

Stalinization and De-Stalinization in Literary Studies

Doctoral Dissertation

Theses

The dissertation is divided into two main parts. The first one deals with the Stalinist transformation of Hungarian literary studies, by which I mean the translation, adaptation and introduction of socialist realism as the language of interpretation. The second part focuses on those changes that led to a throughout shift in the professional discourse of literary studies.

At start, I review the main trends of international Soviet Studies, with a special focus on how the term socialist realism has been interpreted. I highlight recent approaches that aim to revision the traditional understanding of both Stalinism and socialist realism based on extensive contextual research informed by newly accessed and, in part, published archival materials. These interpretations take a critical stance toward the understanding of socialist realism as a political doctrine invented and enforced by Stalin and his closest circle, and argue instead that, while the term itself was coined by the highest political elite, principles of socialist realism were based on the taste and choices of certain privileged social groups, such as young workers and Russian leftist intellectuals. However, I also criticize this new discourse on socialist realism, because it fails to take into account that there were huge differences in the meaning and understanding of the term in the so-called Eastern Bloc. One thus cannot generalize without considering how the local political, historical and cultural traditions affected the translation and application of socialist realism to the given culture. Moreover, I underline the difficulties of defining socialist realism in a period, when political changes constantly modified the meanings of socialist realism. I argue that socialist realism could be treated as a politically driven interpretive *language* instead of a set of values or aesthetic doctrines.

Next, I discuss the specific conditions that defined the way socialist realism was introduced in Hungary, and I highlight the so-called Lukács debate in 1949–50 as the main event of such a process. By a throughout analysis of the discourse, I define the main characteristics of Hungarian socialist realist criticism and its context, and address the question why Lukács was elected for the role of a scapegoat, and how his position changed during the constructed debate. By the time of the First Writer's Congress in Hungary, Lukács surrendered and became a main proponent of socialist realism Zhdanov style, publicly refusing the main ideas of his concept of “great realism”. The Lukács debate was a clear message for the whole intellectual scene that converting to communism and making, at least, lip service to the regime's preferred interpretive language is a necessity.

I consider the First Writer's Congress in Spring 1951 as the first and most relevant public event that served the aim of representing a large cohort of writers as advocates of socialist realism. I interpret the event only as a partial success on the side of the culture politicians. By analysing the various speeches the writers delivered on this occasion, I show that despite the seemingly homogenous rhetorics, some of the main characters, such as Tibor Déry or Gyula Illyés, did not fully subscribed to the version of socialist realism that József Révai, the head of culture politics envisioned based largely on Soviet models. However, the latter chose not to polarize the inherent conflicts that manifested in the plenary debates.

The literary debates that evolved in newspapers and cultural magazines in the following years, however, revealed even more that few writers are confident with the implemented culture policies. During the controversy on Déry's new novel, *Felelet*, the culture politicians tried to enforce Déry's public conversion to the officially propagated version of socialist realism, but he refused to do so. The debate provoked Révai so much so that he outcasted the novel from the circle of real belles-lettres, and openly harassed all writers that follow Déry's route. In the debate, Lukács played a

major role on the side of Révai, which raises the question of his role in the cultural history of the 1950s. After Stalin's death, and during the process of de-Stalinization at the middle of the 1950s, the political field was defined by rival tendencies within the Party: that of the former Stalinist Rákosi regime, and the reformist stance of Nagy Imre and his circle. Lukács was kind of an in-between figure, who, at the same time, closely followed the developments in the Soviet communist party.

In the second part of my dissertation, I discuss the political, social and intellectual context in which an Institute of Literary History of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences was established. Since members of this Institute served as prominent figures in Hungarian de-Stalinization in the forthcoming decades, I consider its foundation a significant event. In this part of my dissertation, I investigate how the “founding fathers” of this institute made advantage of the political divides within the party, and how the new post-Stalinist rhetorics of a “new stage” could be used in order to foster the idea of establishing such an institute. However, I argue that certain totalitarian practices of implementing political control largely contributed to the fact that this institute could get to be founded.

At the close of my paper, I briefly discuss the fading of socialist realist language in Hungary after the 1956 Revolution, and the way it was revised in order to fit into the new rhetorics of “socialist literature.”

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