

Hungarian–Soviet connections in the literature and art after the Second World War (1945–1948)

JÓZSEF N. SZABÓ



The role of the Soviet Union in Hungary's political and cultural-political orientation

For ideological reasons, there had hardly been any cultural and scientific relations between Hungary and the Soviet Union between the two world wars. The National Bibliographical Centre for instance only maintained connections with four Soviet institutions. Out of this four three were involved in natural sciences. Soviet journals were subscribed to by eight or ten institutions in Hungary. All these journals were, for political-ideological barriers, purely scientific. Hungarian journals were only received by the Faculties of Science of the Universities of Penn and Kazan. It was not really possible to establish direct connections between Hungarian and Soviet cultural institutes. A visit by a Hungarian writer to the Soviet Union was a rare event.

After Hungary's joining the Anti-Comintern Pact diplomatic relations between Hungary and the Soviet Union were suspended. There were some attempts to restore some of the former cultural and scientific relations through the Hungarian Institute in Stockholm, but these individual initiatives were unsuccessful.

At the end of the war the Provisory Government regarded raising the sympathy of the peoples of the Soviet Union towards Hungary as one of its most important responsibilities. Hungarian leaders also wanted to establish good relations with the Soviet Union because the basic political interests of the nation so dictated. This is why the Hungarian National Independence Front and other parties, slowly consolidating after war, incorporated in their programs the necessity of starting new connections with the Soviet Union.

The freshly re-established Social Democratic Party placed friendship with the Soviet Union on top of its priority list.¹ The Independent Smallholders' Party also found gaining the good will of the Soviet Union as one of the most import-

¹ J. Jemnitz: "A magyarországi szociáldemokrata párt külpolitikai irányvonalának alakulása (1945–1948)," [The formation of the foreign policy trend of the Hungarian Social Democrats' Party] *Történelmi Szemle* 8: 2-3 (1965), 134.

ant responsibilities of Hungarian foreign policy.² The National Peasants' Party was ready to make efforts for improving Hungary's relationships with the Soviet Union. As part of these efforts, they intended to intensify economic and cultural relations. One of the reasons why the party found this important was that they wanted the Hungarian people to learn more about the mighty neighbour.³ In the opinion of the Democratic People's Party friendship with the Soviet Union was determined by the strict necessities of apolitical realism that should not be affected by internal ideological-political struggles at all.⁴

In 1945 democratic political factors in Hungary did not deal with the internal situation of the Soviet Union, and did not attribute too much significance to the fact that the country was governed by a totalitarian dictatorship. They were unable to foresee the changes that were soon to be induced in Hungarian political life by Soviet internal relations. Most parties hoped and trusted that after signing a definitive peace treaty and the departure of the Soviet troops the connections between the two countries would rest upon equality, and cultural and scientific connections would benefit both countries. In order to understand the atmosphere of the age it is necessary to be aware that public opinion about the Soviet Union was basically positive in Western Europe as well, the achievements of the Soviet soldiers in the war were admired in the allied countries. Stalin himself was accepted. All members of the anti-fascist coalition regarded the Soviet Union as an indispensable partner in the struggle against Nazism. In 1945 neither Hungarian nor western politicians were preoccupied with Stalinism as a political danger, although Soviet reality was not unknown. It is to be remembered that in the period directly following the war international anti-totalitarianism was exclusively identical with anti-fascism. Criticism against Stalinism in the West only became powerful during the Cold War.

Nobelprize winner scientist, Albert Szent-Györgyi, one of the most respected and popular representatives of Hungarian cultural life, initiated an opening towards the Soviet Union in the summer of 1945. Szent-Györgyi believed that after the war Hungary became a direct neighbour of the old Russian Empire, so tighter cultural and economic connections between the two countries would follow. In his opinion, any successful cooperation was to be based upon a better understanding of each other's ideas and institutions.⁵

Barriers making cooperation difficult had to be removed in order to raise connections onto a new level. In order to accomplish this, the National Provisory Government made a resolution (530/1945 ME) in which they ordered the destruction of all anti-Soviet pamphlets and periodicals.⁶ The resolution of the Minister of Education (1883/1945 VKM) was of great significance, as it ordered that special attention was to be paid to the revision of all school textbooks and other teaching materials related to the history, literature, geography and economics of the Soviet

² S. Balogh-L. Izsák, *Pártok és pártprogramok Magyarországon (1944-1948)*. Budapest 1977, 184.

³ *Ibid.*, 226.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 260.

⁵ New Hungarian Central Archives (UMKL)-XIX-I-1e. 1945-41928.

⁶ *Magyar Közlöny* [Hungarian Bulletin], 1945, no. 9.

Union and its allies.⁷

Before entering into diplomatic relations, several attempts and initiatives were made to start a cultural cooperation with the USSR. The press took action to prepare the ground for better bilateral connections. As early as 29 March, 1945, *Szabad Nép* reported that cultural restoration had begun in the Soviet Union. The Hungarian Government requested the Soviet Union to send experts to Hungary in order to survey the possibilities of cultural connections between the two countries as soon as possible. The Hungarian Government also requested this possibility for three or four Hungarian experts in the Soviet Union.⁸ Entering into diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union on 25 September was important from the aspect of cultural relations as well.⁹ Ambassador Gyula Szekfű did a lot for developing new cultural and scientific ties between the two countries. The Hungarian Cultural Attaché to Moscow, Dr. György Radó was also in constant contact with the Hungarian Ministry of Education. The Ministry made the utmost efforts to introduce Hungarian culture in the Soviet Union.¹⁰

The Tildy-government that has been established following the elections of 15 November, 1945, also regarded imperative laying the foundations of economic and cultural connections with the USSR. The attitude of Ferenc Nagy's government, set up on 4 February, 1946, was similar.¹¹ Dezső Keresztúry was the Minister of Education in both cabinets, and he found it his most important mission to create favourable conditions for the international reception of Hungarian culture. Keresztúry rejected the idea of national isolation in his very first speech, and he believed that as soon as gates leading to the East and to the West were open, Hungarian spirit and education had to find its way through them.¹² During his period in office, Keresztúry made a number of initiatives for cooperation in a variety of fields of culture and science.

Cooperation in Literature and Arts

During Horthy's regency connections in the field of arts between the two countries were virtually non-existent, apart from some individual activities. Democratic Hungary was determined to change this situation. In order to make Hungarian art known in the Soviet Union, and the other way around, plans were made to stage the play entitled *Stormy Sunset* in the Kamara Theatre as early as June 1945,

⁷ Ibid., 1945, no. 31.

⁸ *Szabad Nép*, 29 March, 1945; Béla Dálnoki Miklós' address on 3 September, 1945. Bulletin of the National Assembly, I, Nemzetgyűlés naplója I. kötet. Hiteles kiadás. Athenaeum Irodalmi és Nyomdai Részvénytársulat Könyvkiadója. p. 42.

⁹ *Szabad Nép*, 26 September 1945; Ambassador of the USSR to Hungary, G. M. Pushkin, presented his credentials on 2 November, 1945. *Magyarország történeti kronológiája*, [A historical chronology of Hungary] ed. Gyula Benda, 4 vols. Budapest 1983, 1023; Gyula Szekfű presented his credentials in Moscow on 27 March, 1946. S. Balogh, *Magyarország külpolitikája (1945–1950)*. [Foreign policy of Hungary] Budapest 1988, 349.

¹⁰ UMKL-XIX-I-1e. 1946–50808.

¹¹ *Bulletin of the National Assembly*, 1: 23, 368.

¹² *Szabad Szó*, 18 November, 1945.

and a Soviet photo exhibit was also included in the ideas.¹³ In August 1945 the Ministry of Education approached the Soviet legation with the request of inviting renowned Soviet musicians to give concerts, thus introducing Soviet music to Hungary. The Hungarians also inquired about the possibility of Hungarian musicians touring in the USSR. The Hungarian cultural government wished to find out whether it was possible for Hungarian and Soviet ensembles, choirs and orchestras to organize tours in each other's countries.¹⁴ In 1945 no Soviet reply came to the Hungarian proposals. There were, however, some Soviet events.

The first exhibition, entitled "Fight and Construction in the Soviet Union", was organized in the Museum of Fine Arts on 14 July, 1945. On 15 August a performance of the National Ukrainian Song and Dance Ensemble took place in the City Theatre. The Hungarian Ministry of Education intended to go beyond occasional events and wished to begin high-quality and regular cooperation in the field of arts.¹⁵

Hungarian periodicals soon published news about the values of Russian-language literature. The journal entitled *Magyarok (Hungarians)* published Géza Képes's translations of Mayakovski and Lőrinc Szabó's translations of Pushkin. The first issue of *Irodalom-Tudomány (Literary Studies)*, distributed as the official publication of the Hungarian-Soviet Cultural Association, published Sarolta Lányi's translations of Pushkin, Lermontov, and *The Igor Song*. The journal introduced the poetry of Jesenin, Mayakovski, Blok, Kotsov, Gorki, and the prose of Katayev, Tyhonov, Sholohov, Tolstoy, Platonov, Simonov, Fadyeyev, Leonov and Gorki.¹⁶ Important milestone in the popularization of Russian-Soviet literature in Hungary was the visit of Ilya Ehrenburg, who delivered a highly successful lecture in French at Györfly College. The lecture was attended by prominent personalities of Hungarian arts and political life.¹⁷

Book publishers also made efforts to make up for lost time. *Az orosz költők antológiája (An Anthology of Russian Poets)* by Jenő Győri Juhász was published in 1945. Gogol's play, *Looking for a Wife*, was published in the same year. A great interest was expressed in Soviet music, earlier completely inaccessible to the Hungarian audience. Introducing the value of Soviet music began in the autumn of 1945, when Shostakovich's VII Symphony was performed on 13 October.¹⁸

As musical diplomacy was always important for Hungary, in August 1946 the Foreign Minister found it desirable that outstanding Hungarian musicians would tour in the USSR, so as to establish Hungarian-Soviet cultural relations. The Head Department of Arts of the Ministry of Education, as reported by Ambassador

¹³ UMKL-XIX-I-1e. 1946-9116; The National Theatre staged Chekhov's one-act play "The Bear" in 1945. The translator was Endre Sík. E. Sík, *Egy diplomata feljegyzései*. [Notes of a diplomat] Budapest 1967, 9.

¹⁴ UMKL-XIX-I-1e. 1945-30366.

¹⁵ *Négy évtized. 40 éves a Szovjet-Magyar Baráti Társaság*. [Four decades. The Soviet-Hungarian Friendly Society] ed. J. Balázs, Budapest 1985, 185-186.

¹⁶ *A magyar irodalom története, 1945-1975. I: Irodalmi élet és irodalomkritika*. [A history of Hungarian literature, 1945-1975, 1: Literary life and criticism] ed. M. Béládi, Budapest 1981, 1: 67-68.

¹⁷ *Szabad Nép*, 21 November, 1945.

¹⁸ *Szabad Nép*, 14 October, 1945.

Gyula Szekfű, found it possible that world famous composers, Zoltán Kodály primarily, would perform their own compositions with the cooperation of Soviet musicians at the Moscow Philharmonics. Tours by conductors, musicians and singers were also regarded as feasible as a continuation of this idea.

The VOKS only gave a positive answer to the Hungarian proposals made in the field of music in the summer of 1946. The head of the Federal Association of Cultural Relations then offered to organize a Hungarian concert with the participation of the Moscow Philharmonics on St. Stephen's Day. The significance of this initiative by the formerly rather reserved Soviet cultural diplomacy is well exemplified by the fact that similar concerts had only been organized with the French and the Americans before.¹⁹

Less successful were the Hungarian efforts in the field of theatrical performances. It is clear from Ambassador Szekfű's reports that the Soviets did not find the exchange of theatres, whole plays or opera companies feasible, due to "serious financial difficulties".²⁰

The Hungarian cultural government indicated its willingness to cooperate in fields of arts as well. The Hungarian Theatrical Institute sent a letter to the Soviet Theatrical Institute in order to establish connections. The Hungarian letter was an answer to a Soviet initiative, in which a library of 30 volumes had been presented to the Academy of Dramatic Arts in Budapest. The Soviet Theatrical Institute asked for similar materials for their planned Hungarian section.²¹

Hungarian cultural diplomacy was active in the area of fine arts as well. They contacted the Soviet legation and offered to take a representative collection of Hungarian pieces of art to the Soviet Union, in the form of travelling exhibits if possible. The Hungarian authorities were at the same time ready to accept similar Soviet proposals.²²

There was no cooperation in the field of fine arts between the two countries in 1945. In Hungary, however, it was believed that organizing a large-scale representative exhibition of Hungarian art in the major cities of the Soviet Union would be possible in the spring of 1946. Hungarian cultural diplomacy also intended to introduce Soviet art in Hungary in the form of a large-scale representative exhibit, as initiated in 1945.²³

Conditions of establishing tangible Hungarian-Soviet connections in arts were provided in the summer of 1946. From the report of Ambassador Gyula Szekfű dated 28 May we learn that the Soviets were willing to organize an exhibit of contemporary, classic (Renaissance, Baroque), or modern paintings in Budapest. The exhibition of Hungarian paintings in the USSR was, however, not possible, due to the "lack of adequate exhibition halls". The classic and modern museums were unable to host the work of the Hungarian artists because of extensive restoration work going on at that time.²⁴ Despite the negative reactions received from the So-

¹⁹ UMKL-XIX-I-1i. 1946-102220, UMKL-XIX-I-1e. 1946-96835.

²⁰ UMKL-XIX-I-1e. 1946-65584.

²¹ *Szabadság*, 22 May, 1946.

²² UMKL-XIX-I-1e. 1945-30366.

²³ UMKL-XIX-I-1e. 1946-50808.

²⁴ UMKL-XIX-I-1e. 1946-65585.

viets to the Hungarian initiatives, the Ministry of Education found the issue important and kept it in the foreground. Progress was made, however, only after signing the peace treaty.²⁵

Stagnation in the cooperation in art

The Hungarian initiatives in terms of improving bilateral art connections were not received with much enthusiasm in the Soviet Union even in 1947. The exchange of artists, for instance, was not very attractive for the Soviets because they did not know Hungarian artists very well, and they never invited unknown artists. Sending Soviet artists to Hungary was rejected similarly to other Hungarian proposals with the argument that it was not possible to have the artists be gone even for a short time.

The same argument was used to explain the cancellation of the tours of theatrical ballet and opera companies. On the Hungarian side, however, great efforts were made to promote art cooperation. The Hungarian cultural attaché, right after his arrival at his post, initiated a discussion with the executive of VOKS in charge of the performing arts. The attaché was informed that only the performances of Hungarian orchestras were possible. Not even that was to come to fruition. It is well illustrated by the internationally famous Zoltán Kodály's case, who had originally intended to have his concert in the USSR in February 1947, but the composer was only able to travel to the Soviet Union later. Because of the delay, the Soviets further postponed the concert. The real reason was that the Soviets were offered because Kodály first had had a tour in the USA, and not in the Soviet Union.²⁶ In May 1947 Kodály, together with his wife, finally arrived in Moscow. In the Grand Hall of the Moscow Conservatory Kodály performed "Háry Suit" in a highly successful concert, which was broadcast by the radio.²⁷

The Hungarian cultural leadership relentlessly urged the promotion of Hungarian-Soviet cultural connections, in spite of all the difficulties. In August 1947, Minister of education Gyula Ortutay submitted a proposal to the Government, regarding the invitation of Soviet artists. The Minister requested the permission of the Government to invite the Soviet performing artists who were on tour in Prague. Ortutay wished to invite the Soviet artists for a three-week tour. The touring Soviet art group consisted of Barosova, singer of the Soviet Grand Opera; Lepeshinskaya, Prima Balerina; Kondratov, ballet dancer of the Grand Opera; violin artist Lisa Giles; and two other performing artists constituted. In order to be able to invite this group of artists, Gyula Ortutay requested the government to grant a sum of HUF 60,000 extraordinary financial aid to the Ministry of Education for the invitation of the Soviet ensemble.²⁸ Hungarian-Soviet art connections were depressed, the press tended to "amplify" the few events that occurred. *Szabad Nép* in its 13 August, 1947 issue, for example, stated that the planned visit

²⁵ UMKL-XIX-I-1e. 1946-50808.

²⁶ UMKL-XIX-I-1e. 1947-37099.

²⁷ *Szabad Nép*, 8 May, 1947.

²⁸ UMKL-XIX-I-1e. 1947-117756.

of the Soviet artists was going to be "the most important event of the whole season".²⁹

On the Soviet side interest in the issues of Hungarian culture was only experienced at the centennial celebrations of the 1848 Revolution and War of Independence. All Soviet papers wrote about the celebrations. *Trud* in its 16 March, 1948 issue wrote four, *Pravda* three columns. In its 17 March issue, *Izvestiya* published an article about Petőfi, entitled "The Fighting Poet of the Hungarian Revolution". Several literary papers also dealt with Petőfi, including *Literaturnaya Gazeta*, in a writing entitled "Democratic Traditions in Petőfi's Poetry".³⁰

As a summary it is justified to assert that the Hungarian Communist Party carried out a change of the political system as a result of which the country turned away from its traditional cultural values and began to follow the Soviet patterns. The Communists wanted to implement this "new" model according to well-established methods. Although the demolition of the bourgeois democratic political forces in Hungary took place with active Soviet assistance, the USSR behaved reservedly in the field of cultural connections. For the Zhdanovian Soviet cultural political leadership, Hungary in its provisional state was an uncertain area, despite the new communist leadership of the country. The reason for the reserved behaviour of the Soviet Union was a superior attitude the USSR had no intention of treating Hungary as an equal partner.

²⁹ Szabad Nép, 13 August, 1947.

³⁰ *Párttörténeti Intézet Archivuma*. [Arcives of the Institute of the (Communist) Party's History] PTI. Arch. 274 f. 21/71.