The Ford Foundation and the Reinforcement of Democracy
in Cold War Europe, 1950-69

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1. Project Description

My study of the Ford Foundation’s efforts toward establishing peaceful relations between East and West and toward the strengthening of democracy in Europe is part of an extended research project titled “Cultural Diplomacy and the Reinforcement of Democracy in Cold War Europe, 1945-1969.” It attempts to investigate American cultural and educational policy in Europe during the Cold War and the broad impact that foreign exchange programs have had on the process of furthering the values of democracy and civil society in select Western and Eastern European countries. I intend to evaluate the degree of cohesion between US foreign policy and the international activity of private foundations, identifying any possible connections between them in the enhancement of democracy in Europe. It is of highest significance to determine whether these efforts were parallel and complementary, separate and independent, or even in conflict or competition.
The project focuses primarily on interaction among the actors and institutions involved in the democratization process generated by Ford Foundation-sponsored exchange programs. These would include the less formal contacts of scientists, universities, research centers as well as any encouragement of such liaisons fostered by the US government and private foundations. I am trying to determine to what extent the Ford Foundation’s various international programs – grants-in-aid, fellowships, overseas research and training, intercultural publications and international studies, and exchange of persons – laid the basis for friendly relations and mutual understanding between East and West and within the Atlantic alliance. I will compare the results of these private efforts with the outcomes of government-sponsored exchanges of scholars and official study visits to the US.

Making use of the Ford Foundation archives, I have investigated the extent to which the foundation was able to safeguard individual civil liberties by sponsoring institutions that were looking into ways of “strengthening the position of the free world” and “combating communist threats.” I have attempted to uncover whether Ford Foundation activities, directly or indirectly, strengthened democratic institutions, brought countries into closer relations, or made progress towards a reduction of the political, intellectual, scientific and social gap between the US and the countries of Western Europe. I have also examined how initiatives such as the Eastern Europe Fund, exchange programs with Eastern European countries, and other projects for international cultural cooperation served as tools for imparting knowledge that helped initiate the struggle for a more democratic world.

I have thus tried to explore in what ways and to what degree Eastern Europeans’ first-hand experiences with American institutions became a testing ground for democratic institution building, for the establishment of private enterprise, for civic participation, and, later on, for local community involvement. In a more detailed way, I have studied the Foundation’s policy of funding scholarships, fellowships, and internships for prospective leaders, talented individuals, and promising scholars through intermediary institutions such as the Institute of International Education (IIE) and the Social Science Research Council. I have explored the way the Ford Foundation sponsored groups and individuals willing to build coalitions in support of democratic values, and funded the publications and conference attendance of young academics, journalists, writers or artists. The primary focus of the study has been to evaluate whether Ford Foundation activities enhanced the development of social capital, and assisted in forming a network of cooperating countries for the support, establishment, or restoration of democracy.
I look at the period between 1950, when the foundational Gaither report recommended the “internationalization” of Ford Foundation activities, and 1969, the year of the Tax Reform, the end of the Johnson administration, and shifts in foreign policy aims that coincided with uprisings and pro-democratic demonstrations in Eastern Europe. I look at the Foundation’s activities in the three Western European countries of Austria, Germany, and Italy, where former dictatorships required the emergence and consolidation of democracy. I also study Ford activities in three countries in Eastern Europe: Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Poland. Beginning in the 1950s, each of these countries became a focus of hope for the emergence of democratic values and new practices of civil society.


2. Some observations on Ford Foundation efforts to strengthen democracy in Europe.

The documents I examined frequently refer to the role that the Ford Foundation hoped to play in improving or building democracy in Western Europe, and, since about 1954, Eastern Europe as well. The Ford Foundation seems to have discussed its engagement in the process of democratization more openly and straightforwardly than the Rockefeller Foundation did in its comparable records from the same period. Shepard Stone’s reports, written between 1954 and 1955, consider new challenges facing the foundation in Europe’s changing reality. He highlights a great need for strengthening cooperation between the US and Europe, for building solid democracy, for reconstructing education, and for supporting American cultural activities there.¹ He supports the view that the Ford Foundation should develop programs in Europe, as well as both short and long-term studies of European and Atlantic problems and relations. He also speaks of widening European horizons, through cooperation with young intellectuals and leaders. He suggests that cultural activities would be of great political value in building such relationships.²
Just six months later, Stone sums up several of the trips made by Ford Foundation officers to Europe to fulfill important steps taken by the Foundation to strengthen ties with Europe.³ Stone states bluntly that if Europe wants to meet the challenge of the “impressive economic, scientific and social development of Russia,” it “must develop an open, democratic society.” He also discusses the role Ford was to play in Europe in comparison with the other big private foundations. While Rockefeller and Carnegie were well known and respected in Europe, Ford was mainly associated with its programs in India and East Asia. This had to be changed through more visits to Europe by respected Ford Foundation representatives. He suggests creating one or even several field offices in Europe. In his view, activities needed to be centralized if “friendly, permanent relations [were] to be developed with the leaders and thinkers of Europe; embarrassment [was] to be avoided; and the Foundation [was] to be alerted to important European trends and ideas.” The initial budget of the field office was to be one million dollars over a three-year period. Staff were to be increased, and the director would spend at least five months in Europe in the course of two or three visits there.⁴ In all of his reports, Stone emphasizes that the U.S. had very low prestige in Europe, which was similar to what it had experienced immediately after the war, but was now attributable mainly to the internal conflict of the McCarthy era.

What is crucial here is Stone’s frequent comparison of Ford’s reputation in Europe in relation to the standing of the Rockefeller Foundation and Carnegie Corporation. He urged the preparation of a public relations program to educate the European public about the foundation. A preliminary conclusion might thus be made that the Ford Foundation wanted not only to expand its activities but also to expand public knowledge about the foundation and to improve its public image in general. Stone lists specific projects and programs for particular countries, such as exchanges of leaders, cooperation between educational institutions, adult education, and conferences for Britain, France, Germany, Yugoslavia, and Italy. General projects included European youth movements, the Congress for Cultural Freedom, the European Cultural Center, and the Salzburg Seminar.⁵

In 1960, the Foundation considered extending the activities it had already been undertaking in Eastern Europe under the auspices of the Institute of International Education. Of course, there was the question of the possible consequences such programs could produce. It appeared likely that these initiatives would prompt the Soviet regime to tighten its grasp on the satellite countries and that this negative result may well outweigh the positive achievement of establishing a platform for scientific and cultural cooperation.
Ford Foundation officers were also pondering the question of which group, students or independent scholars, seemed to produce more results in the long run when brought to the US under exchange program. On the one hand, the students appeared to be less influential, having less impact on their surroundings, their peer groups, and on more broadly defined receiving groups than did the scholars. On the other hand, exchange students as a group were a lot cheaper and more institutions in the US were involved in organizing and monitoring their visits. The State Department suggested that an immediate program directed to countries such as Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, Romania, and Hungary should be launched as soon as possible. Several rules set for the exchange program included reciprocity of opportunity, access to archival material equal to any American student, reasonable freedom to travel and visit public places, accommodation for wives at the students’ expense, selection and placement procedures similar to that of the Polish students under the IIE, even distribution of candidates among different fields, an emphasis on pre-PhD candidates, and, finally, a division of financial responsibility similar to that of the Polish program.  

Various projects, such as supporting the study of international affairs and international cultural activities, fulfilled the objectives of Areas II and IV of the Ford Foundation program. The international program for Europe was considered valid because it corresponded with “the objectives of US foreign policy.” The program for “strengthening democratic institutions in Europe and developing East-West relations on a democratic basis,” was thought to be improving traditional American ties with Western Europe. The exchange of persons was considered to be the most useful because it increased Europeans’ awareness of what was happening in the US. Programs conducted by the ITR and IA likewise provided incomparable opportunities to expand American knowledge of events behind the Iron Curtain. Similarly, Foundation officers understood that international and area studies contributed to vibrant relations between American universities and universities in the Iron Curtain countries (e.g., Cracow and Lublin and Notre Dame, Indiana). Thus, it might be surmised that the Ford Foundation’s contribution to promoting democracy was not only meaningful and long-lasting, but came at a very “sensitive” time of thaw in Eastern European countries.

3. Case Study: From scholarly exchanges to refugee assistance in Eastern Europe during the Cold War.
Cold War conditions did not deter the foundations from attempting to expand educational exchanges between the two opposing blocs. They sought to improve the quality of scientific research, to launch new fields of scientific pursuit, and to develop the overall state of knowledge. Taken together, these efforts helped to induce a process of democratization, enhancing the building of civic society and the quest for freedom.

Political unrest, brought about by the first signs of “spring” reaching the countries behind the Iron Curtain, gave the foundations challenging new decisions to make and daring steps to take. Ford Foundation grantees and fellows were, in many cases, among the “enlightened minority” that initiated or at least actively participated in attempts to introduce change in Eastern European countries (as were Rockefeller Foundation grant recipients). Such attempts included writings, strikes, uprisings, and other forms of resistance that derived from general dissatisfaction with economic, social and political conditions.

Professor Andrzej Korboński of UCLA, who worked with the Ford Foundation on the selection process for Polish grantees, stated that “it is difficult if not impossible to draw a direct connection between the exchangees and the March 1968 explosion that took place in Polish universities and resulted in a major purge of faculty and students. Still, it is interesting to note that among the purged professors, most if not all have participated in the Exchange Program sponsored by the Foundation.”

The foundations therefore felt an obligation to assist them in all possible ways. Most Ford Foundation activities directed towards relieving the refugee problem in Europe concentrated on aid to refugee intellectuals and relocating displaced scholars, students, and professors.

It is worth pointing out that the Foundation treated scholars and intellectuals differently depending on their country of their origin. I have attempted to compare how and to what extent the Foundation provided help to refugees coming from Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia during three particularly turbulent periods of the Cold War. I concentrated on the events of 1956 in Hungary and Poland, on 1968 in Czechoslovakia and Poland, and on Martial Law in Poland in 1981. Although the underlying causes of events in those countries seem to be similar, the international community, the US government and the foundations all reacted differently. During the 1956 events Ford (as well as Rockefeller) gave much more attention and long-lasting support to Hungarian refugee students than to their Polish counterparts.

The first cause of that discrepancy was the difference in the severity of consequences resulting from the uprisings. The reactions of the Communist regimes and the Soviet
intervention that followed were considerably milder in Poland. Fewer Poles therefore left the country at the time.

Second, the foundations assumed partial responsibility for helping selected groups in an effort to “repair” the passive reaction of the American government that had so willingly encouraged “the captive people” of Eastern Europe to reach for freedom but had done nothing to assist them when they did.

Third, applying a lesson that the Rockefeller Foundation had learned the hard way when trying to aid refugees during the Second World War, the Ford Foundation sought to utilize already existing organizations and institutions. In the foundations’ view, it was much better to help receiving countries such as Austria, France, Great Britain, or Germany support Hungarian students than to deal with them in the US. The aim of providing grants to European universities that would admit students, and of assisting them financially until they graduated, was to keep Hungarian refugees in Europe.

Finally, there was the sheer number of the Hungarian refugee population, which in a very short time reached (by some estimates) almost 200,000 (including about 6,500 students and 300 intellectuals), turned out to be a greater burden to the neighboring countries than anyone had expected or was prepared for. In the spring of 1968 intellectuals and scholars in Czechoslovakia and Poland stood against the Communist regimes that limited their right to free expression. Censored, ostracized, fired, threatened, and terrorized for their political views or their ethnic background (of the 20,000 Poles that left Poland many were of Jewish origin), many intellectuals were forced to leave their countries. The American foundations were the first to offer them assistance by organizing relocation or resettlement in Western European and American universities.

Assistance to the exiles of the 1968 Eastern European Spring was mostly directed to those who refused to cooperate with the Communist regimes. The lack of freedom for intellectual exploration and the pursuit of knowledge in their home countries led them to decide to continue their work in exile. Another group of Polish grantees was composed of those who had been forcibly deported, with no right to return. Their passports had been confiscated and they had been handed a document stating that they were not Polish citizens and were not allowed to re-enter the country. This last group escaped the persecutions, death threats, and direct attacks on their families and friends, who were frequently arrested by the Militia or the SB (Security Service of the Polish Ministry of Internal Affairs) to be
interrogated, beaten, and blackmailed into cooperating and denouncing others. Many lost their lives to murder and suicide.

In the case of Czech refugees that year, the Foundation’s policy was provisional, subject to revision as changing circumstances required. Czechs were to be encouraged to stay in Europe, as care was to be taken not to “contaminate” Czech intellectuals with Western ideas that would make it difficult for them to return to Czechoslovakia. Universities both in Europe and in the US were to bear most of the financial burden. A major, well-publicized fellowship program was to be avoided, as it would serve as a magnet to attract Czechs out of the country. The Foundation made financial resources available to the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS) for refugee work and to the International Association for Cultural Freedom for help in placing them in universities.12

The persecution of Polish intellectuals intensified when Martial Law was introduced in December 1981, as “General Jaruzelski’s junta incorporated in its program measures aiming at the annihilation of Polish culture.” The group of intellectuals excluded from universities, those who refused to sign the “declaration of loyalty,” grew bigger. With the help of Helsinki Watch, the Ford Foundation developed a typology of human rights activity to be applied in Eastern Europe to address concrete problems of Foundation support. The proposed practice worked well for the support of of human rights and for the establishment of intellectual freedom in Eastern Europe. The Foundation’s main categories of human rights included:

- **Individual self-expression**, without censorship or any kind of ideological control, the freedom to continue with one’s work in spite of persecution, harassment, or lack of formal employment.
- **Societal self-organization** (a term used by the Polish opposition): intellectual endeavors done independently of the official repressive system in the form of theaters, seminars, publication of books, pamphlets, journals, or producing other forms of art. The Polish Flying University, the Czechoslovak “Petlice” (Padlock) book series, and the Yugoslav journal “praxis,” are perhaps the best examples.
- **Social self-defense**: local organizations established in order to defend human rights, to document and report any human rights violations and to organize support for the victims of abuses. Organizations that helped to inform the national and international communities about human rights violations included the Social Self-Defense
Committee (KOR) and many others in Poland, and Charter 77 and the Committee for the Defense of the Unjustly Persecuted in Czechoslovakia. These categories functioned in almost all countries in Eastern Europe: Hungary, Romania, East Germany, Yugoslavia, and Czechoslovakia. Poland, however, seems to have been the most active. In the 1980s, increased repression by the communist regimes forced all activists, intellectuals, and workers to conduct their activities with greater care and secrecy, and on a smaller scale, due to growing personal risks from persecution and imprisonment to assassination.

There were forms of resistance that were not specifically addressed by the Foundation: dissent by religious groups and churches; open political opposition taken by the political parties or underground movement. Both forms were active and present in Poland. In other countries additional activities largely took the form of terrorist attacks or revolutionary strategies.

The Ford Foundation targeted several types of East European human rights activities for support. The first type took the form of various largely informal and voluntary outside organizations, the majority of them underfunded, that furnished direct assistance to refugees. They helped refugees communicate with relatives at home, organized aid to prisoners, and collected funds for individual scholars and artists, or for undertakings such as the Flying University and the publications of the intelligentsia. They also translated Western literature to make it available to the local audience and translated local literary work for international circulation.

The second type involved Western human rights organizations with direct or indirect connections to those existing in Eastern Europe, mainly through exiles who were already well-established abroad. They helped to document and distribute information about human rights violations, and about movements and individuals. The Chekhov Publishing Corporation, generously funded by the Ford Foundation, is one example of this type of grantee.

A third category comprised formal organizations in democratic countries, such as Amnesty International or Helsinki Watch, that sought to raise global awareness and to exert pressure on local governments to stop repressive activities, as well as to pressure their own governments to criticize regimes, to act and demand greater freedom.
Other types of activity that the Foundation sponsored include the publication of journals (“Survey,” “Index on Censorship,” “Freedom Appeals”), the work of institutes researching human rights issues, and law firms organizing the defense of victims.

Deriving some experience from the Rockefeller Foundation’s successful support for Hungarian refugee students, the Ford Foundation was able to avoid many mistakes in the wake of the events of 1968 and to launch a well-planned program for Polish refugees in 1981. The difference in its approach might have also resulted from a study the Foundation undertook between 1975 and 1978. Bearing the title “Human Rights and Intellectual freedom,” this project shifted the Foundation’s interests towards “the strengthening of intellectual freedom and the free flow of ideas and information into and out of repressive societies.” General rules were rarely applied to all groups of refugees, though in the 1980s some common procedures and directives were given to intermediaries such as voluntary agencies, foreign governmental organizations, and universities. Ford Foundation action on Eastern Europe included:

- Continued emergency funding for refugees: Polish refugees in the US were funded through the International Research & Exchanges Board (IREX) and ACLS in the US, as well as the Fondation pour une Entraide Intellectuelle Européenne (FEIE) for refugees in Europe;
- Support for policy, coordination, and organizational matters within the general context of refugee work;
- Support for the intellectual needs of exiles, such as providing individual scholarships (L. Kolakowski, Z. Bauman), AND granting funds for conference organizing and for literary publishing efforts (K. Jeleński, Cz. Miłosz);
- Support for activities in Poland, including free intellectual and cultural endeavors (the so-called “parlor culture”), such as independent publications that would reach local audiences (these were among the most generously sponsored);
- Scholarly research and documentation (on “Solidarity,” Oral History Project);
- Area studies, such as Polish studies and studies of agricultural development in Eastern Europe (F. Levcik) or on the economy (I. Sachs).

My archival research allowed me to draw up a set of informal guidelines that were repeatedly used by the Ford Foundation in its handling of Polish, Czechoslovakian, Russian
and Hungarian refugees. The unwritten rules of the program for aiding Eastern European refugees covered areas such as:

- Procedures for selecting the “valuable” intellectuals to be assisted;
- A methodology of ascribing “A” and “B” status to refugees;
- A detailed screening process;
- Channeling funds rather than direct Foundation involvement;
- Taking into account any possible impact made on local political climates and future cooperation with local regimes;
- Cooperation with voluntary agencies, universities, human rights and refugee organizations;
- Avoiding possible problems in the selection procedures of intermediary organizations;
- Regulating support for locally active human rights activists, student organizations, dissidents;
- Aiding interned or imprisoned opposition leaders;
- Encouraging intellectuals living and working abroad to help refugees at home;
- Setting fixed periods for assistance;
- Cooperating with the US State Department rather than criticizing government ineptitude and lack of action;
- Working with US embassies and refugees in bordering countries;
- Funding specific intellectual projects in order to avoid mere subsistence support;

In the period 1981-1983, Polish intellectuals constituted a very particular category of refugees. For the most part they were not dissidents or defectors (which was the case with East German and Czechoslovakian refugees), nor were they émigrés. Rather, they were largely from the political mainstream, and went abroad with the permission of the Polish government. They sometimes even traveled with the government’s own sponsorship, under an exchange program, doing professional work, or accepting visiting professorships. While they were abroad in 1981, the events of December 13 took them by surprise. Some, against advice from the FEIE, for example, decided to return home immediately, risking internment or some other form of persecution (it did not matter that they had gone abroad with the regime’s blessing; the fact that they had spent time in the West made them a direct danger in the junta’s
eyes). Others hesitated, and over time it became harder and riskier for them to return. Still others were determined to resettle and, at least for the time being, to continue their professional and scholarly interests while waiting for the situation at home to improve.

The Ford Foundation made funds available to recipients through IREX. These payments were classified not as political resettlement grants or as career-transition support, but rather as “an ad hoc expansion of routine international exchange and cooperative activities,” meaning that Poles abroad were to be treated as regular visitors. This approach allowed for the avoidance of direct conflict with the Polish regime, in the interest of resuming academic cooperation once Martial Law was repealed.

In spite of a large caseload, the Ford Foundation tried to meet individual needs with the assistance of intermediary organizations such as the FEIE and IREX. Exiled intellectuals and scholars were to be provided material support to enable those who were unemployed to continue with their creative activity and to supplement the meager earnings of those with jobs. It was equally crucial to ensure that they had free time at their disposal, in order to avoid any charges of their being parasites who were fully dependent on external aid. Refugee intellectuals were to be given easy access to international books and journals and any other materials they needed for their work. Personal intellectual contacts with the outside world were also critical, even by correspondence or via telephone conversation. 17 Finally, exiled artists, scholars and intellectuals desired moral encouragement to pursue their endeavors. International recognition for their struggle and achievements, either through publications or awards, such as the Nobel Prize in Literature given to Czesław Miłosz in 1980 or the Nobel Peace Prize for “Solidarity” leader Lech Walesa in 1983, provided inspiration and reassurance.

The overall impact of Ford Foundation activities on civic participation and democratic institution building in Eastern Europe remains to be evaluated. It is clear, however, that the Foundation’s role in intellectual and academic exchanges, in aid to refugees, in the expansion of area and international studies, as well as in improving relations between Western Europe and the US during the Cold War all rank among the Foundation’s top achievements and contributions to peace building.

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1 As early as 1952 the Ford Foundation deliberated over the role of foundations in the reform of the political systems of foreign countries. Officers expressed the belief that the role of foundations began with institution building, university education, social research institutions (e.g., the Carnegie and Falk


3 Countries visited at that time were Austria, Belgium, Denmark, England, France, Germany, Italy, Switzerland, and Yugoslavia. However, apart from a very interesting overview of international relations, of the present state of affairs, and of possible developments in the future, the reports consist essentially of the names of people who were interviewed. One report containing Stone’s observations on the people and places he visited during his trip to Denmark, France, Yugoslavia, Austria, and Germany (meeting Adenauer, German army representatives, and German scientists) appears not to be as detailed, meticulous, observant, and analytical as the reports written by Rockefeller Foundation officers. The Ford reports are rather general, sometimes even vague, containing more personal observations than objective assessments. RAC, FF, Unpublished Reports, Report 010642, Memorandum from S. Stone to Price, and Gaither, “Footnotes on European Trip.” August 16, 1955.


10 RAC, FF, Grant File 0570322, Reel 2517, Institute of International Education, Inc., “Exchange of Students, Professors, and Specialists Between the USA and Eastern Europe, Specifically Poland and Yugoslavia.”


14 RAC, FF, Unpublished Reports, Report 011662, Francis X. Sutton, “Poland,” June 23, 1982; International Division, Office of the Vice President, Office Files of Francis X. Sutton, Series II, Box 45, Folders 2, 3, and 5, USIAP, Polish Crisis, 1981-82.

15 Board of Trustees Meeting, September 23-25, 1981.

16 RAC, FF, Grant Files, Reel 4971, Grant 08550756, “Information Gathering on Human Rights in Hungary, Poland and Czechoslovakia and Publication of the East European Reporter”; Reel 4573, Grant 08250389, “Poland Watch Center Support for Collection, Translation and Dissemination of Information on Polish Human Rights”; International Division, Office of the Vice President, Office Files of Francis X. Sutton, Series II, Box 45, Folder 2, 3, 4 and 5, USIAP, Polish Crisis, 1981-82.

17 RAC, FF, International Division, Office of the Vice President, Office Files of Francis X. Sutton, Series II, Box 45, Folder 2,3,4 and 5, USIAP, Polish Crisis, 1981-82; Series VI: Ford Foundation History Project, Regional Files, 1951-1985, Box 61, Folders 1-17; Series VII: Ford Foundation History Project, Subject Files, 1949-1985, Box 79, Folders 7 and 8.