

Péter Kovács¹:

Understanding or Misunderstanding?

(About Diplomatic Telegrams sent from the American, British and Soviet Legations in Budapest between 23 October – 4 November 1956)

I. Introduction to the main sources of this article

When I took the decision to comment on some minor diplomatic aspects of the Hungarian Revolution for this special issue of the *Miskolc Journal of International Law*, I opted for dealing with the diplomatic telegrams sent from the three legations² accredited to Hungary. I am fully aware of the inherent problems of such an endeavour: first, I am not a historian and second, up till now, only a limited number of diplomatic telegrams have been published in Hungary. Nevertheless, the comparative reading of these telegrams can also leave certain impressions and can contribute to a better understanding of some of the taken steps.

The background of this short article is composed of two short booklets: „*Secret reports*”³ was published in 1989 and it contains British and American⁴ diplomatic telegrams sent from Budapest and some of the received replies and instructions respectively from London and Washington. The „*Yeltsin-dossier*”⁵ is the compilation of different documents transmitted by Boris Yeltsin in 1992 to Árpád Göncz, the Hungarian President of the Republic. Most of the documents liberated at that time from the most serious embargo, are reports about different meetings of the Politbureau of the Soviet Communist Party, or reports made by the Soviet ambassador to the UN and the instructions sent to him. This book, however contains also analyses made by Yuri Andropov (at that time ambassador to Hungary) or reports made by top Soviet officials (Mikoyan, Suslov and KGB general Serov) during their mission in Hungary, transmitted by Andropov to Moscow.

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² In fact, at that time the United States and the United Kingdom had only legations, but the Soviet Union was represented by an Embassy.

³ Titkos jelentések 1956 okt. 23-nov.4, Hírlapkiadó Publishers 1989 Budapest (in the following: Secret Reports)

⁴ I assume from a comparative reading of other articles written about diplomatic coverage of 1956 that the booklet published in Hungarian should be the translation of several pieces contained in: Foreign Relations of the United States, 1955-1957, Eastern Europe. Volume XXV, Washington DC 1990 (FRUS Vol. XXV). However, there is no explicit reference to this in the habitual way.

⁵ A „Jelcin-dosszié” Szovjet dokumentumok 1956-ról Századvég, 1956-os Intézet as Publishers 1993 Budapest (in the following: Yeltsin-dossier)

Both booklets contain analyses made during spring- and summer time, although I will refer to them, when necessary, I will concentrate on the telegrams sent in the turbulent October-November weeks. Let me emphasize I emphasize once again that both booklets are far from being exhaustive: both include only such documents which were declared open by the three governments according to their respective rules and interests. It is also obvious from the numbering of the British and American telegrams, that „*Secret Reports*” is a selection, in the same manner as the „*Yeltsin-dossier*”. When a leading expert of the issue commented the latter booklet, he wrote however that even if it is incomplete, it is correct in the way that the selection gives a general view through the most important documents of the decision-making. It is also clear, that several reports were not included in the „*Yeltsin-dossier*” even if one can hardly imagine that Andropov and his staff went past some important events with their eyes shut.⁶

Concerning the period of October 23-November 4, *Yeltsin-dossier* contains five telegrams written by Andropov and five others written by Mikoyan, Suslov and Serov. Marshal Zukov’s telegrams are already linked to the bloody Soviet military intervention engaged on November 4, crushing the Hungarian Revolution⁷.

„*Secret Reports*” publishes thirty-seven telegrams, telexes or typed telephone-conversations on behalf of the US Legation, meanwhile thirty documents come from the British Legation. As it happened with the *Yeltsin-dossier*, „*Secret Reports*” also contains a good number of documents from other sources.

It is worth remembering that both booklets were published in Hungary and in Hungarian. The quotations will thus be retranslated into English hopefully without considerable changes in the content or loss of meaning.

II. Telegrams sent from the American and British Legations during the two weeks of the Hungarian Revolution

The telegrams sent from the US Legation of Budapest during the first days of the Revolution broken out on October 23 1956, reveal astonishment and contain no more than – rather lengthy – descriptions of the events⁸. When the shootings and the different armed events transformed the peaceful demonstration into an uprising, the military attaché and his deputies tried to get information by walking in the streets counting and qualifying the armed vehicles and other weaponry. They also used as a complementary tool information received on behalf of their known and unknown collaborators in the capital. In the published telegrams, there is only one (!) sentence⁹ containing evaluation: here, the Legation *strongly recommends* the State Department *to abstain from making publicly comments in whatever sense on Imre Nagy* who soon became

⁶ See György Litván’s introductory remarks, (*Yeltsin-dossier* p. 14-15)

⁷ This is often called as the „2nd intervention” in order to distinguish it clearly from the first Soviet intervention launched on October 23-24.

⁸ Telegram of October 23 from the US Legation, n° 15, checking number 13527 (*Secret Reports* p.31); telegram of October 24 from the US Legation, n° 153 and 154, without checking number: (*Secret Reports* p.35-36); telegram of October 24 from the US Legation, n° 156, checking number 14654 (*Secret Reports* p.36);

⁹ Telegram of October 24 from the US Legation, n° 153 and 154, without checking number: (*Secret Reports* p.36)

prime minister, after his readmission in the Politbureau of the Hungarian communist party¹⁰. In these telegrams, the Legation also advised the diffusion of the events should be divulged through the American and Western-European press.

More or less the same can be said about the telegrams¹¹ sent from the British Legation during those days. One of the telegrams¹² expressed the assumption that Imre Nagy had had knowledge¹³ about forthcoming events and thought that a fruitful collaboration between the hardliner Gerő¹⁴ and reformer Nagy was hardly possible, even if – according to the legation - Nagy could hardly wash himself from the suspicion that he was co-responsible for the invitation of the Soviet troops, even if in all probability, Gerő had sent the invitation prior to the cooptation of Nagy.¹⁵ The only advice the Legation gave in the telegram was a call for a sympathetic Western press coverage.¹⁶

In the next round of telegrams and telexes we can feel a certain change in the attitude of the American¹⁷ and the British¹⁸ Legations. They do not only relate events, casualties, victims, number and types of weapons but they report about meetings¹⁹ before the Legations where thousands of people were claiming helps from the United States and the United Kingdom to carry out the aims of the Revolution. We can also feel the Budapest based diplomats' impatience and perplexity concerning the absolute lack of clear guidance from Washington and London. The American diplomats report that they had to formulate declaration²⁰ on their own while waiting for an urgent official one²¹. The answer of the State Department is however very empty: „There is no proposal for future declarations with the exception that you can repeat the

¹⁰ The official name was Central Direction of the Hungarian Workers' Party.

¹¹ Telegram of October 23 from the UK Legation, n° 404 (Secret Reports p.32); telegram of October 24 from the UK Legation, n° 419 and NH 10110/86 (Secret Reports p.34); telegram of October 31 from the UK Legation, n° 520 and NH 10110/203 (Secret Reports p.38-39);

¹² Telegram of October 24 from the UK Legation, n° 419 and NH 10110/86 (Secret Reports p.34);

¹³ This assumption was erroneous.

¹⁴ The former n°2 of the nomenclatura, Ernő Gerő replaced some months before Mátyás Rákosi at the post of general secretary of the communist party, according to the desiderata of Nikita Hroustshov

¹⁵ This assumption was correct.

¹⁶ An internal note of the Foreign Office refers to such – by the way rejected – proposals of the Legation. Note n° NH 10110/630 of October 25, (Secret Reports p. 32-33);

¹⁷ Telex of October 25 from the US Legation, checking number 14766; telex of October 25 from the US Legation, checking number 14791; telex of October 25 from the US Legation, checking number 14795; telegram of October 26 from the US Legation n° 165, checking number 17446, telex of October 25 from the US Legation, checking number 14805; telex of October 25 from the US Legation, checking number 14835; telex of October 25 from the US Legation, checking number 14853; telex of October 25 from the US Legation, checking number 14867; (Secret Reports p.43-50)

¹⁸ Telegram of October 25 from the UK Legation, n° 430; telegram of October 26 from the UK Legation, n° 452 and NH 10110/99 N; (Secret Reports p.52-53)

¹⁹ Telex of October 25 from the US Legation, checking number 14791 (Secret Reports p.44); telex of October 25 from the US Legation, checking number 14795 (Secret Reports p.46)

²⁰ „We understand the situation and we have already reported it to our government with such complexity as we could. You certainly understand, that we, here cannot make a decision, as this is the responsibility of our government and the United Nations. We have been living for years in Hungary and think that we understand the situation.”

telex of October 25 from the US Legation, checking number 14835 (Secret Reports p.49)

²¹ Telex of October 25 from the US Legation, checking number 14853 (Secret Reports p.50)

expression of our sympathy and you can assure them to inform the government continuously and in full as much as possible.”²²

The British Legation submits a proposal to the Foreign Office to bring the Hungarian case before the United Nations in order to settle the issue definitely in favour of the „anticommunist uprising”.²³ A day later, the British Legation repeats this idea and formulates it in terms of international law: „The question is whether the special obligations of the great powers generally recognized and enshrined in the postwar treaty about European security do not entitle Her Majesty’s Government to propose their immediate observance? What could the best way of the reestablishment of a solid government be? Cannot this massacre be considered as of such nature that it should be promptly examined by the Security Council according to articles 34 and 35 of the Charter?”²⁴ The answer is not known but the previous day, the position of the Foreign Office was very close to that of the State Department: „(...) We should be careful and we should not say anything which could push the hot-headed of Budapest in further useless riots. (...) I suggest to say as little as possible. (...) We express our heartfelt sympathy and condolences for those and their families who were killed or wounded. These riots show how difficult even a moderate reform can be in Eastern Europe. We do hope that the reforms will be continued without such a tragical price in human life.”²⁵

(We remind the reader that articles 34 and 35 of the UN Charter deal with the peaceful settlement of disputes²⁶ under Chapter VI where the competence of the Security Council – contrary to the one enjoyed under Chapter VII – is only recommendatory.)

Several telegrams sent by the US²⁷ and the British²⁸ Legations around October 26-27 witness a growing perplexity of the diplomats at the inertia of their governments. Apparently they would prefer a much more active American and British attitude and probably had no idea of President Eisenhower’s thoughts reflected in a rudimentary transcribed telephone

²² Telex of October 25 from the US Legation, checking number 14853 (Secret Reports p.50)

²³ Telegram of October 25 from the UK Legation, n° 430 (Secret Reports p.51)

²⁴ Telegram of October 26 from the UK Legation, n° 452 and NH 10110/99 N; (Secret Reports p.52)

²⁵ Instruction of October 25 in the Foreign Office for the Press Department, n° NH 10110/175 (Secret Reports)

²⁶ Article 34: The Security Council may investigate any dispute, or any situation which might lead to international friction or give rise to a dispute, in order to determine whether the continuance of the dispute or situation is likely to endanger the maintenance of international peace and security.

Article 35 (1) Any Member of the United Nations may bring any dispute, or any situation of the nature referred to in Article 34, to the attention of the Security Council or of the General Assembly. (2) A state which is not a Member of the United Nations may bring to the attention of the Security Council or of the General Assembly any dispute to which it is a party if it accepts in advance, for the purposes of the dispute, the obligations of pacific settlement provided in the present Charter. (3) The proceedings of the General Assembly in respect of matters brought to its attention under this Article will be subject to the provisions of Articles 11 and 12.

²⁷ Telegram of October 26 from the US Legation, n° 162, checking number 17452 (Secret Reports p.57-59); telegram of October 26 from the US Legation, n° 163, checking number 17435 (Secret Reports p.59); telegram of October 26 from the US Legation, n° 166, checking number 17548 (Secret Reports p.59); telegram of October 27 from the US Legation, n° 168, checking number 17573 (Secret Reports p.60-61); telegram of October 27 from the US Legation, n° 169, checking number 17465 (Secret Reports p.61); telegram of October 28 from the US Legation, n° 161, checking number 17453 (Secret Reports p.61);

²⁸ Telegram of October 27 from the UK Legation, n° 458 and NH 10110/116 (Secret Reports p. 62-63); telegram of October 27 from the UK Legation, n° 462 and NH 10110/118 (Secret Reports p.63-64); telegram of October 27 from the UK Legation, n° 464 and NH 10110/120 (Secret Reports p.64-65); telegram of October 27 from the UK Legation, n° 465 and NH 10110/121 (Secret Reports p.65);

conversation: „These guys may perhaps survive (...) the Russians will not be deterred (...) the eventual adherence of neighbouring countries to the NATO (...) being afraid of this, the Soviet Union should crush them. The question is whether we should make a statement recognizing that we do not have influence in this region (...) But he does not know how to do it. We could say that „we are where we were before”(....)”²⁹

The US Legation claimed not only a more active attitude but the rethinking of the American policy in the light of the events: „There is no good options for the insurgents and this results in the most critical political and moral problems for the US government. The USA cannot look with a total inactivity that the Soviet [Union] profits from her military capacity by crushing these fights. But logically, this leads us to the question of what the US government can do (...) The Legation does not claim to be aware of all the international legal aspects of the issue. From western radio-reports, we know that France, the UK and the US will join to bring the case before the UN. The Legation has the impression that France should be the initiator. (...) We think that the US should lead and urge the discussion about Hungary in the UN. (...) The Legation is fully aware of the heavy responsibility of a decision in favour of material assistance for the Hungarian people against the Soviet and the kind of risks a direct assistance would involve. The Legation does not have a clear picture of the range of possible alternatives before the US government between the extremities of either submitting the case to the „juridical” UN or giving material assistance for the insurgents. But alternatives do exist between these extremities and there may be alternatives where the inherent risk is not too high. The Legation considers that the general and vehement reaction against the communist rule taken into account, it should be submitted under due consideration by what means insurgents could be assisted and whether a certain risk can be taken regarding the huge scale refusal of the Soviet rule”.³⁰

Complaining about the problems in the functioning of telecommunication, the US Legation reports to take such operative decisions which normally should have been submitted to Washington for previous approval. The Legation is referring here to its good offices for a cease-fire between government and insurgents.³¹

The British Legation suggests to profit from the propaganda-possibilities and urges humanitarian assistance.³² It also suggest that the General Assembly of the UN should act again, as it was done in 1950 about the violation of human rights in Hungary³³. (Under this suggestion, we should probably understand the Resolution 385(V) of the General Assembly which is the follow up of the so-called peace-treaty advisory opinion issue. Here, the General Assembly condemned³⁴ the lack of cooperation on behalf of Hungary, Bulgaria and Romania and invited countries, especially signatory parties to the peace treaties to submit to the Secretary General all evidence which they then held or which might become available in the

²⁹ Rudimentarily retranscribed conversation n° 10/26/56/2, Eisenhower Library, (Secret Reports p.57);

³⁰ Telegram of October 27 from the US Legation, n° 168, checking number 17573 (Secret Reports p.60-61);

³¹ Telegram of October 27 from the US Legation, n° 161, checking number 17453 (Secret Reports p.61-62);

³² Telegram of October 27 from the UK Legation, n° 458 and NH 10110/116 (Secret Reports p. 62-63);

³³ Telegram of October 27 from the UK Legation, n° 462 and NH 10110/118 (Secret Reports p. 63-64);

³⁴ GA Res 385(V) Observance in Bulgaria, Hungary and Romania of human rights and fundamental freedoms §§ 2-3

future³⁵ and invited the Secretary General to notify the members of the UN of any information he might receive in connexion with this question³⁶.)

In another telegram, the Legation seems to propose steps aiming that the Hungarian case should be dealt with in the UN under Chapter VII. The initiative should be taken even under the threat of a veto: in this way, old and recent promises would be kept.³⁷ Apparently, as a consequence of their technical problems, the American diplomats used also the channels of the UK Legation. One of the telegrams of complaisance is submits a proposal to the State Department for approval putting forth a cease-fire which should be adopted by the United Nations³⁸. Another considers the possibility of the international legal recognition of the insurgents and it urges a „UN intervention in one form or another.”³⁹

The American⁴⁰ and British⁴¹ telegrams sent from the Legations around October 28-29 deal with the description of new clashes between Soviet troops and insurgents. The British diplomats pay attention to the changes in the terms used by prime minister Imre Nagy⁴², getting closer to the armed groups that the British and American diplomats call „nationalists”. The American Legation suggests the exercise of a greater pressure on the Soviet Union⁴³ for it is compatible with the evaluated risks as well as the creation of an international committee „to represent the nationalists’ case at the talks with the Hungarian communist government and the Soviet.”⁴⁴ Beside humanitarian medical help⁴⁵, the high level assistance should also include the sending of western military equipment in order to improve the insurgents’ positions at the talks and to maintain their military potential.⁴⁶ According to the report sent from the British Legation about Mikoyan’s visit in Budapest, the formulation of a face-saving policy is under consideration which could be accepted by the Soviet Union in the managing the withdrawal of troops.⁴⁷

In an internal note prepared within the Foreign Office, we can read a certain positive reaction to the proposals sent from the Legations: even before 1956, sovietized countries most far fetched ambitions had as far as having a yugoslav type status, it has worth thinking about the utility of arriving directly to an Austria-like position.⁴⁸ There is however no written remark of approval or refusal on the document.

³⁵ GA Res 385(V) § 5

³⁶ GA Res 385(V) § 6

³⁷ Telegram of October 27 from the UK Legation, n° 462 and NH 10110/118 (Secret Reports p. 63-64);

³⁸ Telegram of October 27 from the UK Legation, n° 464 and NH 10110/120 (Secret Reports p. 64-65);

³⁹ Telegram of October 27 from the UK Legation, n° 465 and NH 10110/121 (Secret Reports p. 64);

⁴⁰ Telegram of October 29 from the US Legation, n° 177, checking number 17311 (Secret Reports p.70); telegram of October 29 from the US Legation, n° 182, checking number 17359 (Secret Reports p.71-72); telegram of October 29 from the US Legation, n° 180, checking number 17322 (Secret Reports p.72-73);

⁴¹ Telegram of October 28 from the UK Legation, n° 482 and NH 10110/123 (Secret Reports p. 69); telegram of October 30 from the UK Legation, n° 498 and NH 10110/172 (Secret Reports p.74-75);

⁴² Telegram of October 28 from the UK Legation, n° 482 and NH 10110/123 (Secret Reports p. 69);

⁴³ Telegram of October 29 from the US Legation, n° 177, checking number 17311 (Secret Reports p.70);

⁴⁴ Telegram of October 29 from the US Legation, n° 180, checking number 17322 (Secret Reports p.73)

⁴⁵Telegram of October 29 from the US Legation, n° 182, checking number 17359 (Secret Reports p.72);

⁴⁶ Telegram of October 29 from the US Legation, n° 180, checking number 17322 (Secret Reports p.73)

⁴⁷ Telegram of October 30 from the UK Legation, n° 498 and NH 10110/172 (Secret Reports p. 74-75);

⁴⁸ Internal note in the Foreign Office NH 10110/524/N (Secret Reports p. 75-76)

The telegrams sent between October 30-31 from the American⁴⁹ and the British⁵⁰ Legations are written not only in an enthusiastic style reflecting definite sympathy towards the insurgents but beside the continuous coverage of military and political events, they repeat the necessity of a much more active American attitude in the reshaping of political framework. (The view of the Legation was probably influenced also by the repeated mass gatherings in front of the Legation when people repeatedly asked for direct US involvement and assistance.) The US Legation stood for the establishment of an international monitoring committee and it thought that if insurgents renounce of the exigence of completely free elections, the Soviets would withdraw their troops when that they get assurance that Hungary's policy will not be „bourgeois” and anti-Soviet. The US Legation considered that the position of prime minister Imre Nagy was very fragile but an international agreement could stabilize him. In case of the failure of an understanding between Soviets and local communists on the one hand and „nationalists” on the other, according to the Legation, western powers should find the proper means of providing help to the insurgents, if they were ready to fight at long term against Soviets. But the best way out would certainly be a kind of finlandisation of the relationship between Hungary and the Soviet Union.⁵¹ Having the impression that the American role is not at all clear, in other telegrams the Legation calls for a solemn presidential declaration about imminent political and economic assistance for Hungary.⁵²

It is worth noting John Foster Dulles's circular to US embassies abroad, written during these days is however very reluctant: having admitted that absolutely no connection could be established with the Legation, the secretary of state gives only a rather descriptive picture on the events and summarising the actual American aim, he writes about his endeavour to put an end to the involvement of Soviet troops in the fights and to contribute to the creation of conditions permitting an eventual withdrawal of Soviet troops from Hungary. He thinks that it is under deliberation at the Soviet leadership, whether a more tolerant attitude or the reestablishment of the occupation would serve better the Soviet interests. According to Dulles, even this second would mean political benefit for the US because of the involved heavy military costs and the definite end the Soviets' positive political image. Dulles does not want to qualify Imre Nagy's personality but he has some doubts about his sincerity and that's why a certain American pressure seems to be useful. He promises assistance in foodstuff and medicine and does not exclude the possibility of the eventual extension of the assistance to other items.⁵³

⁴⁹ Telegram of October 30 from the US Legation, without n°, checking number 18132 (Secret Reports p.79); telegram of October 30 from the US Legation, n° 197, checking number 18530 (Secret Reports p.79-80); telegram of October 30 from the US Legation, n° 188, checking number 18108 (Secret Reports p.80-81); telegram of October 31 from the US Legation, n° 200, checking number 18993 (Secret Reports p.98); telegram of October 31 from the US Legation, n° 201, checking number 18984 (Secret Reports p.99); telegram of October 31 from the US Legation, n° 203, checking number 19176 (Secret Reports p.100);

⁵⁰ Telegram of October 31 from the UK Legation, n° 514 and NH 10110/194 (Secret Reports p. 90); telegram of October 31 from the UK Legation, n° 515 and NH 10110/197 (Secret Reports p.91); telegram of October 31 from the UK Legation, n° 516 and NH 10110/201 (Secret Reports p.93-94); telegram of October 31 from the UK Legation, n° 517 and NH 10110/202 (Secret Reports p.94-95);

⁵¹ Telegram of October 30 from the US Legation, n° 188, checking number 18108 (Secret Reports p.80-81);

⁵² Telegram of October 31 from the US Legation, n° 200, checking number 18993 (Secret Reports p.98); telegram of October 31 from the US Legation, n° 201, checking number 18984 (Secret Reports p.99);

⁵³ John Foster Dulles's memorandum for American diplomats accredited in abroad about the Hungarian situation. n° 779/546 (Secret Reports p. 82-83)

A proposal in one of the telegrams sent from the British Legation repeats the ideas to fix the current British aim in the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Hungary and in the scrupulous control of Imre Nagy to see whether he performs his promises made in his speech transmitted by the radio. The Legation repeats to the discussion of the Hungarian issue in the General Assembly and it proposes a UN monitoring in the context of the debates of 1950.⁵⁴

About November 1, the telegrams of the US⁵⁵ and the UK⁵⁶ Legations comment on the reopening of clashes as well as lynching.⁵⁷ A telegram gives a rather good analysis about the causes of the revolution but it expresses mistrust vis-à-vis prime minister Imre Nagy, recognizing however the importance of the reshaping of the Hungarian Government on the basis of multipartism.⁵⁸

The American Legation reports that its chargé d'affaires was received by Imre Nagy and the prime minister was speaking about his recent meetings with ambassador Andropov whom he told that Hungary was protesting against the arrival of new Soviet troops and declared that Hungary would leave the Warsaw Treaty, proclaim her neutrality, call for the UN and ask the assistance of the four (!) big powers to ensure the preservation of Hungary's neutrality.⁵⁹ Dulles's reaction is somewhat disappointing: while he orders to notify the Hungarian Government of the arrival of the message which will be carefully read by the US Government. On the document however, Dulles writes only the following words: „Nagy is reporting about the entry of new Soviet troops.”⁶⁰ The British Legation transmits an analogous telegram and adds that according to an oral clarification, an Austran-type status is envisaged by the Hungarian Government.⁶¹ Neither of these telegrams speak of whatever view expressed by the diplomats at these meetings, but the British Legation feels that this new step could improve the position of Hungary at the debate of the General Assembly.⁶² The American Legation considers that Soviets are seriously thinking about a second military intervention nevertheless, in the new situation, the possibilities for a growing American influence are enormous and calls once again for a more clear American position, if possible, via a presidential declaration about the importance of rule of law and the opening of economic talks.⁶³

⁵⁴ Telegram of October 31 from the UK Legation, n° 517 and NH 10110/202 (Secret Reports p.94-95);

⁵⁵ Telegram of November 1 from the US Legation, n° 204, checking number 422 (Secret Reports p.103); telegram of November 1 from the US Legation, n° 206, checking number 1278 (Secret Reports p.104-105); telegram of November 1 from the US Legation, n° 208, checking number 569 (Secret Reports p.106); telegram of November 1 from the US Legation, n° 210, checking number 745 (Secret Reports p.111);

⁵⁶ Telegram of November 1 from the UK Legation, n° 528 and NH 10110/220 (Secret Reports p.104); telegram of November 1 from the UK Legation, n° 529 (Secret Reports p.106-107); telegram of November 1 from the UK Legation, n° 536 and NH 10110/233 (Secret Reports p.107); telegram of November 1 from the UK Legation, n° 537 and NH 10110/224 (Secret Reports p.107-108); telegram of November 1 from the UK Legation, n° 539 and NH 10110/226 (Secret Reports p.108-109); telegram of November 1 from the UK Legation, n° 538 and NH 10110/225 (Secret Reports p.109); telegram of November 1 from the UK Legation, n° 533 and NH 10110/228 (Secret Reports p.110-111);

⁵⁷ Telegram of November 1 from the US Legation, n° 204, checking number 422 (Secret Reports p.103);

⁵⁸ Telegram of November 1 from the US Legation, n° 206, checking number 1278 (Secret Reports p.104-105)

⁵⁹ Telegram of November 1 from the US Legation, n° 208, checking number 569 (Secret Reports p.106);

⁶⁰ Telegram of November 1 from the US Legation, n° 208, checking number 569 (Secret Reports p.106);

⁶¹ Telegram of November 1 from the UK Legation, n° 536 and NH 10110/233 (Secret Reports p.107); telegram of November 1 from the UK Legation, n° 537 and NH 10110/224 (Secret Reports p.107-108);

⁶² Telegram of November 1 from the UK Legation, n° 539 and NH 10110/226 (Secret Reports p.109);

⁶³ Telegram of November 1 from the US Legation, n° 210, checking number 745 (Secret Reports p.111-112)

The telegrams sent about the events of November 2-3 by the American⁶⁴ and the British⁶⁵ Legations describe the personalities of the newly reintroduced multipartism, but they also express their anxiousness about the growing number of Russian tanks and the multiplication of acts of sporadic violence, offering a pretext for the return of the Soviet army. Some notes found in the archives of the Foreign Office witness about the consideration of an Austria-like neutrality for Hungary.⁶⁶ According to one of them, the application of the procedure of the famous resolution *Uniting for Peace* (GA Res. 377(V)) was also under consideration.⁶⁷ It was suggested to put under deliberation that the Foreign Office back Hungarian neutrality without the stipulation of whatever international legal guarantee therefor.⁶⁸ The draft-speech greeted Hungary's neutrality on her own demand and according to the Austrian example, as being conform to British interests – this was suppressed from the telegram sent to the Hungarian Government.⁶⁹

Appeals or initiatives on behalf of the Legations to their governments can be found in only one British telegram. Here, the Legation expresses its opinion that the whole issue of neutrality was not thoroughly examined and the final form can and should be fixed by Hungarian and Soviet talks. Nevertheless, the Legation proposes that the greatest possible number of states should declare openly that they back Hungarian neutrality.⁷⁰ The American⁷¹ and British telegrams⁷² sent about the events of November 4 deal with the details of the Soviet military invasion crushing the Revolution and with demands for asylum⁷³.

⁶⁴ Telegram of November 1 from the US Legation, n° 212, checking number 1123 (Secret Reports p.115); telegram of November 2 from the US Legation, n° 217, checking number 1670 (Secret Reports p.119); telegram of November 3 from the US Legation, n° 219, checking number 2099 (Secret Reports p.123); telegram of November 3 from the US Legation, n° 224, checking number 2258 (Secret Reports p.123);

⁶⁵ Telegram of November 2 from the UK Legation, n° 549 (Secret Reports p.120); telegram of November 3 from the UK Legation, n° 550 and NH 10110/255 (Secret Reports p.120-121); telegram of November 3 from the UK Legation, n° 554 and NH 10110/256 (Secret Reports p.121-122); telegram of November 3 from the UK Legation, n° 555 and NH 10110/257 (Secret Reports p.121); telegram of November 3 from the UK Legation, n° 560 and NH 10110/260 (Secret Reports p.125); telegram of November 3 from the UK Legation, n° 562 and NH 10110/289 (Secret Reports p.125-126);

⁶⁶ Internal note of November 1 of the Foreign Office n° NH 10110/332 (Secret Reports p. 118-119) and Telegram of November 2, from the Foreign Office to the British mission to the UN, n° 1482 (Secret Reports p. 117-118)

⁶⁷ Internal note of November 1 of the Foreign Office n° NH 10110/332 (Secret Reports p. 118)

⁶⁸ Internal note of November 1 of the Foreign Office n° NH 10110/332 (Secret Reports p. 118-119)

⁶⁹ Internal note of November 1 of the Foreign Office n° NH 10110/332 (Secret Reports p. 118-119)

⁷⁰ Telegram of November 3 from the UK Legation, n° 562 and NH 10110/289 (Secret Reports p.125-126);

⁷¹ Telex of November 4 between the US Legation and the State Department without n°, checking number 25.36 (Secret Reports p.135-141); telegram of November 4 from the US Legation, without n° (Secret Reports p.142); telegram of November 4 from the US Legation, n° 231, checking number 2881 (Secret Reports p.143); telegram of November 4 from the US Legation, n° 232, checking number 3005 (Secret Reports p.144)

⁷² Telegram of November 4 from the UK Legation, n° 569 and NH 10110/262 (Secret Reports p.144); telegram of November 4 from the UK Legation, n° 577 and NH 10110/271 (Secret Reports p.146);

⁷³ A de facto asylum was granted to Cardinal Mindszenty till 1971(!)

III. Telegrams sent during these days from the Soviet Embassy

The telegrams sent by Mikoyan and Suslov⁷⁴ treat mostly the military and political events of October and the details of talks with the Politbureau of the Hungarian communist party. Serov⁷⁵ reports about impressions, personal fear of AVH-staff⁷⁶. He also mentions atrocities and lynching.⁷⁷ As far as Andropov⁷⁸ is concerned, the dossier contains some detailful analyses as well as reports about meetings with Hungarian politicians.

Mikoyan and Suslov were upset as the finally adopted declaration of the Politbureau was slightly different from the one they had agreed on, i.e. the declaration mentioned also the opening of negotiations about the withdrawal of Soviet troops instead of opening them only „after the reestablishment of order”.⁷⁹ Andropov transmits *ex post facto* the call issued by the previous government (the Hegedüs-government) for Soviet military assistance⁸⁰ He reports on his talks with Imre Nagy when the prime minister energetically protested against the growing number of Soviet soldiers⁸¹ and wanted answers for the strange disappearances⁸² of two members of his government.⁸³ In his reports, we can feel however that some top officials of the Hungarian foreign ministry did not obey to the instructions of the Nagy-government and took a distance thereof.⁸⁴ When Andropov takes part at the session of the governmental cabinet, he gives detailful descriptions of the personal attitudes, metacommunicative reactions of different ministers when Hungary's neutrality is mentioned.⁸⁵

It is worth mentioning that in Serov's report references are also made to information acquired from Soviet⁸⁶ secret agents acting among insurgents.⁸⁷ Legations were also monitored: „From the observation of the American Legation, let us call point out that some people are leaving the capital with parcels. Two Americans, Olivert and West told the secret informer of our

⁷⁴ Mikoyan and Suslov's report of October 24 to the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Yeltsin-dossier p. 47-50); Mikoyan and Suslov's report of October 25 to the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Yeltsin-dossier p. 50-52); Mikoyan and Suslov's report of October 29 to the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union Report (Yeltsin-dossier p. 60-61);

⁷⁵ Serov's Report of October 28 to Mikoyan (Yeltsin-dossier p. 54-55); Serov's Report of October 29 to Mikoyan (Yeltsin-dossier p. 62-64);

⁷⁶ AVH (Államvédelmi Hatóság, Office for the Defense of the State) was the Hungarian equivalent of the Soviet NKVD, KGB, etc.) It was responsible for investigation in political crimes, for the guard of internment camps, repression of anticommunist behaviour, etc.

⁷⁷ Serov's Report of October 29 to Mikoyan (Yeltsin-dossier p. 62-64);

⁷⁸ Andropov's report of October 28 (Yeltsin-dossier p. 56-57); Andropov's report of October 29 (Yeltsin-dossier p. 67-68); Andropov's report of November 1 (Yeltsin-dossier p. 73-75); Andropov's report of November 2 (Yeltsin-dossier p. 81-82); Andropov's report of November 4 (Yeltsin-dossier p. 94-95);

⁷⁹ Mikoyan and Suslov's report of October 25 to the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Yeltsin-dossier p. 51);

⁸⁰ Andropov's report of October 28 (Yeltsin-dossier p. 56-57);

⁸¹ Andropov's report of October 30 (Yeltsin-dossier p. 67-68); Andropov's report of November 1 (Yeltsin-dossier p. 73-75); Andropov's report of November 2 (Yeltsin-dossier p. 81-82);

⁸² János Kádár and Ferenc Münich, the future quislings of the returning Soviet occupation.

⁸³ Andropov's report of November 2 (Yeltsin-dossier p. 81-82);

⁸⁴ Andropov's report of October 30 (Yeltsin-dossier p. 67-68); the reference concern the minister Horváth and one of his deputies, Szarka

⁸⁵ Andropov's report of November 1 (Yeltsin-dossier p. 74)

⁸⁶ In the text, it is not really clear whether these persons belong to the network of the Soviet or to the Hungarian police.

⁸⁷ Serov's Report of October 28 to Mikoyan (Yeltsin-dossier p. 54);

friends that if the uprising will not be crushed soon, UN troops will intervene, according to the proposal of the US, thus creating a second Korea.”⁸⁸

IV. What consequences can be deduced from these telegrams?

The general view about the proclamation of Hungarian neutrality is that it was a desperate act on behalf of Imre Nagy in order to create such a situation where a presumable second Soviet intervention⁸⁹ would be deprived of its only one justification thought by the diplomats and cabinet-members as relatively plausible in terms of international law: the Warsaw Pact commitments.⁹⁰ It is clear from the detailed preparations of the timing of the Soviet military intervention, that the view blaming the „irresponsible” declaration of neutrality for the second Soviet attack cannot be supported.⁹¹ It is another current opinion that Western Powers and especially the United States of America were not prepared for the events⁹², were underinformed about it and that’s why they did not understand their importance. It is also often emphasized that the British and French intervention at Suez diverted the attention from the small Hungary to the channel of top importance. (On the other hand, this intervention, its prompt reactions could influence the Soviet policy-makers when deciding about tolerance or repression vis-à-vis the Hungarian endeavour aiming not only a relative emancipation in the communist empire but in fact the enjoyment of a genuine sovereignty.⁹³)

The lack of adequate attention is frequently explained also by the fact that foreign ministries did not get adequate information from their diplomats or intelligence agents acting in Hungary. This was not independent from the fact that only a small number of people were sent there by the United States. But all these facts did not change too much concerning the basic problem: the United States of America did not have a real plan how to treat situations when the Soviet influence zone faced real, local phenomena of dismemberment. Moreover, according to Kissinger, the United States were unable to treat two crises at the same time.⁹⁴

Henry Kissinger blames Dulles and Eisenhower but also the State Department and the American Legation in Budapest. He states that the Legation should have reported that the political system of communist Hungary was dismembering: an evidence known by all journalists.⁹⁵ Kissinger thought it improbable that the State Department, disposing of eminent kremlinologues should not have examined the probability of a Soviet intervention, but anyway

⁸⁸ Serov’s Report of October 28 to Mikoyan (Yeltsin-dossier p. 55);

⁸⁹ The note of November 1 about the proclamation of neutrality refers also to the arrival of new Soviet troops.

⁹⁰ Kissinger, Henry: *Diplomácia*, Budapest 1996 Panem-McGraw-Hill-Grafo (Hungarian translation of Henry: *Diplomacy*, New York Simon & Schuster 1994) p.552

⁹¹ „Imre Nagy’s more strident demands for independence and particularly his declaration of Hungary’s intention to leave the Warsaw Pact were the salient reasons for provoking the deadly Soviet reprisals of early November.”

Steve Long: *The Hungarian Revolution of 1956 and the Shortcomings of US Strategy Towards Eastern Europe* (49th Parallel – An Interdisciplinary Journal of North American Studies, <http://www.49thparallel.bham.ac.uk/back/issue15/long.htm>)

⁹² Kissinger: *op. cit* p.547

⁹³ See Géza Herczegh: *The 1956 revolution in its international context*

(The article can be found in the present number of the Miskolc Journal of International Law.)

⁹⁴ Kissinger: *op. cit* p.547

⁹⁵ Kissinger: *op. cit* p.553

the Eisenhower administration did not do anything to put higher the price of such an intervention.⁹⁶ Even if Kissinger approves of the decision about the non-involvement of American military forces, he disagrees strongly with the lack of serious political and economic sanctions. He thinks that credible warning with long term political and economic sanctions could have influenced the Soviet leadership in the decision-making. The American attitude should have been as consequent and pro-Hungary as it was in the Suez-crisis.⁹⁷

In his recent book Charles Gati blames the CIA, the State Department and also their local residents at the Legation.⁹⁸ Having made researches in the CIA-archives, he arrives to the conclusion that these people did not send adequate, precise pieces of information as they closed themselves in their building, but also due to their instructions, low number, bad preparations.⁹⁹ Chris Tudda points out however that „US diplomats in Budapest (...) lobbied the State Department to support the Hungarian revolutionaries.”¹⁰⁰

Gati also refers however to the consideration of an Austria-like status for Hungary. This was proposed on October 26 session of the National Security Council by Harold Stassen, counsellor on disarmament. Eisenhower refused it, but some hours later, he gave instruction to Dulles to think about it. Dulles's opinion was negative and the message for the Soviet government was formulated finally without the reference on Austria-like neutrality.¹⁰¹

We have seen *supra* that an analogous initiative was evoked and rejected in the Foreign Office at the same days.¹⁰² We have also shown that the idea in a similar form was proposed by the American Legation in one of the telegrams.¹⁰³

In the above shown telegrams, we could feel the perplexity¹⁰⁴ of the Legations and the fact that they wanted to get clear instructions and while waiting for them, they tried to take initiatives. We have also seen the problem of the technical impossibility of communication in the first week of the Revolution. In the meantime, the legations made efforts to say words to the Hungarian partners, people and the crowds which could be logical, compatible with the rules of diplomacy, pro-Hungarian but without engaging definitely their Governments. Apparently, the Legations were not only in possession of detailed information about military and political events but their prognoses of Soviet steps and the metamorphosis of the political colour of the

⁹⁶ Kissinger: *op. cit.* p.554

⁹⁷ Kissinger: *op. cit.* p.554

⁹⁸ Gáti, Charles: *Vesztett illúziók. Moszkva, Washington, Budapest és az 1956-os forradalom (Lost Illusions. Moscow, Washington, Budapest and the 1956 Revolution)*, Osiris 2006 Budapest p. 168

⁹⁹ Gáti: *op. cit.* p. 168, 181

¹⁰⁰ Chris Tudda: „Reenacting the Story of Tantalus” Eisenhower, Dulles and the Failed Rhetoric of Liberation, *Journal of Cold War Studies* Vol 7, n° 4, Fall 2005 p. 30

¹⁰¹ Gáti: *op. cit.* p. 165-166

¹⁰² Telegram of November 1 from the UK Legation, n° 536 and NH 10110/233 (Secret Reports p.107); telegram of November 1 from the UK Legation, n° 537 and NH 10110/224 (Secret Reports p.107-108); Internal note of November 1 of the Foreign Office n° NH 10110/332 (Secret Reports p. 118-119) and Telegram of November 2, from the Foreign Office to the British mission to the UN, n° 1482 (Secret Reports p. 117-118)

¹⁰³ Telegram of October 30 from the US Legation, n° 188, checking number 18108 (Secret Reports p.80-81); See also Gáti: *op. cit.* p. 165-166

¹⁰⁴ Referring to the decision of the National Security Council, Tudda remarks that, „Nothing could better illustrate how the gap between the administration's public rhetoric and its refusal to act had confused its own people. But this decision was not publicly disclosed; nor did the White House inform US, NATO or Soviet diplomats.” Tudda: *op. cit.* p. 31

Revolution were not at all false. The sources of information were diversified. The initiatives sent from the Legations were of activist-type suggesting a very strong political and economic assistance, completing the humanitarian help. The involvement of the United Nations, the proper use of the procedural precedents of the General Assembly and the Security Council were considered. They were apparently informed not officially but only via the international mass media about the steps taken at the United Nations.

We could read however in Serov's report reference on information acquired with intelligence methods on steps which were in fact discussed during these days at the American Legation. We do not want to overemphasize the reference of Serov's report on the United Nations, because in these days, the involvement of the United Nations in the Hungarian case was discussed by mostly everybody – with a great amount of naivety, as we all know.

We are not in the position to precise who „Olivert” and „West” were, were they diplomats, journalists, travellers? Real or imaginary persons? Anyway, it is not of historical importance whether the Soviet secret services could have or could have not agents infiltrated in the US Legation.

According to historians, Serov's report was important from another point of view: i.e. it suggested to Moscow that local communists were already completely out of the control of events, the political option would be non-communist and the staff of the secret police and the former nomenclatura were afraid. This actually contributed – among many other things - to changes in Kroushthov's opinion and to the decision about the preparation of the invasion and the formulation of the ideological covering.

Let's not exclude however that the suggestions of Spencer Barnes¹⁰⁵, the very active American chargé d'affaires, could have got out at least in a metacommunicative way – not necessarily by himself - thus meaning in these busy days effectively an apparent confirmation of the expectations of so many Hungarians. The decision of the Nagy's Government about neutrality was linked in the oral and written arguments to the inexplicable and progressive rearrival of Soviet troops: formally it was taken cca. at midday of November 1, after the previous approval of the Politbureau. According to the testimony of the deputy-minister of foreign affairs of the government, in the morning, several „delegations” proposed to the government to take this step and the ministry of foreign affairs supported it unanimously without any hesitation.¹⁰⁶ It is completely unrealistic that the local „already” friendly legations would not have been previously consulted about a step of such an importance. As we have indicated *supra*, the day before, the British Legation, proposed once again the Foreign Office to reconsider an

¹⁰⁵ After his return to Washington, Spencer Barnes was working in the Policy Planning Staff of the State Department and he was author of such internal prognosis and documents about the relationship of the United States vis-a-vis the Central and Eastern European countries which can be considered as more or less followed in the later decades: he emphasized also the necessity to take distance between communist power and civil society, he pointed out the importance of active links inter alia by well chosen scholarships, etc. We have the impression that he was considered as a recognized expert in Central European and Hungarian affairs. Foreign Relations of the United States Vol X, Part 1, FRUS 1958-60 Section 3 of 19. See namely the document of August 26, 1958, PPS Files: Lot 67 D 548

¹⁰⁶ Heltai, György: A Varsói Szerződés felmondása (Egy tanú vallomása), Az igazság a Nagy Imre ügyben, [The denunciation of the Warsaw Treaty. A Witness's Testimony. The Truth in the Imre Nagy Affair] Bruxelles 1959 Európai Petőfi Kör p.86-88

Austrian-type neutrality for Hungary.¹⁰⁷ It is worth noting that one of the depeches of John MacCormack, the local correspondent of New York Times refers to the broadcasting of such a promise¹⁰⁸ already on October 31.

As we have written in the introduction, the hereby used documents are from two books containing only a *selection of liberated documents*. The above referred ones witness about the fact that both the American and the British Legations early understood the importance of the events and their diplomatic staff tried not only to inform their home superiors, but also to push them to a direction which is *ex post facto* considered as a plausible but regrettably missed one, according to Kissinger or Gáti.

In this historically unique climate of my country, the diplomats' eventual understatements, *bona fide* metacommunications could influence the decision-making about Hungary's neutrality. And according to the considerations *supra*, I think that it was not at all unexpected...

¹⁰⁷ Telegram of October 31 from the UK Legation, n° 517 and NH 10110/202 (Secret Reports p.94-95);

¹⁰⁸ The depeche refers to the joint declaration of ministers János Kádár, Zoltán Tildy and Ferenc Erdei. (NYT, October 31, 1956, p.1, 21) See also in the text in: Richard Lettis: The Hungarian Revolt <http://www.hungarian-history.hu/lib/revolt/>