

Final Report
Visegrad Scholarship at the Open Society Archives

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Research: *Silent de-Stalinization – the party intelligentsia as opposition in Hungary*

My research examined communist writers in Hungary after 1945, their way to anti-Stalinism and the Hungarian Writers' Union's role in the 1956 revolution. In 1953, after Stalin's death, communist writers realized that they were supporting a system that corrupted their socialist belief in everyday life. The New Course, designed and ordered by the Soviet party, gained great momentum in Hungary, as this was the only country in the region where the reform attempt had a leader, Imre Nagy who wholeheartedly advocated the policy of change. On the other hand, Rákosi remained in power and sabotaged radical changes. "Silent de-Stalinization" (1953-1956) and reforms were not allowed to go beyond a certain point. Since the political history of the 1950s and the revolution is well documented, the research was focusing on the intellectuals' inner transformation and their way to the resistance. How did formerly loyal Party servants become one of its most ardent critics? How did they reconcile their own beliefs with the demands of the Party for so long – and what did finally drive them to take a stand? How did they fight against the Stalinist regime, what was their limit and to what extent did they have an impact on society? Since the Hungarian intellectuals and freedom fighters had different goals in 1956, can the intellectuals be classified as an opposition at all?

The research is based on different sources' analyzation and comparison. The Hungarian Subject Files (HU OSA 300-40-1) provided the research's macro level. The Biographical Files and Biographical Card Files (HU OSA 300-40-5 and HU OSA 300-40-6) provided the micro level. The Subject Files contain lot of documents in Hungarian and in English about the writers' revolution (or as the RFE reports refers to it the "intellectual revolt", the "writers' historic role", "the opposition to Rákosi"), the 1956 revolution, the literary life, the Writers' Union.

An RFE report from 1976 tried to analyze the Hungarian and Polish events after 20 years. The report asked the following question about the writers: "What made them change? Many of these writers rejected Stalinism what they had earlier espoused or accepted. The Sauls verily became Pauls with some indeed exhibiting and almost Paulian enthusiasm and single mindedness for the new cause. Perhaps only psychologists could fully explain some of these conversions."

To understand this, I had to focus on the micro level. The Biographical Files contain interviews, articles written by the writers, excerpts from their memoirs, RFE reports about them. The boxes of Tibor Déry and Gyula Háry also have many documents in English and in German. The micro level (and memoirs) helped me to understand the events of 1953-1954, the writers' inner transformations. The cause of their revelations was the New Course (summer of 1953), the release of communist politicians convicted in show trials and Imre Nagy's October breakthrough (summer and fall of 1954).

But from these documents we can also see their limits: in the writers' revelations there is a phase delay – they understood Imre Nagy's policy and supported him and the New Course when he fell from the power. Also, in the beginning their motivation was to fix their corrupted communist belief – they only paid attention to their own inner circle and less to peasants, workers or non-communist writers.

There is a political term, the artistic repossession what we can use to describe the writers' action in these years. Artistic repossession is a form of cultural resistance. It describes a range of creative strategies developed by artists working under strict ideological control and censorship within the context of an authoritarian dictatorship. They started the “literary discussion” – but it was not only about literature and it was not a real discussion since they had the same opinion.

The Subject Files focused on the events of 1955-1956 – which is understandable as the communist writers became an opposition in March 1955 when they rejected the communist party's resolution (part of the re-Stalinization in Hungary). According to an RFE report, “the rejection of the March resolution outgrew the limits of literature and became a general political protest.” The affair precipitated the awakening and revolt of the party-intelligentsia; a unification between the communist and non-communist writers started. The literary press was the writers' main instrument, where they could express the general social dissatisfaction, the bureaucracy's damaging role, the criticism of dogmatism in the communist party, the rejecting of cult of personality, the unlawfulness of the communist leaders and their grievances in cultural life. Naturally, these articles had many consequences (banning newspapers, threats, dismissing, reprimands), but the communist party could not stop the unifying intellectuals.

The RFE reports closely follows the writers' articles and actions. Among those we can find:

- the „old and young debate” (euphemism for more independence)
- Tibor Déry's article which says young people have to find their own unique voice
- László Benjámín's poem which caused a withdrawn issue of Literary Journal

- Gyula Háy's famous article (*Freedom and Responsibility*). The article ended with the plea that, in the interest of both state and literature, the literary watch-dogs should be called off)
- the November memorandum written by writers and journalist (the memorandum denied the necessity and right of the Party to direct literature. This memorandum was condemned by the November resolution of the Central Committee and saw it as an ultimatum and attack)
- Petőfi Circle's debates (in June 1956 Tibor Déry and Tibor Tardos were expelled from the communist party because of their speech during a meeting)
- the General Assembly of the Writers' Union in September 1956 where non-communist writers were elected into the Presidium and Stalinist writers were out.

I want to mention another article by Gyula Háy, *Before the General Assembly*, written on 17 September 1956. Háy wrote that writers, as every person, are allowed to believe in God, not to believe in God, to think in a Marxist way, to reject Marxism, to criticize certain politicians or the standard of living, to demand humanity, etc. We can interpret this article as a devoted communist (and ex-Stalinist) writer had written about respecting basic human rights just before the 1956 revolution. On the other hand, the RFE and biographical files focused on another article by Háy (*Why don't I like Comrade Kucsera*, 6 October 1956), which criticized the ministry officials and highlighted their role in maintaining the political system.

After nearly three decades of dutiful service to the communist party, the writers joined the uprising against Soviet authorities during the 1956 Hungarian Revolution. On the other hand, as the RFE reports suggest as well, they lost their intellectual role during the revolution in that respect that their writings or radio speeches had no effect on the mass. The RFE reports show that the Writers' Union had a bigger role in the resistance after the revolution (November 1956 – January 1957) and meant some kind of hope for the society. The writers also called themselves as the “spiritual leaders of the revolution”. In January 1957 the arrest of certain writers started, and the Writers' Union was dissolved by the party. Tibor Déry, Gyula Háy, Zek Zoltán and Tibor Tardos were sentenced to prison in the “great writer trial”.

The communist writers could only return to the cultural life in the mid-1960s after compromising with the Kádár regime. This could be another research project in the future – the OSA material is also very rich on this topic.

List of OSA sources consulted

HU OSA 300 Records of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Research Institute

Hungarian Unit - Subject Files

HU OSA 300-40-1, archival boxes:

- 564
- 572-574
- 676
- 1312-1313
- 1299-1311

Hungarian Unit – Subject Files in English

HU OSA 300-40-2, archival boxes:

- 85-87

Hungarian Unit – Biographical Cards

HU OSA 300-40-5, archival boxes:

- 14
- 35-36
- 63
- 105
- 193
- 212

Hungarian Unit – Biographical Card Files

HU OSA 300-40-6, archival boxes:

- 2
- 4
- 12
- 21
- 26-27