

The Intelligence of Literature

APPROVED FOR RELEASE
CIA HISTORICAL REVIEW PROGRAM
18 SEPT 95

CONFIDENTIAL

A case history in the analysis of literary rebellion.

James V. Ogle

he controversy in the Soviet Union involving nonconformist writers like Ilya Ehrenburg and Yevgeniy Yevtushenko and reaching into the highest levels of party and government has dramatically illustrated for the Western public the close link between literature and politics in Soviet society. To one who has been watching for years a similar drama played on the small stage of Hungary, this is a gratifying development. When I became responsible for Hungarian political and cultural journals in 1958, it was with the conviction that the trends there which culminated in the 1956 revolt could not have stopped dead, that they must re-emerge in some form. This paper is an account of how the re-emergence was discovered and includes a description of the course taken by these trends as evidenced in the open literary sources.

Rationale

Perhaps it is still necessary to justify the study of such matters as an intelligence concern. Obviously, persons like Yevtushenko cannot be regarded as likely recruits for covert operations: the fact that they

publish indicates a degree of acceptance by and commitment to the system. The stance and the influence of dissident and liberal writers is an element in and one index to the stability of a society, however, and a study of their ideological motivations and the groupings among them can be rewarding for intelligence. Changes in the party line, softening or hardening on a wide range of questions, are often indicated by shifts in the treatment of literary dissidence, and these shifts cannot be detected if one does not know who the dissidents are. If a political upheaval should occur, like Hungary's in 1956, such a study will have given in advance some indication of the direction it might take—the aspirations of the rebels, those likely to join them, their attitudes toward the West, etc. In any case it will lend precision to the description of a key target for specialized propaganda and appeals.

It may be objected that reading between the lines in open sources is a terribly indirect method when personal contact is becoming increasingly possible. But the one does not replace the other. This kind of dissidence does not reveal itself to outsiders (fear of provocateurs and a marginal commitment to the system or a devout commitment to the homeland forbid it) ; in fact the discreet and effective dissidence that is important, as distinguished from the lunatic fringe, can be identified only as it is manifested in internal action and reaction.

The first step in such a study is to locate the areas of ambiguity, areas in which the party line is ill defined or laxly enforced. The second step is to identify the writers making the greatest use of the freedom this ambiguity permits—pressing for freer publication rights or for freer contact with the West, reviving interest in previously suppressed writers or traditions, or expanding permitted criticism into tabu matters, as by linking consumer shortages to the agricultural policy. Third, although not always necessary, it is sometimes possible and helpful to identify language differences, "open codes" whereby liberal or dissident groups set themselves off from the party line while paying it lip service as necessary. The fourth step is to divide the rest of the writers into "good guys" and "bad guys" on the basis of attack and support patterns; the "good guys" need not express liberal or dissident ideas themselves, but they support and defend those who do. Finally, analyzing more deeply the writings of those identified in this manner, one can define the ideology of the liberals, the forces and direction of change. In the normal flow of events, of course, this final step does not complete the work of the analyst, because partial victories of the dissidents or a change in the party line make it necessary to begin again.

Revival of the Ferment

The Hungarian regime's cultural policy in 1958 was characterized by personal vendettas and a desperate search for allies. Except for those in prison or in the West, the leading writers were populists, and they were "on strike." They were ineligible as allies anyway: populism in Hungary is a "third road" ideology, which the Kadar regime then regarded as the most immediate danger. In the first half of 1958 the Central Committee published a massive attack on the populists, and the high-level campaign against them continued into the following year, abating only in the latter half of 1959. But in the meantime, seeking allies, the party rehabilitated the urbanist, avant-garde tradition personified by the poet Attila Jozsef. Once a communist but expelled from the party, he had committed suicide in the 1930's. It would be an understatement to observe that the party line in this maneuver was ill defined.

The result was a great wave of poems, essays, and short stories which revived and carried forward the ideology of the 1956 revolutionaries. I noticed first that many stories and poems were permeated by an existentialist despair far removed from the optimistic socialist realism which the party supposedly desired. Looking more closely at the essays written by the existentialist poets, I found certain positive values which were receiving a different emphasis than in the party press. Technological efficiency and subjective freedom were posted as supreme values, and it was clearly implied that these were better realized in the West. The materialist dialectic of this ideology argued that the evolution of societies is determined by the economic-technological base but that this base itself is the creation of free, individual minds. An "open code" consisting of allusions to science, time, the atomic age, and humanism was developed so that the protestations of Marxist purity made by the liberals took on entirely different meanings from those of the conservatives.

Patterns of mutual attack and support revealed that two leading literary editors were associated with the rather limited group of talented liberals, which also enjoyed the support of many older writers and virtually all the youth, as evidenced in the activity of the "literary theaters." Almost immediately, but with increasing effort as the party awoke to the danger,

these liberals looked for justification and support to the modernists then emerging in the Soviet Union. Thus, contrary to what one would expect after the Soviet crushing of the 1956 revolt and contrary to their own positive evaluation of the West, the "good guys" had a pronounced Soviet orientation.

Confused by the apparently Marxist character of the modernists and by their Soviet orientation, the party was slow to react. Through 1959 the conservative-liberal debate took the form of an esoteric discourse on the meaning of "modernness" and "modernism."¹ The "bad guys" attacked modernism as Western and decadent while the "good guys" either discounted it (as a "stylistic trend" and "not an ideology") or defended it for its Soviet origin. The modernist writers became increasingly political and increasingly outspoken, and in April 1960 they were unanimously predicting a "new spring" in world politics. The events of May 1960, the failure of the summit meeting and the subsequent hardening of the party line, crushed these hopes.

Party Crack-Down

By the end of 1960 or the beginning of 1961 the party had reevaluated the situation, offered the hand of friendship to the more passive populists, and proscribed modernism as the chief danger. As they re-emerged, the populists had developed their own dissident ideology. Human dignity was made the supreme value, and the third-road political stand was sublimated into a passive support for the communist regimes in Hungary and the Soviet Union, viewed as necessary evils within the framework of an ideological fatalism. This proved to be more acceptable to the party, partly because it was less attractive to the youth. Indeed, the modernists eventually became the severest critics of the populists.

Acting with a restraint more indicative of weakness than of wisdom, the party did not take "administrative" action until it had appropriated the slogans of both dissident groups. Party spokesmen reiterated the need for acceptance of what is useful from the West, the need for freedom to experiment, and the need for modernness (as opposed to modernism). But in November 1961 several liberal literary editors were removed or demoted. Coming as it did on the heels of the 22d Congress of the

CPSU, this move was misinterpreted in the West, by those who had not been following Hungarian events, as part of a "destalinization" process. Nothing could have been farther from the truth. But it is probably true that its fortuitous juxtaposition with the Congress prevented the swift administrative consolidation of the situation evidently planned. The ranks of the modernists were swelled by those reacting to the Congress just at a time when their coherence as a group was being broken.

Throughout 1962 confusion reigned as the party sought, with little success, to re-establish control and as the liberals and dissidents sought, with almost as little success, to find an area of ambiguity or modes of expression not contaminated by the changing party line. It is indicative of the magnitude of the problems faced by the party that the party organization of the Writers Federation was not formed until May 1962, a late enough date at best, and the secretary of this party organization, writing in February 1963, admitted that it could not be expected to function fully until mid-1963.

The Hungarian modernists never reattained the level of purposeful ferment which preceded the change in the party line in 1960. But isolated events indicate their continuing activity. Most dramatic, perhaps, was the organization of the "Work Community of Young Writers" early in 1963. Apparently the young modernists organized this group independently in order to develop a common program by interjecting the "generation concept" (which opposes the "pure" younger generation to those tainted by the Stalinist past) into the modernist ideology described above. This time, however, events in the Soviet Union were against them. The "generation concept" was immediately attacked, and some months later the "Work Community" was transformed into an organ of the Communist Youth Federation and new leaders were elected.

At the time of this writing, the Hungarian regime seems motivated by an overriding concern to present itself as the most liberal force in Hungary. This is being accomplished at great cost in terms of ideological purity. The rank-and-file party members are being alienated by the party policies in many areas. Thus, although they have been broken as a coherent group, the modernists have won a victory because it was their pressure, in addition to foreign policy considerations, which has determined the party line. It is now necessary to identify new areas of ambiguity. Perhaps the most curious is the putative link between dogmatism and nationalism which liberal, or at least anti-dogmatic, historians and literary critics have pretended to discover. The party line

on this is not yet clear, but neither is it clear where such a hypothesis would lead the liberals. It would probably deepen the break between populists and modernists and might alienate the youth. One thing, however, is clear. The young liberals are on the move throughout Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, and even if the modernist banner is ripped from their hands they promise to be the spiritual leaders of the future.

Literary Politics Elsewhere?

It is a question whether such studies are applicable to other societies than the Soviet and East European, which appear peculiarly prone to links between literature and politics. But it would seem that any society with a relatively sophisticated tradition could develop such a link when a more primitive political system is forced upon it. Thus the trend toward oneparty systems in many areas of the world might lead to what one might call non-party politics, or literature as politics, bringing the development of subtly oppositional programs and elites whose very existence modifies government programs and which offer a potential for change. In this case, the intelligence of literature might be a more broadly useful pursuit.

INSTEAD OF A BIBLIOGRAPHY

Readers interested in reading the original documents on which this brief analysis is based are invited to look into the more than 250 issues of the *Eastern Europe Press Survey* which have been published so far by CIA's Foreign Documents Division. *Eastern Europe Press Survey* (137), Summary No. 2915, 26 January 1961, pages 37-55, contains a detailed discussion of the ideological aspects of Hungarian populism and modernism. Most readers, however, will probably be satisfied with the following examples, all from recently published works by a young Hungarian physicist.

Excerpts from a poem:

*Time splits within me, into past and present.
I am the point of impact, as are all who live...
I bet on . . . knowledge of material, not on faith....
I see a new law of a new stellar system and I create it So that I can
violate it for a newer law.
There is no mercy for me....*

Excerpts from an essay:

*I belong to that generation which matured in no-man's land. . . . I
felt that socialism was not only the collectivization of industry but
also the good public feeling of the citizenry. . . . The socialism of
the poetry of Attila Jozsef represented in my microworld the faith
and morality, the only possible socialist behavior....*

Excerpts from a travel report:

*"To your homeland," Yevtushenko raised his glass. And I could not
think of another answer except: "To the new poetry." . . .*

1 At first the party insisted on the purely Hungarian word for modernness, *korszerezeg*, condemning even *modernseg* as tainted by the bourgeois concept of modernism. It now accepts *modernseg*, defined as adherence to "progressive" ideals, but it still condemns *modernizmus* as decadent. Similar hair-splitting took place with the three Hungarian words for "peaceful coexistence." For years the party writers used *egyimas mellett eles*, literally "living one beside the other," for coexistence in the Khrushchovian sense while condemning *koegzisztencia* as revisionist or Titoist. The liberals consistently used *egyutteleles*, literally "living together." At the time of the Moscow peace congress, which seemed to mark a general broadening of the Khrushchovian term, the party adopted *egyutteleles* and the liberals began to shift to *koegzisztencia*.

CONFIDENTIAL

Posted: May 08, 2007 07:51 AM