

István Mészáros: Cultural Life in Hungary since 1948

Introduction

The intellectuals had a decisive role in the revolutionary events. The story of their struggle is of interest to the entire European community, just as the Hungarian revolution was not an event which affected only Hungary. -- The question of national minorities is a question of supreme importance in the solution of the Central - East European problems; it was in the way of the development of a spirit of solidarity in the Danube basin, it made every one of the nations weaker and exposed to Russian supremacy. A Danube basin federation would be the only guarantee of peace and balance in Eastern Europe and would, at the same time, be a great experiment in combining the ideals of democracy and socialism -- such was the conclusion which the Hungarian intelligentsia arrived at in the last ten years.

The intellectuals in Hungary first refused to collaborate, then courageously spoke the truth. The problems brought to the surface by the revolution cannot be solved or suppressed by force; this means only a postponement, while aggravating the problems, but in the end they will be vindicated, even in the Soviet Union itself.

The Lukács-debate and its consequences.

1948 was called by Rákosi the "year of change" because by that time he succeeded in liquidating the other parties and with it all political opposition outside the Communist Party. Now he was waging a ruthless war on the "internal" enemies. This culminated politically in the Rajk-trial and in the cultural-ideological field in the Lukács-debate. An essay against the Lukács line by László Rudas, four times rewritten by Rákosi and Révai, was published in the Social Review in July 1949 and became the official party line and took the central place of cultural life.

This was not the first Stalinist attack on Lukács. Already in the years of his emigration to the USSR, in the periodical Literaturnij Kritik, he fought for the principle of realism as opposed to the idyllic lie called the "revolutionary romanticism." In 1941 he was put in prison by the NKVD (GPU). He was saved by the intervention of the German and Austrian intellectuals only, also emigrés in the USSR, a much more important group than the Hungarian.

In 1949, the events which had taken place in Russia repeated themselves: Lukács was branded as "cosmopolitan," "a tool (servant) of imperialism," and the publication of his works was forbidden in Hungary and abroad. Two of his books were about to be published in Poland, Czechoslovakia and France; the intervention of the Hungarian Communist Party succeeded in stopping this. This was not surprising in Poland and Czechoslovakia, caught in the Stalinist net, but astounding with respect to France, where Aragon should have had no difficulty in keeping his promise made in 1948 regarding the publication of Lukács's works. Quite to the contrary, he took severe dispositions against him, which were not changed during the period of relaxation after Stalin's death. Only in East Germany did they disobey the orders of the Hungarian Communist Party, and in West Germany his popularity is immense; his works are published through the care of Bertold Brecht.

Also other measures were taken against Lukács -- who was in a very dangerous position -- such as calling meetings to denounce him. But the worst did not happen, because the echo of the Lukács-debate was so great in the West that the Hungarian leaders thought it wiser not to put into prison the philosopher of international fame.

Also, preoccupied by the Rajk-trial of much greater political significance, they did not wish to provoke the reaction of the Hungarian intellectuals by the arrest of Lukács, as they thought it would be easy to eliminate him from the Hungarian cultural life.

Réval's definitions of the reasons for the campaign against Lukács: "the liquidation of comrade Lukács would silence the last representative of the literary "standard" and put an end to the relations between ~~the~~ Hungarian literature and that of the West. Also, in the final analysis, the sharpness of the class warfare in Hungary and the international arena, and in relationship with this, the increase of political and ideological vigilance are the motives for attacking certain opinions of Lukács which only serve the "vacillating" ones, that is the enemy. His literary activity cannot be considered anything but a rightist movement, from the political and ideological point of view." The purpose really was to obtain a final break with Western literature and art, and it was not the Party's fault if it did not succeed in its task. Also, the purpose was to establish the rule of Zhdanovism.

Until 1948 the Party's tactics was to avoid the delicate problems and keep silent about their true intentions in order to attract to it certain groups or at least neutralize them. During this period they permitted Lukács's activity to take on a quasi official character, identifying itself with the Party's cultural

policy. They indeed needed Lukács at that time to attract "sympathizers" from the Hungarian intellectuals.

The works of Lukács which he wrote during the debate, such as "Literature and Democracy," "For a New Hungarian Culture" have not been published as yet in any language. In them are expressed with even greater clarity the author's cultural political principles and their sharp contradiction with Zhdanovism. In Hungary, until 1948, the year which saw the end of the coalition, various literary, artistic, and philosophical tendencies could be freely expressed, because only through discussions and analysis was it possible to gain new elements for Marxism.

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Characterization of Zhdanovism: Stalinism in culture. Révai, despite his great culture and talents, accepted it with limitless cynicism. The prescribed style is "socialist realism" based on "revolutionary romanticism" which in fact eliminates the element of realism from the former. The propaganda in this direction coincided with the Lukács-debate.

Another fundamental problem of the debate was the "absolute superiority" of socialist art. Lukács refuted this principle by the "principle of unequal development" of Marx, which, however, was looked upon as a heresy ~~and~~ at this time in Hungary. Lukács's self-criticism was considered not profound enough and inconsequent. He used the "excuse" that his knowledge of Soviet literature was too limited. Révai refuted this obvious evasion of the problem by referring to his long stay in the USSR and said that the present debate was in fact the continuation of the debate against him, directed by Fadeyev in the '30's in the USSR. Anyway, the debate did not leave room for contradiction and did not consider the person under attack as an individual; the Party is always right. The intellectual development of Révai is very similar to that of Fadeyev: he always sacrificed his personal convictions for the "party line." In the Lukács debate the voice of the opposition was suppressed without pity and the Party sought to force the representatives of Hungarian literature to write their works according to the Soviet prescription, separating themselves entirely from the Hungarian reality. Without liquidating Lukács's theses, they could have never achieved this goal. It was through its incurable sectarianism that the Hungarian Communist Party became the enthusiastic avant-garde of Zhdanovism. Révai, among others, wrote in one of his articles against Lukács: "The people's democracy is but an historical deviation, a transitory tactical change, etc." The main difference between Lukács and the Rákosists was that the former meant what he said, whereas the latter said everything according to the tactical necessities of the moment. The same applied both to politics and culture.

Lukács did not change his opinions since his book "Theses of Blum" (his pseudonym) in 1928 against Béla Kun's sectarianism. Révai, in his intervention in the Lukács-debate in 1950, used the occasion also to justify the murderers of Rajk, because the policy of the Rajkists was very much similar to the theory of Lukács. Thus, with the help of politics and violence, ~~the~~ Zhdanovism succeeded in imposing itself on ~~the~~ Hungarian cultural life for a certain period, at least outwardly. But all they accomplished was to destroy; they could not bring about positive results, as had Lukács's cultural policy done in the preceding years. Lukács never wanted to make people blindly believe, he wanted to convince them.

The Lukács-debate opened the way to Zhdanovism and to the absolute power of Révai in the cultural field. The period between the debate and June 1953, when Imre Nagy came to power, was the darkest era in Hungarian culture.

The Déry-debate.

Characteristically, the "whipping boy" of Hungarian literature has been, in the last decade, Tibor Déry, a writer of Socialist convictions. Few are his works which did not arouse a vehement attack from the Party. By the irony of fate, his principal enemy was that same József Révai on whose poetry, three decades earlier, he had passed shattering criticism, declaring it not only void of talent, but also inhuman. And with good reason, too. It is not sure that personal revenge was pushing Révai on in his attacks on Déry, continuously renewed since 1945, but there is no doubt about the spirit expressed already in that early poetry, which refused to respect any human values.

Déry's career as a writer began in 1917, with the Nyugat, but he became a writer of fame in 1945 only, with his great novel, a trilogy, entitled "The Unfinished Sentence." The years following the first World War he had spent in exile in Austria, Germany, Spain, and Italy. He was imprisoned in the Horthy regime for a few months for having translated Gide's book on the USSR. His great work, "The Unfinished Sentence," was written between 1934 and '38, but could not be published in that era; however, it was circulated in manuscript among the better part of the Hungarian intellectuals, until it eventually reached wide fame.

The first attack, after 1945, was directed against his volume of short stories entitled "Infernal Games," about the siege of Budapest, because in one scene he dared to picture the

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violence of the Russian soldiers. Similarly, his plays and novels were called "decadent" and bourgeois because he had the courage to deal with the moral conflicts of life. Despite of all this, the sharpness of the attack in the party press in 1947 against the "Unfinished Sentence" caused surprise. It was accused of "grave defects of conception" in order to defeat the profound criticism of the sectarianism of the Hungarian Communist Party in Déry's novel. The only great supporter and defender of Déry was Lukács. At this time there was still a certain freedom of criticism and the party leaders could not settle the matter with a word of authority, and the result of the Party intervention was to make the book widely read and popular. But the party kept coming back to it during the Lukács-debate, in the party congress, on his other novel, "The Answer," branding him always decadent and bourgeois. Those who dared to praise the book had to share the accusation of "bourgeois objectivism."

A new attack, provoked by the performance of the play "The Mirror", written a few years earlier, levelled the accusation of the writer's subjectivism. In 1951, at the first congress of the Hungarian writers, Déry was attacked by Sándor Gergely. Révai in fact defended him against Gergely, but also according to Zhdanovist principles. Later he recanted his "defense." This 1951 congress actually represented the mildest point in the attitude of the Party towards Déry in the course of a so-to-speak permanent Déry-debate. Again he was attacked, on account of the "White Butterfly" for "representing from the inside" instead of from the "outside" his understanding of the bourgeois morals. The party used the tactics of "workers' letters" of protest, written of course by party functionaries, approved by the party journalists and leaders. These letters then were used as "arguments" against Déry, while hypocritically speaking of the supremacy of the people.

The "workers' letters" were a useful means, if not against Déry -- who continued to write according to his views, -- but against the average writer. They were to prove that Déry was a "fellow-traveler inside the Party" and that, if he did not show himself disposed to follow the official cultural policy, he automatically would qualify himself as one "outside of socialism." A nationwide campaign discouraged those sympathizing with Déry. The furor over the short story the "White Butterfly" was memorable because the method of "popular outrage" with which they experimented during the Rajk-trial was applied for the first time in the cultural field, establishing thereby the practice of the terroristic "debate," so clearly anti-cultural.

This last debate was a sort of prelude to the great literary battle, the "Déry-debate" proper. It developed about the second volume of the novel "Answer" in 1952-53. The party's opinion was formulated even before its publication. New series of letters

appeared. A "debate" was opened only to make the Party's views triumph. Révai closed the debate before the ideological forum of the Party with the following words (autumn, 1952): "The debate was characterized by the fact that the majority of the participants were not in accord with the Party's position, and, consequently, it was "formalistic." What makes this statement even more curious is that the majority of the participants were party members. The party's "position" was nothing else but the long article by Révai, published in the Szabad Nép in the summer of 1952, which condemned Déry's novel in the harshest way. The question arises why the need for organizing a spectacular "debate" when the party's position was taken in advance? The purpose was to force the dissenters to make public self-criticism or keep silent and to impose on all a "superior verdict." At the same time the idea of settling artistic problems by "decision from above" is fundamentally anti-artistic.

The attacks against the "Answer" began by a declaration by József Darvas, then Minister of Public Education and president of the Writers' Union: bourgeois objectivism and decadence. His views were elaborated by Péter Nagy, also before the Writers' Union. At that occasion a certain liberty of discussion was still permitted, in other words, those in defense of the book could make themselves heard. Even Déry could intervene, explaining his own creative method, saying that the writer has the right to mould the plot and the destinies of his characters in perfect harmony with the internal nature of the reality represented. This most natural concept sounded like a heresy in Hungary at the time. The intervention of Révai shattered all equilibrium of the debate. Not only did he express his "feelings of friendship" in an unspeakable way, but he ordered the strictest administrative measures against the book. He forbade the imminent publication of the second volume in East Germany and the reprint of the work in Hungary, despite the great public demand for it, and tried to force the writer to rewrite his novel from beginning to end.

-- Review of Déry's novels, the "Unfinished Sentence" and the "Answer."

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In order to justify the stepped-up armament industry and the heavy burdens imposed by the 5-year plan, the party used the pretext of an impending war. To make it more impressive, the closed air raid shelters were reopened and newer ones built, water-reservoirs against fire reinstated, air raid drills for the population reintroduced and military courses introduced at schools and universities. The deportations from Budapest and the putting of

people into concentration camps was also justified by claiming that in view of the imminent major conflict, internal security can be better preserved if the internal enemies are reduced to a minimum.

Pressure was exerted on literature and all the arts in order to make them represent this menace of war. All this was done by order of Stalin, as proved by an identical development in the other people's democracies. -- The political aims and "ideals" ~~and~~ around the Déry debate: the Stalinist order was to create an atmosphere conscious of extreme danger -- this was called "historical necessity" -- and literature was expected to express and inspire supreme heroism and action as natural under such circumstances. Had the state of national danger actually existed, the writers would have responded to it naturally. But since reality was different and the above requirement was artificially imposed on the country by the party leaders, the inevitable result was a profound chasm between the party and the writers, and the latter became more and more attracted by the truly burning questions of the nation. The only solution for this situation, as far as the party leadership was concerned, was to impose its decisions on literary life. The new order, launched at the occasion of the Déry debate, was that literature should represent reality not on the level of life, but on that of the "interdependence of superior politics." This meant in simple words the servile acceptance of the subjective and arbitrary points of view of the leaders of the party and a rejection of the country's reality and life.

-- The cult of personality under the pretext of "collective leadership," its implications, methods, etc.

-- István Király's "constructive" criticism: on an interjection of Révai's, he made a complete volte-face with his opinions expressed in the opening sentence of his intervention in the Déry-debate. Déry wrote a one-act play entitled "Talpsimogató," eternalizing the ~~type~~ comic type of uninhibited adulator and the "ideal middle cadre." Király was made editor of Irodalmi Újság and received the Kossuth prize in recompensation for his "merits."

-- Schematism, which was permitted to play a limited part of "signalling" the weak points, had ceased to be tolerated by the party.

The increasing war waged against Déry was in fact a reflection of the great internal contradictions of the party, and it could not stop because these contradictions were never decreasing, on the contrary, they were becoming stronger than ever. Déry resisted throughout and enriched Hungarian literature with works of perennial value, and he can rightly be considered the central figure of the recent years.