

## EAST EUROPE

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HUNGARIAN LITERARY POLICY, AS REFLECTED AT THE  
PARTY CONGRESS

SUMMARY: The following points can be ascertained from a study of the HWP's Sixth Congress's (28 November - 3 December 1966) material referring to literary policy: Authentic Marxist concepts are undergoing a noteworthy transformation; at the congress, the Party leadership expressed support for a relatively liberal literary policy; in literary life pressure from the dogmatists can also be felt, but this pressure is weak.

The four exponents of literary policy: Kadar (1), Szirmai (2), Kerec (3), and Garai (4), on the whole repeated what had already been laid down in previous Party documents, but in more detail and with greater precision. It is not surprising, therefore, that Western observers analyzing the congress summarized the situation in the following way: the literary policy remains liberal and the writers' and artists' freedom of movement has not become more restricted. While this is true, it is what is apparent on the surface. The aim of the present study is to examine what lies beneath this surface.

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- (1) János Kadar, first secretary of the HWP. See his Central Committee report, Köznevelés, 29 November 1966, p. 3-12, HWP No. 1770 of 12 December 1966.
- (2) István Szirmai, foremost ideologist of the Party, Central Committee and Politburo member, a controversial figure. In the West, believed to be the Party mouthpiece for a liberal literary policy; in Hungary, however, he does not enjoy much popularity among the writers.
- (3) Emil Kerec, a theater director who has earned some credit for fostering the "socialist" theater. He dealt primarily with the non-conformist spirit existing among artists.
- (4) Gábor Garai, poet, writer, secretary of the Writers' Association, representative of the pre-regime generation of young writers. He mainly represented the success of Hungarian literature in the world and elaborated on some financial problems.

### Old Doctrines... Just Paid Army

A noteworthy ideological renaissance started after the XXth Congress of the Soviet Communist Party. This renaissance was most strongly felt in the field of aesthetics. Considering that the ideological center of Marxism shifted from Moscow to the West, the stimulus on the focal points of Hungarian intellectual life now derives primarily from Paris, Rome, and Vienna. The name of Roger Garaudy, the outstanding French philosopher and one of the leaders of the French Communist Party, has long been known among the Hungarian intellectuals. The latter not only follow his work with great interest, but are also in personal contact with him. A few months before the congress, Garaudy visited Hungary, spending four days in Budapest. He delivered many lectures and met the leaders of Hungary's Marxist intellectuals.

The Italian influence (Fogliatti, Gramsci) is apparent in Hungary during debates at which the Italian Marxists' view, that autonomy must be assured culture, is often quoted.

The influence of Vienna is chiefly represented in the person of Ernst Fischer, the well-known Austrian Marxist philosopher, whose view on the role of intellectuals has a fermentative effect.

But let us go back to the Party Congress.

Those who carefully analyze the material of the Sixth Congress will probably become aware of the fact that this congress, as opposed to the eighth, did not declare "socialist realism" to be the only salutary Communist literary trend. The last congress repeatedly made reference to "socialist literature" and not "socialist realistic literature." And even if socialist realism does make its appearance here and there, it is only in such ways as, for example, mention of the fact that debates have been held about it, that in the past some writers have enriched literature with important socialist realist works, or that some people are impatient because the great socialist realist dramatic work has not yet been born.

What has happened, therefore, to socialist realism?

Someone who has carefully followed the debate on socialist realism, which has already lasted for 20 years in Hungary, will ascertain that this doctrine has undergone a phonetic metamorphosis. Through a combination of debates on aesthetic and theoretical art and international and, especially, Eastern exchanges of views, the concept of socialist realism has been continuously expanded, has penetrated new territories, and has introduced ever-new problems into its sphere of interest. Consequently, several trends have developed within Hungarian socialist literature and art, and according to Kadar's literary policy they are all justified. Literary policy does not guarantee a monopoly to anyone of them.

In the aesthetical debate on socialist realism in Hungary within the past few years, the doctrine itself has splintered, has disintegrated into a cloud of smoke, and has, in the end, simply

faded away. Naturally, this does not mean that the debate is finished and that, in the future, the Marxist aesthetes will drop their favorite debating subject. Pragmatic literary policy, however, has reached a conclusion, and socialist realism has been de-throned in its essence by the congress' resolution.

Let us examine the situation of the doctrine of CONFORMISM and NON-CONFORMISM. The literary policy of the personality cult demanded conformism. It served to discredit this concept to such an extent that, today, the expression conformism provokes only disapproval and protest. Keres,<sup>45</sup> for example, declared at the congress that the artists have a definite horror of being classified as conformists. Even Kadar himself declared in his concluding speech to the congress that: "We don't ask for conformism from anyone, not even from the Communists. They are not conformists either. To say that individuality, too, should develop and offer society what it is able."<sup>46</sup> But this is still a mild treatment of the concept. Andras Hegedus had previously declared conformism to be a downright pathological phenomenon.<sup>47</sup> But if the Communists are not conformists, then they can only be non-conformists. This was emphasized by a Party propagandist, Bela Kocsai, a former head of the MSZP's Central Committee cultural department: "The most non-conformist force in Hungary today is the Marxist Party."<sup>48</sup> Well, if everyone is a non-conformist, friends and enemies alike, how can one distinguish between them?

The concept of non-conformism is beginning to weaken, its purport and its dividing lines are becoming blurred. Szirmai himself revealed this, when he declared at the congress: "Conformity in politics means an unprincipled subservience to every regime. On the other hand, non-conformity, when set in keeping with the characteristics and targets of power, likewise lacks principles. I am convinced that many people, far from non-conformity is a fashion, do not even think about what they do, and for them self-contained opposition is merely a fashionable pose."<sup>49</sup>

This conceptual chaos was increased still further by a Hungarian radio commentary<sup>50</sup> which tried to interpret the congress

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45) Hét az Irodalom, 10 December 1966, p.3.

46) Hosszabeszéd, 4 December 1966, p.3.

47) Andras Hegedus: "The Two Types of adaptation: Conformity and Conformism." Hét az Irodalom, 13 November 1969.

48) Bela Kocsai: "Party-Mindedness, Commitment, Decadency" Társadalmi Szemle, December 1966, pp. 41-53.

49) Szirmai's congressional address, Hosszabeszéd, 2 December 1966, p. 4., MSZ No. 1771, 15 December 1966, p.8.

50) Tamás Bekes: "Meditations on Conformism and Non-Conformism." Radio Kossuth, 2010 hrs., Hungarian Monitoring Bulletin, 30.12.1966, p.1944.

debates on conformism and non-conformism. According to this, the "revolutionary" idea has nothing to do with the false alternative of conformism and non-conformism. Moreover, the concept of non-conformism -- according to the commentary -- is one which has been transplanted from the West. The situation becomes even more complicated when we simply identify the concept of non-conformism with that of "oppositional sentiment, behavior." For then the concept of "oppositionalism" itself gradually becomes hazy. Peter Veres, a politician and journalist excelling in original observations and unusual formulations, declared only recently that the definitions "government-Party" and "oppositional" are already historically obsolete. Today, every one is able to agree with or to oppose something according to his own interest, ideas, and power of discernment. Today, there are no more enemy parties, therefore every indifferent person, every impassive or angry soul can be a party unto himself.!! The impartial spectator observes with astonishment the squabble over the doctrine of conformism and non-conformism. Who is right? Gairani, Kopecki, or perhaps the radio commentator? What should Peter Veres say to the new formulation? It seems that the bell tolls for the doctrine of conformism and non-conformism. The doctrine just fades away....

How do we stand with the doctrine of Party-mindedness? It seems that this doctrine has become the favorite of literary policy-makers. It was already widely expounded before the congress!! and also played a distinguished role at the congress itself. The congress resolution on Party-mindedness -- this doctrine has undergone an essential metamorphosis since Lenin's time -- deals with it as a weapon against trends alien to socialism. "Party-minded public enthusiasm" is the true motivation of literature and art, and a "Party-minded" answer must be given to the problems of the past and the present.

Party-mindedness is, strictly speaking, the nucleus of the broader category of "commitment." At present, these doctrines are very virulent and vigorous, at least in the academic spheres of aesthetics. Practice, however, presents a different picture. The Party's cultural apparatus checks the individual literary works and compositions and decides, according to its own pleasure, whether the work in question is committed or not, and whether or not it is biased. Although these tactics may be illustrated by a long line of examples, in practice, the doctrine begins to slacken, to blur, to fade away.... as it becomes a doctrine 'sans fives.'

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(11) Peter Veres: Diary, El Iran December 1966, p.105.

(12) The cultural and theoretical team of the HSWT's studies  
"The mission of literature and arts in our society."  
Irredentist Review, July-August 1966, pp. 27-38.

Are the Cultural Apparatchiks Sobering Up from Their Trigger-Happiness?

"Thoughts cannot be shot out of people's heads with bullets..." said Szirmai at the Congress.<sup>13)</sup> With these words, he proved before the Congress that, in spite of the seriousness of the international and domestic political situations, the Party wants to maintain its relatively enlightened literary policy. Considering that, since 1964, the signs of "rigor" have increased in domestic policy, the maintenance of the relative liberality of literature is undoubtedly a noteworthy congress decision. How may one explain this apparent contradiction?

According to information received from Hungary, tensions within Hungarian society are mounting. In this situation, the Party leadership apparently has deemed it desirable to keep the intellectual sphere free from tension. The contrast here with the ineptitude of the Gomulka regime in Poland is striking! The application of administrative means caused dangerous tensions not only during the Rakosi era, but also left very unfavorable marks during the period following the 1956 revolution. The literary community reacts with great sensitivity to any aggressive interference. The most recent example of this is the replacement of editors carried out during the past few years, as a result of which the "climate for discussion" fostered by the Party suffered a perceptible jolt.

"Historical experience," said Szirmai at the congress, "teaches us that the suppression of non-Marxist trends cannot replace the fight for essentials carried out with them, that their administrative suppression can only lead to ideological isolation, to our isolation."<sup>14)</sup> Szirmai's comment in the conclusion of the sentence, "...but can lead to our isolation," is remarkable. Monitoring of the live radio coverage of the Congress proved that this phrase was uttered at the congress, though the words were omitted in the press through the cautiousness of the censors.

The Party leadership is obviously refraining from irritating the literary community any more than is necessary, and is endeavoring to gain the support of the literary world wherever possible in solving grave domestic political problems. How else can Kadar's paralytic on this subject be evaluated?

Debate, or ideological persuasion, is the method which has replaced administrative means. Debate, as a tactic and method, has really gained a prominent role during recent years. According to a Hungarian study carried out between 1957 and 1964,

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13) Hungary Today, 2 December 1966, p.8.

14) Radio Kossuth, 1 December 1966. Hungarian Monitoring Bulletin, 1 December 1966, pp. 39-40.

148 different debates were held in literary periodicals and papers.<sup>115</sup> There are debates in which the Communists are baited, debates in which "the enemy" joins in, and debates which are simply forced on the Communists. The fact that, in spite of this, the congress still championed debate, shows that the Party leadership really has no alternative, because the application of administrative means has proven itself counter-productive and obsolete. This is further demonstrated by other remarks made at the congress: "We must assume a patient ideological struggle against alien views and a wrong attitude... the literature of malice will also come into the press, because this ghost can be laid to rest only in an open ideological fight... the non-Marxist, but unhostile enemy views can appear more openly today, because their suppression cannot be a substitute for the ideological debate carried out with them.... Guidance must continue to be exercised primarily by means of political, ideological influence...."

All this seems to support the assertion that the Party leadership has wored up from its trigger-happiness and abandoned the "firm-hand" literary policy. Even if the gun does go off in some border-line cases, this will not assail the Party's relatively liberal literary policy. Such an incident would only mean that one of the writers had dared to tread on prohibited ground, engaged in voicing prohibited thoughts, and that he had not followed the rules of the game as played between the Party's cultural apparatus and the writers. Of course, the congress did not leave any doubt that there are limits beyond which writers cannot go. However, the permissible limits are not narrow, and the congress appears to have promoted the trend toward their expansion.

#### The Literary Sectarians Caught in a Blind Alley

One of the characteristic traits of the congress's literary political debates was that they contained numerous sharp attacks on the literary sectarians. It is evident from the report of the Central Control Committee as well as pre-congress materials that unreconstructed dogmatists continue to be a problem for the Kedar leadership in several spheres. The sphere of literature is no exception. "There are some backward, primitive people who are incapable of anything else... who toward the so-called firm-hand policy," said Seirmal at the congress. These people often refuse literary works which otherwise the directors of literary policy would proudly stamp with the seal of socialism. These people seem to discover political opposition, or even more, "treasoning" tendencies, where, according to the official Party standpoint, there is no trace of such. Seirmal went on "It is not useful, and I do not think it brings anybody nearer to socialism if we take, for example, these notorious critical notes, which in the spirit of an out-dated

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<sup>115</sup> Eric Gordon: Debates in the Literary Press Between 1953 and 1964. Yalung, March 1966, pp. 38-48.

prosecutor, defined -- inefficiently and with an even smaller sense of responsibility toward culture -- one of our best dramatic works, a success of the policy of relaxation."<sup>16</sup> This criticism obviously was a reference to Ferenc Szabó's film, Twenty Hours, which was at first received rather reluctantly by the critics, but later, after the screen version of the work had received the Moscow film prize, was widely acclaimed.

A special problem for the Kadar regime are those writers who lend their full support -- one cannot say talents -- in the difficult post-1956 period. Szirmai devotes a special passage in his speech to these writers:

"...Finally, may I mention those socialist writers, artists, Party members and non-Party members, with whose problems -- I admit -- we do not deal sufficiently. They have already enriched Hungarian culture with excellent socialist realistic creations, and have added new themes, new features to it. Now, they have to cope with a difficult task. The rapid development of our society in the last decade, the new style which has rid itself of dogmas, our renewed ideas, and many other things, demand that they, too, take stock of the world anew in several respects, redraft their themes, their heroes, and their conflicts. It is these writers who deserve the greatest attention, the most devoted care, because it is from them that the Party, the readers, and the people in general, who hope to find in literature not only entertainment but also a source of advice and instruction, expect the greatest help."

A part of this group of writers is made up of so-called "fire-dancers," writers figuring in the poetical anthology published under the title Fire Dance. Some of these poets have become isolated and disjoined because of their sectarian attitude expressed in that anthology. These "fire dancers," with few exceptions, simply lost touch with literature. Even a poet as famous as Mihály Vaci has difficulties, even today, in freeing himself from the tedious tone which has become passed today, to say the least. In his poems, Vaci still preaches "revolutionary zeal," which Hungarian critics wryly laugh aside.

Szirmai's tactful but firm criticism of these literary hacks, who were so useful ten years ago, is but a further indication of the Kadar regime's efforts to achieve and maintain a modus vivendi with Hungary's creative intellectuals.

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(Hungarian Unit)

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[16] Szirmai's congress address, Sopronbadány, 2 December 1966.  
See HPS No. 1771, 15 December 1966, pp. 7-8.