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RFE EVALUATION AND ANALYSIS DEPARTMENT

Background Report

Hungarian Unit

POLEMIC AMONG HUNGARIAN CRITICS OVER RUSSIAN NOVEL

A dissenting voice has appeared among Hungarian critics of the Russian novel "The Brothers Jersov" by Vladimir Kochetov. Hungarian literary critic Ferenc Botka wrote in the February 1959 issue of "Magyvilag" that Hungarian critics were superficial in their almost unanimous praise of the book which was published in Hungary in May 1959.

"The Brothers Jersov" is recognized in the West as an "antidote" for Dudintsev's book "Not by Bread Alone" and as such was warmly praised by most Communist literary publications. Among Hungarian papers only that of the Education Ministry, "Könyvtarai", No. 8, which has a rather small circulation, criticized weaknesses in the content and construction of the book.

Then, in the February issue of the well-known literary journal "Magyvilag" Ferenc Botka turned strongly against the praise of the Hungarian reviewers and condemned the "schematism" of the novel. Botka's stand raised a fuss among the reviewers. "Magyvilag" published three articles in its April issue, two of them attacking Botka and one criticizing Kochetov. Thus it seems that a fairly widespread debate is developing over Kochetov's novel in Hungary, a debate which is swinging over from the literary into the political field.

The "Fidelity of Soviet Reality"

Kochetov's novel was published in Hungary half a year after it appeared in the Soviet Union, on the occasion of the "Book-Week Festival". The general tone of the Hungarian reviews was set by "Not as Irodalom" (29 May 1959) in an article nearly one page long which praised the novel unreservedly.

With a wide social cross-section, the description of countless individual destinies and passions, the novel is a faithful mirror of Soviet reality. Kochetov's message is clear, determined and passionate; he does not hide the fact that his novel too is an active position taken in a struggle, the soundness and efficiency of which was already confirmed by the Third Congress of Soviet Writers... It is never schematic, rigid or one-sided. (Tev Miklos).

"Sati Hirlep" (2 June 1959) tops these praises:

Ecohetov's sole concern is to observe Soviet life... He observes it and puts it on paper. And it becomes clear that this life, even in its most usual everyday form, is a hymn, is poetry. The poetry of truth. Of a truth which gives evidence of human greatness, intelligence and creative force... There is no truth more poetic and no poetry more truthful than this. (Katalin Jure).

Why this unanimous enthusiasm which even surpasses that of the Soviet reviews? "Palusi Vasarnap" (7 June 1959) reveals also this:

The picture Ecohetov presents us is moving. And it is also a very good reminder. In other surroundings, under other conditions, the same as those in the southern iron-working town described, history has formed cadres... In the framework of a southern Russian town, Ecohetov shows the atmosphere of the 1933-34 "thaw" and those strange personalities who dropped up suddenly at that time and who, in order to live their own parasitic lives at the expense of the workers let their instincts run wild, and did not choose their means... The sea of the epoch speaks here to the readers of the epoch. And the moral to be drawn is so evident: the strength of the intriguers is great, they can also be victorious for a short time -- trouble-causing and the unworthy dragging of men in the mid can be pursued with artistic perfection, but finally justice will prevail. (Foldes).

The "Társadalmi Szemle" review (August-September 1959) holds that the chief merit of the novel is the exposure of the "revisionist petty-bourgeoisie". Apart from the truly critical article of "Könyvtárni" only Istvan Debér, the reviewer of "Magyar Hírszem", picked mentioning also the stylistic weaknesses of the book, which, however, he attributes mainly to the translator, Iren Esztoros.

Hungarian Criticism Called Superficial

"Magyarvilág", February 1960, published Ferenc Botka's review ("Once Again About the Brothers Jereev") which attacked above all the Hungarian reviewers of the novel. The author of the article, as a kind of defense, compares in the first place the reviews published in Soviet periodicals with the Hungarian passages.

Hungarian 'criticism' is full of easy, and often superficial praise, and then the reviews attribute 'merits' to Ecohetov for which he is condemned by Soviet reviewers. He was also praised for virtues which do not exist in the novel...

Botka acknowledges the "ambitious and pure idealism" of the novel, but holds it to be a second-rate work from the point of view of artistic creation.

The article's message was not toned down to even epic proportions. The polemical is present, the pamphlet character led unintentionally to distortions... Distortions in the descriptions of negative figures can be attributed to the lack of sufficient knowledge and vistas... The figure of Orleanseer and also the symptoms of revisionism presented in the novel, in the first place in their appearances and compared to their importance, are strongly distorted. Orleanseer becomes a common intriguer; revisionism, on the other hand, becomes simply the venture of an untalented artist-carceral... In fighting schematism, Kochetov's novel falls into the mistake of a special kind of "counter-schematism". While a part of earlier Soviet literature was characterized by the fact that positive figures were artificial, in his case schematism went over to the other extreme...

And to conclude the attack against the Hungarian reviewers:

The true significance of "The Brothers Jersov" became clear during the courageously conducted, courageously Soviet debate following its publication. Hungarian criticism unfortunately did not always approach these heights. It was often superficial and wrongheaded; but mostly it only nodded in agreement. It did not debate.

The Debate Develops

The critics flared out in protest against Botha's article, especially those who had written favorable reviews. Comments published in "Nagyvilág", April 1960, openly attacked Botha's standpoint from the political point of view with the exception of a short comment by János Eilbert who condemns Kochetov. The first contributor, Ferenc Rajda, asks without hesitation, Why was Kochetov's book praised by the Hungarian reviewers:

I am unable to agree with Botha's reasoning. He most passionately holds that Hungarian criticism should state clearly that Kochetov exaggerates the danger of revisionism. This assumption, debatable in itself and also debated, is even able to stand on its own in Hungarian criticism. "The Brothers Jersov" reveals the activities of the revisionists after the 20th Congress. And if the revisionist attack in the Soviet Union was perhaps not as dangerous as Kochetov presented it, let us not forget that in our country it led to armed counter-revolution. Therefore, to demand in our country what Botha demands in his article -- however good his intentions -- inevitably adds grist to the mill of apolitical bourgeois aestheticians.

Estelin Iure, reviewer of "Etel Hirlep", distorts Botha's article completely. In her review Botha demanded that the Hungarian

reviewers accept the viewpoints of the Soviet critics, some of whom condemned the book. According to Inre, the fact that the Hungarian reviews praised the book, in contrast to the Soviet critics, proves that Hungarian criticism was not merely "nodding in agreement" but was "forming its opinion independently".

The last article of the series, and undoubtedly the best, was written by Janos Elbert, entitled "The One Who Sees a Debate, Sees a Debate".

Kochetov's book is a polemical novel; it takes up a lively debate with two previously published Soviet literary works: "They" by Ilja Ehrenburg, also known in Hungary, and "Not by Bread Alone" by Vladimir Dudintsev, whose work is only known by its reputation in our country. The acceptance of the task of polemic determines almost naturally the outline of the novel's subject, the direction of its development, determines its pattern -- and also its schematism... The other reason for the writer's failure is not to be found in his descriptive method, but in his false portrayal... Ehrenburg idealizes and Kochetov denounces revisionism which appears as a concomitant of the times following Stalin's death and the 20th Congress. Ehrenburg describes the melting snow with smooth, warm colors in "They", Kochetov sees the same as gray slush and describes it with dark colors. But the most important thing escapes the attention of both: spring.

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