



This photograph was taken by Tamás Urbán at a concert in 1981 (It now belongs to Fortepan).

The COURAGE Registry: A Gateway to the Cultural Heritage of Eastern European Nonconformism

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ABSTRACT

The COURAGE Registry is a digital research tool that allows exploring the legacy of cultural opposition in former Eastern European socialist countries by cataloging and describing relevant collections on dissident culture across Eastern Europe and worldwide. The linked database reveals a great variety of nonconformist cultural practices that were formerly largely unknown and promotes comparative research of similar phenomena in Eastern European societies and cultures. The researchers on the project tended to treat visual sources as traces of the past equally as important as written documents. Images were not only illustrations of the given narratives but, in some cases, visual documents were the only sources that preserved the memory of the alternative or underground activity, while in other cases, it was the act of taking pictures that resulted in the confrontation with official cultural policy. This article aims to provide insight into the basic dilemmas and issues that the project faced dealing with images for the database through three examples. Firstly, we focus on the photo documentation of an exhibition of the Hungarian art group Inconnu that was made by the secret police following the destruction of the artworks. Secondly, we show how photos were also taken by official photographers who operated in the so-called "grey zone." Finally, our third example refers to Fortepan, a unique public initiative that focuses on the digital preservation of private photographs created between 1900 and 1990.

KEYWORDS

Cultural opposition; underground culture database; digital collection; Eastern Europe; secret police; grey zone.

The COURAGE Project was funded by the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation program to uncover the visual and material heritage of cultural opposition in former socialist countries in Central and Eastern Europe. The main pillar of the project was the online database, the Registry (<http://cultural-opposition.eu/registry/>), which contains illustrated descriptions of 566 collections on dissident culture across Eastern Europe and worldwide. Since its launch in 2016, the

COURAGE platform/database has striven to understand how visual and material collections operate and relate to each other. What is the relation between their private, public, and "hidden" nature? Are there any differences between alternative and large mainstream collections? What functions and roles do they serve in the respective societies? How do they present their holdings to the public? And how do these collections shape political and memory cultures?

The creation and preservation of these

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collections are arguably acts of manipulation and interpretation, and their investigation has revealed the hermeneutic processes behind the tendency for cultural opposition to become a self-reflexive social practice. The genre of photography is specific in this respect for it assumes a second-order observer by definition for whom the conscious act of documenting an activity is evident. Collections of photo documentation, therefore, were just as disturbing for the authoritarian regimes as the illegal or non-conformist activities themselves, and it was often rather dangerous during state socialism to create and preserve such collections. This article attempts to provide insight into the basic dilemmas and issues that the project faced dealing with images for the database.

In this paper, by using examples mainly from the Hungarian context, we show that the multiple roles and controversial connections between the participants in the cultural life resulted in different “transitional categories.” The “agents” described in the following categories acted not only as documenters of certain events, as groups of people, and the like, but also the preservers of such photo documents. Our first category refers to the secret police, and their photo documentations, which sometimes became the only chronicler and preserver of dissent culture, such as in the case of the Hungarian art group *Inconnu*. Our second category is related to those photos that were taken by official photographers who operated frequently in the so-called “grey zone” (e.g., Tamás Urbán). The third category refers to Fortepan (<https://fortepan.hu>) which is a unique public initiative, dealing with the digital preservation of private photographs created between 1900 and 1990. Through this case, one can see how photographs shape the heritage of cultural opposition and dissent in recent times.

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Images were not only illustrations of the given narratives but an effort was made to add detailed descriptions and metadata to them. In some cases, visual documents were the only sources that preserved the memory of the alternative or underground activity, while in other cases, it was the act of taking pictures that resulted in the confrontation with official cultural policy.

Visual traces of the cultural opposition are relatively rare or are hidden. Since such activities could be illegal or banned at that time, it was dangerous for the participants to create such documentation. Photographs of underground or alternative life could be turned into pieces of evidence in the hands of the secret police, and therefore taking photos not only potentially compromised the photographer but was also risky because it made the participants identifiable. Private collectors at some point either destroyed their collections fearing persecution or carefully hid their images. Distrust in the state in general and in public archives often prevented collectors from storing their materials in accessible repositories even after the regime changes (Scheibner 2018: 406).

The press was certainly not a good source of such photographs either. Unapproved images of nonconformist activities or photos of the most underprivileged communities of society were not allowed to be published. Such content was not illegal but was not supported by the state. Such photos were preserved primarily in private collections as the acquisitions of public institutions (museums or archives) were monitored as well; although there admittedly were great differences between the management of these repositories in terms of how strictly they followed cultural-political directives. In most cases, though, an ideological selection prevailed, which frequently sealed the fate of oppositional pieces that went against state propaganda and the mainstream artistic taste of the time. These phenomena together resulted in the lack of visual documentation

on several topics.

Paradoxically, sometimes the documentation of countercultural activities was the result of the surveillance operations of the secret police. As an example here we can mention the exhibition of the Hungarian art group Inconnu titled *The Fighting City* project, which we will analyze later (Huhák 2018). The second category is the visual heritage of alternative or oppositional activities made by the participants or other stakeholders themselves, frequently by professional photographers.

In dealing with this topic, the COURAGE database adopted a strategy opposite to the practice of former socialist states. In contrast with the archives that the socialist secret police would build to accumulate information and to control, the Registry provides free access to these stories and images stored on one platform. The project has thus collected the venues and scenes of alternative culture, the “backstage of communist reality and power” (Bádică 2014: 203), such as the chapel studio in Balatonboglár, the Black Hole underground club, or the Orpheo group’s commune.

Starting with the first category, the Hungarian secret police observed culture in many ways. Surveillance targeted religion, art, youth subcultures, and creative intellectuals throughout the four decades of state socialism in Hungary. One example was the exhibition organized in Budapest in 1986 by the amateur artist group Inconnu to mark the thirtieth anniversary of the Hungarian Revolution of 1956. The group had become well-known for their alternative, oppositional artistic and political actions. They started developing their performances with obvious and direct political content in the mid-1980s, parallel to the actions of the democratic opposition. In 1986, Inconnu announced an international fine art tender to organize an apartment exhibition at Tibor Philipp’s apartment who was a member of Inconnu—as it would have been impossible to organize a public exhibition. The idea of



Photo 1: Inconnu group, 1988. Photo credit: Fortepan/Tibor Philipp.

1956 played a central role in the Inconnu mindset, their artistic expression, and their attitude to the Kádár regime (Gyáni 2006).

The foreign pieces sent to Inconnu for the exhibition were mostly copies, reproductions, and mailed-in artworks. According to the police report, the collection was “counter-revolutionary”: forty-three items—photos, graphics, paintings, other artifacts—and illegal press issues (a further thirty-nine items) were confiscated and later destroyed. Although the original catalog included data on the artists and their work, the artifacts themselves—as a collection curated as an exhibition conception—were preserved solely “thanks” to the photo documentation of the secret police. Thereby, the secret police itself created—as part of their destructive action—the collection of sources that today constitutes the single visual trace that depicts the exhibition in its entirety.

Just hours before the opening, the police confiscated all the artworks from the apartment where the exhibition was to be displayed, leaving behind only the official confiscation order. As a reaction to that, the Inconnu group decided to paste more than forty copies of this order (the same number as that of the confiscated artworks) on the

walls in an attempt to create “true visual absurdity” in the absence of the seized items. Even though the original exhibition was no longer physically present, it was opened to an audience of roughly one hundred people. For the opening, the artists of the Inconnu group presented a statement/manifesto, in which they reacted and protested against the action of the police (Sümegei 2010).

Art historian György Sümegei (2010) wrote in his study that *The Fighting City* was simultaneously a political act and a courageous artistic action. This exhibition is undoubtedly unique due to several other aspects. First of all, in 1986 this was the only international exhibition on the topic of 1956 in Hungary. Obviously, numerous artifacts were created to commemorate the Revolution, but none of the artists or groups undertook to organize a public presentation from these materials. Secondly, we cannot find any other examples of simultaneously banning and dismantling a full exhibition either. According to Sümegei, the officers did not consider the collection of artworks a real exhibition because of the unusual installation format—the pictures sent in were mounted on matboard instead of being framed. So perhaps they made this irreversible decision more easily. We can read about this fact in the police documentation, but, indeed, the appearance of the artworks was not the real problem; the goal was to threaten the oppositional groups and the artists (Apor et al. 2018).

The second category of visual material is represented by sources generated by official or amateur photographers who were organizers, participants, or just visitors of the given events. Taking photographs on certain sensitive topics could be interpreted as oppositional action. For example, during the 1980s, Alexandru Barnea, a historian and archaeologist, decided to start capturing buildings in cities and villages with his photo camera as an act of “passive resistance” against the Romanian Communist Party’s policy of demolition of historic buildings—

the so-called *sistematizare* or systematization—as it was about to be put into practice (Pătrășconiu and Petrescu 2017). There is also another example given by the Croatian Goran Pavelić Pipo who took photos of the new wave music concerts in Zagreb from the late 1970s to the late 1980s (Godić 2018). The Hungarian photographer Ferenc Kálmándy also documented the transformations of the Hungarian youth culture, underground pop, and intellectual art scene during the 1980s (Havasréti 2019).

The communist regime was constantly dedicated to creating their representational canon of potentially dangerous social groups, especially the youth subcultures (e.g., the hippies). The negative stigmatization of deviants or the enemy of the state (or the people) could be repeatedly seen during the regime. However, many official photographers were able to use an empathic, humane approach when taking photos of different social interactions and events. Sometimes, this protected status also gave them a unique opportunity to capture the realities of life in the people’s democracy that could be perceived as politically sensitive by the regime. That was also the case of Tamás Urbán who took photographs in a youth prison near Budapest, capturing the terrible conditions and the everyday brutalities the inmates endured.

Urbán was a well-known forensic and social documentary photographer, but also did commercial work. An important part of his oeuvre was related to *Ifjúági Magazin* (Youth Magazine), where he spent almost twenty years starting with the 1970s, taking photos of the emerging pop music scene (concerts, venues, bands). In the 1980s, he also started working more on social issues (drug addicts, youth subcultures) using a sociographic viewpoint.

Unfortunately, some of his projects fell victim to censorship and could not be seen at that time. However, from the beginning of his career, Urbán was very determined





Photo 2: Black Hole Underground Club, 1988. Photo credit: Fortepan/Tamás Urbán.

to archive and document his own works. In 2015, Urbán started using the Fortepan platform for publishing many of his photos. This act also shows how a private collection containing mostly unpublished photographs from the socialist era became part of a digital platform providing free access—it can be used and modified by any user under Creative Commons 3.0.

This case leads us to the history of the Fortepan platform (Scheibner and Horváth 2018), an innovative and groundbreaking answer to the question of how we can make our photo heritage available to a wide audience. The largest free-use digital photo collection documents the twentieth century until 1990. Launched in 2011 as a private non-profit initiative, its name, Fortepan, references a former Hungarian photography company, Forte. The platform has been dynamically expanding as both institutions and private individuals have donated photos; the collection grows by about 15,000 new items each year. As a result, today we can browse more than 134,000 items.

The founder Miklós Tamási's interest in

old photographs was partly connected to the memory of the Revolution of 1956. As he put it in a 2010 interview, “For me, the starting point for collecting photographs was the Revolution. I was interested in 1956 and curious about the details, few of which were available at the time. This was in 1987–1988, and except for a few blurry pictures in textbooks, visual materials were not accessible. Furthermore, my father was taking pictures in 1956. I saw these pictures in the family albums, and they were very interesting” (Terján 2010).

The amateur and official photos on Fortepan mainly originated from flea markets, inheritances, donations from individuals and companies, and public collections. Tamási considers the collection an online exhibition. According to his conception, only those digitized items are put on the website that have good quality, meet the basic compositional requirements, and have some interest regardless of the topic. Fortepan seems to have broken down a social and cultural wall: we can find these photos not only in newspapers,





Photo 3 : Black Hole Underground Club, 1988. Photo credit: Fortepan/Tamás Urbán.

magazines, history books, or in exhibitions, but also in communal and private spaces, in schools, movies, corridors of multinational companies, or even dentist's reception areas (Scheibner 2018).

Fortepan covers, among other things, cultural opposition under communism in Eastern Europe. We can find photos of underground music scenes, alternative theatre, and film, "grey zone" cultural activities, and the democratic opposition. We should mention here the documentation work of István Jávör, the founder of the independent video periodical *Fekete Doboz* [Black Box] (Mravik et al. 2018); photos by sociologist István Kemény and film director Pál Schiffer about the Gypsy settlements; Tamás Urbán's pictures on the underground music club Fekete Lyuk (Ádám 2019) or the boarding school in Aszód. These pictures did not get publicity in the socialist era. Moreover, the photos of the actions of Inconnu group are also part of the Fortepan photo collection.

The visual heritage of our past can both

give rise to feelings of nostalgia and create an opportunity to ask questions and to recognize that people are not only passive victims of their fate but also active creators and curators of their lives and environments. This is the attitude that the Fortepan model is based on. The story behind Fortepan demonstrates the power and efficiency of an independent civic project in contrast to the rigid structures of official institutions. It is worth mentioning that the owners do not have to resign their ownership, as Fortepan digitalizes the pictures for free, asking only permission to share them online. If somebody would like to also donate the original photos, these will be preserved in the City Archive of Budapest. The confidence in the project from donors and the general public is nourished by the idea of publicity and accessibility. The donors of photo collections can easily see the results: the pictures are used for the benefit of the public (Scheibner 2018).





Conclusion

The concept behind the COURAGE database was to avoid the totalitarian paradigm, so instead of juxtaposing or separating the state and society, the project followed those social historians who examined the diversity of dialogues and interactions that took place between ordinary people and representatives of the communist regime (see Geyer and Fitzpatrick 2009; Fitzpatrick 2000, 1999). The revision of the totalitarian paradigm which treated society as the regime's passive object involved changing the way we think about culture. Beyond the propaganda versus samizdat division, researchers on the COURAGE project aspired for a more complex narrative paying attention to the mutual influence, sometimes controversial relationships, and overlaps between the cultural spheres, actors, groups, and venues (Apor and Horváth 2018).

In that framework, this paper examined the specific even paradoxical role that images (photographs) are playing in the interpretation of cultural opposition and dissent during communism. It is important to note again that the quantity and quality of the photographs available on cultural opposition are also telling us about the opportunities of dissent: the presence of the state, the dissent, and the "grey zone" between the two. It is generally true that many events or private photographs are scarce because taking photos under the regime could be too dangerous both for the photographer and for those photographed. However, in many cases, photographs were taken by the state (e.g., secret police), and now these photos are not merely records of particular events or persons, etc. but proof of the intentions of the state. Beyond these, there was even a "grey zone" where official photographers could let themselves drift and capture topics not officially sanctioned as well.

On these grounds, three examples have been discussed, representing different "transitional" categories: first, those types of photographs featuring various cultural events and activities created and preserved by the secret police; second, the photos taken by professional photographers on topics not officially sanctioned. Our third case was the unique Fortepan platform containing private photos. Via Fortepan, this "collection" made invisible by the socialist state became the open heritage of dissent culture and visual history of the twentieth century in Hungary and beyond.

In this context, the COURAGE Registry provides free access to the cultural heritage of these practices that have eventually contributed—in their own different ways—to preserving the memory of Eastern European dissent culture. Moreover, the database including public data of the public and private collections, archivists, museum experts, and other stakeholders keeps this heritage alive on an online platform.



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