The Form and Functioning of the Union of Czechoslovak Writers in the Late 1940s and Early 1950s in the Context of Czech Literature

Michal Bauer

♢ eSamizdat 2024 (XVII), pp. 115-128 ♢

One of the most important Czech writers of the second half of the 20th century, Arnošt Lustig, in a book-length interview he conducted with journalist Karel Hvížďala at the very end of his life, characterized the 1950s in Czechoslovakia quite favourably in hindsight:

> Even though we had socialism then, which everyone now slanders so much, I had the feeling that [people] were living well and rightly. The truth is that I – like many others – was not in the uranium mines at that time, nor was I a trapped hockey player for the national team. Had I been, I would certainly have spoken differently. But it's also true that under socialism, if you were lucky, you didn't suffer. It must be said that there were several kinds of socialism at the same time: one was in the concentration camp at Leopoldov and another in the writers' castle at Dobříš, in the Russian Gulag or in Romania. Those who were lucky got away with it[1].

Such a fluctuation in values seems incomprehensible, especially for a former inmate of several concentration camps, where he witnessed the greatest horrors and tragedies of modern times. It is undoubtedly related to his personal situation after February 1948, when he became a reporter, journalist and aspiring writer. Leopoldov and other prisons of the communist regime did not concern him, and in 1950 he even agreed to the death sentence and execution of the innocent politician Milada Horáková. In the 1950s, he was among those heading for the writers' castle in Dobříš. Some sixty years later, he saw the state of society in 1950s Czechoslovakia in a bipolar form, the criterion being a vague notion – those who were lucky enough to escape persecution. Where did the moral sensor go? How did it become an apology for, or at least an understanding of, the Soviet satellite regime? Apart from one's particular position in this system, the relationship between 'I' and 'we' and between 'us' and 'them' seems to play a significant role here – as does, of course, the way in which self-reflection takes place within the framework of social and historical events. Much has been written about the dissolution of the 'I' into a 'we', including the voluntary process of enthusiastic identification. It is as if the 'I' ceases to exist in the 'we', surrendering or being forced to surrender to those super-personal ideals. The 'we', after all, more easily and radically defines itself against the 'they' than (would) be the case in the opposition of 'I' versus 'you'. This was certainly the case with the recent experience of the Second World War, where the 'we' were the Czechs, the occupied countries, the Slavs, etc., and the 'they' were the aggressors, especially the Germans, the Nazis, the fascists. This essential bipolarity remained in the post-WWII and post-war regimes.

The Individual 'I'

Soon after the war, two great Czech poets independently attempted to defend their own 'I'. They were aware of the danger of losing individuality, of hyperbolizing power, of stratifying the system and fitting into social categories, of being obliged to a supra-individual entity. And both feared the absence not only of an original, individual artistic voice, but of their entire personality. The convergence of their respective trajectories is also remarkable because they came from opposite poles of the social spectrum. Both expressed their disagreement (*nesou-*

[1] K. Hvížďala, *Tachles, Lustig*, Praha 2011, pp. 131-132.

hlas) in artistic terms: through their voice (*hlas*). Jan Zahradníček, a Catholic poet, wrote in his poetic composition *La Saletta*:

> Even though everyone walks on their heads,
> I don't want to walk on my head too
> though I expose myself to danger
> of ridiculousness for my natural walk
> I don't want to holler yes and no
> depending on where it's blowing from
> [...]
> I'm terrified of herds
> chewing the cud from morning till night
> the only stuff...[2]

František Halas, a member of the Communist Party, wrote almost identically at the same time:

> I'm no longer
> for the treacherous Echoes
> I'm for the Voice.
> for ears unclogged
> [...]
> I don't want to be the meat of the air around
> how they like it
> I don't want to be a stake in the ordinance
> by public opinion
> I don't want to be the clue that swallows only the dust
> of their comedies
> played on the mayors
> [...]
> I want to be read by someone
> and praised
> In Light of Remembrance[3].

In both cases, there is a radically expressed resistance to any regulation or expectation of how and what they should write about. Their shared 'I don't want to' and 'I won't' is a clearly articulated resistance to the absolute demands of a system that operates not just on the poet but on every human being.

The Ambivalent Role of Artists in a Totalitarian Society: Serving and Leading

As often happens in the wake of major historical events, after World War II human rights were still restricted, and the power of systems still grew. Often, this is done by switching the signs, a process that happens naturally, and which people not only identify with voluntarily, but also demand. While in Germany or Italy there arose a complex creation of post-fascist societies, Stalinist totalitarianism spilled over into all the countries where the Red Army entered. Within the relationship between politics and art, politics attempts to capture art. It is the culmination of a process that began in the 1920s and intensified in the 1930s. It has to do with the rise of power and totalitarian systems.

To take control of art, to subjugate it, to determine its form – this is what politics repeatedly tries to do. In a totalitarian system, it has very powerful means at its disposal. Literature tends to be associated with and tied to history, often as its illustrator[4]. A totalitarian regime, or system in general, wants to strengthen these ties and subjugate the interpretation and form of history and art. This, of course, goes against the nature of the arts, including literature, as a human expression separate from power, with its immanence, even resistance to power and to the system, defining itself against it. The aforementioned process of the seizure of art by the system, by the regime, by the post-revolutionary and, twenty years later, by the post-war power was seemingly a given – with reference to the exacerbated history. It was explained and justified by logic, factuality, rationality, and truth. The ethical and the aesthetic were combined and subordinated to the ideological or political-ideological. For many artists, it was an obvious and necessary thing to take part in this process. Justifications did not even have to be sought; they were at hand, so to speak. Of course, this process has deeper roots and does not appear exclusively in a totalitarian society. The models for the existence of national myths and the man of the masses are older, and to identify with them or to define oneself against them means not only to take a stand, but also (and above all) to reflect a way of thinking and artistic creation. For it is not merely a matter of expressing agreement or disagreement (that would be too easy and sim-

[2] J. Zahradníček, *La Saletta*, Praha 1947, p. 47.
[3] F. Halas, *A co básník*, Praha 1947, pp. 6-10.
[4] J. Brabec, *Estetická norma a historie literatury v totalitním systému*, in *Zlatá šedesátá – Česká literatura a společnost v letech tání, kolotání a zklamání*, ed. by R. Denemarková, Praha 2000, p. 11.

plistic), but a continuous, never-ending process, a "constant transformation"[5].

In a situation of strengthening the system and devaluing the individual, writers, or rather artists, are given an ambivalent role. Their position in post-war Czechoslovak society was channelled by the state. If, at the beginning of the war, at the turn of the 1930s and 1940s, the need escalated to ask questions about the form of modern art, the actual situation of the artist, his or her position or even role and responsibility, after World War II these tendencies of searching and questioning were quickly suppressed and replaced by seemingly clear values and norms. A political and ideological understanding of art became the norm for many. In Czechoslovakia, this manifested itself in various ways, most visibly from an institutional point of view in the presence of politicians at writers' and artists' events.

The presence of politics in art in the second half of the 1940s was already evident at the Writers' Congress in June 1946. The honorary committee of the congress consisted primarily of members of the Czechoslovak government and other politicians. President Edvard Beneš was the honorary chairman of the writers' organization, the Syndicate of Czech Writers. He gave his first speech at the opening ceremony of the congress on 16 June 1946. Writers were given an important role in post-war society from the outside, as the title of Beneš's speech, *Poslání literatury v novém Československu* [The Mission of Literature in the New Czechoslovakia], illustrates. Reflections on the mission of writers in the nation became commonplace.

President Beneš spoke of writers as fighters for a new world of post-war humanism, characterized by militant rhetoric and the automatic association of struggle with humanism. The president took it for granted that artists would be given tasks by the establishment and would serve the nation. At that time, he understood the tasks as given by the nation itself. But instead of the nation, the commissioner became the political party, which presented itself as the representative of a social class, the state, the nation, truth, justice, the world of socialism, the camp of peace, etc.

> Literature and national culture [...] should first of all serve the nation in its spiritual improvement and in its development towards the highest moral, spiritual and cultural standards in general. It has the unconditional task of preserving and cultivating everything that contributes to the harmonization of national tendencies and aspirations with human tendencies and aspirations. In this sense, literature is a direct instrument of the struggle for the progress of the nation; it is the carrier and controlling factor of the entire spiritual process of the nation and, at the same time, its guiding agent...[6]

Edvard Beneš was returning to writers the alleged duties of the 19th-century National Revival when he spoke of the need "to fulfil one's duties as a writer as a stirrer of the national conscience"[7]. The designation of the writer as the nation's conscience was already known in the Czech environment in the first half of the 20th century and became one of the most commonly used at the 1946 June Congress. It resurfaced at the second congress of the Union of Czechoslovak Writers in April 1956. President Beneš's call for a union between artist and nation, as well as for a union of freedom and service, culminated in the conclusion of his speech, in which he urged writers to "continue to fulfil their great national duty"[8].

Writers became public property; they were perceived as creative personalities and political figures and found themselves in a schizophrenic position. They were both subordinate to politicians and chosen to lead the masses. They had to carry out the tasks assigned to them by the politicians on various occasions, including artistic conventions and meetings, but also, of course, Communist Party congresses. These tasks were supposed to come automatically and naturally in the course of history, and at the same time they became a moral criterion. Constant meetings with politicians were supposed to improve the position of writers; they were called 'true artists', 'national artists', 'masters of culture',

[5] J. Brabec, *Šalda dnes*, in *Na téma umění a život. F. X. Šalda 1867-1937-2007*, ed. by T. Kubíček – L. Merhaut – J. Wiendl, Brno 2007, p. 17.

[6] E. Beneš, *Projev pana presidenta republiky Dr Edvarda Beneše na sjezdu českých spisovatelů v červnu 1945 v Praze*, Praha 1946, p. 19.

[7] Ivi, p. 28.

[8] Ibidem.

etc. The glorification of writers was also connected with the allocation of castles and houses, such as the Dobříš castle in Central Bohemia, the Budmerice castle in western Slovakia, the writers' house in Budislav near Litomyšl, etc. They were given not only the castle premises themselves, but also the adjacent parks, cheap accommodation and meals, grants to write the required works of art, and various training courses given by politicians or selected writers. The most important of these was the castle in Dobříš, as it was relatively close to Prague and therefore easy to reach. At first it served as a recreation centre, but soon it became a political and cultural centre. In addition, writers were awarded various literary prizes, the most important of which was the State Prize, named after president Klement Gottwald, a politician who had nothing to do with literature, but everything to do with power.

Writers' receptiveness to the system was reflected in the royalties they received for their published works; they were given positions in book publishing houses or on the editorial boards of cultural periodicals, their works were edited into books, staged on theatre stages, and became the basis for film scripts. On the one hand, it was an offer of a share in immortality. Modern political rulers were endowed with the divine attributes of omniscience, power, cult, immortality. This was true even of the dead Lenin, who was said to live forever[9]. Until March 1953, Joseph Stalin and Klement Gottwald were viewed as immortal, too. The physical manifestation of this was the embalming of their bodies. Writers identifying with the regime were promised immortality in the glory of their works. At the same time, however, they were channelled into the role of obedient executors of orders. These were justified by the so-called logic of development, the logic of history, objectivity, truthfulness, reality, etc.

Economic Level of Power in Relation to Writers

The regime's offer also took a very concrete financial form. This concerned not only political positions and the aforementioned editorial positions but also royalties for published works. The average wage in Czechoslovakia in 1949 was 888 Czech crowns, a year later 970 crowns, and in 1951 it was 1034 crowns[10]. A look at the archival materials of the publishing houses of the time shows authors' royalties. Vítězslav Nezval was the most expensive in this business between the regime and the authors. His demands for royalties were enormous even before February 1948. The publishing house and bookshop of Fr. Borový, which published his books, often had difficult and recurring disputes with him over his royalties.

Nezval carried this principle over to the period after February 1948. At that time, he also demanded an increase in royalties from the sale price of books and even managed to get a 20 percent royalty compared to the 15 percent royalty of the 1930s. Another matter Nezval objected to was the print run of his books and, above all, their selling price. He always demanded an increase in the number of copies published and also an increase in the selling price. Until February 1948, publishers argued that they needed to get his books to as many readers as possible, so they tried to keep prices down. Nezval refused to do so, fearing that he would receive a lower royalty. Already in May 1945, during negotiations for the publication of his most popular collection, *Sbohem a šáteček* [Goodbye and a Shawl], he "refused the selling price of 50 CZK" and asked for a price of 100 to 150 CZK. He rejected the offered fee of 100.000 CZK as low, as "he had an idea of 200 – 240.000 CZK", finally "he agreed to a fee of 150.000 CZK"[11].

[9] A sufficient example is the issue of the magazine of the *Kulturní besedy československo-sovětského přátelství* from 15 December 1952, entitled *Věčně živý Lenin* [Lenin Eternally Alive].

[10] P. Hortig, *Přehled průměrných mezd a maloobchodních cen v bývalém Československu* https://zpravy.kurzy.cz/666494-prehled-prumernych-mezd-a-maloobchodnich-cen-v-byvalem-ceskoslovensku/ (latest access: 05.09.2024). For comparison, it should be pointed out that in 1951 there was an overall significant increase in the price of some foodstuffs, so that a kilo of bread cost 8 CZK, a kilo of rice 10 CZK or 40 CZK, a kilo of butter 80 CZK, a kilo of pork 50 CZK, a litre of milk 4.45 CZK. Shoes cost 450 to 580 CZK, a vacuum cleaner 6.320 CZK, a Škoda car 50.000 CZK (in 1952).

[11] *Záznam o návštěvě u básníka Vítězslava Nezvala dne 7. května*

The same was repeated in the cases of Nezval's other books. When the collection *Veliký orloj* [The Great Astronomical Clock] was published at the turn of 1948 and 1949, a fee of 150.000 CZK was agreed for Nezval, the print run was 10.000 copies, the price of the book was 75 CZK (paperback edition) and 100 CZK (bound edition).

The publication of his poetic composition *Zpěv míru* [The Song of Peace] was especially lucrative for Nezval: with a print run of 50.000 copies and a selling price of CZK 15 for the first edition, he received a royalty of 200.000 CZK in October 1950. Other editions soon followed, with royalties of 40.000 CZK (for the 2nd edition in December 1950), 30.000 CZK (for the 3rd edition in October 1951), 30.000 CZK (for the 4th edition in June 1952), and print runs of 10.000 and 5.000 copies. Nezval's collected works (*Dílo*) began to appear simultaneously with the publication of this poem. For each volume he received first 150.000 CZK, then 190.000 CZK. The poet and the publishing house then switched from a flat fee to a fee for the number of verses, with a rate of CZK 30 per verse. This was advantageous for Nezval, who spread his verses over more lines to achieve a higher fee. The fourth volume of his writings, *Básně alarmy a rány na buben* [Poems Alarms and Blows on the Drum], contained 2.600 verses, so that the royalty in December 1951, using the then method of calculation, where the amount of the print run was divided into several norms, was 280.800 CZK. The book printed 10.750 copies, costing 66 CZK in paperback and 89 CZK in hardback. If the entire print run were sold, it would raise 833.000 CZK, so Nezval's fee was a third of all sales. These are not new original works but reissues of reduced and censored earlier books by Nezval: in this case, the collections from the early 1930s, *Skleněný havelok* [The Glass Havelock] and *Zpáteční lístek* [The Return Ticket][12]. Even more lucrative for him was the publication of his poetic composition *Z domoviny* [From Fatherland] in April 1951: for 30.000 copies he received 420.480 CZK[13]. The book's selling price was 38 CZK for the paperback edition and 59 CZK for the hardback edition. At the turn of the 1940s and 1950s, Nezval published about five books in Czechoslovakia every year.

By comparison, Jaroslav Seifert, another of the most important Czech poets of the same generation as Nezval, had considerably lower fees. His relationship to the post-February regime was, however, different from that of Vítězslav Nezval. Unlike Nezval, who wrote ideologically committed poetry at the turn of the 1940s and 1950s, Seifert avoided this type of work. However, this was reflected in his publishing opportunities and his royalties. In February 1950, he received a royalty of CZK 18.000 for 3.000 copies of his book of poems, *Píseň o Viktorce* [The Song about Victoria]. Its price in bookstores was 40 CZK; the royalty was 15% of this amount. In June 1952, Jaroslav Seifert received 84.000 CZK for the second edition of *Šel malíř chudě do světa* [The Painter Went Poorly into the World] in 10.000 copies, which was about a third of what Vítězslav Nezval received. Even another important poet of this generation, Konstantin Biebl, received a much lower fee than Nezval for his collection *Bez obav* [Without Fear] in July 1951. It was 132.000 CZK, even though these poems were presented as models for new poets who subscribed to socialist realism.

Just to illustrate and to provide a broader context, we can mention a famous poetic debutant of the time: in March 1953, Milan Kundera published his first book of poetry, *Člověk zahrada širá* [Man, a Large Garden], but in a smaller edition of 2.000 copies. Kundera received 11.400 CZK for this collection. He was a novice, albeit a very successful one, who had already aroused great interest among readers with his poems published in magazines, but the difference with Nezval is enormous. Kundera's fee, by comparison, was about a quarter of what Nezval received. This system of varying royalties and the frequency of book publication was elaborated by the regime and served effectively to structure the writing

1945 v 1/2 12 hod, Prague, Memorial of National Literature, fund of the publishing house Czechoslovak Writer, Vítězslav Nezval – publishing contracts.

[12] At the prices prevailing at the time, Nezval would have been able to buy almost six cars with the fee he received for this single book.

[13] In this case, he could have bought eight cars and would have had more than 20.000 CZK left over.

community[14].

The Problem of Continuity in Czech Literature after February 1948

One of the fundamental problems of literature at the beginning of the totalitarian post-revolutionary regime in Czechoslovakia was the question of continuity. The power relationship with art culminated in a major lecture by Ladislav Štoll, originally a poet and prose writer, then a politician, who presented an apparent solution using the material of Czech poetry of the last thirty years: from the establishment of Czechoslovakia in 1918 to the coup in February 1948. Štoll, as a member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, created norms by referring to a certain type of poetics (parts of S. K. Neumann's work, especially in the form of the collection *Rudé zpěvy* [Red Songs] and Jiří Wolker's poetry book *Těžká hodina* [A Difficult Hour]) and based his approach on a rigid class perspective. It is no coincidence that he called his lecture and its book form *Thirty Years of Struggle for Czech Socialist Poetry*. The periodization, the bipolar understanding of literature, the militant vocabulary, and, in this case, the word struggle, are essential. Štoll declared the relationship between the personality and work of S. K. Neumann to be not only an artistic criterion but even a moral one. Although Štoll's self-representations and interpretations have been presented as normative, his conception of literary history has understandably never been unanimously accepted. Another norm-setter of the time, Zdeněk Nejedlý, referred to the work of authors primarily of the 19th century as exemplary art – Bedřich Smetana in music, Mikoláš Aleš in visual art, Josef Václav Myslbek in sculpture, Alois Jirásek in literature, Josef Kajetán Tyl in drama, etc. Every norm, all the more an external one (in this case from the political environment), is resisted by art. Nevertheless, political and ideological pressure left its distinctive traces on Czech artistic production not only in the 1950s.

Ladislav Štoll was one of the politicians who, on various occasions, supervised literature and art in general. He applied the principle of power; his very presence, as well as that of other politicians at art congresses and at various events of cultural workers, was a sign of supervision. Members of the State Security Service, the power-regressive arm of the communist state apparatus, were also present at these art gatherings[15]. The importance of artists' meetings in the presence of politicians was usually reflected in the venue of these events, the arrangement of the halls, and the positioning of politicians and artists within them. These events were held in the buildings of the Slav House in Prague, the Faculty of Arts of Charles University, the 5 May Theatre, which is today's State Opera House, or the National Assembly of the Czechoslovak Republic, which was the highest legislative body. The Honorary Presidency always included politicians who sat in elevated seats facing the participants below, and who had to raise their heads when listening to them. It was a model that copied church ceremonies and religious practices, except that the priest was replaced by a Communist functionary and God by Lenin, Stalin or Gottwald. After all, their busts, statues and paintings, together with the flags of the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia, were an integral part of the decoration of these spaces. Life was ritualized in every way. The organization of these events honoured and co-created the hierarchy of the time. It took the form of a pyramid: at the top were the aforementioned top state and party politicians and Marxist-Leninist ideologues, below them were leading party functionaries, honorary members, Stakhanovites, national artists, laureates of the Klement Gottwald State Prize, leaders of writers' and other artistic organizations, then ordinary communists and members of these organizations, and so on. Connection with the so-called 'people' (in the language of the time, *lidé* [individuals] were replaced by *lid* [people]) was ensured by sending writers and

[14] All data come from archival materials stored in the Memorial of National Literature in Prague, the fund of the publishing house Československý spisovatel, unorganized.

[15] For example, at the second congress of the Union of Czechoslovak Writers in April 1956, there were ten members of the State Security. M. Bauer, *II. sjezd Svazu československých spisovatelů 22. – 29. 4. 1956, svazek II (přílohy)*, Praha 2011, p. 813.

artists to factories, mines, agricultural cooperatives and, conversely, by sending delegations of workers and peasants to art exhibitions, cinemas and theatres. Workers were also encouraged to engage in literary production, and on 1 May 1949 the Workers to Literature campaign was announced to further strengthen the environment of factories, mines, steelworks, oil refineries and the figures of workers in Czech literature. The Union of Czechoslovak Writers and the Ministry of Information and Enlightenment, which announced the action, declared the aim as being "to find new literary talents among the workers, especially among the ranks of workers and peasants, and to facilitate their literary growth in every possible way"[16]. It was also supposed to be about authenticity in artistic creation. However, the results of the workers' engagement in literature were trivial. On the contrary, texts by authors who depicted the factory environment and workers' characters without censorship or embellishment, such as Bohumil Hrabal's prose *Jarmilka*, were banned.

Sending delegations to the Soviet Union was a matter of course, as evidenced by the contemporary press, newsreels, and archival materials of the Union and other artistic organizations, as well as reportage and art books. Furthermore, there was also the welcoming of Soviet writers in our country (Stepan Shchipachev, Vadim Kozhevnikov, the most frequent member of Soviet delegations in Czechoslovakia was Boris Polevoi), but also from other so-called people's democratic countries (Stefan Zolkiewski, Zdzisław Hierowski, Pencho Danchev, Dobrica Ćosić, Petru Dumitriu, etc.) and so-called progressive artists from Western countries (Paul Robson, Howard Fast, Michael Gold, Jorge Amado, Ernst Fischer, Jack Lindsay, Vercors, Theun de Vries, Louis Aragon, Vasco Pratolini, Salvatore Quasimodo...)[17]. One of the most famous pieces of stylized prose reportage in Czech literature from this period, is the title text from Jan Drda's 1952 collection *Krásná Tortiza*, which describes an excursion of Czech farmers to a model collective farm in the Soviet Union. The celebration of Soviet perfection and versatility seems today not only implausible, but above all comical. The fulfilment of the schematicism of the time, however, earned the author the highest literary award, the State Prize for Literature.

The Eastern Orientation of Czech Culture

The political orientation of the state turned definitively towards the East, and Czechoslovakia became a satellite of the Soviet Union. This was also reflected in culture, where the previous preference for Western art, especially French art, also turned to Soviet art and language. There was a complete change in the number of books translated from French or English into Czech, in favour of books translated from Russian[18]. Political, literary and fiction

[16] *Working in Literature*, leaflet, Prague, Memorial of National Literature, fund of the Union of Czechoslovak Writers, unorganized.

[17] Of the Italian art of the 1940s and 1950s, cinema in particular had a great resonance in the Czech environment. The first Italian Film Week in Czechoslovakia was held in 1947. The films shown included *Roma città aperta* and *Paisà* by Roberto Rossellini, *Sciuscià* by Vittorio De Sica, and *Il sole sorge ancora* by Aldo Vergano. The film *Roma ore 11*, directed by Giuseppe De Santis and screened in Czech and Slovak cinemas since 1953, was of great interest to the public. It was seen by more than 1.820.000 people. Other Italian films were shown in Czechoslovak cinemas during the 1950s, and then in the 1960s many Italian directors and screenwriters visited Prague, especially during the 1962 Italian Film Showcase. M. Bauer, *Generace ne/osamělých běžců. Několik poznámek o literatuře a filmu na přelomu padesátých a šedesátých let 20. století*, in *Protřepat, nemíchat! Mezi literární vědou a kulturálními studii*, ed. by D. Skalický – J. Wiendl, Praha 2022, pp. 65-68. In January 1965, Pier Paolo Pasolini was in Czechoslovakia and had several meetings with Czech filmmakers and writers. *Dialogues with Pasolini*, "Divadelní a filmové noviny", 1965 (VIII), 12, p. 9. But that was a different time.

[18] To illustrate, the number of translations from French into Czech published in book form in 1937 was 110 titles, while in 1949 it was 44 books. After February 1948, works of French surrealism or existentialism were completely eliminated. The Czech National Bibliography records two translations of André Breton's works into Czech in 1937, the collection *International Surrealism* for the exhibition of the same name in Prague in 1947, and then translations as late as 1996. Another case is Paul Éluard, whose admiration for Stalin and the Soviet Union at the end of his life is obvious. A collection of his 'political poems' was published in 1950 under the title *I Say What is True*. Albert Camus's novel *The Stranger* was published in 1947, but his next book published in English was *Mor* in 1963. Since November 1989, Camus has been one of the most frequently translated and published French authors in the Czech Republic. Interestingly, only the first two parts of Jean-Paul Sartre's unfinished tetralogy *Les Chemins de la liberté* were published in Czech under the title *Cesty k svobodě* in 1946 and 1947. The third completed volume has not been published in Czech.

works were translated from Russian or Soviet literature (Lenin, Stalin, Trofimov, Dementiev, Plotkin, Gor'kii, Polevoi, Gladkov, Azhaiev, Maiakovskii, Shchipachev, etc.). This is true even though the number of translators from French was considerably higher than the number of translators from Russian. After all, one of the first major problems in Czech education after World War II was the provision of Russian language teaching, as there was a shortage of teachers of this language. The situation was to be improved by the People's Courses in Russian, which were established after February 1948. Russian was primarily intended to enable people to read the writings of Lenin and Stalin.

Learning Russian and translating from it, or from other languages of the Soviet empire (of which Ukrainian was the main one), becomes a sign of a new art, a new literature, a new time, a new society, a new history, a new man: the adjective 'new' was one of the most frequently used at the time, often in a bipolar sense in relation to the old. Russian was described as "the language of communism and the peace camp"[19].

An example of this new orientation is the case of the sixteen-year-old Milan Kundera, who began publishing his first translations from Russian in May 1945 and then from Ukrainian. Soon after the end of World War II, Kundera updated the poem by Vladimir Maiakovskii *Voz'mem vintovki novye* [We'll Get New Rifles] from 1927, which the Russian poet wrote for the weekly magazine for young pioneers and schoolchildren, "Pionerskaia Pravda", and the children's magazine "Pioner". It was used during the so-called Defence Week of the Soviet Union, which took place between 10 and 17 July 1927. The lyrics, set to music several times by Maiakovskii, were highly publicized, and the song was also featured in the 1940 film *Timur i jego komandar* [Timur and His Commandos], based on the novel by Arkadii Gaidar and directed by Aleksandr Razumnyi. Milan Kundera translated the poem in 1945 with the title *Vezmem zbrusu nový kvéry* [Let's Take Brand New Guns], and five years later, in 1950, he gave his translation the title *Písnička Rudé armády* [The Song of the Red Army]. This change was motivated not only by the search for an adequate expression in English, but also by the intention of updating Maiakovskii's text: in 1945, in 1950 and in subsequent printings throughout the 1950s. In addition to the translations of Maiakovskii, Milan Kundera continued to select other Russian and Ukrainian poets, such as Mikhail Kuzmin, David Burliuk, Stepan Shchipachev, Pavel Shubin, Lev Oshinin, Semen Botvinnik, Maksim Ryl'skyi, Tsezar Solodar', Pavlo Tychyna, Stepan Oleinik, etc. He was also interested in Ukrainian folk songs, which he translated into Czech. It was in the mid-1950s that Kundera began translating French poetry. His translation path was therefore the opposite of the direction of official cultural policy.

Violence as a Means of Exercising the Influence of Politics in Literature

The Communist Party finally took power in Czechoslovakia on 25 February 1948. A day later, the so-called Action Committee of the Syndicate of Czech Writers was established and began expelling its members. This action committee, which met for the first time on the day it was formed, originally included sixteen members, including Jan Drda, Marie Majerová, Vítězslav Nezval, Marie Pujmanová, and Václav Řezáč. The composition, however, soon changed. Immediately, exclusions started, which Jan Drda described as a continuation of May 1945. The events of February 1948 were thus justified and given even greater significance by being regarded as a continuation of May 1945[20]. The first writers to be expelled from the Syndicate of Czech Writers were Catholic authors and critics of the

[19] *Ruština jazyk komunismu a tábora míru*, "Kulturni besedy", 1952, 7, cover.

[20] The situation was more complicated in Slovakia, the eastern part of Czechoslovakia, which was in coalition with fascist Germany during World War II and participated in the attack on the Soviet Union in 1941. In the official propaganda of the Slovak state, the Soviet Union was referred to as "Judeo-Bolshevik", and the Slovak Propaganda Office published materials against Bolshevism and Judaism that listed the intellectuals and Catholic officials killed in the Soviet Union. For example, see the publication *Slovensko na prelome – Slowakei im Umbruch* (1941). Stalin was depicted in various illustrations as being led by the hand by a Jew in order to get him to go to war.

Communist Party policy (A. C. Nor, Bedřich Fučík, Josef Knap, Ferdinand Peroutka, František Kovárna, and others).

The leaders of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, the new government and prime minister, and then in June 1948, the elected president, Klement Gottwald, created a climate in society of seeking out, labelling and eliminating the external enemies, the so-called agents of reaction and the West. Soon, however, the search turned to internal enemies who were supposed to have infiltrated the Communist Party and the highest political and state positions and be destroying the construction of socialism. In the latter case, the most famous of the period's trials was that of Rudolf Slánský, General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Czechoslovak Republic's Central Committee, and thirteen other accused officials between 1951 and 1952. Eleven of them were executed. An example of external enemies was the trial of Milada Horáková in 1950, which resulted in four death sentences, including that of the politician and literary critic, historian and translator Záviš Kalandra. From the literary point of view, then, the trials of Christian-oriented intellectuals in 1952, in which the writers Josef Knap, Josef Kostohryz, František Křelina, Václav Renč, Jan Zahradníče and others were sentenced to long prison terms, were also significant. The worst affected poet, Zdeněk Rotrekl, was given life imprisonment instead of the proposed death sentence. The language of the time included expressions such as 'purification of society' or 'purification of public life', 'liquidation of agents', 'exposure of pests', 'punishment and trial', 'revived society', etc. These terms were not only heard in the speech of politicians, judges and journalists, but also became part of works of art.

Czech Writers' Associations in the Late 1940 and Early 1950s

After May 1945, the Syndicate of Czech Writers was carefully structured into seventeen sections. For specific works of art, the main section was the fiction one, which consisted of several subcommittees: criticism, translation, youth literature, theatre, film and radio. The members of all sections, including the fiction department and all its subcommittees, met to discuss current topics, mainly of a political and organizational nature. The chairman of the Syndicate of Czech Writers after the war was the poet František Halas, a man of high artistic and moral repute. He was removed from the literary scene in 1948 and was to play only a formal role in the reorganization of the writers' organization. He died in October 1949 and his last poems were published in book form only after another eight years. People associated with the politics of the Communist Party, who wholeheartedly subscribed to socialist realism and the Soviet Union, were placed at the head of the writers' organization. In addition to the Syndicate of Czech Writers, in the 1940s there were other associations or organizations bringing writers together, such as the Literary Department of the Art Discussion (among other things, he published the magazine "Listy", and in October-December 1947 he organised a series of eight evenings of Young Literature, featuring the most important authors of the young generation). The Circle of Czech Writers, the Moravian Writers' Circle, the Association of Moravian Writers, and the May Society of Fiction Writers, which, however, disappeared after February 1948 (e.g., the liquidation meeting of the Circle of Czech Writers was held on 1 April 1948).

One of the first events that identified artists with the new regime was the meeting of the so-called progressive working intelligentsia in Prague's Lucerna on 27 February 1948. Its purpose was to declare the artists' positive attitude towards the new government of Klement Gottwald. The packed hall was dominated by a podium with members of this government and the necessary flag equipment of the time, i.e. the Czechoslovak flag intermingled with or touched by the Soviet one. The very prominent slogan above the podium read: "With Klement Gottwald to Socialism". The literary spokesman was Jan Drda, who became famous for his schematic, yet popular and well-publicized collection of short stories, *Němá barikáda* [The Silent Barricade], first published in 1946. He became editor-in-chief of "Svobodné noviny", soon re-

named to "Lidové noviny", an organ of the Syndicate of Czech Writers, a member of the National Assembly, and later a candidate and member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia. This combination of political, artistic, creative and organizational positions was common and mutually beneficial at the time. Drda's role was emphasised at the subsequent Congress of National Culture in April 1948, when he sat on the podium next to Klement Gottwald, who was still Prime Minister at the time. At this congress, on 11 April 1948, the Minister of Education, Zdeněk Nejedlý, delivered a paper setting out the "ideological guidelines of our national culture"[21]. The expression 'national culture' was meant to imply the desired form, with the disappearance of individualization and the emphasis on collective conception and importance. The responsibility of artists and cultural workers was utmost, as it corresponded to the nation, and at the same time evoked belonging to the period of the so-called National Revival. The artists of this so-called new era were interpreted as the heirs of the 19th century revivalists, and they were to help solve the problem of cultural, national, linguistic, and moral continuity: while the former had saved and revived the nation in the 19th century, the latter, after February 1948, were supposed to educate and cultivate it – but in compliance with political and ideological demands from outside the cultural sphere, i.e. advocates and builders of socialism, admirers of Stalin and the Soviet Union, readers of works of socialist realism.

In 1948, the Syndicate of Czech Writers was prepared to be transformed into the Union of Czechoslovak Writers. It was a political affair, as evidenced by the fact that it was carried out under the supervision of the Central Action Committee of the National Front. At the same time, the so-called 'membership screening' was being carried out from a qualitative and cultural-political point of view, and a preparatory commission for the reorganization of the Union of Czechoslovak Writers was elected, which also worked on the creation of the statutes of the organization. The statutes of the Union of Soviet Writers, including the political preamble, were adopted as the basis, although the 1947 statutes of the Union of Czech Writers were available. In addition, the organizational structure of the Union was determined. The branch was the lowest organizational level and consisted of two national sections, the Czech and the Slovak. A chairman was elected to head the national section, who was also the vice-chairman of the Union. The sections had committees and bureaus, and their task was to encourage creativity, seek out new authors, organise conferences and publish journals. A congress was declared the supreme body of the Union, to be held every three years, which never happened. (Union congresses were held in 1949, 1956, 1963 and 1967.) The congress was to set the so-called general line of creative writing tasks. Between congresses, the highest organ was the Central Committee, which initially consisted of the president of the Union, the chairmen of the national sections (who were also vice-chairmen of the committee), the general secretary and nine other members.

The Central Committee was responsible for the overall management of the Union, especially all ideological, economic and organizational matters, deciding on delegations, drawing up the budget, deciding on appeals against the admission or expulsion of members. The area of competence of the board was the same: it dealt with all these matters between the meetings of the Central Committee. It was also decided that there would be regional trustees, secretariats at the Central Committee, in the national sections and branches, conciliation and arbitration courts, and an auditing body to check the management of the Union.

If we compare the organizational structure of the Union of Czechoslovak Writers with that of the Union of Czech Writers, we can see that the number of unions, subcommittees, commissions and other bodies was reduced. The number of commissions was significantly reduced and only four permanent commissions were created: creative, foreign, cultural-promotional and economic. The creative commission dealt with questions of creativity, support of the candidates of the Union of Czechoslovak Writers, monitoring of young writers, search for new authors, etc. The Foreign Commission was re-

[21] Z. Nejedlý, *O literatuře*, Praha 1953, p. 44.

sponsible for relations with foreign countries, sending writers abroad and receiving guests, translating Czech works into foreign languages and foreign works into Czech. The Cultural and Promotional Commission organized the training of writers, patronage, took care of press matters (magazines, publishing houses) in terms of ideas, promotion of the Union, organized lectures, discussions, exhibitions, etc. The Economic Commission was responsible for economic matters, scholarships at Dobříš, the social life of writers, their legal protection, etc. Members of the Central Committee were appointed as chairmen of the individual commissions. The formation and scope of activities of the creative, cultural-promotional, foreign policy and economic commissions were declared at the writers' congress in March 1949. Thus, the ideas about the structure of the Union of Czechoslovak Writers presented here were implemented from the founding of the Union, which took place at the First Congress of the Union in March 1949. Jan Drda became chairman of the Union in March 1949 and remained so until the Second Congress of the Union in 1956. The press organs were the daily "Lidové noviny" (in 1952 it became the weekly "Literární noviny") and the monthly "Nový život", the organ of the Czech section the weekly "Kulturní politika" and the organ of the Slovak section the weekly "Kultúrny život". The printing and publishing enterprises of the Union were initially the Lidová tiskárna in Brno, the publishing enterprises Topič and Fr. Borový, including a bookshop, a salon and periodicals, from which the union publishing house Československý spisovatel [Czech Writer] was formed. It was by far the largest publishing house in Czechoslovakia. All private enterprise in the field of non-periodical publishing was banned and centralized by the state. Censorship took place at several levels – writers' organizations, the Communist Party, the state. Published books were divided into three categories: those that would be released for free sale, those that were released for sale in antiquarian bookshops, and those to be destroyed. Permission to publish a book granted before February 1948 was re-examined. Many typescripts were destroyed, and the publication of many books in production was not completed. Probably the most famous case is Jiří Kolář's collection *Roky ve dnech* [Years in Days], which was already printed in 1948 but was never published. There were also inspections of publishers' and booksellers' warehouses, as well as of library collections. "In the first ten years of its power alone, the Communist regime destroyed, that is, tore, burned, dumped or sent to the scrapheap, that is, physically destroyed at least 27.500.000, that is, twenty-seven and a half million, books"[22]. There was a so-called membership cull: on 30 June 1948, the number of members of the Union of Czech Writers was 1614, and the number of members of the Union of Czechoslovak Writers in October 1950 was 220 members and 49 candidates in the Czech section[23]. The organizational structure of the Union was gradually changing, as were its statutes, but their political and ideological basis remained the same throughout the existence of the writers' organization.

The transformation of the Union of Czech Writers and the Society of Slovak Writers into the Union of Czechoslovak Writers at the congress in March 1949 served as an institutional confirmation of the changes in the organization of writers and Czech (and Slovak) literature. Personnel-wise, this transformation was represented by Jan Drda, who became the new chairman of the writers' organization, i.e. the Union, after the removal of the previous chairman of the Syndicate, František Halas. The artistic as well as human credit of both these personalities was incomparable, but Halas's disillusionment with the conditions in the Soviet Union, which he experienced during his visit to that country in 1946, his illness and his inability to engage vigorously in the artistic and social processes of the time played a significant role. On the other side, Jan Drda remained loyal to the regime in power, taking advantage of the offer of a political career and the promotion in the literary sphere that came with it. His book *The Dumb Barricade* could have functioned as a nor-

[22] J. Jedlička, *Dodatek k nenapsaným dějinám české literatury*, "Rozmluvy", 1987, 7, p. 131.

[23] For lists of excluded and retained members of writers' organisations, see M. Bauer, *Ideologie a paměť*, Praha 2003, pp. 274-295.

mative work in the field of Czech prose, specifically the short story. (In the genre of the novel, Václav Řezáč's novels *Nástup* [Rapport] and *Bitva* [Battle] served as normative works, the third part of this trilogy being unfinished; in poetry, it was the work of Vítězslav Nezval.) Drda himself spoke of the writers' organization as an ideological and working one, not a creative or artistic one. In his view, literary work should capture the new Czech man, especially the working man, a new reality that would show the path of the Czech nation to the future, to the so-called socialist tomorrow. Guests of honour at the congress with opening speeches were politicians led by Prime Minister Antonín Zápotocký, the President of the National Assembly Oldřich John, ministers Zdeněk Nejedlý, Václav Kopecký and Ladislav Novomeský. According to Drda, the motto of the congress was President Gottwald's slogan – from words to deeds, from discussion to creation. The congress was held, fittingly, in the National Assembly building in Prague, and President Gottwald was elected honorary chairman, an event which, according to the contemporary press, "was received with thunderous applause"[24]. A writers' delegation came to see Gottwald at Prague Castle, and his letter was read out at the congress, with the obligatory references to the Soviet Union as a model, as well as a characteristic conclusion in which he equated artistic creation with manual labour and entrusted it with specific tasks and obligations. At the same time, he espoused Stalin and the designation of writers as engineers of human souls: "I wish, therefore, that your congress may also end, as the congresses and conferences of industrial and agricultural workers end today, with the slogan 'Get to work!' Do not disappoint the hopes that are placed in you: become engineers of the souls of our people, spokesmen of their aspirations, their love and their hate, become their socialist builders!"[25].

Literature of Power and Power of Literature

The period of the 1950s in Czechoslovakia was characterized by an attempt to make the future visible. Perspectivism was universal and therefore also applied to literature. However, the future was determined, and the task of writers was to fulfil this determination. The norm claimed universal validity, the individual absolute. There are several answers to the question of "why so many eminent artists and leading scholars went along with these tendencies, why they entered into the service of these demands"[26]. One of them is offered at the beginning of this article, through Arnošt Lustig's thoughts on happiness at the writer's castle in Dobříš. Another possibility is the awareness of the crisis of modern art, "often stemming from isolation from a wider circle of consumers, where the very freedom of creation carries with it an inner contradiction that leads many artists to desire identification with super-personal ideas"[27]. This condition then leads the artist to an absence of resistance to the norm. What the post-recession system in Czechoslovakia offered was a considerable possibility of recognition, appreciation in multiple meanings, and a great interest on the part of the recipients. Many of them did not perceive, or did not want to perceive, the contradiction between the direction and their work. They resorted not only to censorship, but also to self-censorship, when they took into account problematic ideas, characters, themes, ways of thinking, etc., but ultimately chose to excise them from their works. Of course, we cannot forget the authors who were truly enthusiastic supporters of the new regime and believed in it. However, many of them, such as Pavel Kohout or Karel Šiktanc, gradually came into conflict with it. When it was founded in 1949, the Union of Czechoslovak Writers had already taken the form of a power-directed organization. In the history of this writers' organization, the opposition to this power and normalization was expressed several times, especially at the second congress in April 1956, more cautiously at the

[24] V. Pekárek, *Spisovatelé do prvních řad budovatelů*, "Lidové noviny", 05.03.1949, p. 1.
[25] K. Gottwald, *Drazí přátelé, soudruzi a soudružky!*, in *Od slov k činům*, ed. by O. Kryštofek – J. Noha, Praha 1949, p. 6.
[26] J. Brabec, *Estetická norma*, op. cit., p. 12.
[27] Ivi, p. 13.

third congress in May 1963 and then significantly at the fourth congress in June 1967. The controlling, power-directed, censorship situation in Czech literature, established at the turn of the 1940s and 1950s, was increasingly rejected by prominent writers such as Jaroslav Seifert, Milan Kundera, Ludvík Vaculík, Pavel Kohout, Ivan Klíma, Alexander Kliment, Josef Škvorecký or Jan Procházka. The totalitarian system's claim to control the individual and society as a whole came into conflict with their need for independent creative space. However, this tension existed throughout the forty years of the regime in Czechoslovakia.

www.esamizdat.it ◇ M. Bauer, *The Form and Functioning of the Union of Czechoslovak Writers in the Late 1940s and Early 1950s in the Context of Czech Literature* ◇ eSamizdat 2024 (XVII), pp. 115-128.

♢ *The Form and Functioning of the Union of Czechoslovak Writers in the Late 1940s and Early 1950s in the Context of Czech Literature* ♢

Michal Bauer

Abstract

The study examines the transformation of the Syndicate of Czech Writers into the Union of Czechoslovak Writers at the turn of the 1940s and 1950s, when the writers' association turned into an ideological organisation fully dependent on official politics. The destruction of private publishing houses and the grouping into large, state-owned ones, is examined and analysed. The paradoxical role of writers and artists after 1948, i.e. to serve and to lead at the same time, is also discussed.

Keywords

Czech Literature of 20th Century, Totalitarian Regime and Literature, Writers' Organizations in Czechoslovakia, Arnošt Lustig, Vítězslav Nezval, Milan Kundera.

Author

Michal Bauer is professor at the Faculty of Arts of the University of South Bohemia in České Budějovice. His main research interests are totalitarian regimes and art, with a focus on literature and film. He is the author of several academic monographs, including the books *Ideology and Memory. Literature and Institutions in 1940s/1950s* (in Czech 2003), *The Song of Darkness or Halas Interpretations after 1948* (2005, in Czech), *Associations of a Labyrinth: Codification of Ideological-Aesthetic Norm in Czech Literature in the 1950* (2009, in Czech). He is a co-author of the collective monograph *History of New Modernity* (3 volumes – 2010, 2014, 2017, in Czech), which examines Czech literature and culture in the 20th century, and the sequel *Chorus and Disonance. Czech Literature 1947-1963* (2022, in Czech). He has contributed to a number of Czech and foreign journals and other books, most recently by studies dedicated to the work of Milan Kundera.

♢ ISSN 1723-4042 ♢