

Approaches to Literature in Hungary, 1945–1949

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ABSTRACT

The coalition period, 1945–1948, was a transition between the new and weak democracy established after the war and the impending communist dictatorship. Literature, precisely because it appeared to be more than just literature for politicians, was regarded as extremely important. Literature and the study of literature was confined to a few daily, weekly newspapers, literary journals and a small number of books. Printing paper was allocated by a communist official. During the transition period, it became gradually clear for those involved in literary matters (poets, writers, critics, scholars) that the rules of the game were changing. The communists introduced a new type of argumentation couched entirely in class warfare terms. Old and non-communist scholars and critics were browbeaten. At the same time, the communists started courting what they saw as the most influential group of intellectuals, that is, the populist writers. The communists were inflated with new adherents from all directions. The other parties, saturated with infiltrators and police informers, began to crumble. A new generation of scholars, born in the 1920s, came forward. Some of them were to become the dominant figures of literary scholarship up to 1989, the collapse of socialism. The transition period ended when the newspapers, journals, except those of the communists, were discontinued and the Academy was reorganized.

Keywords: literary scholarship, the coalition period in Hungary, Marxism, Stalinism, literary institutions, György Lukács

From positivism and *Geistesgeschichte* via Stalinism, Marxism and structuralism to post-structuralism: the paths Hungarian literary studies have taken since 1945 seem fairly obvious, almost pre-

determined. The nouns in the first sentence – and one might add quite a few others like Freudism, formalism, reception aesthetics, dialogism, hermeneutics, deconstruction, post-colonialism – do not refer to intellectual movements that evolved into one another gently and gradually in the course of time. Rather, they reached Hungary fully formed, were adopted with some modifications, and existed side by side. The state of being close together, however, can bring about peaceful coexistence through negligence and ignorance just as easily as interaction through experimental combinations or interaction through tension and conflict. A consecutive pattern of the theoretical possibilities realized in real time yields the story of post-war literary studies in Hungary.

The first period, 1945 to 1949, was extraordinary in a number of respects. The end of the war, the promise of a new beginning free from the taboos and restrictions of the previous period and, in equal measure, the inherent uncertainty of the country's geopolitical situation, that is, the question whether and when the Soviet occupation would end, inspired frantic efforts both in literature and in literary criticism. Although literary studies were confined to a few daily and weekly newspapers, literary journals and a small number of books, which focused primarily on contemporary and early 20th century Hungarian literature, a new generation of talented literary scholars came forward. Some of these young scholars were later to become dominant figures of the socialist period, wielding their power in questionable ways.

The ambivalence at the outset was radically simplified by the communist takeover in 1948. To grasp the course of the events, it will often be necessary to go back and forward in time, beyond the limits of the coalition period, that is 1945 and 1948. After the takeover, strict Stalinism reigned for a number of years, nearly a decade. Under the surface, however, despite all the Marxist slogans and declarations, there was an unadvertised but unavoidable continuity with the practice of literary history and literary criticism of earlier periods. Since there were no Marxist guidelines for some of the literary scholars' main activities, for example biography and stylistic analysis, they were generally carried out according to earlier norms and standards – peppered here and there with phrases like class-warfare, bourgeois

decadence, exploitation, means of production, imperialism, revolution, or superstructure.

Piecemeal sovietization

In 1944–1945, the members of the communist elite, returning from their Moscow exile in the wake of the invading Red Army, had boundless energy to rearrange the political landscape to their own advantage and had an unconcealed desire to direct the course of the events. They had nothing to fear in Hungary, except the wrath of Stalin. They were lucky to have survived and painfully aware of their comrades and relatives who disappeared during the great purges in the Soviet Union.

An incremental sovietization of Hungary, as opposed to the introduction of instant draconian measures, the model of 1919, was decided at Party meetings in Moscow in September and October of 1944.¹ The graduality of the moves to be taken was the origin of what became known as “salami tactics.” This, however, implied that the communists had to accept, at least temporarily, the presence and activities of other legitimate political parties and organizations. They adopted an old military metaphor (i.e., people’s front) to describe their sharing of power with the rest of the political arena. However, since they usually described the world in military terms (e.g., class warfare, the poet as a partisan as opposed to the poet as a regular soldier),² it is not entirely clear whether these expression should be taken literally or metaphorically. In either case, the weaponisation of huge chunks of the common vocabulary was an essential feature of Stalinism.

In the new situation, poets, writers, critics, and literary historians had to realize that the rules of the game were changing, and old assumptions about success no longer applied. New possibilities opened

¹ **Kenez**, Peter. *Hungary from the Nazis to the Soviets: The Establishment of the Communist Regime in Hungary, 1944–1948*. Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 14.

² **Lukács**, György. “Szabad vagy irányított művészet?” – *Forum II*, 1947, № 4, pp. 250–268.; **Lukács**, György, “Free or Directed Art?” – In: **Lukács**, György. *The Culture of People’s Democracy: Hungarian Essays on Literature, Art, and Democratic Transition, 1945–1948*. Ed. Miller, Tyrus. Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2013, pp. 129–152.

up with promising career prospects and entirely different types of winning arguments. The practice of literary history needs years or decades of preparation, so in the brief, frenzied coalition period, the study of literature was often limited in range and depth. Almost all the scholarly books published in the coalition period, between 1945 and 1948 were written earlier. The period was unique in the sense that almost all literary scholars and critics participated in discussions of contemporary literature. In hindsight, it is quite clear that the judgements and opinions they put forward about contemporary literature determined how literary history would be written in the decades to come.

The new generation of talented and ambitious young scholars, most of them born in the 1920s, included József Szauder (1917–1975), Előd Halász (1920–1997), László Kéry (1920–1992), Béla Köpeczi (1920–2010), Péter Nagy (1920–2010), Miklós Szabolcsi (1921–2000), István Király (1921–1989), Tibor Klaniczay (1923–1992), Sándor Lukácsy (1923–2001), and Pál Pándi (1926–1987). Almost all of them would become academicians, and all of them would be at least heads of departments at various universities or at the Academy of Sciences. Between 1945 and 1949, some of them adopted a fierce and threatening Stalinist rhetoric in order to cow the older or non-communist scholars into reticence.

The new beginning: parties and intellectuals

The elections of November 1945, with an amazing 92 % turnout, showed that the Independent Smallholders' Party received 57 %, both the Social Democrats and the Communists about 17 %, and the National Peasant Party 7 % of the votes.³ Despite their sweeping victory, the Smallholders were prevented from forming a government on their own. Both marshal Kliment Yefremovich Voroshilov, the head of the Allied Control Commission in Hungary, and Vyacheslav Mikhailovich Molotov, the Soviet foreign minister, made it abundantly clear that they would only accept a coalition government with the

³ **Romsics**, Ignác. *Magyarország története a XX. században*. Budapest: Osiris Kiadó, 1999, p. 284.

interior minister, a key post supervising the police, appointed by the communists.⁴

The Smallholders' Party was somewhat bland and unexciting, usually hesitant to act decisively, but both of these features were part and parcel of their appeal. They offered no fanciful solutions to the problems of the country beyond democracy, i.e. the rule of law, and private property, i.e., capitalism. They were seen as the least threatening – in the sense of encroaching on and meddling with the lives of ordinary citizens – among the parties available. It also helped that they were definitely not communists, apart from the ubiquitous infiltrators and police informers. The majority they initially enjoyed disappeared as the Party, with a little help from their communist friends, was sliced into ever smaller parts.

Gábor Tolnai (1910–1990), a scholar of old Hungarian literature, was a member of the Smallholders' Party. His career, however, seems to be incongruous with that of anybody outside the Communist Party. He was director-general of the National Library, 1946–47; an academician from 1948, one of the very few who could keep his membership in the Academy after it was reorganized in 1949; the head of the university department in the Ministry of Culture and Education, 1948–1949; the ambassador to Italy, 1949–1950; the minister of Education, 1950–1951; secretary (1952), then president (1962) of the Scholarly Qualification Committee; the head of the old Hungarian literature department at the Budapest university, 1953–1980; the editor of *Kortárs* [The Contemporary], one of the few literary journals of the period, 1957–1962. Posts like these were available only to old and trusted comrades. When Tolnai was a university student, he belonged to the *Szegedi Fiatalok Művészeti Kollégiuma* [The Art College of the Youth in Szeged].

Two other members of the same circle, Ferenc Erdei (1910–1971) of the Peasant Party and Gyula Ortutay (1910–1978) of the Smallholders' Party, joined the Communist Party in secret very early on (Erdei in 1944, Ortutay in 1945). In other words, they acted as high-level infiltrators. The sociologist Erdei was interior minister, 1944–1945;

⁴ **Borhi**, László. *Hungary in the Cold War, 1945–1956: Between the United States and the Soviet Union*. Budapest, New York: Central European University Press, 2004, p. 5.

an academician from 1948; the minister of agriculture, 1949–1953; the minister of justice, 1953–1954; the secretary-general of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, 1957–1964, 1970–1971. The folklorist Gyula Ortutay was an academician from 1945; the minister of culture and education, 1947–1950; a member of the Presidential Council, 1958–1978; the president of the Hungarian Folklore Association, 1946–1978; the president of the Society for Dissemination of Scientific Knowledge, 1964–1978. Although there are documents to prove that Erdei and Ortutay joined the communists in secret, Gábor Tolnai's case is unknown. However, unlike Erdei and Ortutay, the scholarly achievement of Tolnai, as opposed to the power he was entrusted with, was insignificant after 1945.

At the opposite end from the Smallholders, the National Peasant Party, with its meagre 7 % of the votes, had a sizeable group of well-known, highly educated and outspoken intellectuals with grand ideas for the elevation and empowerment of the poorest and least educated segment of society. They agreed, to some extent, with the Marxists that fundamental changes were both necessary and inevitable in the structure of society, in favour of the people at the bottom. They had, as a tradition to look back on, the movement of the 'populist' writers between the two world wars. The word 'populist' is an inadequate equivalent for the Hungarian word *népi*, but there does not seem to be any better translation.

The noun *nép* (people, population) and the adjective *népi* were used throughout the nineteenth century with quasi-religious overtones for the unprivileged, exploited, suppressed, uneducated, mainly rural and agrarian masses supposed to provide the real backbone of the nation. The word *nép* is only related to the German *Volk* through this nineteenth-century connection. Its usage was not a direct counterpart to how the Third Reich appropriated the word *Volk*. The word *nép* was immediately purloined by the people returning from Moscow. The Communist Party daily was called *Szabad Nép* [Free People]. The word was also used in compounds like *népbíróság* (people's tribunal), *népköztársaság* (people's republic), *népi demokrácia* (people's democracy), *néphadsereg* (people's army), *Népstadion* [People's Stadium], *népfront* (people's front). As soon as it came in touch with unpopular things, not only did the word lose its revered sublime over-

tones but began to get tainted. Later it was simply seen to reverse to its opposite the meaning of whatever it was connected with: people's democracy was understood to be the lack of democracy. The word *szocialista* (socialist) produced the same effect in *szocialista demokrácia* (socialist democracy) and in other expressions. Grammatically, they acted as privative modifiers. Eventually, the word *nép* fell out of use, except in old compounds like *népharag* (public indignation, public uproar), *népmese* (folktale) or *népsűrűség* (population density). The words 'socialist' and 'communist' could not fall out of use because they never entered common, everyday speech. Apart from Party meetings, they were almost exclusively reserved for public occasions in public spaces. In addition to *nép*, the communists did not hesitate to use, even overuse, words like 'nation' and 'democracy.'

The populist group had a strong sense of solidarity despite their widely divergent ideas and frequent conflicts of personality. As if by common agreement, they were free to use whatever energy, argument, leverage, career-enhancing opportunities they saw in order to further the cause of the 'people.' Some of them, like the poet József Erdélyi (1896–1978) echoed Nazi slogans and could not stop voicing anti-Semitic slurs, others became rabid communists, and were still accepted, praised and protected by the rest of the group. Ideological orientations were seen as superficial additions to, or inconsequential modulations of, the core populist doctrine about the empowerment of the rural population at the bottom of Hungarian society.

No matter how talented and articulate they were, the overall influence of the populist writers was badly overrated by the communists. This mistake was characteristic of a party which saw its strategic enemy in the large Smallholders' Party, and had no agrarian organizations to rely on. The Peasant Party's election result, that is, their 7% shows that the 'people' the Party intellectuals idealized and idolized were less enthusiastic about their grand ideas. Suspicious of any schemes, the 'people' resisted being elevated and empowered the way the Party proposed. But a matter as minor as unpopularity could not turn off the communists. It was not popularity but power they were after. While the Smallholders' Party was clearly slated for demolition through fragmentation, the populist writers as potential allies and legitimating partners were usually courted and treated with utmost

care by the communists throughout the whole period of socialism. The novelist Péter Veres (1897–1970), the chairman of the Peasant Party from 1945 to 1949, was minister of defense between 1947 and 1949. Another novelist, József Darvas (1912–1973), the deputy chairman of the Peasant Party (1945–1949), also suspected to be a closet communist, was almost continually a minister (construction, culture, education) from 1947 to 1956. Ferenc Erdei, mentioned above, also belongs here.

Other, more significant populist writers, like Gyula Illyés (1902–1983), László Németh (1901–1975), Lőrinc Szabó (1900–1957), János Kodolányi (1899–1969) kept some distance and were loosely affiliated with the Peasant Party, if at all. (Strictly speaking, Németh and Szabó were not populists, only quasi-populists, not far removed from the populist group.) Németh, Szabó and Kodolányi, waiting for the dust to settle, shunned publicity for some time. Erdélyi was hiding in Transylvania. He was tried and convicted for war crimes in 1947, but, after serving a most lenient sentence, he came free again in 1948. He was permitted to publish a book of poems in 1955.⁵ In return, he was only expected to include a few nice and understanding lines about the socialist regime. László Németh, in an attempt to preempt unfriendly measures against him, moved far away from the limelight to Hódmezővásárhely, a small town in the south of the country. He taught in the local secondary school for years and translated a classic Russian novel, Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, for which he was awarded a literary prize in 1952.⁶ Eventually, both Illyés and Németh grew into the highly ambivalent role of the 'distinguished fellow-traveller.' They were guests of honour at the 10th congress of the Communist Party in 1970. At that time, having lost much of their outsider status, having been turned into allies, with their speech and attitude suggesting that they were letting bygones be bygones, they blended almost seamlessly into the tableaux of Party dignitaries. Being protean, it seems, had a price.

The Social Democrats had a proud tradition going back to the nineteenth century. The members of the Party were mostly urban

⁵ Erdélyi, József. *Csipkebokor*. Budapest: Szépirodalmi Könyvkiadó, 1955.

⁶ N. N. "Kiosztották az 1952. évi irodalmi és művészeti díjakat". – *Magyar Nemzet* VIII, 4 April, 1952, № 80, p. 7.

blue-collar workers. The expression 'organized workers' referred to members of a union. The unions were, in turn, controlled by the Social Democrats. At the turn of the century, the Party created a media empire (presses, publishing houses, newspapers, journals) second only to that of the Catholic church. They stressed the importance of education and supported reading clubs, choruses, recitals. They were familiar with various versions of Marxism and the idea of class struggle. However, instead of revolutionary upheaval, they usually went for higher wages, better working and housing conditions. Between the two world wars, the illegal communists, much as they despised the Social Democrats for their alleged petty bourgeois views and spineless compromises, used some of their clubs and papers as cover. After the war, the Party, especially its top leadership, was infiltrated by the communists. This was the time when the term 'crypto-communist' entered Hungarian language. The Party seemed to provide a relatively safe haven, at least for a while, for disillusioned erstwhile communists, like Lajos Kassák (1887–1967), a well-known avant-garde poet, novelist and painter.⁷ But the days of the Party were numbered. Betrayed by some of their leaders and under immense pressure from the outside, they could not avoid merging with the communists in 1948. Since then, the anti-authoritarian tradition of the Social Democrats has disappeared without a trace.

Before the elections of 1945, the number of the Communist Party members swelled so fast that József Révai (1898–1959), who was to become an iron-fisted minister of culture, predicted a 70 % majority.⁸ The rapid growth of the Party was partly due to the fact that the rank-and-file members of the Hungarian Nazi party (called the Arrowcross Party) were forced by the communist-controlled police to choose between joining the Communist Party and being interned. György Lukács (1885–1971), coming home from his Moscow exile a little later than the others⁹, is said to have responded to this with

⁷ **Standeisky**, Éva. "Művészetpolitikai elképzelések a Szociáldemokrata Pártban 1945–1948 között (Kassák, Justus, Fejtő)". – *Történelmi Szemle* XXIX, 1986, № 2, pp. 325–340.

⁸ **Gyarmati**, György. "A közigazgatás újjászervezése az «ideiglenesség» korszakában". – *Történelmi Szemle* XXXVIII, 1996, № 1, p. 92.

⁹ He had to save his step-son from the Gulag.

caustic wit: “We are a small country. We have only one set of vicious thugs.” Like other excellent one-liners, this one is attributed to several people: György Lukács, Pál Királyhegyi (1900–1981), a journalist and comedian, and Jenő Heltai (1871–1957), a poet and novelist, the first cousin of the Budapest-born Theodor Herzl. Herding the ordinary members of the Arrowcross Party into the Communist Party was not as outrageous as it seems at first glance. It has been argued that the two parties, apart from anti-Semitism, had a lot in common, like railing against exploitation, social injustice, big banks, big corporations, agitating for a social revolution, for a planned economy and adopting underhand, violent methods.¹⁰ People with exactly the same social background joined the Arrowcross or the Communist Party almost randomly. Endre Rajk (1899–1960), a member of the Arrowcross government from 1944 to 1945, and László Rajk (1909–1949), a communist, a veteran of the Spanish civil war, the interior minister between 1946 and 1948, the victim of a showcase trial based on fabricated charges of high treason, were brothers.

When added up, the informal influence, the connections with the occupying army, the administrative positions in the government and the intellectual power of the Communist Party was formidable. Their special relationship with the Soviet occupying forces made it certain that they were listened to when they decided to speak. György Lukács was one of the great philosophers of the twentieth century. But when he was not in one of his aphoristic moods, and was talking about, for example, indefinite objectivity (*meghatározatlan tárgyiasság, unbestimmte Gegenständlichkeit*) or when he used the formulaic Stalinist phrases he picked up in Moscow, he was less easy to follow. József Révai, on the other hand, saw through complex problems with ease and could come up with razor-sharp arguments on the spot. He even earned the grudging respect of the populists who regarded him as a worthy adversary. Despite the unimpressive 17 % nationwide support of the Party, it is evident in hindsight, rather striking in fact that, even before the communist takeover, writers and critics addressed their arguments to Lukács and Révai as if they were presiding judges con-

¹⁰ Ungváry, Krisztián. “Értelmiség és antiszemita közbeszéd”. – *Beszélő* III, 2001, № 6, n.p.

sidering their case. Lukács and Révai, on the other hand, assumed an air of authority as a matter of course.

Within and without

An obvious consequence of the communist policy and communist police was that though a number of Nazi leaders and collaborators were summarily sentenced to death by the people's tribunals (189 between 1945 and 1950, to be precise¹¹), the de-Nazification of the country could not even start, because de-Nazification was mainly seen in terms of blacklisting, firing or interning the staff of the former state bureaucracy, rather than as a process of erecting institutional, constitutional and legal barriers to despotic, authoritarian, autocratic and dictatorial ways of conducting public affairs. When István Bibó (1911–1979), another – perhaps the most – outstanding member of the Peasant Party published an article, in 1945, about the obstacles to the introduction of real democratic measures, the communists, acting offended, disparaged him and belittled his arguments.¹² Lukács described the article in a condescending manner as “superficial” and coming from the “right-wing.”¹³ In the absence of a public discussion about the nature of democracy, it may have seemed that the problem with Nazi Germany was not that it was a dictatorship, but that the power was in the wrong hands.

The fact that in his response to Bibó's article, Lukács dismissed the possibility of the dictatorship of the proletariat in the short run, shows that he did not expect any sudden change in Stalin's strategy of power sharing and gradual sovietization. In other words, in 1945, the leadership of the Party guessed, quite mistakenly, that the transitional period of coalition governments might last much longer than a couple of years. After 1949, Lukács, and almost Lukács alone, would be criticised for this mistake. By attempting to create a broad-based but communist-dominated coalition, by wooing the populists, by let-

¹¹ **Romsics, Ignác.** *Magyarország története a XX. században.* Budapest: Osiris Kiadó, 1999, 279.

¹² **Bibó, István.** “A magyar demokrácia válsága”. – *Valóság* I, 1945, № 2, pp. 5–43.

¹³ **Lukács, György.** “A demokrácia válsága» – vagy jobboldali kritikája? – *Valóság* II, 1946, № 1, pp. 86–97.

ting in their midst people coming from populist writers, the Party was laying the groundwork for a period of relatively peaceful coexistence with what they thought to be the most influential intellectual force in the country.

In this short period, about three years, there was a great deal of uncertainty – when ‘uncertainty’ usually meant fear – about Stalin’s ultimate intentions. In addition to recruiting true believers and former Arrowcross Party members, it was possible for the Communist Party to grow rapidly because there was a sufficient number of renegades, opportunists and turncoats. They figured out early that in the new situation the sooner they declared themselves to have always been communists deep down, the better positions they could aspire to. The careers of Ferenc Erdei and Gyula Ortutay, among others, show that they were right. Despite all the uncertainty others saw, such opportunists were betting on the worst possible scenario for the country. In the meantime, however, the recruitment policy of the Communist Party and the idea of the people’s front lead to a major inside-outside problem.

As literary critics and theoreticians, Lukács and Révai disdained what they saw as bourgeois literature with its isolated self (*das isolierte Ich*), and had serious misgivings about avant-garde that they associated with the madness and cacophony of the age of imperialism.¹⁴ Apart from envying their supposed popularity and reach, Lukács and Révai had doubts about the populist writers as well, and suspected them of right-wing tendencies.¹⁵ When, however, due to the recruitment policy and their desire to have a broad appeal, the floodgates were raised, it became a little late and rather awkward for the Party ideologues to reject the new adherents’ suspicious views. István Király, who was on government scholarship in the Third Reich as late as 1944, joined the communists very early, acquired the Party jargon in no time, declared himself to be a Marxist, a disciple of Lukács and a follower of Révai at that, and, at the same time, came out in favour of the populist writers, especially László Németh whose name was

¹⁴ Lukács, György. “Az absztrakt művészet magyar elméletei”. – *Forum* II, 1947, № 12, pp. 715–727.

¹⁵ R[évai], J[ózsef]. “Hozzászólás egy bírálathoz”. – *Szabad Nép* III, 1945, № 122, p. 4.

somewhat unmentionable because of the things he said in 1943, after the defeat of the German army at Stalingrad, about the possible revenge of the Jews after the war.¹⁶

When at the end of the semi-democratic period all the other parties with their daily newspapers and journals were swept away, the microcosm of the Communist Party, so far as writers and critics are concerned, represented the outside – that is, the bourgeois, social-democrat and populist intellectuals – fairly well. The slices of the salami just turned up in new places. What had been inter-party skirmishes continued as infra-party faction struggles. Parallel to the gradual sovietization of the country, the external dialogue was becoming an interior monologue. But this was the monologue of a split personality murmuring in different, conflicting voices. The Party's top leadership, consisting almost exclusively of Moscow-trained veterans, was, as usual, both stirring up and thriving on such tensions. The populists, still courted, occasionally reproached, were never vindicated, while the hard-line Stalinists back from Moscow (the so-called Muscovites), never fully rejected, were held on leash. Although the communist takeover seemed to simplify matters, the situation remained quite complex. For example, we should never forget that György Lukács had to prove that his Stalinism was genuine in a stiff competition with other Muscovite survivors.

István Király went on to become one of the half dozen major figures in literary scholarship for the period of socialism. He was the secretary of the Society of Literary History (1948–1952), the editor (1949–1950, 1953–1956) of *Csillag* [Star, 1947–1956], first the only, then the leading literary journal after the communist takeover; the editor (1960–1963) of *Kortárs* [The Contemporary, 1957–], another literary journal; the editor of *Szovjet Irodalom* [Soviet Literature, 1970–1989]; the head of departments of literature in Szeged and Budapest; an academician from 1970; a member of Parliament between 1971 and 1985 and a member of the Central Committee's various organs after 1956. In 1952, his book on Kálmán Mikszáth the novelist (1847–1910)

¹⁶ **Németh**, László. "Németh László előadása". – In: *Szárszó, 1943. Előzményei, jegyzőkönyve és utóélete. Dokumentumok*. Eds. Sándor Györffy, István Pintér, László Sebestyén, Attila Sipos. Budapest: Kossuth Könyvkiadó, 1983, p. 221.

was awarded the highest prize for literary achievement.¹⁷ He always had a chauffeured black limousine at his disposal. Whatever twists of fate history held in store for the country, Király always came out on top. Never disheartened by derision or contempt, he had the rare ability to alter his conviction and allegiance mid-sentence if he sensed a change of wind.¹⁸

The preeminence of literature

Literature, book reviews, criticism, literary history had an outsize role after 1945. Actually, this started earlier. Between the two world wars, under the conditions of censorship, with the freedom of expression severely curtailed in comparison with the entirely free press of the Dual Monarchy, the communists and populists alike, and many people in between, scrutinized each and every literary work for its direct and indirect political content. Reading between the lines, presupposing a significant degree of textual duplicity, was common. Lukács's articles from the period, written in Moscow, also mention the possibility of doublespeak.¹⁹ (That he had an eye for duplicity may also betray something about his own position.) Almost everybody agreed that literature was more than just literature. For them, literature was, not among others but primarily, or, for some, exclusively, a political statement, some kind of proxy, a coded message or a move in the struggle for power. Since their works were studied meticulously by many people on all sides, even by people who could not care less about literature, writers and critics considered themselves as the main protagonists in a drama of historic proportions. After 1949 when the turbulent coalition period turned into a straight Stalinist dictatorship, under the watchful and not especially benevolent eyes of the Party leaders who were, in turn, overseen every step of the way by the Soviet Big Brother, the stakes were raised and the pursuit of literature

¹⁷ Király, István. *Mikszáth Kálmán*. Budapest: Művelt Nép Könyvkiadó, 1952.

¹⁸ Aczél, Tamás, Méray, Tibor. *Tisztító vihar. Adalékok egy korszak történetéhez*. München: Griff, 1978, 95.

¹⁹ Lukács, György. "Szélgjegyzetek Illyés Gyula "Magyarok" című könyvéhez". – In: Lukács, György. *Magyar irodalom – Magyar kultúra*. Eds. Ferenc Fehér, Zoltán Kenyeres. Budapest: Gondolat Kiadó, 1970, pp. 188.

became lethal. Everybody, including topmost Hungarian leaders like Révai, dreaded the fateful midnight knock at the door by the secret police.²⁰ Lukács had a hair's-breadth escape.

With the emergence of a new type of political police, not entirely different from the Orwellian thought police, another set of restrictions also applied. This was the beginning of what is called self-censorship: some names became unmentionable, certain topics were better avoided as if they had never existed. And this situation remained the same almost up to 1989, the collapse of socialism. The list of unmentionable names, topics, views, arguments changed periodically, but there were always many taboos. (And, accordingly, there were restricted areas in major libraries. The books in the local branches and in the second-hand bookshops were carefully screened.) There was also an enormous gray area of sensitive subjects which could only be discussed and evaluated in public in accordance with the guidelines provided by a handful of literary scholars appointed by the Party to positions of power. It was not unlike the old joke: only a few things are permitted in socialism, but whatever is permitted, is mandatory. The landscape of literary studies was, in fact, slightly more complex than that. Only occasionally did all the top figures speak in unison and act in a coordinated manner. Usually, there were factions and conflicts, temporary alliances and conflagrations of hostility among them, and it was not in the interest of the Party leadership to let them heal the wounds they inflicted and suffered.

One serious wound, re-opened whenever deemed necessary by the Party leaders, was the decades-old animosity between the populists and the 'urbanites' (*urbánus*). Starting from the early 30s, the word 'urbanite' was usually not used in its literal sense but as a substitute or euphemism for 'Jewish.' But not all the urbanite writers were Jewish. Attila József (1905–1937), one of the greatest poets of Hungarian literature, a former communist and a former member of a populist organization, sided with the urbanites when word went out that writers could publish either in populist or in urbanite papers, but not in both. After the war, when the derogatory communist connotations of the word 'bourgeois' (*polgár, polgári*) could already be taken

²⁰ *Csengőfrász*, a typical expression of the period, means 'the shock one gets from hearing the doorbell ring in the wee hours.'

for granted, 'bourgeois' tended to replace 'urbanite,' still referring to the Jews, in order to denounce them. Since it is always useful to divide in order to conquer, the animosity between the populists and the urbanites was kept alive throughout the period of socialism. Occupying various government and Party posts, the man responsible for cultural affairs after the 60s, György Aczél (1917–1991), always pointed out, whichever side he happened to be talking to, that he was not free in his decisions. He said he had to make concessions to the other side in order to moderate their demands. He was playing with fire, but never in his wildest nightmares could he imagine that socialism would ever come to an end, and latent anti-Semitism could get out of control again.

In the socialist period, the lack of absolute unity at the top, on the other hand, meant that from time to time interesting developments took place in the cracks among the barons of literary studies. Structuralism had a chance to appear in one of these power vacuums in the 60s. But for the outsiders, for the general public, the toxic rumours and byzantine intrigues whispered in the corridors and offices at the Party headquarter were usually not perceivable. The secrecy that made applied, practical and local Kremlinology indispensable for survival for those in the public sphere even had its own name: it was called 'party discipline.'

Paper shortage as cultural policy

The central allocation of paper was introduced as a temporary measure in 1945. It remained firmly in place almost until 1989. In fact, the paper shortage was just a convenient reason for saying 'no' to whoever wanted to start their own newspaper, journal or publishing venture. At the beginning of the coalition period, all existing newspapers and journals were automatically terminated, and permission to new ones was granted by the Allied Control Commission, that is, by Voroshilov's office. It was agreed that the newly established political parties and various other organizations, also permitted by the Commission, were entitled to have their own newspapers. Paper was allocated by Gyula Kállai (1910–1996), a die-hard communist, the head of the prime minister's press department. Later, when the periodical

press was regulated by the Hungarian authorities, acquiring sufficient quantities of subsidized printing paper became more important and more difficult than obtaining the necessary licence, which was often a mere formality after securing an allotment of paper.

During the coalition period, communist papers like *Szabad Nép* [Free People], *Tovább* [Further Ahead], *Szabadság* [Freedom], *Forum* always had enough printing paper. They were the exception. The Social Democrats' *Népszava* [People's Voice] and *Kortárs* [The Contemporary], the Peasant Party's *Szabad Szó* [Free Word] and *Válasz* [Response], the Smallholders' *Kis Újság* [Small Paper] had to deal with difficulties all the time, just like other significant papers. The journals *Világ* [World] and *Haladás* [Progress] belonged to small parties, *Polgári Demokrata Párt* [Bourgeois Democratic Party, 76 thousand votes, 1.6 %], and *Magyar Radikális Párt* [Hungarian Radical Party, five thousand votes], respectively. Other important journals like *Magyarok* [Hungarians], *Újhold* [New Moon], *Valóság* [Reality] were published by various social organizations. *Magyarok*, *Újhold* and *Válasz* were the best literary journals of the period. A donation of ten American dollars during the hyperinflation after 1945 solved some of the problems of *Újhold* for a while.

The types of debates. (1) Contemporary writing

The word *vita* (debate, controversy) started out as a relatively neutral, descriptive word referring to a public discussion. However, after the communist takeover, in expressions like the 'Lukács debate' or the 'Déry debate', it sounded more like a reference to the indictment in a showcase trial.

One of the early debates took place at the first congress of the Hungarian writers in 1946 in Debrecen.²¹ The communists just loved debates, congresses and associations. They were destined to become herding devices in the socialist period.²² The Writers' Association was founded in 1945. The first congress was staged as a courtroom

²¹ N.N. "Írók vitája a debreceni kultúrhéten". – *Szabad Nép*, V, July 3. 1946, № 146, p. 4.

²² N.N. "Debrecenben megalakult a Magyar Írók Szövetsége". – *Szabad Nép* III, 25 March 1945, № 1, p. 6.

drama with the populist and the urbanite writers as plaintiffs and György Lukács as the judge delivering the verdict.

In his opening speech Lukács said that whereas Hungarian literature should be unified and all the writers ought to respect each other as parts of the whole, it was sadly fragmented between the populists and the urbanites.²³ Sowing seeds of discord, this was just a perfect introduction to an out-and-out polemic about the negative roles the plaintiffs believed the other side to have played both between the two world wars and afterwards. A united anti-communist alliance of populist and urbanite writers that would have been a serious existential threat for the communists had to be avoided. Péter Veres, pointing out what he regarded as an obvious obstacle to unity and reconciliation, mentioned that certain bourgeois writers labeled István Sinka (1897–1969), Géza Féja (1900–1978), János Kodolányi as fascists. In his speech, displaying the well-known solidarity among populist writers, Veres somehow forgot about the fact that Sinka, Féja and Kodolányi published wildly anti-Semitic pieces in extreme right-wing papers throughout the 30s. Speaking immediately after Péter Veres, Pál Kardos (1900–1971), a literary historian whose parents, wife and child had been victims of the Holocaust, reminded him of the rampant anti-Semitism of the 30s and early 40s in which Sinka, Féja, Kodolányi, Erdélyi were regularly involved. Later, Gyula Illyés talked about the retrograde political and literary role the writers of the bourgeoisie played between the wars.

It is less interesting that the populist writers presented their case against the 'bourgeois' writers now in quasi-Marxist class-warfare terms and as if they had also been victims instead of perpetrators than the fact that the people at the congress had a foreboding that some form of punishment for those losing their case was a real possibility. Even if they sensed that Lukács was manipulating them, even if they knew that it was Lukács who set them at each other's throat, they could do nothing because they could not afford to lose their case

²³ Lukács, György. "A magyar irodalom egysége". – *Forum* I, 1946, № 9, pp. 1–16.; Lukács, György. The Unity of Hungarian Literature. – In: Lukács, György. *The Culture of People's Democracy: Hungarian Essays on Literature, Art, and Democratic Transition, 1945–1948*. Ed. Miller Tyrus,. Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2013, pp. 163–183.

by turning against the judge. Anyway, it was a clever setup, a crafty stratagem, worthy of a cunning politician. And who was in a position to mete out a punishment? How severe could it be? Being banned from publication? Internment? Imprisonment? Being thrown into outer darkness? Nobody knew the answers and everybody had fears, except Lukács. In his concluding statement, he completely ignored the 'bourgeois' writers almost as if they were already unpersons and focused on the populists. While he had nothing to say about their undeniable anti-Semitism, he presented a nuanced verdict. The populists, not without fault, should abandon their pessimistic outlook, reservations about the future, as well as their outdated social views and should join the communists in building a new country. What made his uplifting speech, full of positive terms, encouragement and optimism, really scary was that it had no provisions for dissent. Using silence as a weapon, Lukács did not have to utter any threat, or a single word about punishment, everybody still understood that the communists saw any alternative unthinkable.

This was a clear indication that the communists were willing to turn a blind eye to their past anti-Semitism as long as the populists fell in line. And, at the same time, it shows that the communists expected to come into and remain in power forever as early as 1946, keeping the potentially dangerous anti-Semites under permanent control. Thus, the literary historical treatment of the populist writers was more or less set for the period of socialism. They would always receive some sort of balanced evaluation: on the one hand, they served the cause of the poor and uneducated people and, on the other hand, they made some grave mistakes until they were made to see the error of their ways. It should be noted that this approach, couched entirely in political and social terms, does not say anything about the literary value of their achievement. It is indeed difficult, if at all possible, to disentangle the beauty of Erdélyi's and Sinka's poems from their occasionally odious content and invariably repulsive context.

This was not the only possible approach and not everybody appreciated what could be called the communists' delicate tact. Béla Zsolt (1898–1949), a novelist and journalist, the author of one of the first Holocaust memoirs *Kilenc koffer* [Nine Suitcases] relentlessly exposed, in his weekly *Haladás* [Progress], without any balancing act,

the anti-Semitism of Sinka, Erdélyi, Németh and Illyés.²⁴ It should be noted, however, that Illyés stopped making anti-Semitic remarks after 1941, published Jewish writers and even offered to shelter some of them during the worst Arrowcross period.

The types of debates. (2) 'Bourgeois' literature

The label 'bourgeois' literature, when it was used by communists to refer to Hungarian literature between the two world wars, was ill-conceived and misleading. 'Mainstream' would be a little better, but it would also suggest that whatever was neither populist, nor communist literature was only one block on an almost equal footing with them. On the contrary, in varieties, quality, importance, legacy, size of production and size of readership, 'bourgeois' literature, with its iconic journal *Nyugat* [The West, 1908–1941] was overwhelmingly most significant segment of literature. *Nyugat*, never homogeneous and always in opposition to the ruling governments, was so important that very few, if any, person was regarded as a proper writer until they managed to publish in it. This was equally true of the populist and communist writers. Its rivals, like *Napkelet* [The East or Sunrise, 1923–1940] which was much closer to the governments, sometimes also excellent, or *Új Idők* [New Times, 1894–1949], with the largest number of readers, were also 'bourgeois' or 'middle class.' In fact, the communists and the populists were publicity-seeking minorities in literature, and like all self-righteous minorities with a cause and with the implicit feeling of representing the silent majority, they had a strong inclination for sensational, headline-grabbing writing. Even some of the violent anti-Semitic outbursts of the populist group can be seen as publicity stunts aiming to capture the attention – and to shatter the common decency – of the majority of readers.

The use of the words 'bourgeoisie' and 'bourgeois' went from the relatively infrequent and descriptive to the overused and ideologically overloaded after 1945. The terms took on secondary meanings like exploitation, decadence, capitalism, imperialism, sometimes even fascism, and thus became synonymous with the communists' worst enemy. 'Bourgeois' was used with decreasing frequency after 1956,

²⁴ **Zsolt**, Béla. *Nine suitcases*. New York: Schocken Books, 1949.

and gradually lost its menacing Stalinist overtones. At that time, it usually meant 'outdated and unimportant' and 'no longer relevant.' By the mid-70s, just like *nép* and *népi*, it was not used any longer, except in Party documents unread even by Party members. After a short period of intensive political use in the late 90s, when 'bourgeois' was used in positive contexts, standing for the doubleplusgood, now there seems to be an unspoken agreement among politicians not to abuse it any longer.

It was quite convenient for communist cultural policy that most of the literary giants, belonging to the first generation of *Nyugat*, like Mihály Babits (1883–1941), Dezső Kosztolányi (1885–1936), Zsigmond Móricz (1879–1942), Gyula Krúdy (1878–1933), Frigyes Karinthy (1887–1938) died relatively young, before 1945. (György Lukács also belonged to this generation and published quite a few articles in *Nyugat*.) It was convenient because they could be declared to belong to the bourgeois past, with no present-day literary relevance whatsoever. It was also convenient because no new role had to be invented for them. True, Milán Füst (1888–1967) and Lajos Nagy (1883–1954) were still around, but they were awarded a medal and quietly pushed aside after 1949. The rest of the dinosaurs, that is, those who had published in *Nyugat*, survived the meteor blasts and did not hasten to join the communists, had to eke out a living on an individual basis.

Lukács may have been bruised by a scathing review of Mihály Babits' in 1910.²⁵ He could also be blind to literary excellence, or its opposite. Whatever the case, a series of articles shows that he decided to lower or deny altogether the value of what he regarded as Hungarian 'bourgeois' literature.²⁶ He was not alone. Árpád Szabó (1913–2001), who was to become an outstanding classical scholar, published an article on Dezső Kosztolányi.²⁷ Szabó used words and expressions like 'petty bourgeois,' 'reactionary,' 'decadent,' 'perverted,' 'sick,'

²⁵ Babits, Mihály. "A lélek és a formák". – *Nyugat* III, 1910, № 21, pp. 1563–1565.

²⁶ Lukács, György. "Babits Mihály vallomásai". – In: Lukács, György. *Magyar irodalom – Magyar kultúra*. Eds. Ferenc Fehér, Zoltán Kenyeres. Budapest: Gondolat Kiadó, 1970, pp. 247–270.

²⁷ Szabó, Árpád. "Polgári költészet – Népi költészet (I. Kosztolányi)". – *Valóság* II, 1946, № 11, pp. 1–24.

'parasitic' and 'rotten.' Lukács, Szabó and others with similar arguments determined the way Babits, Kosztolányi, Krúdy – or even *Nyugat* which was, quite unjustly, divested of any progressive role – were treated in literary essays and literary histories for a long time. After 1949, they became unmentionable, except in short denunciations, until about 1956, and then, still excluded from the classics, they were at best described as minor major or major minor writers with considerable flaws. In the more relaxed atmosphere of the late 70s and 80s, when strict guidelines were eroded, scholars and critics no longer felt compelled to continually warn readers of the pitfalls and limitations of 'bourgeois' literature. By now, Babits, Kosztolányi, Füst and Krúdy are regarded as classics.

It is neither surprising nor accidental that two of the best literary journals of the coalition period, *Magyarok* [Hungarians] and *Újhold* [New Moon] were not affiliated with any of the political parties but with some otherwise insignificant social organizations and looked upon themselves as the direct descendants of *Nyugat*. Some of their authors, like János Pilinszky (1921–1981), Sándor Weöres (1913–1989), Géza Ottlik (1912–1990), Miklós Mészöly (1921–2001), Ágnes Nemes Nagy (1922–1991), Miklós Szentkuthy (1908–1988), and Iván Mándy (1918–1995) produced a huge part of the most valuable literature of the post-war decades. It is also unsurprising that these authors were unwilling to make any concessions to the brutal dictatorship that followed the coalition period. Given their uncompromisingly non-political stance in literary matters, they were allowed to publish again only after 1956.

Re-writing of literary history

György Lukács was elected the president of the Society of Literary History in 1948. The Society, like its journal *Irodalomtörténet* [Literary History] was somewhat drab but it was obviously intended, as a counterpart to the Writers' Association, to direct and supervise literary historians. In his introductory speech, Lukács outlined the immediate tasks.²⁸ Before anything else could be done, literary history

²⁸ Lukács, György. "A magyar irodalomtörténet revíziója". – *Forum* III. 1948, No 11, pp. 860–877; Lukács, György. "The Revision of Hungarian Literary History".

had to be sifted, dividing the worthy from the unworthy. This implied that the politically unworthy, no matter how beautiful literature they produced, had to be thrown on the garbage heap and forgotten about. A true revolutionary, Lukács was willing to sacrifice literary excellence. The greatest Hungarian novelist of the 19th century, Zsigmond Kemény (1814–1875) was deemed unworthy. It took three decades and required an extraordinary effort to put him back into his rightful place. This was also the fate of Babits, Kosztolányi, Krúdy and others. After publishing books became a state monopoly controlled by the Party, the books of the unworthy got scarce. They were not republished and disappeared from the second-hand bookshops.

Apart from his speech, Lukács did not do anything in the Association. The menial work was delegated to real literary historians like István Király, Miklós Szabolcsi, Tibor Klaniczay, József Szauder.

The types of debates. (3) Things to keep mum about

Not only in his life but after his death as well, Attila József proved to be a thorn in the side of the communists. Although poets and critics knew, long before 1945, that he was one of the finest poets of Hungarian literature, the communists could only deal with him as a part of their necessarily restricted and strongly biased party political worldview. There were exceptions: Tibor Déry (1894–1977) and Andor Németh (1891–1953) but they were not speaking for the Party.²⁹ During the coalition period, among the communists proper it was most probably only Márton Horváth (1906–1987), one of the few to take up arms against the Nazis, editor of the Party daily *Szabad Nép*, and Révai's right-hand man, who knew that Attila József was a great poet quite apart from any political considerations. Other communists, especially the Muscovites, could never forgive that, when ostracized from the Party, instead of being terminally crushed, Attila József went over to the Social Democrats. This story, constantly lied

ry". – In: **Lukács**, György. *The Culture of People's Democracy: Hungarian Essays on Literature, Art, and Democratic Transition, 1945–1948*. Ed. Miller, Tyrus. Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2013. 265–289.

²⁹ **Németh**, Andor. "József Attila verseiről". – *Szép Szó* IV, 1937, № 1, pp. 11–15.; **Déry**, Tibor. József Attila. – *Korunk* XIII, 1938, № 1, pp. 3–6.

about for decades, to be re-discovered and exposed only with the waning of socialism, was shrouded in secrecy. It was not accidental that Iván Horváth, (1948-), the son of Márton Horváth and a distinguished literary scholar of old Hungarian literature, played an important role in rectifying the story.³⁰ Beginning in the coalition times, the name of Attila József and the poems of his communist period were mercilessly exploited for propaganda purposes. József Révai, expanding on some of Lukács's casual remarks, even invented a revolutionary triad consisting of Sándor Petőfi (1823–1949), Endre Ady (1877–1919) and Attila József as the mainstream of Hungarian poetry.³¹ Also seen as a Hegelian triad of thesis, antithesis and synthesis, this fiction, the only permissible approach to the history of Hungarian poetry until the 70s, did an enormous disservice not only to other great poets, like Vitéz Mihály Csokonai (1773–1805), Dániel Berzsenyi (1776–1836), Ferenc Kölcsey (1790–1838), Mihály Vörösmarty (1800–1855), János Arany (1817–1882), but to the members of the triad as well.

There was also a group of significant writers living in exile who became unmentionable to various degrees in different periods because they fled the communists. Although Arthur Koestler (1905–1983), the author of the novel *Darkness at Noon* (1940) left Hungary earlier, he remained in touch with Hungarian writers.³² In fact, he wrote a moving obituary of Attila József as a friend and fellow ex-communist.³³ Koestler was strictly unmentionable.

The novelist Sándor Márai (1900–1989) left Hungary in 1948. He made it known that his books could not be published in Hungary as long as the country was occupied by the Russians. Until the late

³⁰ **Horváth**, Iván. “József Attila és a part”. – 2000, I. 1989) № 4, pp. 52–60.

³¹ **Lukács**, György. “Régi és új legendák ellen – *Forum* II, 1947, № 3, p. 204; **Szoláth**, Dávid. “A forradalmi költőtriász. A Petőfi–Ady–József Attila-kánon az ötvenes és a hatvanas években”. – *Literatura* XXXV, 2009, № 4, pp. 446–458.

³² **Koestler**, Arthur. *Darkness at Noon*. Translated by Daphne Hardy. New York: Random House, 1941.

³³ **Koestler**, Arthur. “Egy halott Budapesten, translated by Pál Schweitzer, published by Erzsébet Vezér”. – *Mozgó Világ* IX, 1983, № 6, pp. 62–64. The original version, unavailable to me, was published in the journal *Tage-Buch* (Paris) in 1939. See also **Koestler**, Artúr (!). Attila, a költő. – *Látóhatár* V, 1954, № 4, pp. 198–202.; It is probably the same as: **Koestler**, Arthur. “Attila, the Poet”. – In: *Encounter* (May 1954). This is also unavailable to me.

80s, old editions of his books could only be purchased in second-hand bookshops in secret.

György Faludy (1910–2006), Győző Határ (1914–2006), Béla Szász (1910–1999), leaving Hungary in 1956 after years of torture and imprisonment, also became unmentionable.

Although much less significant but much better known than these writers, quite like Koestler, György Mikes or George Mikes (1912–1987), the author of *How to Be an Alien*, a comic writer representing the same Hungarian tradition in humor as Karinthy and Királyhegyi, was also unacceptable to the Hungarian authorities.³⁴

Béla Hamvas (1897–1968), a novelist and a philosopher, did not leave Hungary but should be mentioned here. Forced into retirement from his job as a librarian and banned from publishing in 1949, he spent more than a decade as an unskilled laborer, a storeroom hand, far away from Budapest, while writing literature, literary theory, philosophy and translating from Sanskrit, Hebrew and Greek.

There is an interesting Hungarian word: *agyonhallgatni*. Literally it means 'to cause one's death by remaining silent about them' but it is always used to refer to an attempt – that can be foiled by the use of the word itself – to suppress somebody or something that should be talked about. Had it been up to the communists alone, death-by-silence would have been the fate of Koestler, Márai, Faludy, Határ, Szász, Mikes, Hamvas and others. But the attempt to suppress them was not to succeed. Határ and Mikes could be heard on Radio Free Europe all the time, occasionally even Faludy and Márai made appearances, and *Minden kényszer nélkül*, the shocking memoir of Szász, one of the countless Hungarian Counts of Monte Cristo, was serialized and broadcast several times.³⁵ The reputation of Hamvas, by contrast, grew by word of mouth.

³⁴ **Mikes**, George. *How to be an Alien: A Handbook for Beginners and More Advanced Pupils*. London: André Deutsch, 1946.

³⁵ **Szász**, Béla. *Volunteers for the Gallows. Anatomy of a Show-Trial*. New York: Norton, 1971.

The types of debates. (4) Lukács the intolerant

In 1946, in his attack on the journal *Újhold*, Lukács stated that in the radically new situation those who wished to renew the bourgeois poetics of the ivory tower and disconnect literature from everyday reality were against the democratic development of the country.³⁶ The deceptive and formulaic Stalinist language needs translation. The expression “democratic development” means “sovietization,” “poetics of the ivory tower” means “unsuitable for class-warfare purposes” and “radically new situation” means “now that the communists have some real power and cannot be stopped from having more.” When read this way, it must be conceded that Lukács was right: the authors of *Újhold* were not keen on the sovietization of the country, did not produce political poetry and did not seek the approval of communist potentates. Young and unfamiliar with Stalinist language, not particularly interested in what politicians were talking about, not hearing the klaxon going off, Balázs Lengyel (1918–2007), the editor of the journal, simply shrugged off what Lukács said.³⁷ He thought that, right or wrong, everybody, including Lukács, can have their opinion. He did not realize that Lukács had just issued a death warrant for the journal, suspended until the communist takeover. Was Lukács a politician at that time? His argument certainly made him one. Ottó Major (1924–1999) an even younger contributor to the journal, had the cheek to reply that intolerant vulgar Marxists, out of touch with contemporary literature, subordinated aesthetic judgement to their political and tactical purposes and, on top of all, Lukács had conservative taste combined with avant-garde zeal.³⁸ Major probably did not know at the time how fortunate he was to survive that he was rude, insolent – and correct. He got lucky because the communist takeover coincided with Lukács’s fall from grace. Personally, Lukács was probably not vindictive. He did not have to be. Bullying and revenge were carried out by

³⁶ **L[ukács]**, Gy[örgy]. “Újhold. Szerkesztő: Lengyel Balázs. Szépirodalmi negyedéves folyóirat”. – *Forum* I, September 1946, № 9, pp. 112–115.

³⁷ **Lengyel**, Balázs. “Irodalomtörténetírás, irodalmi értékrend”. – *Alföld* II, 1990, № 9, pp. 16–19.

³⁸ **Major**, Ottó. “Az esztétikus problémája”. – *Újhold* I, December 1946, № 12, pp. 129–134.

people from another department. It was another twist of fate or another irony of history that Lukács also lost his journal *Forum* after 1949.

This type of debate, let alone impertinence, questioning the authority of the Marxist ideologues to pass judgement on everything they found disagreeable, was infrequent. The editors of other journals, older and more experienced than Lengyel, were more cautious and knew that printing paper was a precious commodity. However, despite all their caution, the papers and journals, except those of the communists, were terminated after 1949. That was also the end of whatever remained of public free speech.

Ousting the academicians

The temporal boundaries of historical periods are rarely clear-cut. The coalition period seems to come close. 1945 as the year the beginning the period refers to the time when the country was fully occupied by the Red Army. However, the first provisional government in the Soviet-occupied region in the east was formed in 1944. 1948 as the end of the coalition period is equally artificial. The 1947 election proved to be a tragic farce. The election fraud that everybody knew was taking place showed that, on the one hand, the communists were willing to go any lengths and blatantly lie about it in order to secure victory and power for themselves, and, on the other hand, that they could act with impunity because there was no authority or legal procedure to stop them. Quite the contrary, all the 49 representatives of the party (*Magyar Függetlenségi Párt* [Hungarian Independence Party]) that demanded a new election after the election fraud was exposed in public, were expelled from Parliament. The country was defenseless against the communist takeover even if it took one or two more years to set up every sinister aspect of the dictatorship that was to follow.

The communist takeover was in the air after the 1947 elections. The decision about its timing was obviously made in Moscow. The communists were overjoyed, the rest of the country stunned and worried with the initially piecemeal and then abrupt destruction of the fragile institutions of democracy. This had both direct and indirect impacts on literary studies. Among quite a few others, the Academy of Sciences was one of the victims, the József Eötvös Collegium the other.

The Hungarian word *tudomány*, resembling the German *Wissenschaft*, refers to both the humanities and the natural sciences. Thus, the name of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences may be a little misleading in an English context. In fact, the various natural science departments were later additions to what had been conceived of as a linguistic and literary establishment in 1827.

Before 1949, when the Academy underwent a major overhaul, it counted as a distinction, a recognition of outstanding scholarly achievement, to be elected a member of the Academy.³⁹ The members enjoyed certain minor privileges, but had no extensive power over their respective fields. After 1949, with its own five years' plan, supervised both by the Communist Party and the government, the Academy became another organ of the state, responsible for the ideological and scientific (scholarly) direction and control of the sciences and humanities.

One of the first acts of the new Academy was to re-organize the department to which the literary scholars belonged. This meant, and that was the whole point of the reorganization, that existing memberships were discontinued. Only six of them were re-appointed again. János Horváth (1878–1961) was one of them. He is generally regarded as one of the greatest Hungarian literary scholars, arguably the greatest ever. In 1949, he was 71. He never set foot in the new Academy. Dezső Keresztury (1904–1996) lost his membership in 1949 but was re-elected in 1973. The resolution regarding the expulsions was rescinded in 1989 but only Keresztury lived long enough to see it. He became an academician twice over, both consecutively and simultaneously.

János Horváth, Aladár Schöpflin (1872–1950), Gábor Tolnai, József Turóczi-Trostler (1888–1962), Géza Voinovich (1877–1952), József Waldapfel (1904–1968) were re-elected to the new Academy. All the others had to go: Zsolt Alszeghy (1888–1970), Frigyes Brisits (1890–1969), Sándor Eckhardt (1890–1969), Aurél Förster (1876–1962), Sándor Galamb (1886–1972), Pál Gulyás (1881–1963), Lajos György (1890–1950), Dezső Keresztury, Jenő Koltay-Kastner (1892–1985), Nándor Láng (1871–1952), Béla Pukánszky (1895–1950), Tivadar Rédey (1885–1953), Sándor Sik (1889–1963), Tivadar Thiene-

³⁹ Póttó, János. "Az Akadémia «átszervezése», 1948–1949". – *Történelmi Szemle* XXXVI, 1994, № 1–2, pp. 79–110.

mann (1890–1985), Damján Vargha (1873–1956), Béla Zolnai (1890–1969), Ferenc Zsigmond (1883–1949). It is not easy now to understand why none of the papers mentioned the re-organization of the Academy.

The József Eötvös Collegium

The 'Collegium' produced an amazing number of brilliant linguists and literary scholars. It was founded in 1895 by the physicist Loránd Eötvös (1848–1919) in order to help poor but talented students from the provinces. The name of the institution comes from his father József Eötvös (1813–1871), a novelist, philosopher and politician, minister of culture and education (1848, 1867–1871). It should be noted that the name was not suggested by Loránd Eötvös. The 'Collegium' was based on the model of the French *École Normale Supérieure*. It is not an exaggeration that the 'Collegium' usually took the poorest and made them the brightest. The most outstanding and best-known members of the 'Collegium' – not involved in its afterlife as the Institute of Literary History – were Zoltán Kodály (1882–1967), Dezső Szabó (1879–1945), Béla Balázs (1884–1949), Zoltán Gombocz (1877–1935), János Horváth, Dezső Pais (1886–1973), Gyula Moravcsik (1892–1972), László Országh (1907–1984), Kálmán Ruttkay (1922–2010), Zsigmond Ritoók (1929–), László Hadrovics (1910–1997), Dezső Keresztury.

In 1950, when excellence was no longer a requirement in a teacher-training facility, the 'Collegium' was discontinued. The building was turned into a dormitory, the huge library, although it remained in place, was taken over by the Academy. Thus, it was only natural for István Sótér (1913–1988) and Tibor Klaniczay, both of them former members of the 'Collegium', when they were looking for a venue of the newly established Institute of Literary History in 1955 that they chanced on the building they knew so well. The new director and deputy director, Sótér and Klaniczay, were later joined by other members of the 'Collegium': György Bodnár (1927–2008), Elemér Hankiss (1928–2015), Lajos Hopp (1927–1996), Károly Horváth (1909–1995), László Illés (1928–2012), József Kiss (1923–1992), András Martinkó (1912–1989), Pál Miklós (1927–2002), Péter Nagy (1920–2010), G. Béla Németh (1925–2008), József Szauder, László

Sziklay (1912–1987), József Szili (1929–), Andor Tarnai (1925–1994) and György Mihály Vajda (1914–2001). It is hard to tell whether the members of the former 'Collegium' produced two thirds, three quarters or even more of Hungarian literary scholarship after 1945.

Before the 'Collegium' was terminated in 1950, some of its best students were expelled under humiliating circumstances. More than a decade later two of them, Elemér Hankiss and Béla G. Németh, in whose expulsions Pál Pándi played the most significant role, made their glorious comebacks. Not only were they employed by the Institute and re-united with the library of their youth but were to have a major impact on Hungarian literary scholarship.

The case of Péter Nagy is even worse than that of Pándi. He was a member of the 'Collegium' and went to Switzerland in 1943. He was always a high-flier. Coming home in 1945, he joined the Foreign Ministry. It was in Cairo that he reported the Hungarian ambassador, Viktor Csornoky (1919–1948) as a spy. Csornoky was executed in 1948, exonerated in 1992. His father in law, Zoltán Tildy (1889–1961), the president of Hungary was forced to resign and kept in house arrest until 1956. Meanwhile Péter Nagy had top jobs at various publishing houses and the Writers' Association. He was a professor at the Budapest university, 1966; a visiting professor in Paris, 1969–1971; the head of the Comparative Literature department at the Budapest university, from 1971; a member of the Academy, 1973; the director of the National Theater, 1978–1979; the ambassador to UNESCO, 1985–1988. In the meantime, he was still an informer of the secret police. His code name was Boris. After 1990, nobody stooped to confront him with his past. He died as an academician.

A postscript to the coalition period. Lukács in peril

Although it happened after the communist takeover, the so-called 'Lukács debate' belongs to the coalition period. The fact that Lukács was removed from the scene raises the question why, in 1945, he had been inserted into it at all. Was he a bait? A distraction? Just another 'useful idiot'? A designated fall guy? Who was playing him? Who decided to remove him? Was it perhaps Révai? Who knows the answers? It is quite certain that the image of Lukács as a world-class philoso-

pher was carefully built up even before he returned to Hungary. His books were published, re-published, translated and reviewed.⁴⁰ He had his own journal. His name never disappeared from the communist daily and weekly papers. His speeches, his roles in various organizations, his professorship at the Budapest university, his reputation in the West, his travels to conferences abroad, even his stay in Belgrade coming back from Rome, were continually and dutifully reported.⁴¹ This is just not the way scholars, however outstanding, however well-known in scholarly circles, are treated in Hungary. Lukács was not a movie star. In addition, in 1945, Lukács was 60. He could have been awarded an apartment and a pension, or even a membership in the Academy without any media attention – just like after 1949. It is quite obvious that somebody was pulling the strings, and that person was not Lukács himself.

László Rajk, a member of the government, was arrested in May, 1949. Lukács had to worry about his own life. Rajk was tried, convicted and executed for treason five months later. He was exonerated of all the fabricated charges in 1956. Soon after Rajk's arrest, an article was

⁴⁰ *Nietzsche és a fasizmus*. Budapest: Szikra, 1945.; *A realizmus problémái*. Budapest: Anonymus, 1945.; *Balzac, Stendhal, Zola*. Budapest: Hungária, [1945.]; *Thomas Mann. Két tanulmány*. Budapest: Magyar-Szovjet Művelődési Társaság, 1945.; *Irodalom és demokrácia*. [Budapest]; Szikra, 1945.; *Az irodalomtörténet revíziója és az irodalomtanítás*. Budapest: Szikra, 1945.; *A polgár nyomában. A hetven éves Thomas Mann*. Budapest: Hungária, 1946.; *Balzac, Stendhal, Zola*. Budapest: Hungária, [1946.]; *Irodalom és demokrácia*. Budapest: Szikra, 1946.; *Lenin és a kultúra kérdései*. Budapest: Merkantil Nyomda, 1946.; *Népi írók a mérlegen*. Budapest: Szikra, 1946.; *A "giccs"-ről és a "proletkult"-ról*. Budapest: Szikra, 1947.; *A marxista filozófia feladatai az új demokráciában*. Budapest: Szikra, 1947.; *Új magyar kultúráért*. Budapest: Hungária, 1947.; *A marxista filozófia feladatai az új demokráciában*. Budapest: Budapest Székesfővárosi Irodalmi és Művészeti Intézet, 1947.; *Thomas Mann. Két tanulmány*. [Budapest]; Atheneum, 1848.; *Lenin és a kultúra kérdései*. Budapest: Új Magyar Könyvkiadó, [1948.]; *Marx és Engels irodalomelmélete. Három tanulmány*. Budapest: Hungária, 1948.; *A történelmi regény*. Budapest: Hungária, 1948.; *József Attila*. Budapest: Magyar Pedagógusok Szakszervezetének Oktatási és Kulturális Osztálya, 1948.; *Nagy orosz realisták*. Budapest: Budapest Székesfővárosi Irodalmi és Művészeti Intézet, [1948.]; *Az újabb német irodalom rövid története*. Budapest: Szikra, 1948.; *Ady*. Budapest: Szikra, 1949.; *A marxi esztétika alapjai*. Budapest: Szikra, 1949.

⁴¹ N.N. "Rómából hazafelé..." – *Szabad Nép* VI, February 1948, № 50, p. 9.

published against Lukács.⁴² After his time in the infamous Lubyanka prison in Moscow, Lukács must have known about warning signals. László Rudas (1885–1950), a crude and shrewd Stalinist hard-liner accused him of anti-Marxism, disparaging Lenin and underestimating Soviet literature. Lukács was convinced that the charges against him were rubbish but he had to consider that the attack was published in *Társadalmi Szemle* [Social Review], the ideological journal of the Party. This was a clear indication that the article had been approved of at the very top. Fully aware of how easy it would be to connect him to the case of Rajk,⁴³ in one of his letters to Révai, Lukács explicitly mentions Rajk, and in another he speaks of a potential 'death sentence' against him.⁴⁴

With the life of Lukács hanging in the balance, with our surge of sympathy for him, it would only be natural to regard the views he held at the time as more justifiable than those of his opponent.⁴⁵ However, at that moment in history, both Lukács and Rudas were Stalinists pure and simple. Lukács, of course, was erudite, while Rudas was boorish, but their main difference was that they had belonged to different factions of the Party between the two world wars. His diatribes against avant-garde, against contemporary non-political poetry, against such 'bourgeois' classics as Babits and Kosztolányi and his overestimation of the populist writers show that the coalition times were one of Lukács's worst periods when he did not let his sense of quality counteract the immediate political concerns of his Party. Only after long years out of power and in the decompression chamber of the post-Stalin world, could he abandon some of the worst aspects of mixing raw political arguments into considerations of literature.

After two rounds of abusive self-criticism, that is, after his full and unconditional surrender, when he had to lavish praise on insig-

⁴² Rudas, László. "Irodalom és demokrácia". – *Társadalmi Szemle* IV. 1949, № 6–7, pp. 412–439.

⁴³ Especially with his stay in Belgrade in 1948.

⁴⁴ Lukács, György. "Lukács György Révai Józsefhez". – In: *A Lukács-vita (1949–1951)*. Ed. Ambrus, János. Budapest: Múzsák Közművelődési Kiadó, 1985, pp. 309–310, 310–311.

⁴⁵ Scheibner, Tamás. *A magyar irodalomtudomány szovjetizálása. A szocialista realista kritika és intézményei*. Budapest: Ráció Kiadó, 2014. 145.

nificant Soviet socialist realist novels and had to talk about the remarkable humanism of Lenin, was Lukács finally allowed to live.⁴⁶ He could even keep his membership in the Academy. Márton Horváth and József Révai played decisive roles in pushing him to self-criticism.⁴⁷ But Horváth and Révai – in their own different ways – disappeared from the scene after 1956. István Király and Pál Pándi were there to stay. During the debate, Király was eager to show his willingness to turn his back on Lukács, his mentor, and Pál Pándi joined him.⁴⁸ Despite their show of non-allegiance, Király and Pándi would put the questionable achievements of Lukács's Stalinist period to their own good use only a few years later.

Pándi went on to become another despot of literary scholarship for the period of socialism. A survivor of the Nazi death camps, he was, at the Eötvös Collegium, a student of Király, then became a very young university professor in 1949; the head of a literature department in Szeged, 1960–1961; the head of the Budapest 19th century department from 1967, an academician from 1973, one of the editors of the Party daily *Szabad Nép*, 1955–1956; one of the editors of the new Party daily after 1956 *Népszabadság* [People's Freedom] 1967–1971, 1982–1985, the editor of the journal *Új Írás* [New Writing], 1962–1963, the editor of *Kritika* [Criticism], 1972–1983. In tandem with Király, Pándi used Lukács's arguments according to which a 'great poet' had to be at the same time a 'social revolutionary'. Pándi always remained faithful to this type of orthodox Stalinism.

For about a decade after 1956, Pándi had not only the ear of György Aczél, but was a close friend of István Király and Miklós Szabolcsi. The three of them represented the revolutionary triad invented by Révai. Pándi had Sándor Petőfi, Király had Endre Ady and Szabolcsi had Attila József. The friendship with Szabolcsi broke up when Szabolcsi

⁴⁶ **Lukács**, György. "Bírálat és önbírálat". – *Társadalmi Szemle* IV, 1949, № 8–9, pp. 571–592.; **Lukács**, György. "Következtetések az irodalmi vitából". – *Társadalmi Szemle* V, 1950, № 7–8, pp. 613–616.

⁴⁷ **Horváth**, Márton. "A Lukács-vitáról". – *Szabad Nép* VII, 25 December 1949, № 300, p. 11.; **Révai**, József. Megjegyzések irodalmunk néhány kérdéséhez. – *Társadalmi Szemle* V, 1950, № 3–4, pp. 193–211.

⁴⁸ **Király**, István. "Népi demokráciánk irodalma". – *Irodalomtörténet* XXXVIII, 1950, № 2, pp. 33–56.; **Pándi**, Pál. "Hozzászólás Devecseri Gábor cikkéhez". – *Csillag* III, December 1949, pp. 45–47.

deviated from the strict Marxist line and made concessions to avant-garde and structuralism in the mid-60s. Pándi's friendship with Király ended abruptly when in a heavy bout of drinking at the University, Király said something about Pándi's Jewish oversensitivity.⁴⁹ But, at the end of the coalition period, this was still in the distant future.

Lessons for post-coalition period

After the communist takeover, the rules of the game started to change. The most important lesson was not intellectual but existential: non-Marxist scholars and critics became unemployable and non-Marxist approaches to literature had no chance to appear in print. Thus, everybody had to have a Marxist façade, which, at that time, meant a Stalinist façade. This was especially frustrating for the real Marxists. When everybody is expected to be a Marxist, what distinguishes them from the vulgarizers and the opportunists? The quest for the communists' Holy Grail, that is, "authentic Marxism" began immediately after the takeover. The "Lukács debate" can also be seen in this light. However, at the same time, this search was both dangerous and superfluous. The opportunists, as usual, fared much better than the true believers who had the disadvantage of taking the Marxist doctrine seriously. In any case, what counted as authentic Marxism at any given moment was readily available in the editorials of the Party daily *Szabad Nép*, and in Party brochures. But what was the most important takeaway from the Marxist writings of the coalition period? What was the lesson no literary scholar or critic could ignore? What was the minimum Marxism that all publications had to display?

The most pervasive requirement was the analysis of literary phenomena in societal terms. The assumption was that social views and aesthetic value cannot be separated. Great art cannot be but progressive. What progressive meant was defined according to the class-warfare conception of society. In practice, a minute investigation of society for literary historical purposes never took place. And why should it have? The outcome, from which no deviation was permitted, was

⁴⁹ Király, István. "A nemzet-vita hullámai". – In: *Rejtőzködő legendárium. Fejezetek egy kultúrpolitikus sorstörténetéből*. Eds., Csáki, Judit, Kovács Dezső. Budapest: Szépirodalmi Könyvkiadó, Szemtanú Kiadó, 1990, p. 199.

predetermined. As a result, the same two or three dozen phrases, assumed to correlate social and literary phenomena, were repeated like mantra. The predictability of the phrases which met the censors' criteria provided, at the same time, a possibility for hiding. Some of the books published under high Stalinism are still readable and relevant if one can filter out what was, like some kind of constant background noise, unavoidable and compulsory in them. With the social content heavily favored, it is not surprising that the formal aspects of poetry were neglected.

When György Lukács urged literary scholars to participate in the revision of literary history, he made it quite clear that some of the classics had to be dropped from the list of authors whose works could be researched, taught and published. This was to become a kind of retrospective literary *nómenklatúra* (nomenclature), the official list of trusted sources. What Lukács said was not just an empty threat. It was about that time that scholarship, education and publishing were placed under strict Party control.

The expression “progressive tradition” (*haladó hagyomány*) was coined but not much used in the 30's. After the communist takeover, it was so overused that it lost almost all its meaning. This was quite inevitable. György Lukács and József Révai defined the mainstream of Hungarian literature as consisting of Sándor Petőfi, Endre Ady and Attila József. With giants like Zsigmond Kemény or Imre Madách (1823–1864) discarded from the national canon, the status of a huge number of other writers became insecure as well. Making the case that this or that author should be seen as belonging to the progressive tradition seemed to offer a degree of protection for them. An enormous guessing game started. Where would Mór Jókai (1825–1904), János Vajda (1827–1897) or Sándor Bródy (1863–1924) belong? The compost heap or the progressive tradition? The lesson literary scholars had to learn was that individual initiative had ceased to exist. Research topics had to be coordinated with higher authorities.

Finally, the takeaway from the Lukács debate was that those who strayed from the Party line had to face not just one major rebuke but the attack of a pack of Party hyenas. During the 50's, the life of everybody who had the strange idea of being a literary scholar was to become quite interesting.

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