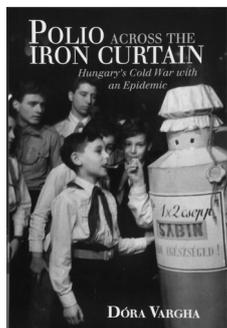




Book

Polio: a Hungarian perspective



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**Polio Across the Iron Curtain:
Hungary's Cold War with an
Epidemic**

Dóra Vargha

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Polio's story is often told as one played out upon the American stage. In his 2005 book *Polio: an American Story*, David Oshinsky writes of the disease as "one of the most significant and culturally revealing triumphs in American medical history". It is a persuasive argument—as summer epidemics of infantile paralysis grew ever more fierce throughout the early decades of the 20th century, America became the epicentre of a fraught, divisive, but ultimately successful race to develop an effective polio vaccine, all funded by the March of Dimes (still perhaps the best example of crowdfunding in history). Yet it would be wrong to think of polio's history as a purely American story. As highlighted by Dóra Vargha in *Polio Across the Iron Curtain: Hungary's Cold War with an Epidemic*, other important stories are still to be told.

Vargha's account focuses on Hungary's experience of polio in the 1950s. Although the remit may be narrow, this focused approach is one of the book's strengths. For Vargha, polio becomes a lens through which to examine the major social and political upheavals of the era, most notably the Hungarian Revolution of 1956. In meticulous detail, her thesis reveals the challenges polio imposed on successive communist regimes, and how different interventions—the iron lung, Jonas Salk's injected polio vaccine, and Albert Sabin's oral vaccine—were mobilised to combat this threat, with varying degrees of success.

Hungary's battle with polio is a story of fascinating contradictions. In one chapter, Vargha considers the country's attempts to import Salk's vaccine in 1957, as the spectre of another major epidemic loomed. Families were encouraged to ask friends and relatives abroad to send parcels of vaccine that would be fast-tracked through customs. The same friends and relatives that had been branded dissidents for fleeing the country after World War 2 were now being relied on by the state. Likewise, a West German pilot became "a hero in the coldest days of Cold War Hungary" for delivering the first official shipment of polio vaccine to Budapest, subverting the standard rhetoric of the time.

A recurring theme of the book is the ways in which polio catalysed cooperation at a time of immense political tension. The Iron Curtain became surprisingly porous as "vaccines, iron lungs, people and practices crossed... back and forth in a mutual effort to prevent and treat the disease".

Crucially, ideas flowed in both directions. For example, during the early trials of Sabin's oral polio vaccine, Hungary and its eastern European neighbours had a pivotal role in pioneering mass immunisation campaigns, in which all children under a certain age were vaccinated in a matter of days. The fact that the health-care systems of

these countries were "centrally controlled from top to bottom" was key to the success of such an approach. Mass immunisation has since become a pillar of the Global Polio Eradication Initiative, and remains a crucial strategy for responding to outbreaks and boosting immunity in high-risk regions.

Polio Across the Iron Curtain is at its most effective when it scratches beneath the surface of daily life in 1950s Hungary. In addition to combing through newspapers, health reports, and research papers, Vargha conducted extensive interviews with people who lived through the events being recounted. In one revealing passage, an interviewee describes the tense moment when, after their son contracted polio, a black car arrived at their house—an event "which usually meant that the political police was coming to take someone away". As ever, the standard rules did not seem to apply for polio. Having heard of the son's condition, the officers were delivering gamma globulin, "hoping that it might help".

Elsewhere, Vargha describes the remarkable events that followed a distress call from a hospital in Debrecen in October, 1956. Amidst the turmoil of the Hungarian Revolution, polio cases had started to spread across the east of Hungary; not an ideal time for the hospital's only iron lung to break. The appeal reached Munich via radio, and within hours an iron lung was being flown in, "almost certainly organised by the West German Red Cross". But with no functioning airports in the region, it was left to amateur radio users to help redirect and land the plane safely.

The book provides an optimistic perspective of how health issues have the capacity to transcend political and social divisions, particularly when children are involved. In many ways, the Global Polio Eradication Initiative continues to be a powerful example of this message. When the campaign was launched in 1988, polio caused about 350 000 cases annually. Through a globally coordinated vaccination effort, the disease has been reduced to a pale shadow of its former self. Last year saw just 138 cases, and continued transmission is restricted to just three countries (Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Nigeria).

Yet, the story of polio is not over and the barriers to eradication are considerable. In the last refuges of the disease, vaccination campaigns must contend with unceasing population movement, restricted access to insecure regions, and suspicion that all too frequently spills over into violence. Just as polio prevention efforts once crossed the Iron Curtain, they must overcome these obstacles if eradication is to be achieved.

Edward Parker