

**Artist and Public Intellectual - Artist or Public Intellectual?
Polemics of the Hungarian Avant-Garde on 'New Art',
Writer's Role and Responsibility during WWI**

The aim of the present paper is to find out whether avant-garde artists of the early 20th century considered themselves as intellectuals: a question that emerged as part of debates on artistic ideas and ideologies in the avant-garde movement. In France in the wake of the Dreyfus Affair, writers, scientists and artists claimed to have a say about public affairs only on the basis of their intellectual capacities.¹ This new figure of the modern intellectual sporadically emerged throughout Europe – including in Austro-Hungarian monarchy – by the early 20th century.² The French influence appeared for instance in the adoption of the term – *intellectuel* – borrowed from the French vocabulary.³

The first years of WWI saw Hungarian intellectuals' resistance to political and economic powers diminish, and similarly to other European countries, Hungarian modernism came under the fire of a national backlash and cultural life was dominated by positivism.⁴ The Hungarian press and periodicals overtly supporting the Great War trumpeted their moral victory over the “intellectuals”. In periodicals which until then had defended literary autonomy and modernism, writers abstained from portraying themselves any longer as autonomous intellectuals and, at least in the beginning of the conflict, they even took part in supporting the war effort.⁵ Even later on, these modernist journals anti-war attitude did not become vigorous enough.

Nevertheless, during WWI a new feature in the history of intellectuals appeared: the dissident opposing the policy of the authoritarian pro-war state. Such dissidents included avant-garde artists. A number of radicalized artists who mainly saw the war as a conflict between the ruling classes and the masses, also expressed their opposition to the war “through

¹ Christophe Charle, *Naissance des « intellectuels », 1880-1900*, Paris, Seuil, 1990.

² Christophe Charle, *Les intellectuels en Europe au XIXe siècle. Essai d'histoire comparée*, Paris, Seuil, 1996.

³ Eszter Balázs, “*En tête des intellectuels*”. *Les écrivains hongrois et la question de la liberté et de l'autonomie littéraires (1908-1914)*, Thèse de doctorat, Paris, EHESS, 2008. See also as a book published in Hungarian: „Az intellektualitás vezérei”, *Viták az irodalmi autonómiáról a Nyugaton és a Nyugatról*, Budapest, Napvilág, 2009.

⁴ Eszter Balázs, “War Stares At Us Like an Ominous Sphynx” Hungarian Intellectuals, Literature and the Image of the Other (1914-1915)” in Lawrence Rosenthal – Vesna Rodic eds., *The New Nationalism and the First World War*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, 97.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 108-111.

calculated provocations, such as publishing works by artists who were citizens of enemy countries”.⁶ Franz Pfemfert, editor of *Die Aktion* (The Action), the leading Expressionist organ in Berlin was such a figure.⁷ In the left-wing *Aktion* – which combined aesthetic radicalism with political radicalism – Expressionism became “a powerful vehicle of antiwar commitment, international solidarity”, and the editor staff consciously advocated internationalism.⁸ As art historian Éva Forgács says: „The term *avant-garde* was once again infused with its original military and political meaning.”⁹

Similarly, the most important platform of Hungarian dissidents was the emerging avant-garde movement with its journals, founded by the writer Lajos Kassák.¹⁰ Like in German activist groups, the idiom to convey revolt and despair, which was adopted by this movement, was Expressionism. According to the above quoted Éva Forgács, Expressionism in Central Europe was not seen as a mere aesthetic category (such as art works were not “purely” expressionist neither); activists had an articulate social-consciousness and political goals.¹¹ They harshly refused the war and urged a radical transformation of the society. Similarly to German expressionists and unlike Italian Futurists (who believed in violence as an ethical and regenerative force in itself and were pro-war), Kassák’s movement dared to adopt a vigorous antiwar stance by firmly opposing the war and calling for it to end immediately (Kassák’s journals were inspired by *Die Aktion*.¹²) This activity led to the immediate banning of *A Tett* (*The Deed*) within one year, in October 1916.

My analysis will focus on definitions of ‘new art’ and ‘new artist’ in the Hungarian avant-garde – concepts that constantly evolved until the end of WWI. Also I will present how the notion of the ‘intellectual’ became once again an accepted self-representation among certain avant-garde figures (however, with new significations) after the first years of the conflict when autonomous liberal intellectual had become an insult by writers of the establishment.

⁶ Éva Forgács, The Activation of the Avant-Garde in Timothy O. Benson – Éva Forgács eds., *Between Worlds: A Sourcebook of Central European Avant-Gardes, 1910-1930*, Los Angeles Museum of Art, The MIT Press, Cambridge-London, 2002, 143.

⁷ Timothy O. Benson, *Die Aktion* in Berlin in Timothy O. Benson – Éva Forgács eds., *Between Worlds*, op. cit., 145.

⁸ Éva Forgács, The Activation of the Avant-Garde, op. cit., 143.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Eszter Balázs, Avant-Garde and Antimilitarism: the Hungarian Journal *A Tett* (Nov. 1915-Oct. 1916),

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¹¹ Éva Forgács, The Activation of the Avant-Garde, op. cit., 143-144.

¹² See more about influences: Oliver Botar, **Hiba! Csak törzsdokumentumban használható.** Lajos Kassák, Hungarian “Activism,” and Political Power, *Canadian American Slavic Studies*, winter 2002, 393-394.

An intensive reflection about literature and art was not merely the characteristic of the avant-garde in Hungary : generally the relationship between war and literature, between war and culture, became a burning topic from the very first weeks of the war. For many writers, as well as for artists and scholars, the Great War gave way to a new field of experiences. Generally the relationship between war and literature, between war and culture, became a burning topic from the very first weeks of the war, not only in various literary and intellectual periodicals but also in the daily press – pointing to the fact that intellectual activity became bound to a so-called “war culture”¹³. For many writers, as well as for artists and scholars, the Great War gave way to a new field of experiences.

In Hungarian avant-garde journals, however, it was not the influence of the war on intellectual and cultural life that became primordial, but a total renewal of the artistic creation related to social transformation made possible by the chaos of the war. In the Hungarian *A Tett* ‘new art’ and ‘new artist’ were conceived as opposed to traditional modernism, more particularly to aestheticism. Also literature was defined as the “newest” – “synthetic” – by emphasizing a difference with ‘new literature’ – a term used by literary modernism whose emblematic review was the *Nyugat* [West], launched in 1908.¹⁴ However, in the second journal *Ma* (Today) (edited after the first journal’s banning in Fall 1916), artistic innovation were specified in inner polemics, too. Young contributors of the journal, József Révai¹⁵ in particular, envisaged a warrior-like artist and a new – radicalized and leftist – figure of the ‘intellectual’, so to say an avatar of the party intellectual, and which lead up to their break-up with the founder, Lajos Kassák. I would argue that the avant-garde journals contributed significantly to the thinking about the roles and functions of the ‘artist’ and that of the ‘intellectual’ during the war.

Let’s have a closer look at Kassák’s first journal, *A Tett*: according to the writer Andor Havasi (November 1915) artists were supposed to be „men and children” who had to pass on

¹³ The expression ‘war culture’ was defined by historians Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker (Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau – Annette Becker, *1914-1918 Understanding the Great War*, London, Profile Book, 2002, 102-103.)

¹⁴ Lajos Kassák, Szintetikus irodalom (Részlet a Galilei Kör-ben december 3-án tartott előadásból) [Synthetic Literature], *MA*, 2nd issue, Dec. 1916., 18.

¹⁵ Révai, member of the early *Ma*-group, became the most notorious and ruthless of the literary dictators during the Hungarian Stalinist regime of 1949-55, imposing a harsh code of Socialist Realism on the country's writers. (Oliver Botar: **Hiba! Csak törzsdokumentumban használható.** Lajos Kassák, Hungarian “Activism,” and Political Power, op. cit., 391-392.)

emotions and thoughts to people.¹⁶ Also he defined art as opposed to „impressionism” (a pre-war synonym of the aestheticist model); as a true Expressionist, he wanted to grasp “everything while it was in motion”.¹⁷ This belief in the ‘élan vital’, energy, movement and intuition – which was rooted in the anti-rationalist philosophy of Henri Bergson –, we must not confuse with the initial pro-war discourse that subordinated words to actions in order to support the war effort.¹⁸

Soon many writers of *A Tett* attempted to define techniques to create new art in terms of „quest” or „science”, and which is specific to avant-garde movements in general since the beginning of the 20th century. According to the writer Zoltán Haraszti (in December 1915) avant-garde art is a transcendental quest, with neither rules nor limits, close to anarchism.¹⁹ (Anarchist thought was widely influential among Berlin intellectuals²⁰ and it can be seen, at least partly, as a German influence on Kassák’s journals.) The left-wing sociologist Imre Vajda emphasized artistic creation in January 1916 as a similar quest which consists in „leaving the atmosphere of the soul (...) [and] swinging towards the infinites and universalities”.²¹ Art is supposed to show the way to social progress, too. It is revolutionary and believes in socialism (not in social-democracy). At the same time, another definition of art emerged in the journal – a binary opposition of the quest –, based on the theory of natural selection, recognizable rather by scientific analysis, and mentioned for the first time in the journal by Andor Halasi at the end of 1915.²² Lajos Kassák in his program text in March 1916 emphasized both self-expressions of the avant-garde: the openness to spirituality as well as to sciences.²³

In March 1916, Lajos Kassák insisted that the new literature cannot “serve ethnical or national ends” neither turn to itself in a “decadent” way, but rather has as its subject “the entirety of the cosmos”.²⁴ At the same time he overtly emphasized the anti-authoritarian

¹⁶ Andor Halasi, Új irodalmi lehetőségek [New Literary Possibilities], *A Tett*, n2, 15th Nov. 1915, 22.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹⁸ In December, Kassák republished his prewar poem *Mesteremberek* (Craftsmen) whose certain lines could be interpreted as antiwar commitment and which also articulated a harsh refusal of the aestheticist model along with urban vaudeville denounced by Kassák: „let’s throw out the dream decorations, the moonlight and the Orpheum!” However, urban popular culture as mass culture was later warmly welcomed in *MA* (Today) as an inspirational source for new art. (*A Tett*, n2, 15th Nov. 1915, 42.

¹⁹ Zoltán Haraszti, A betüktől az Istenig [From Words until God], *A Tett*, n3, 1st Dec.1915, 39.

²⁰ Timothy O. Benson, *Die Aktion* in Berlin, op. cit., 145.

²¹ Imre Vajda, Világnézet [Worldview], *A Tett*, n5, 5th Jan. 1916, 69.

²² Andor Halasi, Barta Lajos: Egyszerű szívek [Simple Hearts], *A Tett*, n3, 1st Dec. 1915, 52.

²³ Lajos Kassák, Programm [Program], *A Tett*, n10, 20th March 1916, 154.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 153-153.

stance of his journal by outlining the progressive role of art – connected to progressive political and economic movements – on the basis of which “a leading role for the artists in the rule of the state machine” could be possible. This tendency to politicize art was related to the tendency to aestheticize politics and was typical of the avant-garde movement in general.²⁵

For the first time in the journal, Kassák dissociated the movement, along with “conventionalism”, from Futurism such as from Christianity (understood as Christianity used by politics in war).²⁶ The move away from Futurism was not aesthetic but political in nature, since Futurists were pro-war : as far as the breaking up with traditions, the journal shared undoubtedly the Futurist vision of the past.²⁷ Unlike Futurists, the Hungarian avant-garde completely lacked in nationalism: they opposed nationalists’ pro-war politics and represented a clash of values with the establishment and bourgeois art.

In the so-called international issue of *A Tett* August 1916, Kassák sent „red greetings” on behalf of „Budapest guys” (namely the editor staff), „innocent and cultured”.²⁸ First, he stressed the journal’s anti-war stance by listing those who he took as models in the question of anti-war commitment, none of whom were an avant-garde artist!: Romain Rolland, Hall Caine and Karl Liebknecht (two writers who were entente citizens and well-known pacifists, and an anti-war German politician). Second, Kassák claimed for an „art of absolute value”. Naturally, it was not the artistic ideals, but the international dimension of the journal that was an intolerable provocation for the establishment and which lead to its prohibition.

In response to the critics and accusations by the Hungarian mainstream bellicose press, in November 1916 in the freshly launched *MA* (Today) Kassák turned these accusations upside down as he defined the new artist as a genius and a crazy person (an antithesis of the

²⁵ The program of politization of the art and aesthetizaion of politics was born in the Hungarian part of the Monarchy not during WWI but the years before the war. Small journals of leftist ‘vitalism’ such as *Aurora* (Dawn), *Május* (May), *Új Magyar Szemle* (New Hungarian Review) proclaimed a „revolutionary” art which was not equal with marxist aestheticism, neither art of propaganda and they criticized art-for-art’s sake. These small journals were, however, still tied in many ways to *Nyugat*, the great journal of Hungarian literary modernism. These were the avant-garde journals – *A Tett* and *MA* – that put at first into their focus the program of a new art.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 154.

²⁷ At the same time in order to challenge the Hungarian pre-war literary and aesthetic modernism Hungarian Avant-Garde „was imbued with a variant of the Futurist insistence on an epochal break with the past”. (Éva Forgács, *The Activation of the Avant-Garde*, op. cit., 144.) See for exemple: Aladár Komját, *Hungaricus: A szenvedő ember* [Hungaricus: The Suffering Man], *A Tett*, n13, 6th May 1916, 224.

²⁸ Lajos Kassák, *Jelzés a világra* [A Sign to the World], *A Tett*, International issue (n16), 1st August 1916, 277.

‘sober person’ – claimed by conservative critics).²⁹ New art has to express the chaos of modernity like a good poster in the streets, and by using images as weapons: this is a good example of how avant-garde embraced imagery of mass culture.³⁰ As predecessors, Kassák identified the so-called primitive and ‘negro’ art.³¹

In his lengthy essay of the November issue in 1916, titled *Synthetic literature*, he used antifeminist rhetoric as a way of denigrating the aestheticist model of art: ‘new art’ is a “joyful action” in contrast to a “feminine game”, a “humiliation”, based on “nuances and points”.³² Using antifeminism had been a widespread method in the Hungarian discourse of denigration since the turn of the century for many reasons; when contrasting ‘old’ and ‘new’ arts in such terms, Kassák seemingly shared the common antifeminism of the pro-war discourse (which contrasted the two fronts in these terms and glorified a militant masculinity). To Kassák’s mind, artists are virile, masculine: “aggressive men who arrange socially”, capable of shaking up the public.³³ Accordingly, art is a provocation and a combat against conformism. Poems themselves are defined as “heavy, raw blocks”, “plastic, musical and theoretical instruments”.³⁴ Art is “raw material subordinated to the genius of the artist”³⁵, but it is only “seemingly brute – he stressed –, in reality, art is a provocation hidden in a drilled and trimmed material”.³⁶ Masculinizing the image of the avant-garde artist and art, Kassák was not unlike the emerging youth movements such as Expressionism and Futurism. Indeed, these youth movements wanted to challenge the ruling elites in the quest for a ‘new man’ by offering an alternative masculinity to the hegemonic masculinity. But while Futurists exalted a militant masculinity which glorified war³⁷, Kassák meant a different – anti-war – alternative

²⁹ Lajos Kassák, A plakát és az új festészet [The Poster and the New Art], *MA*, n1, Nov. 1916, 4. He detailed stigmatizations (namely: “fools”, “pederastes” and “bastards”) in Lajos Kassák, Szintétikus irodalom (Részlet a Galilei Kör-ben december 3-án tartott előadásból) [Synthetic Literature], *op. cit.*, 19.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 3. See on this: Timothy O. Benson, Exchange and Transformation: The Internationalization of the Avant-Garde(s) in Central Europe in Timothy O. Benson ed., *Central-European Avant-Gardes: Exchange and Transformation, 1910-1930*, Cambridge and London, The MIT Press, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2002, 60.

³¹ Lajos Kassák, A plakát és az új festészet [The Poster and the New Art], *op. cit.*, 4.

³² Lajos Kassák, Szintétikus irodalom (Részlet a Galilei Kör-ben december 3-án tartott előadásból) [Synthetic Literature], *op. cit.*, 20.

³³ *Ibid.*, 21.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 21.

³⁵ Lajos Kassák, A plakát és az új festészet [The Poster and the New Art], *op. cit.*, 2.

³⁶ Lajos Kassák, Szintétikus irodalom (Részlet a Galilei Kör-ben december 3-án tartott előadásból) [Synthetic Literature], *op. cit.*, 21.

³⁷ George L. Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers. Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars*, New York-Oxford, Oxford University Press, 55.

masculinity, which was rather un disciplined one representing chaos of the soul and an individual freedom, and, thanks to these, the only one capable of social transformation.

Also the question of artistic innovation provoked the first real internal polemics in *MA* from 1917 which lead up to a schism in the journal's staff a year later. A small group composed of the youngest contributors had began to claim for independence from Kassák's authority on the pages of the journal from 1917. In June 1917– not independently from the major changes in Russian politics – the 19-year-old József Révai claimed for a “warrior-like, combatant, military and moreover political” writer who would be “a serious and sober intellectual waiting for the socialization of literature.”³⁸ He used the French neologism ‘intellectual’, which he understood as warrior-like figure that one can consider as an avatar of the party intellectual becoming widespread in the post-war period.

Unlike Kassák and the majority, Révai preferred to use the term ‘literature’ instead of ‘art’, and his choice implied the supposedly greater propaganda potential of literature. Literature should be “tendentious” and monumental, and accordingly, it should have its source in Russian as well as English literature (rather than French or German).³⁹ Also such a writer has to be at the same time an “intellectual” (*intellektüel*), namely a person with interest in public life and politics. Révai continued with gendered stereotypes as well: rather than feminine, passive and decadent, this literature should be “great, raw, moreover dirty strength”⁴⁰ which could affront conservatism, described as a bold, old man with moustache⁴¹ – a stereotypical portrait of Hungarian virility of the 19th century. While antifeminism was a common trait with Kassák, Révai outlined the subject of the artistic product as exclusively social comparing it to “mass flats with smell of cooking”.⁴² This image was rooted in literature published by authors of proletarian origins in the social-democratic press before WWI and resurfaced here as a proof of artistic innovation according to Révai.

A month later, in July 1917, still referring to the question of literature, Révai turned to binary oppositions once again: the ideal writer has to be a “combative critic” – whose

³⁸ József Révai, Ibsen és a monumentális irodalom [Ibsen and the Monumental Literature], *MA*, n8, 15 June 1917, 129.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ József Révai, Kritika (Schöpflin Aladár könyvéhez. kritikai tanulmányok. A Nyugat kiadása, 1917) [Critique], *MA*, n9, 15 July 1917, 135.

⁴² József Révai, Ibsen és a monumentális irodalom [Ibsen and the Monumental Literature], *op. cit.*, 129.

individuality is unimportant –, instead of being a “tolerant critic, a literary historian”.⁴³ Criticism should be combative (non “objective”), and the writing “aggressive and dirty” and taking position.⁴⁴ He emphasized the organic independence of literature and politics, and how the former should be incorporated into the latter. This time he clearly contrasted Russian literature to the French through the examples of Turgenieff and Verlaine.⁴⁵ The first would represent massiveness and monstrosity which were seen as qualities of the ‘newest’ literature. Similarly to Kassák, he rejected in his writings published in *MA* the aestheticist model (which he called alternately ‘Secession’ and ‘Impressionism’), by pointing out the responsibility related to cultural creation which is, however, a great difference from Kassák.

The same year in October – a date close to the Bolshevik revolution in Russia – Révai already claimed for writers to be objective, from Budapest, international and of Proletarian origins.⁴⁶ This time, he did not only subordinate one specific role of the writer to another (“literary historian” to “critic”), but also said what kind of origins a writer should have. Révai also emphasized the organic interdependence of literature and politics, and how the first should be incorporated into the latter and he emphasized the responsibility of the writer – which was, however, a great difference from Kassák.

In November 1917, Révai rejected the “genius” (poet) claiming that he has to give room to “characters” coming from the masses.⁴⁷ This was another detail distinguishing him from Kassák, who had previously claimed for “genius” and “crazy persons”. Along with the origins of the writer, Révai defined its mandatory moral character. Poetry should be a derivation of social work and consequently the form is a sin against the content. This negation of the form was another element that could oppose him to Kassák for whom the choice of form was particularly significant and who outlined artist as “social man” without any restriction.⁴⁸ This time, along with three fellow editors (Mátyás György, Aladár Komját, Gyula Hevesi and József Lengyel) Révai left Kassák’s group and planned the publication of their own journal, to be entitled *1917*. The censors did not grant Komját and his group

⁴³ József Révai, *Kritika*, op. cit., 134.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 134-135.

⁴⁵ József Révai, *Készülő könyv elé* [To a Book being Prepared], *MA*, Sept. 15 1917, 175.

⁴⁶ József Révai, *Kassák, új fajiság és objektív líra* [Kassák, New ‘Ethnicism’ and Objective Poetry], *MA*, Oct. 15 1917, 192-193.

⁴⁷ József Révai, *Babits Mihály: Irodalmi problémák* [Mihály Babits: Literary Problems], *MA*, 15 Nov. 1917, 9.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*. The awareness of form was a particularity to Central European arts: during the 20th century it was an expression of autonomy not otherwise granted to artists, including the avant-gardes. (Form as the Agent of Social Change in Timothy O. Benson – Éva Forgács eds., *Between Worlds*, op. cit., 237.)

permission to realize their journal plans in 1917, but a year later, they published an anthology of poetry, *1918 Szabadulás* [1918 Liberation].⁴⁹ After months of illegal communist activity, Révai became a founder of the first formation of the Hungarian Communist Party in fall 1918 and worked for the Red Journal. Under the influence of Béla Kun, Georg Lukács and the Marxist philosopher, Ervin Szabó (who had died in September 1918, so before that Communists seized the power).

The next significant intervention of Kassák about the question of art and artist will only be in August 1918 – so in a period when the fact that Hungary would eventually lose the war had already been evident.⁵⁰ He declared – undoubtedly against Révai – that the writer or artist should be “a progressive talent” and have “aggressive strength”.⁵¹ In order to support Kassák and to clarify their common standpoint against Révai and his peers (who left MA circle a year ago), the poet Sándor Barta claimed in November 1918 – so at the official end of the war when new parties, including a Communist Party emerged – that the artist, by representing a “social art”, should not follow any party dogmas and he declared the necessity of social art and a new “cultural politics” based on a new morality and a new thinking.”⁵²

A month later, Kassák welcomed “active antimilitarists” and “intellectual workers fighting the class struggle” who could create a “communist art”, but without “obeying any orders from outside the art field”. Instead of being party agitators, artists are supposed to provide necessities of a higher order to workers. Let’s clarify these words of Kassák! First, “communist art”, of course, was not an official party-based approach to art, but Kassák’s own individual approach. At the time communist ideas were still fluid, not yet dominated by any organization, and many Hungarian intellectuals, disappointed by the war, took a great interest in these new leftist ideas. Second, the term “intellectual workers” was rooted in the pre-war social-democrat vocabulary and became widespread throughout Europe after WWI and far beyond the leftist movements: here, it referred to a radicalized character of the artist. The term “artist” was preferred by Kassák to the term “intellectual”, which he was never in favor, because he took it as a concept related to modernity rooted in the Enlightenment (during the

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Lajos Kassák, A “MA” demonstrative kiállításához [To the demonstrative exhibition of “MA”], *MA*, n8-9, 15 Sept. 1915, 90.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Sándor Barta, *1918 Szabadulás* [1918 Liberation], *MA*, n11, 20 Nov. 1918, 135.

period of the WWI I examined here, he never used it).⁵³ Without never opposing them explicitly, “intellectual” can be seen, however, as an antithesis of the “artist” in Kassák’s articles: the former uses intellectualized conceptions, while the latter intuition and creativity.⁵⁴ Intellectualized conceptions, and their political equivalent in Enlightenment’s rationalist and progressive ideology (including abstract logic and abstract conception of citizenship which was supposed to suppress class identity), were probably seen by Kassák as antithetical to intuition and the avant-garde model of the expression of free will and of an intuitive sympathy with one another.⁵⁵ However, the fact that he finally did not oppose these two concepts explicitly shows that he did not totally refuse the model of the liberal intellectual. When this model was totally rejected, it manifested a great ideological shift: for instance the French political theorist Georges Sorel who drifted, from anarcho-syndicalism to antidemocratic right before WWI, elaborated “an aesthetized concept of revolution, premised on the agitational role of myths”.⁵⁶ An another major difference with Sorel – coming from the Radical left – was the complete loss of Anti-Semitism, in general and regarding intellectuals’ role in Kassák’s texts: unlike Sorel, he never labeled “Jews the very epitome of the “intellectual”, the abstract, disembodied symbol of the “pure idea””.⁵⁷ That was once again Révai (he himself was of Jewish origins unlike Kassák) who referred to Jews with regard to their artistic choices (decadence) in *MA* in 1917 by denigrating them as typical tenets of the aestheticist model.⁵⁸

The period of the Hungarian Soviet Republic (March-August 1919) when “the “outsiders” of radical art suddenly became the “insiders” of a politically progressive government”⁵⁹ raises new problems and the shifts in the definitions of art and artist should be explained in the context of political radicalization of the Hungarian avant-garde. Just before

⁵³ The only time he used the term “intelligencia” (a term expressing a community of all sort of intellectuals) until his emigration, was with a negative connotation see Levél Kun Bélához...[Letter to Béla Kun], op. cit., 146.

⁵⁴ “Since intuition was a form of empathic consciousness, a distinterred type of instict, the social order arising from this state would be the product of a sympatethic communion of free wills, an order expressive of the consciousness of each citizen rather than one imposed mechanically from without by some external authority.” (Mark Antliff, *The Jew as Anti-Artist. Georges Sorel and the Aesthetics of the Anti-Enlightenment, Avant-Garde Fascism. The Mobilization of Myth, Art and Culture in France, 1909-1939*, Durham and London, Duke Univeristy Press, 2007, 74.)

⁵⁵ Earlier he opposed “liberal contemplation” characteristic to naturalism to “true artist” who is “a subversive, revolutionary character”. (Lajos Kassák, *A plakát és az új festészet [The Poster and the New Art]*, op. cit., 2.)

⁵⁶ Mark Antliff, *The Jew as Anti-Artist. Georges Sorel and the Aesthetics of the Anti-Enlightenment*, op. cit., 74-75 (for the quotation: page 63.)

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 106.

⁵⁸ József Révai, *Ibsen és a monumentális irodalom [Ibsen and the Monumental Literature]*, *MA*, n8, 15 June 1917, 129.

⁵⁹ Timothy O. Benson, *Exchange and Transformation: The Internationalization of the Avant-Garde(s)*, op. cit., 56.

the Communist political takeover at the end of March 1919, Kassák firmly dissociated revolutionary art from party art on the basis of artistic liberty and displayed an individual vision of communism and revolution.⁶⁰ During the short-lived Communist regime his journal continued to be published and its late April issue published a speech on “activism”⁶¹ delivered in February – so before the communist takeover –, and which was an individual vision of communism, revolution and revolutionary art.⁶² Nevertheless Kassák agreed to do censorship of posters for the new regime. He was in charge of authorizing and banning this recent visual means of communication as Oliver Botar highlighted it in his article of 2002.⁶³ In his writings on art and artist, he remained however detached from the regime’s official point of view. A last declaration on ‘new art’ was published in June in form of a letter to Béla Kun, the number one communist leader (an ex-prisoner of war in Russia) who had accused Kassák and his peers of being incomprehensible to the proletariat.⁶⁴ In his response, Kassák refused to serve as the mouthpiece of the Commune by stressing that the new art is not class struggle, and its aim is the creation of the “absolute man”, devoted to revolutionary action.⁶⁵ Finally, he asked Kun to leave the judgment of literature to the professionals: it can be seen as an anti-authoritarian stance to safeguard the autonomy of art and artist. Symbolically, these were his final words since the next month *MA* was annihilated by referring to a lack of paper, just before the regime itself collapsed and a rightist regime took power.

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⁶⁰ [Lajos Kassák], Forradalmi művészet – vagy pártművészet [Revolutionary Art or Party Art], *MA*, n1, 26th Jan 1919, 4.

⁶¹ Lajos Kassák, Aktivizmus [Activism] (Lecture on 20th February 1919), *MA*, n4, 10th April 1919, 46-51. (See its translation into English: Activism, lecture given February 20, 1919. Published by Timothy O. Benson – Éva Forgács (eds.), *Between Worlds*, op. cit., 219-225.)

⁶² At the same time it claimed for a „revolution of class of the proletariat” and a communiste regime as well as for “an individual revolution erasing every government and party dictatorship” where the revolution leads to the construction of a “socialist society” (through phases of social-democracy and communism so to say party fights.)

⁶³ Oliver Botar, Lajos Kassák, Hungarian “Activism,” and Political Power, op. cit., 392.

⁶⁴ Lajos Kassák, Levél Kun Bélához a művészet nevében, *MA*, n7, 15th June 1919, 146-148. (Translated into English and published by Timothy O. Benson – Éva Forgács (eds.), *Between Worlds*, op. cit., 230-233.)

⁶⁵ Éva Forgács, The Hungarian Commune in Timothy O. Benson – Éva Forgács (eds.), *Between Worlds*, op. cit., 211.

