Weaponizing Citizenship: From the Cold War to Russia's Invasion of Ukraine
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Background

The aim of this research project was to better understand the ways in which citizenship has been weaponized to the detriment of human rights. My goal in pursuing a Visegrad Scholarship at the Open Society Archives in Budapest was to explore the ways denationalization, forced naturalization, statelessness, and forced migration have been used to manipulate national narratives about belonging and identity, as well as to engineer the polity to align with state interests and ideals. These conversations remain salient in the face of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, where the Russian State is again leveraging citizenship as a weapon. There are reports, for instance, that Ukrainian children are being transferred to Russian territory to be adopted by Russian citizens and forcibly naturalized.[1] There are also important questions about the forced "passportization" of residents in territories such as Crimea, where Russia seeks to assert its control.[2]

This research agenda questions the common, uncritical narrative that citizenship always constitutes a social good. For generations, people across the world have considered nationality the key to enjoying fundamental human rights, or what Hannah Arendt called "the right to have rights."[3] Citizenship supposedly offers national identity, indicates worthiness, and even proves one's existence. Those without it are rendered vulnerable to an array of human rights abuses. Without passports or other state documentation, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees says stateless people "officially don't exist"[4] – well, at least on paper. Citizenship is not only a force for good, however. My

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[1] Bubola, Emma. 2022. "Using Adoptions, Russia Turns Ukrainian Children Into Spoils of War," *The New York Times,* October 22. Available at https://www.nytimes.com/2022/10/22/world/europe/ukraine-children-russia-adoptions.html?smid=nytcore-ios-share&referringSource=articleShare.

[2] Knott, Eleanor. 2022. "The Weaponization of More than Citizenship." EUI Global Citizenship Observatory. Available at https://globalcit.eu/weaponized-citizenship-should-international-law-restrict-oppressive-nationality-attribution/3/.

[3] Arendt, Hannah. 1966. *The Origins of Totalitarianism: New Edition.* Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc.

[4] United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. "What does it mean to be stateless?" YouTube. Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U8xZpNG39oc&t=42s.

work on the weaponization of citizenship[5] highlights how the same documentation that can protect citizens and migrants might also open them up to extensive social control and rights violations. Important messages about who does (and does not) belong in a country are highlighted with the granting or revocation of citizenship, sometimes fueling mass atrocity crimes like ethnic cleansing and genocide. These kinds of violations require us to look at citizenship with a critical eye – not only to recognize the potential for weaponizing citizenship, but also to consider how to punish and prevent what Neha Jain calls "oppressive nationality".[6]

The manipulation of citizenship – from the Soviet era to the current Russian invasion of Ukraine – highlights how citizenship can be used as a tool for conquest and control, rather than human rights protection. This discussion is vital for understanding broader global processes, especially because the international community continues to rely on citizenship to identify rights holders and to signify membership in political communities. While the provision of citizenship is often a positive step toward inclusion and protection, we cannot ignore the harms associated with it – from its historical legacy of genocide, dispossession, and erasure, to current threats associated with nationality being used to punish, reward, and privilege. Ultimately, the aim is to move us closer to a world where people are empowered and protected not because of their passports or legal status, but because of their value as fellow human beings.

OSA Resources

During my Visegrad research presentation at the OSA, I "confessed" to not being a historian or regional specialist in Eastern Europe or Russia. In fact, this was my first experience conducting archival research because most of my work centers on qualitative methodology and political theory. While this fellowship took me outside of my scholarly "comfort zone," I believe it was worth the effort and enhanced the interdisciplinary nature of my work. I am grateful for the OSA staff who provided me with invaluable research assistance and good advice, and I hope that this reflection will perhaps inspire others to include archival research in their own scholarship.

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[5] Kingston, Lindsey N. 2021. "The weaponization of citizenship: Punishment, erasure, and social control." In *Statelessness, Governance, and the Problem of Citizenship,* edited by Tendayi Bloom and Lindsey N. Kingston. Manchester University Press.

[6] Jain, Neha. 2022. "Weaponized Citizenship: Should international law restrict oppressive nationality attribution?" EUI Global Citizenship Observatory. Available at https://globalcit.eu/weaponized-citizenship-should-international-law-restrict-oppressive-nationality-attribution/.

I consulted the following collections during my two-month stay at the OSA, although please forgive me if this list is not exhaustive:

- *The Samizdat Archives within the Records of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Research Institute.* Subject files provided key background information about citizenship stripping (especially its widespread use by the Soviet Union), ethnic minorities, and deportations.

- *The Western Press Archives within the Records of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Research Institute.* Country files from the USSR contained useful information about the use of citizenship stripping, as well as background information about ethnic minorities in the Soviet sphere, state policy discussions, and nationality legislation.

- *General Records of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Research Institute.* Information items helped me better understand policies and practices related to identification documents and citizenship in the Soviet Union and throughout the Eastern Bloc. Subject files from the Balkan Section and others were similarly useful in this regard. Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Research Institute also contained information about discrimination, deportation, citizenship stripping, and other related human rights abuses.

- *Publications of the Human Rights Watch.* These publications offered a timeline for better understanding human rights discussions within the international community, including those related to conflicts over ethnic tensions after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

- *Open Media Research Institute.* Subject files from the Information Services Department outlined the changing nature of citizenship laws in places such as Romania. The Subject files of Dan Ionescu (Research and Analysis Department) further contributed to my work on nationality legislation.

- *Éva Kapitány Photo Collection.* These photographs told the story of a 1988 hunger strike by Hungarian dissidents, who were protesting their inability to access passports and enjoy freedom of movement. This example is an important example of the weaponizaton of passports.

- *Library holdings.* The OSA library contains several relevant books and publications that are not available to me in the United States, including work related to ethnic minorities and nationality in the Soviet Union.

Research Themes/Findings

Although I am still processing my data and considering next steps, I would like to share several research themes that emerged from my time at OSA. These include citizenship stripping (denationalization), passports, and identity documents.

Citizenship Stripping

Archival sources highlighted the longstanding use of citizenship stripping for activities deemed disloyal and/or embarrassing to the state, both within the Soviet Union and throughout the Eastern Bloc. My colleague and fellow Visegrad Scholar Nergis Canefe aptly noted in her presentation that many governments sought to contain their citizens and "kill them slowly from within," but some citizens (especially high-profile ones with international connections and reputations) were instead sent to exile via denationalization and deportation. For instance, three women were stripped of their Soviet citizenship in July 1980 and deported to Vienna, Austria. The women said they were forced to leave on short notice with little more than the clothes they were wearing; they were told they could choose deportation or prison. The women belonged to a feminist group that published the journal *Maria*, which had recently called on Soviet women to urge their husbands and sons to go to prison rather than fight in Afghanistan.[7] In this case and in countless others, the state opted to exile disruptive, prominent/public citizens rather than keeping them within state territory. In most cases, such denationalization rendered the former citizen stateless – that is, they did not hold legal nationality to any country in the world, in violation of human rights norms and international law.

To put this use of citizenship stripping into historical context, the international community had paid careful attention to the issue of statelessness following the World Wars. The creation of stateless refugees, especially following World War II and state disintegration, created pressing challenges for Europe and the newly created United Nations. Two key pieces of international law directly related to statelessness were adopted: the 1954 Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons and the

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[7] "Three women who published…" 1980, July 21. HU OSA 300-85-12:97; Legislation: Citizenship, 1978-1994; Subject Files; Samizdat Archives; Records of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Research Institute; Vera and Donald Blinken Open Society Archives at Central European University, Budapest.

1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness. The 1954 Convention ensured that stateless people enjoy a minimum set of human rights and established the legal definition of a stateless person as someone who is "not recognized as a national by any state under the operation of its law." The 1961 Convention aimed to prevent statelessness and reduce it over time by establishing an international framework to ensure the right of every person to a nationality.[8] Yet after this post-war attention, the international community largely "forgot" about statelessness for decades; it is only within the last decade that statelessness has re-emerged as a human rights priority.[9] It was during this attention lull that legal changes within the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc strengthened the states' powers to denationalize citizens as recently as the 1970s, as well as to block them from renouncing their citizenship and obtaining exit visas to facilitate emigration. In this sense, despite international acknowledgement of the right to a nationality, citizenship was weaponized so that citizens had few options when it came to their legal status and mobility.

Passports

Closely related to citizenship stripping is the thematic focus on passports, which were used to restrict movement, punish dissenters, and even trap people. For instance, the Éva Kapitány Photo Collection at the OSA includes a powerful series on a 1988 hunger strike. In that case, Hungarian dissidents were hunger striking because they had been denied passports by the state as punishment for their political views. They argued that their rights as citizens had been violated, including their right to freedom of movement.[10] In earlier cases, we see how the cancellation of passports in the Soviet Union and throughout the Eastern Bloc was often tied to punishment for perceived "disloyal" activities and opinions among "undesirable" citizens. In 1971, for example, Soviet dissident Valery Chalidze was on a U.S. lecture tour when he was called to meet two government officials in his New York City hotel lobby. He was asked for his passport so the agents could check his identity, and the document soon ended up

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[8] United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. n.d. "UN Conventions on Statelessness." Available at https://www.unhcr.org/what-we-do/protect-human-rights/ending-statelessness/un-conventions-statelessness.
[9] See Kingston, Lindsey N. 2019. "Conceptualizing Statelessness as a Human Rights Challenge: Framing, Visual Representation, and (Partial) Issue Emergence." *Journal of Human Rights Practice, 11*(1): 52-72.
[10] "Hunger Strike for Passports by Members of the Opposition." 1988. 440-1-1:60/1, Documents and photographs; Éva Kapitány Photo Collection; Vera and Donald Blinken Open Society Archives at Central European University, Budapest.

in an official's pocket. Chalidze was then informed that he had been denationalized for "acts discrediting a Soviet citizen," thereby rending him stateless.[11]

The weaponization of passports isn't limited to their revocation or refusal, however. States can (sometimes forcibly) issue them to trap dissenters and to claim territory. A stark example comes from the 1960s, when Hungary advertised "consular passports" to Hungarians living abroad in cities such as Paris, Vienna, and Rome. Circulars encouraged them to "settle" their citizenship and return to Hungary years after fleeing its various wars and revolutions.[12] [13] The Hungarian state turned to coercive measures such as using family connections to pressure and blackmail people into returning. Exiles reported that their relatives were denied visitor passports (that is, exit visas to leave Hungary) until their family members abroad filed applications for consular passports. This put Hungarian refugees in a terrible position; either their loved ones were trapped in Hungary and unable to visit (no matter how close the family connection or how dire the circumstance), or they applied for a consular passport and therefore forfeited their status as a political refugee, eventually being forced to return to Hungary as "re-defectors" or through deportation.[14] In some cases, former Hungarian citizens with Western citizenships were held in Hungary during familial visits because they had not formally renounced their Hungarian citizenship, even though citizenship laws at the time nullified such citizenship with naturalization elsewhere.[15] These actions were part of a broader propaganda campaign, started in the 1950s throughout Europe, to convince Hungarian refugees to return home. While propaganda promised a better life in Hungary, returnees were met with suspicion and subjected to state surveillance. Among

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[11] Kaufman, Michael T. 1972. "Soviet Aides Visit a Dissident in Hotel Here and Lift Passport." *The New York Times,* December 14. HU OSA 300-85-12:97; Legislation: Citizenship, deprivation, 1970-1991; Subject Files; Samizdat Archives; Records of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Research Institute; Vera and Donald Blinken Open Society Archives at Central European University, Budapest.

[12] "Hungarian House in Paris Advertises Consular Passports." 1961, July 14. HU OSA 300-40-4:20; Population: Citizenship, 1961-1963; Information Items; Hungarian Unit; RFE/RL Research Institute; Vera and Donald Blinken Open Society Archives at Central European University, Budapest.

[13] "Circular From Vienna Hungarian Legation to Hungarian Emigrants Concerning Citizenship." 1961, December 5. HU OSA 300-40-4:20; Population: Citizenship, 1961-1963; Information Items; Hungarian Unit; RFE/RL Research Institute; Vera and Donald Blinken Open Society Archives at Central European University, Budapest.

[14] "A Further Instance of Regime Efforts to Blackmail Exiles Into Applying for a Consular Passport." 1961, September 23. HU OSA 300-40-4:20; Population: Citizenship, 1961-1963; Information Items; Hungarian Unit; RFE/RL Research Institute; Vera and Donald Blinken Open Society Archives at Central European University, Budapest.

[15] "Former Hungarian Citizen Visitors Detained in Hungary." 1963, October 26. HU OSA 300-40-4:20; Population: Citizenship, 1961-1963; Information Items; Hungarian Unit; RFE/RL Research Institute; Vera and Donald Blinken Open Society Archives at Central European University, Budapest.

other things, they were only issued short-term Hungarian passports and subjected to heavy investigation upon reentry.[16]

Identity Documents

Mandatory identification, including the Soviet internal passport and various forms of ID throughout the Soviet Bloc, were also weaponized for surveilling and controlling citizens. Scholars warn that once ID cards are mandatory, they can be used as a tool for surveillance and "social sorting" – that is, singling out and even harassing visible minorities and those with "alternative lifestyles".[17] In Cold War Eastern Europe, mandatory ID cards helped the police identify suspected dissenters in places like Romania[18] and Czechoslovakia,[19] flagging those perceived as "unreliable". In Poland, ID cards divided citizens into three categories with different validities: Five-year cards were issued mainly to workers and trusted Communist party members, while three-year cards were issued to peasants, intellectuals, and "not quite reliable party members." A one-year provisional card looked markedly different from the other IDs.[20] Similar categories of ID in Czechoslovakia determined how close a person could travel to an international border, with suspect citizens not allowed to approach the border for any reason.[21] In Hungary, intellectuals were stripped of their drivers' licenses due to their "political unreliability" or insecurity.[22]

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[16] "Hungarian Legation in Stockholm Wants to Register Refugees." 1956, May 12. HU OSA 300-40-4:20; Exile: Re-Emigrants/Sweden, 1956; Information Items; Hungarian Unit; RFE/RL Research Institute; Vera and Donald Blinken Open Society Archives at Central European University, Budapest.

[17] Lyon, David, and Colin J. Bennett. 2008. "Playing the ID card: Understanding the significance of identity card systems." In *Playing the Identity Card: Surveillance, security and identification in global perspective,* edited by Colin J. Bennett & David Lyon, 3-20. New York: Routledge. 9.

[18] "New Special Identity Cards." 1952, February 28. HU OSA 300-1-2-16314; Records of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Research Institute: General Records: Information Items; Open Society Archives at Central European University, Budapest. Available at http://hdl.handle.net/10891/osa:4226c587-d044-469f-a8b8-ae0d291251a3.

[19] "Secret Marks in Identity Cards." 1951, August 13. HU OSA 300-1-2-4327; Records of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Research Institute: General Records: Information Items; Open Society Archives at Central European University, Budapest. Available at http://hdl.handle.net/10891/osa:bd43f329-54b4-4d0e-871f-877bd0b3915a.

[20] "The New Identity Papers." 1953, July 22. HU OSA 300-1-2-37080; Records of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Research Institute: General Records: Information Items; Open Society Archives at Central European University, Budapest. Available at http://hdl.handle.net/10891/osa:4c219209-0d1e-4a46-8964-98633e14368f.

[21] "Different Types of Identity Cards." 1952, January 11. HU OSA 300-1-2-13889; Records of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Research Institute: General Records: Information Items; Open Society Archives at Central European University, Budapest. Available at http://hdl.handle.net/10891/osa:a4d43d9b-2dd2-4e69-aa93-417c938ace0d.

[22] "Drivers' Licenses Taken Away from Intellectuals." 1951, October 29. HU OSA 300-1-2-9893; Records of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Research Institute: General Records: Information Items; Open Society Archives at Central European University, Budapest. Available at http://hdl.handle.net/10891/osa:f87add2d-259e-41c0-a06a-5a582b176a8b.

In addition to refusing or revoking external passports during the Cold War, the USSR also maintained a system of "internal passports" that allowed the government to keep tight control over its population. (Internal passports did not facilitate international travel in the way we tend to view passports today, but rather were necessary for life within state borders. As such, they are more of a state ID card than a "passport" using today's terminology.) These documents were essential to everyday life, from finding employment and placing your child in school to obtaining a library card or picking up a package from the post office. The internal passport was considered one of the fundamental symbols of Soviet life, and the "myth" of the passport held special value that was "inextricably linked with the understanding of what it is to be 'a citizen of the USSR'".[23] Those who were denied internal passports were denied freedom of movement and residency rights in cities, among other things, trapping workers on collective farms or at construction projects. Passportization (*pasportizatziia*) controlled labor, privilege, and internal movement while also serving as a "disciplinary apparatus" that linked rewards and punishments to conformity to Soviet ideology.[24] Some of these practices carried over to the Russian Federation after the collapse of the Soviet Union, including residence restrictions that required citizens to obtain permission to live in most major cities.[25]

Next Steps

My time at the OSA has been enormously beneficial to my scholarship on the weaponization of citizenship. This archival work is part of a much larger book project, and I suspect it will also yield several journal publications (possibly co-authored with fellow Visegard Scholars). I am grateful for the opportunity to conduct research at the OSA, to network with other Visegrad Scholars, to learn from the incredible research staff at the OSA, and to be part of the Budapest community for two months. This fellowship has moved my scholarship forward in new and important ways. Many thanks to all who made this possible.

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[23] Baiburin, Albert. 2021. *The Soviet Passport: The History, Nature and Uses of the Internal Passport in the USSR.* Translated by Stephen Dalziel. Cambridge and Medford: Polity. 2.
[24] Garcelon, Marc. 2001. "Colonizing the Subject: The Genealogy and Legacy of the Soviet Internal Passport." In *Documenting Individual Identity: The Development of State Practices in the Modern World,* edited by Jane Caplan and John Torpey, 83-100. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press. 88.
[25] Spiegelberger, William. 1992. "Russian Residence and Travel Restrictions." Helsinki Watch, 4(14), August. Available at https://www.hrw.org/reports/pdfs/r/russia/russia928.pdf.