

M. Molnár: The History of the Irodalmi Ujság

I. SUBJECT

Antecedents of the Irodalmi Ujság, the political climate. The Irodalmi Ujság is in name the periodical of the Writers' Union, but de facto the mouthpiece of party ideology and consequently practically ignored by the reading public. Increasing and effective pressure of the party on the writers. Stormy internal debates among the writers stressing personal antagonisms, exploited by the party in application of the principle divide et impera ("divide and rule"). The October 1952 party meeting on literature gives the first impulse to the opposition of the writers. The premiership of Imre Nagy and the impact of the reopening of political processes turn the smouldering opposition into a vigorous movement and the Irodalmi Ujság becomes its organ. Counter-measures and terror of the Rákosi clique fail to accomplish their purpose. Open revolt and continued resistance of the writers, an important factor in the political development of Hungary leading to the revolution of October-November 1956. --
Period covered: 1950-1956.

II. OUTLINE

- 1.) Antecedents of the Irodalmi Ujság: In the summer of 1950, the war in Korea broke out, the anti-American propaganda and the policy of Sovietization reached a heretofore unparalleled intensity. The merciless war waged against the so-called internal enemies of the regime was going on relentlessly. József Révai, the leading ideologist of the Communist party, had already stated in the spring that the offensive of the party has three objectives: overcoming the cultural backwardness of the system; extirpation of those theories which consider the people's democracy as a kind of "third road" between socialism and capitalism; consolidation of Hungary's relations with the Soviet Union, her model and master. At the same time, Révai still professed, for tactical reasons, a certain lenience and tolerance. Not so Rákosi, who openly declared that the class enemy which had been beaten on the political and economic fronts withdrew behind the cultural and ideological line to continue its fight against the party and the system. After the complete take-over of power, Rákosi became impatient with the literary policy inspired by George Lukács and supported by Révai, and took upon himself more and more the direction of literary life.
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- 2.) In the summer of 1950, the nationalization and placing under party control of publishing houses, theaters, and other cultural institutions were also completed. Modern Western literature and films were banned, and even the publication of older Hungarian writers, branded "bourgeois," became almost impossible. Most of the new post-war periodicals were

discontinued, there was a spiritual vacuum. To fill this, it was decided to found the Irodalmi Ujság as the periodical of the Writers' Union, on the pattern of the Literaturnaya Gazeta. Béla Illés, a personal foe of Révai's and the representative of the Soviet Stalin-Zhdanov literary line, was appointed publisher, and János Földeák, an old-time sectarian Communist writer, editor-in-chief. The first issue appeared on November 2, 1950, in 30,000 copies, the next only in 17,000, still most of them unsold. Factories, libraries, schools and state farms were ordered to subscribe, in order to keep circulation at least on that level.

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- 3.) The tendency of the Irodalmi Ujság was almost exclusively extreme Soviet and Zhdanov-Stalinist. However, due to the fact that, at least in name, it was the paper of the Writers' Union, during its first year it occasionally contained truly literary articles in a relatively free tone. Béla Illés did everything to prevent such occurrences and appealed to Rákosi for help in refusing "suspect" manuscripts. He finally succeeded in eliminating them from the paper, which also meant the withdrawal from the Irodalmi Ujság of those writers who, to a certain extent at least, had retained a personal opinion.

pp. 5-6

- 4.) From 1951, the party leadership interfered with the editorial work with increasing vigor. The further restrictions imposed on cultural life were a natural symptom of the overall economic and political terror in the wake of the Five-Year Plan. Against this background convened the first congress of Hungarian writers in February 1951. The ostensible point of debate was the struggle against the weaknesses of the so-called socialist-realism in literature, but in fact the congress was conducted in the spirit of total submission to this Communist style of art. By now Révai exacted from the writers an unequivocal declaration of faith to the party.

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- 5.) A silence of dread reigned during the year of 1951. From the background, police terror kept the writers in check; outstanding personalities of cultural life, e.g., Géza Losonczy, Sándor Haraszti, were arrested. Through control over the publishing houses, the economic dependence of the writers was complete. In the foreground there was a huge official apparatus of control over the cultural life: special departments in the Ministry of the People's Culture for each branch of artistic and intellectual activity; the so-called Agitprop /agitation and propaganda department/ in the party center, directed by Márton Horváth; the so-called "College" on ministerial level under the personal direction of Révai; Cultural Department of the Party Center, and, finally, direct pressure exerted on occasions

by Rákosi, Gerő, Horváth, Révai, etc. These three factors -- police terror, economic dependence, official control apparatus -- created a conforming pseudo-literature. The Writers' Union and its periodical, the Irodalmi Ujság, were part of the top-structure in the hierarchy of the cultural control system, and as such, the staunch supporters of the idea of Soviet superiority and of the personal cult of Rákosi.

pp. 7-11

- 6.) Starting in January 1952 and continuing throughout the year, stormy debates interrupted the depressed monotony of literary life. The tone of the personal controversies take on a sharpness out of proportion with the subject matter, and antagonistic groups form within the community of writers. More important than the contents of the debates (on subjects like contemporary Hungarian lyrical poetry) is the fact that, from behind the scenes, the Communist party, in a shrewd political game, encouraged both sides, inciting one against the other. Thus, instead of continuous direct party interference, the party hit one group through the other, choosing its own time to step forward in the part of "arbiter." The most important division among the writers was created on account of Tibor Déry's novel then published; leftist and rightist "deviationists" were facing each other. In October, Rákosi felt that time was ripe for action: the leading personalities of cultural life were called before a meeting of high party functionaries for the "clarification" of the literary situation. After each writer had stated his position, Révai closed the debate in a two-day speech which condemned everybody's stand and carried the weight of a party resolution. However, the clever Communist maneuver backfired: every writer left the meeting dissatisfied and with the secret realization of a complete turning away from the system. The Communist party lost 90 percent of its best writers and left the remainder badly shaken in their beliefs. Even though personal antagonisms remained unchanged among the writers, the passionate clashes ceased and a "spiritual emigration" began: writers stopped publishing or turned to the historical past for subject matter. From a purely literary point of view, this was also a period of incubation for future outstanding works of great artistic value and of revolutionary spirit.

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- 7.) The scarcity of manuscripts and other political considerations (the imminent economic crisis and its demoralizing effects on public opinion) caused the heretofore implacable party leadership to open the Irodalmi Ujság and other periodicals to the silence and personae non gratae writers, such as László Németh, Lőrinc Szabó, Aron Tamasl, etc.

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- 8.) At the occasion of Stalin's death (March 3, 1953), special editions were issued by the Irodalmi Ujság, Csillag, Uj Hang. There was a spontaneous reaction of profound mourning on the part of the writers, even of those politically aloof. The periodical Uj Hang deserves mention, because it was the forum of an undercover opposition to the official line of literature. Despite either positive knowledge or vague intuition of Stalin's true character, there seemed to be an inexplicable respect for this man -- a curious symptom of the psychosis dominating the intellectuals in the people's democracies, worth analyzing. With Stalin's death, however, an era has irrevocably ended.
- pp. 15-17
- 9.) Moscow's shattering criticism of Rakosi's government and the appointment of Imre Nagy as premier had a tremendous echo in literary life. Writers crowded the previously quiet Union headquarters and feverishly exchanged their impressions and reactions both through informal discussions and open debates. During the year to follow, the process of polarization is intensified and the Communist party continues its tactics of sharpening the divisions for its own ultimate purposes. The main divisions were the following: populist vs. urban writers; an attack on the "light" genres, which reinforced the anti-urban trend and, through party maneuvering, branched off into an anti-Western offensive. The party then tried to divide the populist writers among themselves through the István Sinka vs. József Erdélyi controversy.
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- 10.) By 1954, the entire literary world stands united on the side of Imre Nagy, although the personal contacts with him are not as yet close or continuous, because Rakosi keeps Imre Nagy practically isolated. This change was brought about, in the first place, by the reopening of the Rajk trial and of the other pre-fabricated political processes. The sudden realization of the betrayals and crimes committed filled the writers with horror, and bitter self-reproach for -- though themselves misled -- misleading others in turn. An additional sobering factor was the impressions brought back by writers traveling in the West, dispelling propaganda regarding the superiority of the socialist system. Literary essays, in the first place by Gyula Illyés, undertook the revision of Révai's Zhdanov-inspired literary theories and judgments, and in the Writers' Union the revision of the entire policy of the party was openly discussed. The Rakosi clique tries another counter-attack. Jozsef Darvas, Minister of the People's Culture, called a general meeting of the Writers' Union in July 1954, and in a long speech tried to impose

the Communist literary principles which, behind high-sounding phrases, amounted to two rules: "the writers must not write the truth" and "there is no Imre Nagy, there is only Rákosi." But his speech was wasted on the audience. The democratic opposition continued its fight against the Rákosi line. Imre Nagy also intensifies his activity and tries to create a people's front as the first political organization to break the monopoly of the Communist party. Literature gives him active support.

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- 11.) This was the time when the Irodalmi Ujság became the leading organ of the writers' opposition movement and of the "June road" /Imre Nagy's/ program. Throughout the summer and fall of 1954, it published articles and literary works dealing with heretofore unpublicized sides of Rákosi's crimes, the question of rehabilitations, etc. All this was the result of radical changes within the editorial staff, accomplished after bitter inner struggles. Béla Illés continuously invoked the help of Rákosi. However, the Irodalmi Ujság resisted; it established firm contacts with Imre Nagy and also succeeded in obtaining the contributions of the great boycotted writers. The Writers' Union now took seriously the Irodalmi Ujság being its own periodical. In order to increase its effectiveness in reaching the public, it was decided to change it from a monthly to a weekly. The new editor-in-chief, Miklós Molnár, directed the paper with the help of the anti-Rákosi writers and succeeded in offsetting the influence of Béla Illés. The latter, as a last resort, would go at night to the printing plant and take out articles from the finished forms and replace them with his own writings. Finally, he asked for a sick-leave and left for Moscow. The number of copies went up from 17,000 to 35,000.

pp. 26-27

- 12.) The Moscow conference in December 1954 heralds in another change in Soviet policy. Malenkov's ouster foreshadows the fall of Imre Nagy. Rákosi returns to Budapest triumphantly. The Irodalmi Ujság continues its fight despite Rákosi's repeated personal threats. In March 1956, Imre Nagy is ousted, the Rákosi terror restored. Twice they replace the editor-in-chief, in vain: they cannot win over the writers and the Irodalmi Ujság to supporting the regime. They could, of course, prevent the publication of the truly bold and sincere works, but sometimes they failed even there.

pp. 27-29

- 13.) One issue of the Irodalmi Ujság is confiscated, which leads to an open revolt of the writers. The government tries to deny its responsibility for the confiscation, but amidst scandal the truth comes out. The entire secretariat and part of the presidium of the Writers' Union resign. At the same time, about sixty writers and artists, including the editor-in-chief of the Irodalmi Ujság, sign a memorandum addressed to the party Center, listing the most important party measures against the freedom of literature and stating their formal protest against them. The news of the memorandum provoked the enthusiastic sympathy of the public for the writers' movement. In November 1955, the party could no longer refuse the calling of a membership meeting of the Writers' Union. The unusually heated meeting passed a resolution expressing its adherence to the memorandum. It was a great defeat for the Rákosi clique.
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- 14.) The Writers' Union, as a center of open opposition reaching the public through the facility of its paper with a circulation figure in the 30,000's, became intolerable for the regime. In December 1955, before a public meeting of high party functionaries and top cadres, the rebellious writers were exposed, humiliated, and sneered at. The moral "execution" was followed up with dismissals and disciplinary measures; the entire editorial staff of the Irodalmi Ujság was replaced.
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- 15.) The XXth Congress of the Soviet Communist Party did not mean the immediate fall of Rákosi. In the unreliable, smouldering Hungary, the policy of "strong hand" was thought advisable. Therefore, the 1956 movement of the writers was not simply the result and accompanying manifestation of the Soviet "liberalization" process, but also one of the main forces behind the Hungarian political development leading toward the revolution. Though the Rákosi clique had no followers, it had police and jails and the power to keep people in economic dependence. However, the rebellion of the writers flared up again: in March 1956, during a three-day membership meeting, the Writers' Union assailed Rákosi and his accomplices, demanded their ousting, the rehabilitation of Imre Nagy, the bringing to trial of Mihály Farkas and his associates, the replacement of Erzsébet Andics and György Non, etc. Some went so far as to demand a court trial for Rákosi. A suspension of the meeting was ordered; after its resumption, it continued in the same tone; members of the Political Committee of the party, sent to the meeting, were snubbed and ridiculed.

The meeting also demanded the withdrawal of the party resolution on literary matters /an unheard-of occurrence for an inferior party organ to demand from the supreme party organ the withdrawal of one of its resolutions/. -- The membership meeting in May went even further: it demanded the cancellation of party resolutions concerning Imre Nagy. -- In the meantime, expulsions from the party, dismissals, etc., were the order of the day, but they did no longer intimidate the writers.

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- 16.) Rakosi's fall and the congress of the Writers' Union created a new situation. The writers had achieved an autonomous position for themselves -- the party had no word in the election of the presidium. For instance, an active minister (of the People's Culture), József Darvas, was not re-elected. The new presidium reinstated the staff of the secretariat and the editors who had been dismissed after the December 1955 Communist party meeting.

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