

**RUSSIA THROUGH HUNGARIAN EYES**

**TESTIMONIES OF HUNGARIAN WRITERS ABOUT RUSSIA AND**

**THE SOVIET UNION**

**AS REFLECTED IN THEIR TRAVELOGUES FROM THE 1920s AND**

**1930s**

**SUMMARY OF DOCTORAL DISSERTATION**

by

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## I. Choice of subject, and methodology

The dissertation aims to provide a synthetic, discursive study of some Hungarian writers' experience in Russia and the Soviet Union as reflected in their travelogues written during the Interwar Period. The choice of the specific writers was made not only to allow a simple approach of a complex subject, but also because their travel notes show a differentiated and profound perspective, with a complex perception of otherness, and they also stand out among contemporary travelogues in terms of language and style. The chronological framework was determined with regard to the events that impacted on the practicability and nature of the journeys: on one hand the end of the civil war following the Bolshevik revolution and the stabilisation of the new regime, on the other hand, the outbreak of the Second World War and Hungary's participation in the attack on the Soviet Union.

The interdisciplinary nature of the subject justified a broad, horizontal approach. The dissertation makes permanent use of this cross-cutting method applying analytical approaches across the fields of history, diplomacy, *Geistesgeschichte* and literary history. Focusing on the travelogues as literary texts, it employs a text-based, analytical, interpretative, and comparative research method, relying on a rich and diverse source material.

Such works have been highlighted that deal almost exclusively with the traveller's experience in Russia and the Soviet Union, and whose authors published their travel notes in the Interwar Period. Among the texts discussed in detail, I only made one exception from the chronological framework set for the dissertation, in the case of the novel *Egy regény regénye* [The Novel of a Novel] which was published in 1961, since Ervin Sinkó's novel is key among the critical reflections on the Soviet Union published between the two world wars.

The dissertation aims to offer an explanation *inter alia* on the motivation of the authors for their journeys and on the experiences they obtained in Russia and the Soviet Union. To what extent are the contents of the travel notes under study similar or different? How far the travel notes, and the criticism and praises they contain were influenced by the authors' initial milieu and their political engagement? What sort of information and knowledge did they have concerning the Soviet Union before their journeys? What shaped their prior assumptions about the Russians? What image of Russia emerges from the memoirs of the prisoners of the First World War? What were the authors' individual circumstances (family background,

social status, personality development, political orientation) that had an impact on their motivation for their journeys, the characteristic traits of their travelogues, and their preconceptions? Finally, I also seek to touch upon the circumstances of the publication of the travel notes in Hungary, or why they could not be published, as the case may be, and what happened to them after they had been written. An analysis of the Hungarian reception reveals several exciting political and ideological aspects of the image of Russia in Hungary, as well as the context of canonization process in Hungarian literature.

There are several further aspects that underscore the novelty of the choice of subject. One of the travelogues discussed is that of Arthur Holitscher who wrote in German but was born and raised in Hungary. Holitscher and his work are still relatively unknown to both the Hungarian public and in Hungarian literary history. This is true regarding his Russian-Soviet travelogue in particular, and his whole oeuvre in general. Furthermore, such synthetic, comparative analysis of the travelogues under discussion is unprecedented. The dissertation puts them into a wider cultural historical context by also examining the history of Hungarian reception of Russian literature, travel literature before the First World War, and experiences of other travellers of the Interwar Period who were not literary writers. It is important to note that many of the authors highlighted here are in many respects unjustly forgotten, as I have attempted to point out and raise awareness to them in my publications in recent years.

## **II. Structure of the dissertation, precedents**

The dissertation consists of five major thematic chapters. In the introduction I discuss the choice of subject, methodology, the chronological framework, and historiographic precedents. In the following cultural historical chapter entitled *Oroszország és az utazások* [Russia and the journeys] I review the 'discovery' of Russia by the West, the Western image of Russia and its interaction with the Russian self-image, the stereotypes rooted in romanticism and in the fin de siècle cult of Russia, the adulation of the Soviet Union in the Interwar Period, and the transformation of the nature of the journeys in the 1920s and 1930s.

The next chapter deals with the image of Russia in Hungary, the factors that shaped and influenced it, and the main channels of information. Considering their sporadic nature, I touch upon the cultural-academic relations only briefly. More attention will be paid to the impact in Hungary of Russian literature, which provided an important source of information, including

discussing, inter alia, relevant articles published in the literary journal *Nyugat*. A separate subsection deals with Sándor Márai's journalism on Russia.

An overview of Hungarian travellers before and between the two world wars is provided in the next chapter, partly on the basis of original source documents. Besides the reports of István Nogel and Lajos Thallóczy, I am going to touch upon the visits in the Soviet Union of the Károlyi couple, as well as of Zoltán Magyary and Rezső Szirmai.

The longest, central chapter is dedicated to travelogues of Hungarian authors published between the two world wars. The first part partially covers the memoirs of prisoners of war in Russia, highlighting their common thematic elements. Regarding the war memoirs published in the period under discussion, the author of this dissertation has published eight papers of varying length, including some analysis and raising new points in research. Making use of contemporary reviews and positive criticism, I analyse in some detail the memoirs of two authors, the *Szibériai garnizon* [Siberian Garrison] by Rodion Markovits and *A nagy káder* [The Mighty Executive] by Artúr Munk, both of whom were considered bestsellers in their time, but who were later unjustly forgotten. Looking back to academic studies in recent decades, it can be concluded that the comparative analysis of the two texts was only partially carried out, while their place in Russia-related Hungarian travel literature has never been established.

Following the prisoner of war memoirs, I discuss the travelogues and travel reports of such writers whose journeys took place in the Interwar Period. The first comprehensive analysis covers the travelogue entitled *Drei Monate in Sowjet-Russland* [Three Months in Soviet-Russia] by Arthur Holitscher, published in German in 1921, and still not available in Hungarian translation, referencing the author's German memoirs as well. Regarding Holitscher studies of recent decades, only a few short papers have been published, especially compared to the volume and importance of his oeuvre. In the papers of German and Austrian academics, there was little interest about the author's Hungarian background, while in the articles published mostly in German by Hungarian academics, the subject of this dissertation, i.e. the journeys in the Soviet Union and the travel reports remained undiscussed. Consequently, Holitscher's Soviet travelogue has never been examined in a Hungarian context.

The following subsection purports to analyse Arthur Koestler's scrupulous travelogue and its "corrected edition". Considering that Koestler renounced his views after breaking with

Communism and the Soviet Union, and revised his travel experiences in his memoirs, I contrasted the travelogue entitled *Vörös nappalok és fehér éjszakák* [Red Days and White Nights], which is only available in German, with his autobiographic texts published after the Second World War, and I also placed these works in the context of disillusionment and within his oeuvre. For this I also used some of his other works, namely *A bukott isten* [The God That Failed] and *Egy mítosz anatómiája* [The Anatomy of a Myth]. It can be established that in Koestler studies his journeys in the Soviet Union are mentioned only indirectly or sketchily, and they are mostly not referenced from the original travelogue that was published in German.

In the third subsection, travelogues of Gyula Illyés and Lajos Nagy will be discussed together with a famous travelogue written by the French André Gide. The analysis of the essay entitled *Visszatérés a Szovjetunióból / Retour de l'U.R.S.S.* [Return from the USSR] and its reception in Hungary is highly relevant to our discussion, as the author's conversion and subsequent disillusionment provoked strong repercussions in Hungary. At the same time, a comparative analysis with the Hungarian twin travelogues, and especially contrasting the reception of the three texts, will shed light not only on differences in genre, content, and tone, but also how these differences were due to the French and Hungarian political and social contexts that the authors left behind to visit the Soviet Union and where they returned. In the evaluation of the travelogues by Illyés and Nagy, I made use of the authors' diary notes, as well as notes of other writers and contemporary reviews. Studies in recent decades about the two authors' journeys devoted scant attention to the authors' existing knowledge and their information gathering prior to their journeys, while the influential role of their prior literary experiences were not mentioned at all. These studies mainly focused on the two authors and were nearly never contrasted with the experiences of other Hungarian authors (e.g. prisoners of the First World War) who visited Russia and the Soviet Union.

I conclude the section on Hungarian travelogues with the memoirs of Ervin Sinkó entitled *Egy regény regénye* [The Novel of a Novel], referencing his extensive correspondence his autobiographical essay *Szemben a bíróval* [Facing the Judge], and with József Lengyel's text called *Visegrádi utca* [Visegrádi street]. In general, it can be established that studies on the Moscow diary notes did not take into account the experiences shared by other Hungarian writers who also visited the country during this period. Consequently, a comparative analysis of Sinkó's criticism of the Soviet Union had not been possible before.

Finally, in the chapter entitled *Összegzés, konklúziók* [Summary, conclusion] I summarised the conclusions that resulted from the doctoral research. I also sought to point out further possibilities and directions for research on these grounds.

### III. Observations and results

#### 1. The context of the journeys, the authors' motivations and views, and their impact on the presentation of their experiences

A clear distinction should be made between Hungarians who travelled to the Soviet Union from Hungary and Hungarians who travelled from Western Europe, although the Soviet - friendly western public opinion and the tense discourse about the Soviet Union had an impact on both groups, even if at times it was indirect. Holitscher, Koestler and Sinkó began their journeys as believers. While Holitscher was a messianistic witness, Koestler with his pseudo report joins the ranks of political fellow pilgrims (Romain Rolland, Lion Feuchtwanger etc.) only to later, after his renunciation, join those who also turned their backs on the Soviet Union (Victor Serge, Boris Souvarine, Panait Istrati, André Gide, etc.). Although the publication circumstances of the different confessions and the timing of going public may vary, Sinkó's memoir can also be regarded as a part of the European literature of disenchantment.

All the authors had a different purpose and motivation for the journey, they had different careers and personalities, and their initial environments varied, too. Markovits and Munk were 'forced travellers' with their many companions in distress, they arrived in Russia as prisoners of war. Following a comparative analysis of dozens of memoirs, a new perspective emerged compared to previous studies. It could be concluded that the memoirs from the First World War can also be read as vivid records of encounters with another culture and mentality, the Russian spirit, which came as a cultural shock, reflecting a dichotomy of repulsion from and attraction to the alien. Although they did not lack prior impressions and knowledge about Russia thanks to their readings in classical Russian literature, especially 19<sup>th</sup> century Russian novels. We can make this conclusion from the authors' literary references and from their frequent contrasting between readings and actual experiences. Recurring traditional Russia-topoi in the works (e.g. the topic of misleading, the so-called Potemkin-effect, the mystical

landscape of Russia, the Russian cult of love, etc.), are coupled with specifically Hungarian perspectives (e.g. analogy between Russian and Hungarian landscapes and countryside).

Between the two works studied in detail, the *A nagy káder* [The Mighty Executive] by Artúr Munk gives a more significant role to the presentation of Russian conditions, cities, hinterland, and to the changes in internal frontlines, between the red and the white regimes. (These topics are further covered in the novel entitled *Aranyvonat* [Golden Train], written by Markovits, which also presents an suggestive image of the Soviet Union in expansion.) Markovits and Munk equally take an apolitical position: they are only interested in the vast political turmoil in Russia in so far as it hinders or helps their attempts to return home.

The topic of Markovits – in accordance with its intended collective perspective – is primarily the frontline experience of the ordinary man. Accordingly, he provides a vivid description of life in the trenches, depicts with great sensitivity the tragedy of anonymous people suffering and dying unnoticed, the inner life of prisoner camps in Makaryev and Krasnoyarsk, the psychology of captivity, the suffocative atmosphere of their miniature society.

One of the values of *Szibériai garnizon* [Siberian Garrison] is the very precise and nuanced image it provides of the inner structure of prisoner camps (which can be seen as a prefiguration of the Soviet Gulag), the slow transformation of their socio-ethical values, and the dissolution of military ethics and discipline and of the Monarchy's characteristic supra-nationality. Worthy of note is the atmosphere filled with steamy eroticism and hunger for love typical in prisoners' theatres, the rigid hierarchy mirroring social relations in the home country, and the vivid presentation of anti-Semitic feuds. These are some of the points, apart from the experience of the Russian spirit, that little or no attention was paid to in earlier academic studies of the *Szibériai garnizon* [Siberian Garrison]. The subject of the novel entitled *Aranyvonat* [Golden Train] is much more Hungarian-centred: it relates the vicissitudes of Hungarian prisoners of war between 1918 and 1922, mostly in Siberia, with the chaotic and complex Russian background of civil war.

While other qualities of *Szibériai garnizon* [Siberian Garrison] are its grotesque tragedy, its almost vernacular, ballad-like voice full of satire and black humour, the author of *A nagy káder* [The Mighty Executive] shows a special sensitivity to contrasts between comic and tragic elements, which are shown in a suggestive and satiric manner. Compared to *Szibériai garnizon* [Siberian Garrison], *Aranyvonat* [Golden Train] feels less expressive, but it does not lack grotesque tragedy either.

The Russian spirit, the peculiar beauty of Russian landscape, and the ideas about ordinary Russians as portrayed in the works of Markovits and Munk all fit the romantic, exotic stereotypes about Russia. Their novels also reveal that the writers had known classical Russian authors well before their journeys. The *Szibériai garnizon* [Siberian Garrison] has a more romantic, sentimental perspective, so the contrasting of literary and actual experiences has a more central place in it.

Arthur Holitscher, Arthur Koestler, Lajos Nagy, Gyula Illyés, and Ervin Sinkó visited the Soviet Union between the two World Wars. They were not forced travellers, they visited the country which settled for Bolshevism in the long term. Their curiosity is primarily directed to the Soviet labour state and the new society, not the Russian spirit and mentality, which they also observe, however. Thus their interest is essentially political, and consequently their memoirs can be interpreted as political gestures or ideological statements.

Arthur Holitscher could voice his opinion quite freely and directly in his travelogue which was published in 1921. The other authors (Illyés, Nagy, Koestler, Sinkó), however, made their visits in the 1930's, well after the border restrictions, at the same time as the advance of Fascism, and the hysterization of relations with the Soviet Union, during the era of great political pilgrimages. While the travellers from Western Europe had to reckon with the possible reactions of the growing Soviet-friendly public opinion, Gyula Illyés and Lajos Nagy primarily had to keep in mind the ideologically divided intellectual environment in Hungary and the official public discourse of the Horthy regime, one characteristic feature of which was anti-bolshevism and antipathy against the Soviet Union.

In the case of Arthur Holitscher and Arthur Koestler, two Central European writers born in Hungary, their Jewish background, sense of homelessness, difficulties with social integration, feeling outsiders, the collapse of their families, all had a significant role in that they turned to Communism and sought utopias. The messianistic report published by Holitscher is an accurate, well-structured, and conceptual one, in which he touches upon several aspects of everyday life, while he also openly shares with the reader his negative experiences (bureaucracy, lack of freedom, the operations of the Cheka, famine, etc.). Koestler, however, performed a specific political task during his journey in 1932–33: his task was to record the conversion and testimony of a Western liberal intellectual journalist in the framework of a pseudo report which was carefully censored by the Soviets. It is a significant factor that both are believers – Holitscher is obsessed with the anarchist federation, while Koestler is a

communist – and they both attribute religious content to the Bolshevik attempt, which results in a certain similarity and occasional uniformity of the concepts used by the authors.

Koestler as a disciplined communist partly fails to see disappointing things, partly keeps silent about them. His visit to the Soviet Union was still an important factor in his break with Communism and the Soviet Union. Much later, aware of the fate of his companions, of the communist trials, of the pact between Hitler and Stalin, after the Second World War and the sovietisation of Eastern Europe, he renounces his travelogue entitled *Vörös nappalok és fehér éjszakák* [Red Days and White Nights], and then rewrites it, putting it into a new context and adding formerly left out experiences and adding his comments as well. The relevant section of his memoir's purpose is self-confrontation and introspection. *Vörös nappalok és fehér éjszakák* [Red Days and White Nights] can be construed as a product of communist narrow-mindedness, as the author himself later refers to the book in this way. A comparison of the travelogue and the memoirs reveals not only that important experiences were omitted from the original report (people, life stories, famine, poverty, lack of freedom, etc.), but also that these greatly contributed to his break, and inspired the creation of the world-famous, anti-Stalinist essay-novel entitled *Sötétség délben* [Darkness at Noon].

The travelogues of Gyula Illyés and Lajos Nagy differ from Holitschter's and Koestler's inter alia because the authors were neither believers nor communists, although they sympathized with the Soviet Union. But they considered themselves as impartial observers. André Gide, compared to the Central-Eastern-European Holitscher, Koestler, and Sinkó who all had a complex background, identity, and in many ways an unsettled social status, was not just a traveller from the West but a truly pure western observer, too. Therefore his viewpoint is particularly exciting not only in relation to the twin travelogues but to all the discussed Hungarian writer-travellers. Despite differences in style and tone, all three writers are confronted with the lack of freedom, social inequalities, they are very much aware of poverty and the privileged status of writers and artists, notice both conformism and the „complexe de supériorité", i.e. the phenomenon known as the Russian superiority-complex.

Compared to Gide, Illyés and Nagy, Sinkó's perspective is special: his specific situation and knowledge of the Russian language allowed him direct, intimate experiences. Since he was a permanent resident, he was outside the limits of guided visits. By becoming a member of the Moscow society, he personally felt the effects of the totalitarian system as it was being deployed, as well as the stages of the total subjugation of Soviet society. He gained relevant

experience through the vicissitudes around his manuscript *Optimisták* [Optimists], which provided him with a symbolic context while also exposing the real nature of everyday functioning of Stalinian dictatorship, and vividly revealing the moral and personality deformities, and behaviour patterns, all phenomena that are inevitably associated with the regime. Sinkó's experience of dictatorship is more elementary than Gide's. The subjugation of the individual, the general brainwashing by the abolition and continuous reconstruction of collective memory, a more detailed depiction of the Orwellian state than in Gide's work also provides a deeper context. One of Sinkó's most important observations is the sugar coating of terror, the trials, and the general insanity. Ubiquitous kitsch, pink happiness-propaganda, triumphant operettas on the stages, mass events with foxtrot, tango, and jazz imported from the West, and Stalin's constitution of 1936 like a gigantic Potemkin sham performance all served self-hypnosis, the complete denial of reality. Although Sinkó's experience of the Soviet Union was a nightmare, even so, he did not follow the example of Koestler or Gide and did not break with Communism and the Soviet Union. He identified with the argument of Soviet-friendly Western intellectuals, considering the Soviet Union as sole guarantee in a successful fight against Fascism, which should not be discouraged by any exposure or public criticism. And despite his self-torturing internal struggle, he remained a believer.

## **2. Prior knowledge and the possibilities of obtaining information**

While analysing the travelogues, I also sought to throw some light on the authors' prior information and knowledge before their journeys. All the visiting Hungarian writers had prior knowledge and impressions about Russia from classical Russian literature, and Markovits about Siberia also from the travelogues of the American George Kennan. All of those who travelled between the two World Wars, however, complained about the difficulties they encountered trying to obtaining information and seeing clear. Some news also reached Gyula Illyés and Lajos Nagy, such as rumours about the Potemkin phenomenon, the brutality of the GPU (the Soviet political police), the shortage of goods, poverty, etc. They also heard about the reports of previous visitors, they could even read some of them, and they also saw Soviet movies in Budapest cinemas. But in general, they also found it a problem that available information and impressions were controversial. Ervin Sinkó was aware of the criticism against the Soviet Union, nevertheless, since he regarded his commitment to the Soviet Union an unquestionable moral command, he consciously chose to ignore it.

An analysis of Sándor Márai's Russia-related journalism will help understand what prior knowledge travellers from Hungary in the Interwar Period had about Russia and what were the means at their disposal to obtain information about this country. Although the author himself was not a traveller, his writings show that an open-minded intellectual could have access to diverse information, including about almost all major political and economic events. Márai in his writings places Bolshevism and the Soviet regime in a wider civilizational context, and interprets them as manifestations of Asian demonism. Márai held firm anti-Bolshevist views, without being a loyal writer of the Hungarian political regime.

The works under discussion reveal that the travellers' prior information on and impressions about Russia were strongly influenced by Russian literary works as reflected primarily in the writings of Markovits and Illyés. This suggests that Russian literature was an important reference point for obtaining information on Russia, Russian culture and history, which justified an in-depth examination of the characteristics of the reception of Russian literature in Hungary. This examination clearly showed that the interest in Russian literature and culture, whose accomplishments and innovative endeavours reached Hungary even if indirectly, was general in nature, and it could remain independent from negative historical experiences related to Russia, as well as from official and personal political/ideological orientation.

### **3. The personal background of the authors**

I made a special effort in presenting the personal background (family conditions, social environment, start of a career, etc.) of those authors (Holitscher, Koestler, Ervin Sinkó) whose travelogues have a privileged role not only in their political but also in their artistic career. Holitscher, Koestler, and Sinkó are typical representatives of the Central European character which is manifest in multilingualism and multiple identities. While the beginning of Holitscher's and Koestler's career was determined by the trinity of a German–Jewish–Hungarian identity, maybe Sinkó's case is the most complicated one. Apart from his Swabian-Hungarian-Jewish identity, his situation was further complicated by a manifold peripheral existence and being a part of an ethnic Hungarian minority. In the authors' orientation towards radicalism and Communism, their Jewish background, disillusionment with bourgeois society, generational rebellion, a sense of exclusion and the experience of the First World War were all decisive factors. (In addition, Holitscher and Sinkó also cite the

social hierarchy they experienced in their families, and the contemptuous treatment of representatives of the lower classes.)

The travelogues are also imprints of the authors's personalities and their specific perceptions of their own roles: Holitscher, for example, who intended his book to be a prophetic bestseller, regarded himself as an evangelist, a prophet, the messenger of a new society and a new religion.

#### **4. Common and diverging elements of content**

The travelogues written after journeys made in the Interwar Period share many content elements. This is due in part to that all travellers – apart from the prisoners of war – participated, at least partially, in show political journeys, where the institutions shown and visited were the same in many cases. They all gained experience about the Soviet trickery, the Potemkin phenomenon, the unsettling circumstances of their experiences and the obscurity of their vision. Most of the stereotypes of the Western discourse about Russia also appear in the Hungarian authors' experiences.

All authors travelling to Russia between the two World Wars write about the surreal entanglement of the past and future in their own way. Although highlighting different things according to their individual temperaments, all of them make a mention of the misery of the Soviet people, their resilience, the cruelty, the lack of freedom, the enormous social and income inequalities, the emergence of a new social class called labour aristocracy, the personal cult of Stalin, the lack of critical and free thinking, the disappointingly dreary quality of artistic creations. Holitscher, Illyés, Nagy and Sinkó all remark on the Soviet petty bourgeois everyday milieu and its typical accessories such as kitsch – which appears in the novel *Egy regény regénye* [The Novel of a Novel] full-fledged, performing the function of state power – or conformism which assumed frightening proportions. They comment on the characteristic features of the Russian superiority complex, and the derogatory behaviour towards foreigners which is often coupled with irritating ignorance. Sinkó, however, when depicting the nature of servilism, recognizes a much deeper context underlying the Soviet sense of superiority. An analysis of the reports also reveals that the Hungarian travellers Markovits, Illyés and Nagy also considered themselves Western observers. Moreover Illyés and Nagy entered the (Soviet) 'future' recognising Russian underdevelopment, which forced them to also reckon with their own European and Hungarian past. Sinkó, like Gide before

him, also points out the analogy between Bolshevik and Fascist dictatorships: in the *Egy regény regénye* [The Novel of a Novel] he recognizes similarities primarily in the use of language, vocabulary, and argumentation.

The belle-lettrist report of Illyés qualifies most as a romantic travelogue. No coincidence that among the writers travelling to the Soviet Union in the Interwar Period, his work contains the most references to classical Russian literary works and characters, apart from Markovits's. Among the travellers discussed, he notices and points out most emphatically that there is a much deeper and broader phenomenon underlying the new-fangled Soviet layer, which is no other than the Russian character and mentality. The simple Russian man – which in this context does not in the least mean Soviet – is called a “likeable phenomenon” by Márai, arousing deep sympathy both with Markovits and Illyés, while Holitscher and Gide categorically idealises it as the very embodiment of mankind. Underneath the Soviet layer, however, there is another, characteristically Asian nature in addition to the Russian one, which none of the authors fail to notice. The travelogues thus reveal a complex structure of interrelated temporal and civilizational layers of Soviet reality.

### **5. The travelogues as the imprints of homeland conditions**

The travelogues depict not just the country visited but they also provide an insight into the conditions and culture of the country of departure as well. In portraying life in prison camps, the camp society, and everyday life, the novel *Szibériai garnizon* [Siberian Garrison] also describes social and ethnic relations in the homeland. The attention of Artúr Munk in turn is seized by the moral decline, the major or minor infamies on the frontline, and both in the Russian and Hungarian hinterlands, which are a caricature of the survival techniques and career-building strategies experienced in the Monarchy, intensified in the context of war. In the report of Lajos Nagy, we can frequently find ironic and sarcastic remarks about the Hungarian social reality of the 1930s. Open criticism regarding the Horthy regime and Hungarian gentry society can also be found in Sinkó's diary but without any irony. In the travelogue of Illyés, entitled *Oroszország 1934* [Russia 1934] comments about the homeland are always apolitical, clearly positive, romantic or patriotic. In the case of the three believers, Holitscher, Koestler and Sinkó, the journey to the Soviet Union can be interpreted as a political gesture, which comes from the idea that Western civilisation and capitalism came to a dead end and they were inevitably destined to fall. The portrayal of the Soviet regime is

intertwined with a sharp criticism and rejection of Western society and middle class values. There is another thing linking the two communists, Sinkó and Koestler. They both recognised and accurately observed the nature of the particular revolutionary (communist) consciousness, which determined the individual's ethical attitude, aesthetic taste, and argumentation, and which also facilitated the survival and functioning of the communist dictatorship. Such was the consciousness that they could observe on themselves, too.

## 6. The reception of the travelogues

Just as the way the Soviet Union is perceived and presented, the reception of the travel writings also reflect the political public opinion and conditions of the home country. The publication, afterlife, and the popularity of the travelogues do not necessarily show their real literary and historical value, rather they reflect the political and social sensibility of the society of reception, indicating that in the process of literary canonization, aspects other than literary also had a powerful impact. The reception story of *Szibériai garnizon* [Siberian Garrison] by Markovits is quite a novel itself, going to the extremes of first being a worldwide bestseller, before ending up in completely oblivion. As for the assessment of *Aranyvonat* [Golden Train], which was overall negative, it was defined by aesthetic objections, but also, mainly, by ideological considerations. Koestler's book had no reception in Hungary which was under Soviet rule, and neither Holitscher's messianistic travelogues nor his novels were published in Hungary. Their example highlights the relationship between language use and exclusion from Hungarian literature proper, in addition to political considerations. Sinkó's extremely nuanced experience of dictatorship, as well as his communist loyalty, and the circumstances and timing of his open break with Stalinism, made the reception of both the author and his works both problematic independently of political sides and regimes.

The dissertation pays special attention to the Hungarian reception of the three travelogues discussed together (those of Gide, Illyés, and Nagy). The Hungarian reception of *Visszatérés* [Return from the USSR] in which Gide shares his experiences with harsh sincerity, proved to be as diverse as the Western European reaction to it. The publication of the Hungarian translation provoked a drastic reaction by the state authorities: they penalised the publishing company and imprisoned the translator, Tibor Déry.

Considering contemporary reflections and reviews, it can be concluded that the travelogue of Gyula Illyés enjoyed overall positive responses, apart from a few far-right sallies, which did not change later on either. The fate of Lajos Nagy's travelogue, however, proved to be a failure, especially compared to that of Illyés's work. Illyés, with unparalleled awareness, played along the lines of 'political correctness', masterfully balancing criticism and appreciation, carefully avoiding to make any negative remarks about domestic relations. In contrast, Nagy did not consider the sensitivity of either side, regardless of whether he was describing Hungarian or Soviet conditions. Moreover, his work, which was otherwise stylistically brilliant, did not fit into the usual framework of the travelogue genre about the Soviet Union. While Gide's work meets the criteria of religious travel writing, regardless of the author's disillusionment, and Illyés' those of romantic travelogues, Nagy's did not fit into any of these categories.

Sinkó, as a believer, sought to meet communist expectations. His internal struggle and despair were overcome by his profound and fierce commitment against Fascism and his communist loyalty, and as a result he did not have any intention to publish his writings for a long time, nor did he talk about his negative experiences in public. His book comes out as a belligerent gesture only after the Second World War and the death of Stalin – thus supporting the turn of Tito's Yugoslavia against the Soviet Union – at a time when the stakes and novelty were far less important, both in Hungary and abroad. The controversial nature of Sinkó's career is demonstrated by the fact that he publishes his perspicacious and profound criticism of Stalin's Soviet Union as a militant defender of another dictatorship.

#### **IV. Relevant publications by the author of the dissertation**

*A márkai és az orosz bárka.* Esszék, kritikák. Kortárs Kiadó Sorozat: Kortárs kritika Budapest, 2011.

Egy optimista kálváriája Moszkvában. Sinkó Ervin Szovjetunió-kritikája. *Restancia*  
*Független zsidó tudományos folyóirat,* 2020.06.10.

<http://www.restancia.hu/kutatas/hammerstein-sinkoervin.htm>

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