty was illustrated by the case of Albert Szent-Gyorgyi, a Nobel Laureate biochemist. Before emigrating to the United States he was professor at the Szeged University. In this way, he preserved his relationship with the RF, which began in the 1920s in Cambridge, when Szent-Gyorgyi belonged to F. G. Hopkins' circle. In a previous paper I have described the RF's generous grant to Szeged University, which was established right after the First World War and struggled with the difficulties and hardships due to the postwar economic crisis.

After the Second World War, in 1947, Szent-Gyorgyi, the most famous scientist living in Hungary, left the country for America. Being around age 55, he did not want to change his way of living radically, but wanted to keep his Hungarian working style in America. He made tremendous efforts to achieve this goal, but it proved to be extremely difficult.

In my research I found out that Szent-Gyorgyi corresponded with the RF from 1945 until 1953 and, in addition, the RF recorded all kinds of information that came to the knowledge of the officers. From these and from the correspondence and diaries, Szent-Gyorgyi's very special way of adaptation can be reconstructed. Szent-Gyorgyi smuggled out around fifteen researchers from the Soviet-dominated Hungary in the hope of reestablishing his research group in America. There was no university, however, which could absorb such a crowd together. Some of them, including MIT, would have been glad to have Szent-Gyorgyi as a faculty member, but he insisted on keeping his staff and did not want to occupy any regular teaching position. Therefore, he had to build up an entrepreneurial research style. Without a tenured position, he based himself in the Marine Biological Laboratory in Woods Hole and secured both his research money and private income by fundraising. In this he sometimes turned to the RF, which refused him several times but twice (1947, 1952) granted him some funds to buy research instruments. Szent-Gyorgyi's changing moods but insistent strategy can well be read in the RF records. It is quite a dramatic reading, which raises questions concerning the research styles in Europe and America, the advantages and disadvantages of the different styles in various surroundings, the rigidity of research systems and of the researchers, the adaption problems of migrating scientists, and many other issues.

The grant-in-aid that I received from RAC helped me to continue my research on the RF support given to Hungary or Hungarians. These results may contribute to the further understanding not only the significance of the RF support in a single country but perhaps also of the work of the RF itself. I am most grateful for the grant and for the excellent assistance of the RAC staff.