

Where Private is Public. Reading Practices in Socialist Hungary

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The essay concerns itself with the publishing systems of Kádár-regime Socialist Hungary, and argues that the editorial systems which were the substitutes for a censorship office enabled the system to work because they allowed the pre-reading of the publishable materials on several levels.

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One of my most vivid childhood memories is going back to school after the Christmas break, sitting on the cafeteria bench with my two best friends and discussing what we got for Christmas. The lists varied of course, but not when it came to books. Surprisingly – or at least so I thought then – our parents almost always chose the same books as Christmas presents. So, when we were 12 all three of us learnt an effective method about how to stop chewing our fingernails from *The Handbook of Teenagers with Two Left Hands*, at 13 we planned to fall in love with a mysterious double agent *Abigél* style, and by the time we left primary school, from Brunella Gasperini's *Them and Us* series we all knew that we had to pat-pat our family cars good night.

One might say that there is nothing unusual in this experience – we can safely bet that at least one in five teenagers this Christmas will get a Neil Gaiman or Stephanie Meyer novel, and that they almost all grew up on Harry Potter, that is we all have our generational book favourites. I would argue, however, that there is a significant difference there. My parents' Christmas choices were not fuelled by a media generated teenage frenzy, but were the results of economic and political decisions, not on their part, but on the part of our government. The Hungarian regime of my childhood, the so-called Kádár-regime, the period in Hungarian history between 1956 and 1989, named after Party secretary János Kádár, who governed Hungary for more than thirty years after the 1956 revolu-

tion, did not accomplish most of its goals: it did not lead the people to the promised lands of Communism and did not wipe out decadent bourgeois living habits, but it succeeded on an unprecedented scale in controlling all levels of book printing, selling and marketing. In this paper I wish to take a closer look at how, as a result of this all-powerful control, reading in Hungary in the previous era, even when seemingly private, was always part of a public discourse, and I also wish to point out the paradoxical results of this system.

The forty years of Hungarian state Socialism, starting with the manipulated elections of 1947, and lasting until 1989, the peaceful change of the regime, should not be viewed as a homogeneous period. My main focus here is the years after the 1956 revolution, but to be able to understand the main objectives of Kádárist cultural politics, we should first digress a little and take a fleeting look at the pre-revolution years as well, especially because, albeit different in its day-to-day handling of literature and culture, this previous decade of Stalinist dictatorship had laid down many of the foundations of the upcoming Kádár-regime.

Before the Second World War there had been almost 200 private publishing houses in Hungary, supported by an established and well-running system of bookshops, second hand bookshops, libraries and stationeries with book selling licences. The war left most of them devastated, and the liberating or rather conquering Soviet troops also added insult to injury. The interim government of 1945 issued a decree¹ (Kókay 139) which ordered all fascist and anti-Soviet literature to be confiscated and destroyed. Several reports have survived about the Soviet troops' repeated abuse of power – numerous private and school libraries were destroyed by the advancing army, while various more precious volumes from monastery libraries disappeared and ended up in the Soviet Union. It took at least two years for the book industry to recover, and by 1947 it finally reached its pre-war flourish. However, the years of peace did not last long. By 1948 the new Socialist government nationalised all the big publishing houses and by 1949 it placed all bookshops and libraries under the direct control of the Ministry of Interior Affairs, which basically meant placing them under direct political control. On 7 April 1952, the Ministry withdrew the licences of 87 bookshops in Budapest, and 95 bookshops in the countryside, in addition to abolishing the bookselling permit of stationers, thus placing the whole of the book industry under state control.

The wish to have all-encompassing rule over the book industry showed the regime's attitude towards literature and reading, something the Kádár-regime also inherited from its predecessor. Literature was seen as an important forum for propaganda, and the foremost field for the new

government's 'cultural war', the aim of which was to erase the elements of bourgeois cultural heritage from the reading public's mind. While both regimes handled literature and reading habits as vital and subordinate to politics, where they differed was *the means* they wished to control it by. In harmony with Soviet doctrines the Stalinist regime of 1950s' aimed at applying direct political control over all aspects of reading. The political entered the private sphere and central control was to be exercised also over *what* people read and *when*. I would like to demonstrate this through two examples, the first illustrating the attempt to eradicate hazardous material, the second: an effort to promote new reading habits.

In 1950 the Ministry of Culture issued two consecutive official book withdrawal lists for village and work-trade libraries. The first one contained 1,848, the second 6,552 titles, all of which were to be removed from these libraries. Allegedly as a result of an administrative mistake, however, the withdrawal lists were made compulsory for all libraries, bookshops and second hand bookshops as well (Murányi 256). On 9 November 1950, trucks lined up before bookshops and the officials of the Ministry confiscated and then pulped more than 120,000 volumes. Titles on the list included Cervantes's *Don Quijote* because its pre-war edition featured a preface by the then émigré author Sándor Márai, or *Winnie-the-Pooh*, which was published in the 1930s by a bourgeois publisher. Radio Free Europe leaked the withdrawal campaign, causing an international scandal. Answering censorship allegations and protests, among others from the French Academy of Sciences, officials tried to distance themselves from the events. József Révai, Minister of Education, issued a proclamation in which he accused certain reactionary forces in the Ministry of having placed Cervantes, Swift and Hungarian folktales on the withdrawal lists, while the 3rd Congress of the Hungarian Party of Workers in a 'top secret' decree ordered booksellers to place several volumes from the list on display in their shop windows. Nonetheless, as literary scholar Zsófia Gombár remarks,

the publication of further withdrawal lists between 1952 and 1953 seems to flatly contradict the above-mentioned intentions. The three further volumes contained approximately 14,000 titles. [...] According to the preface, the books destined to be discarded were aesthetically worthless, obsolete and of inferior quality, undeserving of being read by the Hungarian working people, who were now on the road to cultural development[.] (272)

While discarding these 'outdated books' – as the title of the volumes called them – in an act of arrogant superiority, the Party also wished to directly dictate what people should read. The so-called *Szabad Nép* half-hour

was introduced in factories and firms, where all workers had to gather and discuss the editorial of the Party daily, *Szabad Nép*. The Writers' League was reorganised, most bourgeois writers silenced and a clique of rather second-rate Socialist Realist authors openly supported. The regime severed almost all contact with the Western world, banning all new Western-European literature from the Hungarian market. This Stalinist model of cultural control, however, never really brought about the results it was hoping to get. What clearly showed the unsustainability of this direct control was that the writers were among the first social groups to rebel against the Stalinist state after 1953, their criticism preparing the way for the revolution of 1956.

The year 1956 marks the end of an era and a turning point in the more than forty years of Hungarian state Socialism, since after the failure of the revolution, two conclusions had to be drawn: first, that the regime could not return to the Stalinist doctrines of the 1950s, if it did not want to risk another uprising, and second, that with the Soviet forces 'temporarily' located in Hungary, no democratic changes were possible in the foreseeable future. Thus people were resigned to live *within* the boundaries of the Socialist state, and János Kádár, the new party leader whose rule was ensured by the Russian tanks stationed in Hungary, made it easier for them. Drawing a lesson from the downfall of his Stalinist predecessors, Kádár pointedly depoliticised the everyday life of Hungarians, and created, with the help of billions of European loans, a false sense of well-being in the country, which, after the starvation and hardships of the 1950s, was warmly embraced by most. In exchange for these new, higher standards of living – which were still ridiculously low compared to Western examples – the Kádár-regime expected its citizens to accept an artificially reduced and strongly controlled public sphere where explicit criticism was forbidden and potential political comments could only be sounded in centrally prescribed forms. If Hungarians wanted to live in relatively decent conditions they had to become politically inert – this was the Faustian deal the Kádár-regime offered its people.

Political criticism eluded all public forums. No one talked openly about the imprisonments and executions after 1956, the permanent presence of the Red Army in Hungary, or the growing economic problems of the 1970s. The stability of public life relied on the double nature of pseudo-important issues pronounced openly and of problems only vaguely hinted at. This was the guarantee that held up the status quo and made the regime able to sustain itself.

This duplicity saturated all levels of cultural politics, and book publishing was no exception. What it first and foremost meant was that uniquely

among most Central-European countries, Hungary did not have a central censorship office. Instead of direct censorship the Kádár-regime developed a multi-level system, in which it expected the members on all levels to self-censor themselves. Through this regulatory system of many layers, and anticipating the self-censoring cooperation of its citizen, the authorities very rarely had to resort to the means of direct control. What I would like to argue here is that this arrangement basically relied on pre-reading the books in several degrees, ensuring that by the time they reached the reading public, they had been weeded of most dangerous material. Let us now turn to the details and see how the system worked on an everyday basis.

Contrary to the binary system of banned or supported of the Stalinist regime, the new regulations relied on the tri-partite value scale of banned, tolerated and supported, the middle being a non-prescribed, only vaguely defined category of works of art, which, although not openly Socialist were at least partly acceptable for the regime. This group changed incessantly, what was banned one day, could easily be published the next. No official guidelines were put down for what passed as tolerable, since the regime wished to keep everyone on their toes, guessing. There were certain general taboos that had to be avoided (anything that would offend the Soviet Union or any friendly Socialist countries, any criticism of the Party leadership, obscenity or vulgarity, or open description of sexual acts), but everything beyond these was up to the temporary judgment of the officials. Of course, to make a system like this work, one needed trustworthy employees on all levels.²

That is why in the autumn of 1957 the Party Committee of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party issued a ruling about book publishing, establishing that besides administrative and material decisions all other resolutions had to be political. The decree prescribed a guidance based on principles, suggesting that a new generation of editors should be trained, 'who will consistently censure anti-Marxist tendencies'. The aim was to create an arrangement which was building from the bottom upwards. These editors in the publishing houses (all of which were state owned, and had a specific profile: Európa was publishing world literature, Magvető and Szépirodalmi Hungarian literature, Móra children's literature, etc.) had to read all manuscripts and issue a reader's report, which in turn was submitted to the weekly publishers' meetings. The reports contained a brief summary, as well as an assessment of the author's importance and known political stance. Furthermore, they also needed to include a final judgment on the reader-editor's part, whether the manuscript was worthy for publishing, or not. Reading these reports it becomes obvious that this

is where self-censoring political criticism entered the reviewing process. Remarks usually include phrases like: neither ideologically, not artistically acceptable, or: does carry a literary value, but its political stance is unacceptable – clearly signifying that aesthetic and political evaluation went hand in hand. However, the question of editors is more complicated than to simply categorize them as censors.

Many of them were silenced intellectuals, several among them writers in their own right, whose work as an editor was seen as a proof of their loyalty. While it is very often the case that they dutifully obliged to the role they were given, once established as trustworthy consultants, they were frequently trying to push the boundaries offered by the regime, especially in the case of works of art they deemed important and of merit. We can therefore claim that had it not been for these pre-readers, several Hungarian and European classics would have never reached the reading public. To justify this with an example, let me quote here the fate of János Pilinszky's volume of poetry *On the Third Day* which was the first book to appear by the poet, who was silenced after 1947 for political reasons. Belonging to the group of bourgeois writers who came to be associated with the banned literary journal, *Újbold*, Pilinszky had been trying to get published, but was denied the opportunity several times, since the authorities deemed his poetry too pessimistic for a Socialist poet. Pilinszky, who is now firmly established in the Hungarian canon as one of the greatest poetic innovators of the post-war era, had several supporters among the editors, who, realising his talent, tried to tilt the authorities' favours towards him. It was them who suggested that he should change the original title of the book (*No Man's Land*) to something less pessimistic, as well as them who wrote flamingly enthusiastic reviews about how the volume would help Hungary's reputation as anti-fascist country, since it contained several poems detailing the horrors of the concentration camps. What finally turned the authorities around was the compromise, also suggested by the editors, which compelled the poet to write a few new works, which were optimistic in tone. The editors then arranged the poems in chronological order, with dates underneath each poem, and convinced the authorities that the upbeat tone of the last poems would suggest that the new Kádár-regime was a better place to live. Thus the volume was published in 1959, albeit in only 1,000 copies and with a special remark from the authorities requesting an ugly cover to dissuade people from buying it. This strategy, however, failed to produce the required effect – all copies were sold in a day, some going at 1,000 forints, instead of the store price of 10. (Domokos 85–96) The fate of Pilinszky's volume is just one from the many examples where the intervening of the editors was instrumental

in ensuring the publication of a book which later became fundamental in Hungarian literary history.

In politically dubious cases a second or 'inner' cycle of reading was ordered, until the Publishers' Directorate finally authorised the publishers' annual list of publications. The Directorate was generally known as the censor's office, but thanks to the reader system it rarely had to exercise its power to stop publications, especially since it also controlled the economic aspects of book publishing, which it could also use as a means of regulation. Since all echelons of editing were under state control, book publishing was absolutely detached from the workings of the market. The Directorate could thus enact certain rules through which it could artificially modify the movements of the market – book price (which were kept unnaturally low to encourage reading) were determined on the basis of a sheet-price system which prescribed that Soviet and Socialist literature was to be sold at the lowest prices, followed by friendly non-Socialist works, while pulp fiction, detective writing as other such 'easy readings' – which clashed ideologically with Socialist ideals were to be sold at almost double the price; furthermore, these works had an additional 'kitsch tax' imposed on them.

Finally, let us turn to the reading public, and to how the control on all levels affected their reading experiences. The rules first of all affected the structure of the books. Since all literature was considered to be political material, even tolerated works were not tolerated in their own right. In the form of prefaces or footnotes readers usually received 'guidelines' as to how to understand the contents of these books. With these precautions, however, several works from world literature got republished, since Socialism wanted to reclaim the classics as their own. Therefore, under the Kádár-regime, and especially in the 1970s the range of available classics was wider than ever before. Furthermore, since many of the silenced writers sought and found work in the publishing industry or as translators, the literary merit of these new editions was also unusually high. Adding to this was the fact that book prices were kept unnaturally low, while literary matters were centrally kept as part of the public discourse. These tendencies, coupled with the seeming liberalism of the carrot and stick methods of the regime all result in that there is a faint sense of nostalgia in Hungarian discussions about reading in the Kádár-regime.

Looking at the behind-the-scene mechanisms of the publishing industry, I wished to argue in this essay that the nostalgia is unjustified. The controlled censorship of the Kádár-regime's editorial systems reveals that there was no freedom when it came to reading. Therefore a special effort is needed now to research the editors' reports as well as the secret police's

archives, in order to obtain a clearer picture of how the private became public in Socialist Hungarian reading practices.

NOTES

¹ Number: 530/1945 ME.

² The description of the editorial system is based on: Bart 2000.

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