Acta Universitatis Sapientiae, Philologica, **15**, 1 (2023) 126–149

DOI: 10.2478/ausp-2023-0009

# Not Only by Accident. Arthur Koestler's Reception in Post-war Hungary, 1945–1948

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**Abstract.** This article is the first part of a series of publications on Arthur Koestler's reception in Hungary during its transition to Communism. Given the author's iconic status as an anti-Communist writer, it is reasonable to suppose that his texts would have been banned and his name rarely uttered, much less printed, in Hungary before the 1989 regime change. It is thus not surprising that this view is virtually uncontested by scholars both in Hungary and beyond. Yet, as shown here on the basis of thirty-one articles published between April 1945 and June 1948 in Hungarian dailies, journals, and magazines, at least in this early and transitional period, Koestler's writing is not only frequently mentioned but actively discussed. Furthermore, through a closer analysis of the contents of these texts, five specific categories of mentions are identified: (1) Koestler cited as a journalist reporting on contemporary events; (2) his opinion quoted as that of an authority figure; (3) polemics towards Koestler's views; (4) reports on the foreign reception of Hungarian literature, including Koestler; and (5) Koestler used as a public scapegoat.

**Keywords:** Arthur Koestler, reception, Hungary, 1940s, Communism.

## 1. Introduction

There is apparently a consensus amongst Koestler scholars that Arthur Koestler's name was either largely unknown or at least taboo in Communist Hungary until the more liberal decade of the 1980s. While this is a logical supposition, given Koestler's status as an icon of anti-Communist fiction,[1] it is nevertheless barely

1 At the very least, in the period between 1940 (the publication of *Darkness at Noon*) and his 1955 public announcement of a "farewell to arms" in *The Trail of the Dinosaur and Other Essays*. Koestler's stance in both his fiction and non-fiction was staunchly political and anti-

more than a subjective impression made without a proper analysis of the author's reception in Hungary.

As part of a larger project, mapping Koestler's reception in Communist Hungary, below, I therefore analyse Koestler's presence in periodicals during the Communist takeover after the Second World War. As I show below, at least in this transitional period, during which Hungarian communists progressively strengthened their hold on politics as well as the public sphere, including the media, Koestler's name was far from taboo. On the contrary, his name was frequently mentioned, his texts and thoughts also often discussed, and Koestler even appears in major works of reference. The numerous mentions found in the Hungarian press can be divided into five distinct types: (1) Koestler is cited as a foreign journalist, reporting on, or providing commentary on, contemporary events; (2) his opinion is quoted as that of a major thinker or public figure; (3) polemics towards Koestler's views; (4) overviews of the foreign reception of Hungarian literature including Koestler; (5) Koestler as a public scapegoat, including cases in which he had no involvement. This, of course, is at least partially a result of the fact that, as explained in more detail below, at least at the beginning of the period, Hungary had a somewhat more liberal media policy than other countries of the Eastern Bloc, as well as multiple political parties, and this changed only gradually. At the same time, it is also important to stress that Koestler's appearance is not limited to the non-Communist press, with even official and semi-official Communist Party publications regularly mentioning him.

## 2. Koestler's Hungarian Reception as Seen by Contemporary Koestler Studies

The conviction that Arthur Koestler's name was largely unknown or even taboo in Communist Hungary until the more liberal decades of the 1980s is widespread amongst Koestler scholars. Béla Hidegkuti certainly claims this much, listing only three exceptions to an otherwise universal ban on all mentions of Koestler's name, and attributing those exceptions to editorial oversight (2005, 1072). Mátyás Sárközi's verdict sounds even more definitive: "In Hungary, until the 1980s, it was not possible to even mention his books, not even if those books were on the history of science, the nature of thinking, or the Khazars"[2] (2005, 47). Mihály Szívós identifies Koestler as a "persona non grata" of the system (2006, 26), and

Communist, an image further strengthened and promulgated in his output as a journalist. It is exactly this image that has survived ever since, regardless of Koestler's decades-long, and mostly unsuccessful, effort to redefine himself as a writer of scientific non-fiction (cf. Atkins 1956, 7; Levene 1985, 30–32; Gordon 1991, 149; Shorten 2012, 26).

2 All English translations of quotes from sources in Hungarian below are mine, unless noted otherwise.

consequently also of public discourse and cultural enquiry. Tamás Staller likewise calls Koestler a "*persona non grata* in the peace camp"[3] (2007, 10), extending the range of the ban to the whole Eastern Bloc. Robert Blumstock, writing a short time before the fall of the Iron Curtain, similarly not only remained cautious about possible future changes to Koestler's Hungarian reception but described the critical reception preceding the 1980s in a similarly negative albeit more cautious manner:

> As long as the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party defines the parameters of what is, and what is not acceptable literature, Arthur Koestler's books will never be best sellers in Hungary. […] By the time he abandoned political questions in mid-life, Hungary was behind the Iron Curtain, and his anti-Communist reputation was hardly appropriate for encouraging a welcome reception in Hungary. Although his subsequent endeavors […] were less tainted with political sentiments, acceptance continued to elude him and his work in the land of his birth. (Blumstock 1987, 39)

Visibly, Blumstock's verdict is more detailed, more nuanced, and seemingly even better informed than Hidegkuti's and Sárközi's simplistic and rather offhand assessments. This is especially impressive if one takes into consideration that Blumstock's study predates the other two by decades, and his research efforts were much more burdened with the physical as well as the less tangible boundaries erected during the Cold War. That said, in its most important outlines, his opinion is hardly far removed from Hidegkuti's and Sárközi's. In his view, as well, Koestler's texts were unwelcome and unavailable, and his name rarely mentioned.

Most of Koestler's biographers fail to provide a more detailed analysis. Michael Scammell, in his monumental biography, *Koestler: The Literary and Political Odyssey of a Twentieth-Century Skeptic* (2009), for example, merely proliferates the myth of Koestler's total inadmissibility in Hungarian public discourse. In fact, he refers to the exact same article by Aladár Komlós that Béla Hidegkuti considers an example of editorial oversight (2005, 1072), in the following manner: "Koestler's name appeared in print in Hungary for the first time since the end of World War II, in an article on Németh and his circle" (Scammell 2009, 496). Later in the same volume, while discussing the 1970s, Scammell admits that in that decade "[i]nterest in Koestler was also beginning to show up behind the increasingly porous Iron Curtain" (2009, 544). Yet, his view of Koestler's repute in Hungary is considerably direr:

3 For a discussion on the use of the term "peace camp" as a synonym for the Communist Bloc, see Roman Krakovský (2008).

> Koestler's work still didn't make it back to his native Hungary, however, even in samizdat. When George Mikes went to Budapest in 1979 and gave a copy of *The Sleepwalkers* to the director of the Európa publishing house, the latter had no idea who Koestler was, still less that he was a Hungarian and had written *Darkness at Noon*. The first samizdat translation of *Darkness at Noon* into Hungarian didn't appear until 1982, a year before Koestler's death, and the book wasn't officially published in Hungary until just before the Berlin Wall came down in 1989. (Scammell 2009, 544)[4]

Nevertheless, besides being either vague, mistaken, or overly careless in his wording, Scammell is at least painting a more nuanced picture than Hidegkuti, Sárközi, Szívós, and Staller. His slightly more complex view is most probably a result of his familiarity with Blumstock's article (see Scammell 2009, 596).

Some other biographies constitute a group of their own in that they steer clear of the question of Koestler's Hungarian reception completely. David Cesarani's (1998), Iain Hamilton's (1982), and Edward Saunders's (2017) volumes are cases in point. The same is true of Christian Buckard's (2004) and Michel Laval's (2005) biographies although the latter is otherwise unusually detailed in its discussion of Koestler's Hungarian roots and the various political changes in Hungary during Koestler's lifetime.

It would, of course, be logical to expect a discussion of the Hungarian reception from Koestler's Hungarian biographers, and, indeed, Zsuzsanna Körmendy's (2007) and László Márton's (2006) accounts are certainly more useful in this respect. This is especially true for Körmendy, who paints a picture in which Koestler is much more present in Hungarian intellectual life, even if neither officially nor universally. Following her account, it becomes apparent that, at least by the late 1960s and early 1970s, some groups of people, namely university students who were brave enough to ask for permission to access the library of the British Embassy, certain party functionaries at various levels, and those who could get access to samizdats or copies illegally smuggled into Hungary, would have been able to read some of Koestler's texts or works referring to them (Körmendy 2007, 543–546). While admittedly these groups are small, and they likely overlap considerably, it seems reasonable to assume that even they alone would have ensured a rather significant penetration of Koestler's oeuvre, at least amongst the intelligentsia, by the period discussed by Körmendy, i.e. the late 1960s – early 1970s.

4 At this point, Scammell either takes some artistic licence in his formulation, referring to 1988 as "just before the Berlin Wall came down in 1989" (2009, 544), or is factually wrong. Koestler's novel was published by Európa in 1988, most probably in July, and certainly no later than in August, given that, on the occasion of the book's publishing, the August issue of the journal *Mozgó Világ* reprinted the review that Mihály Sükösd (1988) originally wrote for Európa as a publisher's reader in June of the same year.

While her insights are certainly revelatory, one should not be satisfied with such a subjective, albeit informed, assessment. Although certainly not registering the penetration of samizdat publications, smuggled books, or top-secret translations produced for internal use only, one rather objective and well-quantifiable measurement of Koestler's reception in Communist Hungary is an analysis of his mentions in Hungarian dailies, magazines, and books. This is exactly the aim of this paper, focusing on the period between 1945 and 1948, based primarily on the holdings of *Arcanum Digitheca*, a full-text database of the Hungarian press.

These four years, immediately following the Second World War, are especially interesting from the perspective of Koestler's Hungarian reception. In the last stages of the war, with the German occupation of Hungary, Koestler's opportunities for publication, as well as visiting the country, arguably disappeared, given both his Jewish heritage and his anti-fascist and anti-Nazi activities as a member of the German Communist Party.[5] Since by the end of the war Koestler had already published the iconic anti-Communist novel, *Darkness at Noon* (1940), as well as other works critical of communism, such as *Scum of the Earth* (1941), it is reasonable to suppose that Koestler must have found himself amongst those suppressed by yet another regime. Yet, as shown below, the case was much more complex.

One possible reason for this was that, at the beginning of the period, Hungary, at least formally, could be considered a democratic state, not only because of her liberation from German occupation but primarily thanks to "the Declaration on Liberated Europe, in which the Big Three [i.e. the US, the UK, and the USSR] bound themselves to facilitate free democratic elections throughout East Central Europe after the war" (Békés 2022, 21). Just as importantly, besides free democratic elections and a multi-party system, this also meant that a wide range of daily papers, magazines, and journals were published, representing a just as wide and colourful political spectrum, even if with some, very tangible limits.

Nevertheless, one should remember that this certainly never meant fully unconditional democracy. In reality, already when "German occupation was over; Hungary […] fell under Stalin's 'jurisdiction'" (Molnár 2001, 295), and the process of increasing Sovietization started even before Hungary became fully liberated in April 1945: in the provisional National Assembly of December 1944, while *formally* the Communists held only less than one fifth of the seats of government, their *actual* political control extended to almost half of the ministerial posts (Molnár 2001, 296). Seemingly, the Communists' hold on the government loosened following the 1945 elections, "the only free elections in the Soviet sphere"

5 On Koestler's Communist and anti-fascist activities, see e.g. Koestler (1937a–c; 1952, 249–352; 1954, 11–392) and Scammell (2009, 77–163). On his Jewish identity, see especially Avishai (1990), Gordon (1991; 1994), McInnes (1999), Inbari (2021), Staller (2007), and Wasserstein (2009).

(Békés 2022, 39), given the landslide victory of the Independent Smallholders', Agrarian Workers' and Civic Party, "with 57 per cent of mandates" (Molnár 2001, 297). Yet, in reality, the Communists' influence hardly weakened, and possibly even intensified already in the days immediately following the elections, and increasingly so during the next two years (cf. Molnár 2001, 295–300; Békés 2022, 21, 38–42; Mueller 2010, 96, 105–106). As a result, a mere two years after the 1945 elections, in "August 1947, […] the new electoral law, various restrictive measures, and electoral fraud made the HCP the largest party, at 22 percent" (Békés 2022, 59). Yet, with all that, "the left-wing bloc was able to gather only 45 percent of the votes" (Békés 2022, 59), so it was ultimately only through forcing the Smallholders Party into a coalition with the left-wing bloc that they could form a government with "a 60.9 percent majority" (Mueller 2010, 106). With the non-fellow traveller members of the Smallholders' Party having been long eliminated, and the Social Democratic Party and the Peasant Party having gone through cleansings of their own (Mueller 2010, 106), albeit a "parliamentary façade was maintained […], from 1947, the semi-democratic regime had had its day" (Molnár 2001, 300–301). And while the elections themselves, even if somewhat manipulated and restrictive, could still reasonably be considered democratic, Hungary herself was democratic only in name, with parliament and country likewise under Communist control.

Afterwards, the Sovietization of Hungary further accelerated, culminating in the elections of 1949, where people could only vote *for* or *against* the "candidates of an artificial Popular Front, nominated in reality by the Communist Party" (Molnár 2001, 301), and where "[o]f the votes cast […], 5,478,515 were for the list of the People's [= Popular] Front, i.e., 95.6 per cent, and 165,283 against. The number of ballots invalidated was 86,721" (Kertész 1950, 51).[6] In fact, changes were so rapid that it is debatable at what exact point takeover could be considered definite. For the purposes of this article, it is sufficient to note that while the process was formalized in May 1949, it was arguably *de facto* final already in June 1948, at the time of the merger of the HCP and the SDP (Molnár 2001, 300–301). For the sake of convenience, I thus provide an overview of Koestler's Hungarian reception between April 1945 and June 1948.

Before doing so, however, it is also worth returning to the question of the freedom of the press and its changes in the period, which, understandably, closely mirror the political developments. Nevertheless, even given the aforementioned variety of periodicals, representing various shades of the political spectrum, one should certainly not imagine this period as one with an unlimited freedom of speech, not even at the beginning. While outlets representing a relatively wide range of opinions existed, Hungarian media were neither completely free nor uncensored in any period of the transformation. Already the Armistice of 20

6 More recent sources offer slightly different albeit less detailed data, but the general picture remains the same. Cf. e.g. Molnár (2001, 301): 96.27%; Pražák (2005, 102): 95%.

January 1945, or more specifically its "article 16 stated that the publication of periodicals was only possible on the condition of the Soviet-controlled Allied High Command's prior permission" (Sz. Nagy 2014, 105), ensuring that only periodicals deemed acceptable by the Soviets could get published. Yet, an even stricter form of control was introduced by the provisional government: on 1 March of the same year, a censorship of the press was instituted with the prime minister's decree no. 390/1945, establishing the central control of proofs before printing (Sz. Nagy 2014, 106). Albeit the papers of the parties of the Popular Front were given an exception from this regulation a month and a half later (Sz. Nagy 2014, 106), the decree retained active censorship for all other periodicals. While arguably governmental decree 11290/1947 mostly merely reinstated the rules codified in article 16 of the Armistice agreement, it is important to note that it nevertheless removed the right of decision from the hands of the formally independent, yet Soviet-controlled, Allied High Command and entrusted the minister of information with this role. This, in theory, might have allowed for more liberal policies, yet this was hardly the case since by 19 September 1947, when the decree was issued, as mentioned above, the government was practically, even though not formally, under Communist control. Perhaps just as importantly, the validity of the Decree was explicitly extended retroactively, applying not only to new requests but also to previously already permitted periodicals, effectively allowing for the closing of already established outlets. Just as importantly, yet another decree, 326/1947 of the minister of information, significantly narrowed the group of potential applicants eligible for such a permission: from this moment on, only in exceptional cases could natural persons apply for these permits, and even juridical persons' representatives had to submit birth certificates and certificates of good conduct in attachment to their application (Horváth 2013, 8). From 1948, permissions were no longer issued by the Ministry of Information but directly by the Press Department of the Office of the Prime Minister (Horváth 2013, 9). In other words, albeit some may have claimed that "the press was almost free" (Gati 1986, 14), Stephen D. Kertész's harsher assessment seems closer to the truth: "Freedom of speech did not exist. Even after the end of Russian censorship, the Communists effectively controlled the press through a system of licenses, allocation of newsprint, and the trade-union of the printers" (1950, 26).

Indeed, as Kertész mentions, there were two other effective methods besides limiting the legality of publishing activities: the distribution of paper and the use of labour unions for obstructing the publication of potentially critical outlets. As Gábor Sz. Nagy explains:

> It is no exaggeration to claim that paper supply is one of the most important issues of post-1918 media history, since this is not simply a problem of economics, but also of politics. Thus, it could serve as a highly efficient

> tool of censorship in the hands of power, given that in most cases it is very difficult to distinguish which of these two aspects is behind specific decisions. (Sz. Nagy 2014, 106)

This strategy was very effectively exploited by the Communists, who, "at first with the assistance of the AHC, and later through their own position of power, limited the opposition dailies' paper supply" (Horváth 2013, 19). An intriguing early case is discussed in detail by Gábor Sz. Nagy (2014). Szilárd Szajda (2003) goes as far as to claim that in that period manipulating the paper supplies was the most important method of exercising control over the press. In addition, the increasingly Communist-infiltrated labour unions could be utilized in a similar manner: under their pressure, "printers refused to handle articles unfavourable to or objected to by the Communist Party" (Kertész 1950, 36).

That is to say, while the media landscape of Hungary in the period was indeed varied, with multiple outlets representing various political parties and ideologies, it was certainly neither uncensored nor completely free. Overly critical papers could not even get published, and even those that did appear were under varying levels of pressure in the form of artificial, or at least artificially worsened, paper shortages, the labour unions' refusal to print specific issues or articles, or even more explicit forms of interference, including censorship or the revoking of licences. It is in this context that Arthur Koestler's media reception is situated.

## 3. Koestler in the 1945–1948 Period: A Frequent Point of Reference

In these four years of political change, Arthur Koestler's name appeared in thirty-one articles published in seventeen different periodicals, as opposed to once during the Second World War and twenty-five times in the pre-war part of the 1930s.[7] In other words, he was mentioned significantly more frequently in Hungary in the short transitional period discussed in this article than in the more than three times longer period immediately before it. Of those seventeen periodicals in the 1945–1948 period, eight were dailies, five weeklies, and the remaining four journals with lower periodicity. The periodical with the highest number of articles about him was the daily *Magyar Nemzet* [Hungarian Nation] (8 articles), followed by the weeklies *Haladás* [Progress] and *Új Magyarország*

7 During the war, i.e. between September 1939 and the end of March 1945, his name appears only in the April 10, 1943 issue of *Magyar Nemzet* [Hungarian Nation], in András Frey's (1943) article entitled *Megint van külpolitika* [There is Foreign Policy Once Again], discussing Koestler's *Scum of the Earth* in some detail. In the rest of the 1930s, Arthur Koestler is mentioned twenty-five times in total, in thirteen different periodicals.

[New Hungary] (both 3 articles), the weekly *Új Idők* [New Times], and the dailies *Szabadság* [Freedom] and *Szabad Nép* [Free People] (with 2 articles each). The latter two were, surprisingly, Communist dailies,[8] *Magyar Nemzet*, in this period, was a daily with strong democratic convictions, leaning to the right of the political spectrum,[9] and *Új Magyarország* was edited by Iván Boldizsár, a prominent, leftist member of the National Peasant Party (Horváth 2013, 14).[10] *Haladás* was one of the media outlets of the Hungarian Radical Party (Horváth 2013, 14), a social-liberal political formation (Péteri 1993, 291). Finally, *Új Idők* was a major conservative, middle-class weekly (Bata 2018, 112–113). In short, even a cursory glance at these periodicals shows an interest encapsulating the whole political spectrum, and a more in-depth reading, as it is shown below, does not contradict this view either.

Just as crucially, Koestler's status was stable enough to warrant his presence even in major works of reference. The first literary encyclopaedia published after the war, *Hungária Irodalmi Lexikon* [Hungária Literary Encyclopaedia] (1947), has an entry on Koestler, albeit with several mistakes. It lists 1882 as his year of birth, making him twenty-three years older than his real age and claiming that he was interned by the Germans during the war (Révay and Kőhalmi 1947, 287–88). The entry correctly identifies Koestler as a reporter of the *News Chronicle* in the Spanish Civil War, including his death sentence. Interestingly, it claims that *Thieves in the Night* (1946) is Koestler's best-known novel, adding that "its characters are Jews, Arabs, English people and American journalists: he elaborates on the Jewish question in its entirety in the guise of a Palestinian story" (Révay and Kőhalmi 1947, 288). This treatment is certainly not an effort to avoid discussing *Darkness at Noon*, which has a sentence of its own: its "topic is that of those disillusioned with the revolution (K. himself is one of them): the contrast of the revolutionary ideology and its practical execution" (Révay and Kőhalmi 1947, 288).

The second volume of the first general-purpose encyclopaedia published after the war, *Révai Kétkötetes Lexikona* [Révai's Two-Volume Encyclopaedia] (1948),

8 *Szabadság* only *de facto* controlled by the Hungarian Communist Party, indirectly and hiding behind the façade of a coalition of democratic forces while *Szabad Nép* officially and proudly declaring itself the central daily of the Party (cf. Sz. Nagy 2014, 106, 108).

9 At the time of its foundation, in the late 1930s, it had a strongly Catholic and conservative profile, but later went through phases of being an independent conservative daily, then being closely affiliated with the Independent Smallholders', Agrarian Workers' and Civic Party, and even later with the Independent Hungarian Democratic Party (Cf. Martin 2002, 105; Szajda 2003, 62).

10 The NPP was a radical agrarian party, with a programme to represent the interests of the poorest agricultural workers, from an emphatically nationalist but anti-fascist perspective, advocating agrarian socialism, but ultimately rather divided between at least two, or possibly three strong factions between a rather class-based, socialist, or even Communist left-wing, a more agricultural nationalist right-wing, and a moderate, centrist group of intellectuals (Cf. Szeredi 2014, 104, 117, 143; Barta 2016, 275–276).

also has an entry on Koestler. This is understandably much shorter, only a single sentence: "English journalist and novelist, lately increasingly serving reactionary interests" (Juhász 1948, 59). Koestler's year of birth is listed in an identically incorrect manner, as this information is from the earlier publication. What is more notable, however, is the critical labelling ("reactionary") in striking contrast to *Hungária*'s neutral discussion of Koestler's disillusionment with communism. This is arguably at least partially the result of the political changes during the time that has passed between the two publications.

Returning now to the periodical press, a closer analysis not only reveals that his writings are regularly discussed, but also allows for a categorization of the types of articles he appears in. The first category comprises the numerous cases when his articles published in English or German periodicals are reprinted or digested in Hungarian papers. These are typically Koestler's articles on the Jewish resettlement of Palestine. The daily *Világ* [World] published a digest on 22 November 1946 of one of Koestler's articles in *Weltwoche* on the situation in Palestine, referring to him as an "outstanding writer" (*Világ* 1946, 3). Koestler's name also appears in Elek Máthé's article (1947), *Ne csodálkozzunk!* [Do Not Wonder!], published in the 31 July 1947 issue of *Haladás*. Here, Máthé debates the main claims of an argumentative piece published by Sándor Ungár in the previous issue of the same weekly. He uses Koestler's *Thieves in the Night* to argue that Zionism and being religious are not mutually interchangeable, and many Zionists are non-religious (Máthé 1947, 7).[11] Likewise, on 13 September 1947, the magazine *Politika* [Politics], published and edited by major figures of the Independent Smallholders', Agrarian Workers' and Civic Party, reprints the letter Koestler sent to the New Statesman and Nation about the situation in Palestine (Koestler 1947, 10).

*Szocializmus* [Socialism], the official magazine of the Social Democratic Party of Hungary, reports in an essay by György Káldor, entitled *Tudomány és Társadalom* [Science and Society], appearing on 1 October 1946, on a series of radio talks broadcast on the BBC Home Service on Sundays, "The Challenge of Our Time," later published as a series of essays under the same title. While only the article's last two pages are devoted to an analysis of the broadcasts themselves (Káldor 1946, 458–459), its general focus also mirrors that of the radio broadcasts: "the lack of synthesis in modern thinking and in particular the wide gulf between the scientific and the humanistic approach to life" (Wyndham-Goldie et al. 1948, 12).

The second type of articles uses Koestler's writing as argument in polemics not fought with Koestler himself. György Parragi's long article, *Az értelmiség válsága* [The Crisis of the Intelligentsia] in *Magyar Nemzet* presents the thesis that of the three revolutionary groups of Hungarian society: workers, peasants,

11 It is worth mentioning here that with *Thieves in the Night* first appearing in its original English version in autumn 1946, *Magyar Nemzet* informed Hungarian readers about this fact as early as 30 October 1946 (cf. Tábori 1946a, 3; Scammell 2009, 280).

and the intelligentsia, the last one is in a double crisis. The first layer of this crisis, in Parragi's view, is economic: intellectuals are basically starving. What he sees, however, as more of a problem, is that they also have a spiritual crisis (Parragi 1946, 1). He sees this latter aspect as a phenomenon rather general than specifically Hungarian, building his argument on two sources: José Ortega y Gasset's *La Rebelión de las masas* [*The Revolt of the Masses*] (1930) and Arthur Koestler's *The Yogi and the Commissar* (1945a), devoting only three paragraphs to the former and seven to the latter. He sees Koestler as a major inspiration for the Hungarian left and calls him "a spearhead of humanist Socialism, whose works have especially raised the attention of left-wing intellectuals" (Parragi 1946, 1), adding that "although we […] do not share all of his views, yet his thoughts provide a useful guiding light in examining the spiritual crisis of Hungarian intelligentsia and its causes" (Parragi 1946, 2). Parragi's discussion is essentially only a summary of the main ideas of a single essay, *The Intelligentsia* (Koestler 1945a, 70–84), used in support of his own argument, but a fair one, reprinting some of Koestler's most critical thoughts without any dampening: "In [Koestler's] view, *the intelligentsia, even in its minority position, must insist on the independence of thought, the freedom of the spirit, on fundamental human beliefs, and on humanism*" (Parragi 1946, 1; emphasis in the original). Parragi even repeats Koestler's warning against lowering the intelligentsia to obedient, uncritical servants of the interests of the party (Parragi 1946, 2).

Parragi later extended his article into a public lecture that he held on 14 November 1946 at the Faculty of Law of the Royal Hungarian Pázmány Péter University (renamed only years later to Eötvös Loránd University) "in front of an audience of several hundred people" (*Magyar Nemzet* 1946, 3). A short report about his lecture refers to Koestler as a "humanist socialist" and lists him as an example, alongside the other thinkers quoted by Parragi, of people who "broke free of the narrow limits of partisan sectarianism, and joined ranks for universal, great human ideals, for natural law, the freedom of spirit, and a new humanism" (*Magyar Nemzet* 1946, 3). The aim of Parragi's lecture apparently was to convince his audience that the emerging Hungarian Republic must be based on freedom of thought and action, and a new humanism, while its citizens should make their voices heard whenever they saw tyranny and oppression or when universal human rights were trampled upon (*Magyar Nemzet* 1946, 3).

In a similar vein, László Madácsy, in his article entitled *Az ember és a béke* [Man and Peace], published in the 27 August 1946 issue of *Szegedi Népszava* [People's Voice of Szeged], quotes Koestler's 1943 prediction about post-war peace agreements:

> In a 1943 issue of the *New York Times Magazine*, Arthur Koestler writes, with prescient wisdom, that unless some unseen turn happens, victory and

> *peace will be conservative*. It will not bring any kind of permanent solution for the savagely mutilated Europe, nor any remedy for the errors rooted in capitalism, or significant progress for humanity. "It will bring an enormous temporary relief to the people of the Continent, it will bring salvation to millions whose life seemed doomed, and a certain minimum of liberty, decency, security. Briefly, it will be a new, perhaps slightly improved, edition of the pre-Hitlerian old order, a nineteenth-century postscript to the first half of the twentieth, which history has written in such abominable style." (Madácsy 1946, 5; emphasis in the original)[12]

Although Madácsy's article is pessimistically critical of the peace agreements and what followed them, the common feature in both his and Parragi's article is the use of Koestler's writing for initiating a public debate about democracy and the direction Hungary and Europe were taking at the time.

On 22 July 1945, *Néplap* [People's Daily], the official daily of the Hungarian Communist Party in Eastern Hungary, published a full-page article commemorating the Spanish Civil War. This text, written by Miklós Világ, lists Koestler as one of those who warned the world against the brutality of Spanish Fascism in vain: "Ehrenburg's world-famous indictment, *No pasaran!* was of no use, Koestler's books, *Menschenopfer unerhört*, [and] *Spanish Testament*, the (conservative) Duchess of Atholl's *Searchlight on Spain*, the writing of Malraux and Hemingway were of no use either. The world was progressing toward Fascism to crush humankind" (Világ 1945, 4). While it is questionable if the Duchess of Atholl is rightfully described as a conservative,[13] the reference to Koestler's book is even more notable. Not only does Koestler's name appear in a positive context in an official Communist daily five years after the publication of *Darkness at Noon* and four years after *Scum of the Earth*, but Világ also refers to *Menschenopfer unerhört* [Unparalleled Human Sacrifice] (1937), Koestler's relatively little-known first book on the Spanish Civil War. It would have been less surprising had he referred to its French edition, *L'Espagne ensanglantéé* [Blood-Soaked Spain, 1937], which "sold between 2,000 and 3,000 copies," a figure that "wasn't bad at such an early stage in the war" (Scammell 2009, 130), but the German original must have been much rarer. Matthias Weßel estimates that even the much more successful German edition of the other book mentioned by Világ, *Spanish Testament*, issued by the Swiss Europa Verlag in 1938, must have appeared at most in 5,000-6,000 copies,

12 The article's direct quote from Koestler's article is reproduced from the English original (Koestler 1943, 5). The rest is my own translation from Hungarian.

13 George Orwell (1945) once called the duchess "the pet of the Daily Worker" and alleged that she "lent the considerable weight of her authority to every lie that the Communists happened to be uttering at the moment." In fact, she was also known for some time as the "Red Duchess" although "[n]o one could have been more vociferous in her hatred of Communist oppression" (Masters 2001, 251).

but 3,000 is a much more realistic estimate, of which around 2,000 copies still remained unsold as late as 1944 (Weßel 2021, 125). With *Menschenopfer unerhört* [Unparalleled Human Sacrifice] having been published by "Willi [Münzenberg]'s Éditions du Carrefour" in Paris (Scammell 2009, 130), the number of copies sold was almost certainly only a fraction of Europa's numbers. Therefore, Miklós Világ's reference to Koestler's earlier two Spanish books potentially indicates a very close familiarity with his oeuvre.

It is not surprising, given Koestler's "take-no-prisoners style of argument and proneness to exaggeration in his polemics" (Scammell 2009, 441), that the third category of articles comprises those where it is Koestler's own writing that sparks public debates. The 15 August 1946 issue of *Haladás*, the weekly of the Hungarian Radical Party, prints an overview of new books by Hungarian authors in London. No author is listed, nor even a title, and while enthusiastic about the number of new English books by Hungarians, it merely lists authors and books with as short descriptions as possible. The text ends with the following, rather innocent-looking value judgement: "We left him as last, but he of course stands first, Arthur *Koestler*, who has one novel advertised these days in London, the one entitled *Darkness at Noon*" (*Haladás* 1946, 2). This is all what is about Koestler in the short report, and the remark about Koestler standing first might simply refer to his fame or the amount of his books sold, yet *Szabadság*, a paper that although it styled itself a "democratic daily," was in fact only "nominally multi-party, but [in reality] under strong Communist influence" (Sz. Nagy 2014, 111), cannot let that remark pass. It prints an anonymous reaction on 25 August to *Haladás*'s likewise anonymous article, entitled *Egy persze és ami mögötte van…* [One of Course and What There Is Behind It…]. It is not only the title that is unambiguously over-fixated on that one word:

> Well, it is worth stopping by for a moment at this "of course." Where does this nonchalant choice of words originate? The author of the report – of course! – is unlikely to have been influenced solely by the, truly existing, Koestler-fad in the West to have used such an unsparing formulation; much rather by what is hidden behind Koestler's, the new saint's, success. (*Szabadság* 1946, 2)

While this formulation is clearly promising, the text does not deliver on its own promise and never reveals what the secret of Koestler's success in the West could be. Instead, it seemingly reprints a critical remark voiced by Harold J. Laski in his review of Koestler's *The Yogi and the Commissar* that appeared in the 9 May 1945 issue of *The Manchester Guardian*. The word "seemingly" is warranted because Laski is misquoted. This is what one reads in *Szabadság*: "Professor Lasky [sic!] himself, theoretician of the English Labour Party, who can by no means be charged

with Communist sympathies, writes the following about him in *The Manchester Guardian*: 'Koestler's unforgiveable sin is that he delivers anti-Soviet arguments to the reaction that has run out of arguments…'" (1946, 2). In reality, Laski only mentions the Soviets once in his review, in a radically different context: "Granted Mr. Koestler's experiences, it is not difficult to understand why he should write with furious hatred of the Soviet Union and all its works, with disillusioned anger at the failure of Continental Marxism, and with cynical contempt for the Labour Party, Left intellectuals, and most of the aspects of that tradition in which he grew up" (Laski 1945, 3). Rather than deriding Koestler for being anti-Soviet, he fully understands his position, and even Koestler's criticism of Laski's own party. Nor are the quotation marks in *Szabadság*'s text warranted, as no such sentence appears in the original. The closest formulation is this: "he does not understand that he has now become the unconscious instrument of the very reaction he was so anxious once to destroy" (Laski 1945, 3). Instead of unforgiveable sin, Laski talks of an unconscious mistake arising from a lack of understanding. *Szabadság*'s use of Laski's review is arguably a case of tendentious manipulation, fitting well with the rest of the article, since it also alleges that Koestler "was cordially received in some English circles even before the war because of his anti-Soviet behaviour" (*Szabadság* 1946, 2). This is markedly untrue: Koestler applied for membership in the German Communist Party at the end of 1931, and became a member in early 1932 (Scammell 2009, 82). He stayed a member for six years until "[o]n April 22, 1938, he wrote a brief letter to the Writers' Association party caucus announcing his resignation" (Scammell 2009, 161). Even after leaving the party, Koestler "continued to number party members among his friends, and to remain within the Communist orbit, for at least another two years" (Scammell 2009, 163).

The fourth group of articles can be summarily called reception pieces: they are either reviews of Koestler's texts or provide a panoramic overview of his foreign reception, sometimes as part of the discussion of other Hungarian writers' texts. On 3 March 1946, for example, *Világosság* [Light], the official newspaper of the Social Democratic Party of Hungary digests a review of Koestler's only play, *Twilight Bar* (1945b), which originally appeared in an unidentified issue of *Danubian Reviewi*, which, if one is to trust *Világosság*, was published in New York (Strem 1946, n. p.). My scepticism is not unwarranted: Koestler is referred to as an American author. Interestingly, the paper uses Koestler's play to argue that "we might all inevitably perish […] unless one or another of those idealist visionaries who still believe in the possibility of human happiness *grabs control in the last moment and saves humanity*" (*Világosság* 1946, 6). A striking turn of interpretation for a disillusioned work published by a just as disillusioned Koestler.

Similar to daily papers, literary and political magazines also discuss Koestler's work, initially in a positive context. *Új Idők*, one of the period's most important literary magazines, writes the following in its 10 June 1946 issue:

> A new English essayist, George Orwell, whose name we already know from the columns of *Horizon*, *Tribune*, and other papers, devotes a major essay in his recently published book, entitled *Critical Essays*, to Arthur *Koestler*, a Hungarian-born titan of the English book market. Koestler worked as a reporter of *News Chronicle* in the Spanish Civil War, and he has been roaming the world since, writing his innovative books that have brought him world-wide fame. Orwell juxtaposes him to the living greats of political fiction, *Silone*, *Malraux*, *Salvemini*, *Borkenau*, Victor *Serge*, and based on his five English books, paints him as the archetype of the left-wing continental writer. (G. J. 1946, 344; emphasis in the original)

In fact, Orwell's essay, while certainly discussing Koestler's works in the context of the authors mentioned above, is hardly as enthusiastic and positive as *Új Idők*'s author, listed only under their initials.

*Sorsunk* [Our Fate], the Pécs-based literary magazine of agrarian writers, likewise provides an overview of the foreign reception of Hungarian literature, this time the French one, and is similarly proud and appreciative of Koestler's efforts and reputation:

> The name and works of the Budapest-born Koestler Artúr are now synonymous with "a man of freedom" seeing the world in its full complexity. His books (one of which, *Le Zéro et l'Infini*, was one of the most successful books in Paris) and articles are the greatest texts of true democratic freedom at present. […] His *Spartacus* [= The Gladiators] has been translated from English to French by the Paris-based Somogy. (Rezek 1947, 234)

As a further example of this generally positive view, Koestler is similarly mentioned as a successful writer in Pál Tábori's essay in the 9 January 1946 issue of the weekly *Új Magyarország* [New Hungary] on the difficulties for Hungarian writers to become visible in Britain (Tábori 1946b, 10).

This enthusiasm about Koestler's successes, and the willingness to discuss his thoughts in earnest, disappears by the end of the period. *Új Idők* provides a revelatory example of the progressive change. While in 1946, the contributor listed as G. J. still calls Koestler a "titan" and his books "innovative" (G. J. 1946, 344), in 1948, another initials-only contributor, S. E., reports briefly on Roger Garaudy's *Une littérature de fossoyeurs* [*Literature of the Graveyard*] (1947). This book would hardly be of much interest in and of itself:

> According to Garaudy, practically all of modern literature, whether in its pessimistic subject matter or in its aesthetic escapism, has come out

> against the joy of the new life. By the end, Garaudy's attack seems to achieve incoherence and approach within hailing distance of hysteria. […] Garaudy's little book at first presents its subject as the state of contemporary fiction, and the novel in particular, but […] he erases altogether the fictional nature of *Darkness at Noon*. That is typical of the attacks on Koestler. Also formulaic was Garaudy's charge that, in contrast to the modulated subtleties of correct Marxist thought, Koestler's gross either-ors were puerile simplisms. (Fleming 2009, 77)

Yet, in the *Új Idők* text, this book is presented as if it were completely objective in its treatment, and his author, whom John V. Fleming calls "an intellectual gadfly" (2009, 75), an absolute authority on literature:

> IT IS ABOUT "LITERARY FALSIFIERS" that Roger *Garaudy*, who belongs amongst the bests of French aesthetes and literary historians with a Marxist worldview, wrote an interesting little book. Whom does Roger Garaudy consider "literary falsifiers"? Jean-Paul Sartre, whom he calls "a false prophet;" François Mauriac, whom he labels "a proclaimer of servitude;" André Malraux, in whom he sees a propagator of the spirit of fascism; and finally, Arthur Koestler, who recently published a whole range of falsities in his works on the Soviet Union and Palestine. (S. E. 1948, 362; emphasis in the original)

Indeed, "Koestler would have had grounds for self-congratulation to have been included in such a group" (Fleming 2009, 75), but there is no hint of irony in the description of this book in *Új Idők*. In a mere two years, Koestler's reputation in the same literary journal has changed from "the archetype of the left-wing continental writer" (G. J. 1946, 344) to that of an anti-Communist liar.

Koestler's writing is similarly critically referenced in Sándor Cseresnyés's review of Aladár Tamás's *Gyanús emberek* [*Suspicious People*] (1947), published in the 27 December issue of *Új Magyarország*. Tamás's book is a novel/memoir of his captivity in Le Vernet Internment Camp. Cseresnyés, who himself was interned in French camps, discusses Koestler's *Scum of the Earth*, albeit without mentioning its title, and contrasts it with Tamás's later text. His view of Koestler's book is decidedly negative, even charging him with conspiracy:

> *Suspicious People* is not the first book written about Le Vernet, the disgrace of the Third Republic. Tamás's bunkmate, *Arthur Koestler*, who is also one of the novel's characters, *likewise wrote a book* about the camp. Koestler, who naturally held a very close and good relation with the Deuxième Bureau – since *he himself* also *worked in a "related profession"* –, only ended up

> in Le Vernet by mistake, and was soon released. Thus, he naturally drew a distorted image of the life of "C-island" since doing so was his aim. Besides, he assessed the anti-fascists of Le Vernet from the same perspective as his friend, the camp's intelligence officer. Therefore, Koestler's book is *false and slanderous*. (Cseresnyés 1947, 10; emphasis in the original)

While alleging that the disillusioned Communist, but still decidedly leftist and most certainly Jewish, Koestler, who documents his escape from the spreading Nazi influence in Vichy France in *Scum of the Earth*, was an undercover French spy is certainly an original and creative albeit baseless charge, the fact remains that Koestler's book is at least discussed in some detail in a major newspaper.

The 15 March 1947 issue of *Kis Újság* [Little Newspaper], the official daily of the Independent Smallholders', Agrarian Workers' and Civic Party, discusses the heated debates emerging in France as a result of the French publication of Koestler's *Darkness at Noon*: *Le Zéro et l'Infini*. Although the anonymous article mentions the lavish praise Koestler's novel received from some critics, it devotes the majority of its attention to summarizing, and also quoting at length, the Communist Georges Mounin's hard-line partisan criticism of the novel (*Kis Újság* 1947, 6). Thus, while it is certainly not very appreciative of Koestler's book, nor could one expect such a treatment from the official newspaper of a party governing the country in coalition with the communists, the novel is certainly discussed at length and in enough detail to raise readers' interest.

Yet, although the tendency in Koestler's changing reputation is clear, it would be a mistake to imagine that by 1948 there was a monolithic media policy of portraying Koestler in negative contexts only. In Lajos Kassák's literary magazine, *Kortárs* [Contemporary], Imre Pán published a short overview of new publications by Hungarian writers abroad and exhibitions by Hungarian painters and sculptors in its 15 March 1948 issue. This brief report contains no judgement of any of the authors and artists mentioned (either positive or negative) and finishes with the sentence: "In testimony that the [human] spirit transcends borders" (Pán 1948, 363).

Finally, the last group of articles does not even concern Koestler directly: his name only appears in them as an act of association by juxtaposition. *Szabadság*, a paper consistently negative in their discussion of anything remotely Koestler-related, published in its 27 June 1948 issue a short article, *Kapard meg az antibolsevista írót, kibújik alóla…* [Scratch the Anti-Bolshevist Writer, and There He Emerges…]. This text presents as breaking news that the author of the anti-Communist bestseller *Out of the Night* (1941), Jan Valtin, published the book under a pseudonym: his real name was Richard Krebs, and he used to be an agent of the Gestapo (*Szabadság* 1948, 4). In reality, these facts hardly count as breaking news in 1948. Valtin/Krebs admitted to this much already at

his hearing on 26 May 1941, seven years earlier, mere months after the book's publication, in front of the House Un-American Activities Committee (Dies et al. 1941, 8480). It is also apparent from his hearing that his Gestapo connections were widely publicized by the Communist Party of the USA years before Valtin even published his book. While the party's strategy thus seems puzzling at first, it makes sense. As Valtin himself mentioned during his hearing, he became at some point a double agent (Fleming 2009, 102). But when he left the German Communist Party out of disillusionment, as a person who knew too much, he became dangerous for the movement:

> Richard Jensen […] had Krebs's passport, and he used it to make a kind of "Wanted" poster with Krebs's photograph and the boldface legend "Beware! Gestapo Agent!" He circulated this worldwide through the ubiquitous Communist sections of seamen's clubs. The Comintern authorities rightly suspected that Krebs would head for America, and they made sure that a version of the poster was published, with commentary, in New York in *The Daily Worker*, in February and March 1938. (Fleming 2009, 126)

Ten years later, *Szabadság* followed the same tactics: it mentioned his involvement in the Gestapo, and withheld that he did that for, and with the approval of, the German Communist Party, hoping thus to discredit whatever he has to say about Communism (Fleming 2009, 101).

This, however, still does not explain what makes this case relevant at all in 1948. The answer can be found in a heavily publicized pair of court cases in France, related to Valtin's book but not involving Valtin himself: his name emerges in both cases because two French politicians, René Cance and Pierre Villon, are independently charged with being former spies based on Valtin's book (Bourgeois 2011, 29–30). This context, however, would remain completely unknown to the reader if it depended only on *Szabadság*. The daily makes absolutely no mention of the court cases and focuses only on discrediting Valtin, and, by extension, Arthur Koestler and others.

At the same time, not all papers choose to stay enigmatic about the French court cases. Imre Kelemen's article, *Herr Kreps* [sic!] *nem bír a "sárkánnyal"* [Herr Krebs Cannot Tackle the "Dragon"], published in the 6 July 1948 issue of *Szabad Nép*, the official daily of the Hungarian Workers' Party, is much more detailed and specific. While Kelemen misspells both the birth name (as Kreps instead of Krebs) and the pseudonym (referring to Valtin as Jean instead of Jan) and incorrectly states that Valtin wrote the book just a few months previously, he at least provides the major outlines of the Cance case correctly, except for insinuating that the case was also against Valtin himself, while it was only against the dailies that used the book as evidence (Kelemen 1948, 2).

Interestingly, both articles mention Koestler in connection with Valtin. In the *Szabadság* article (1948, 4), he is presented as an immoral supporter of the author of *Out of the Night* alongside a few other such personalities. Kelemen (1948, 2) goes even further, suggesting that these people acted as Valtin's character witnesses at court. Given the fact that both Valtin and Koestler were disillusioned former communists who wrote books criticizing communism, Koestler's endorsement for such an author was certainly not impossible. I have not been able, however, to find any evidence whatsoever of him doing so, neither at the time of the publication of the original book in 1941 nor seven years later.[14] It seems more likely that the charge is made-up, and Koestler, Malraux, Daladier and the others, along with Valtin, comprise rather a "wish-list" of the two articles' authors: if only they could all be discredited in a single stroke.

## 4. Conclusions

In short, then, an in-depth analysis of Koestler's reception in Hungary shows that in the period between the end of the Second World War and the Communist takeover in June 1948, Koestler appears in five distinctly identifiable scenarios in the Hungarian press. In the first one, Koestler is referenced as a journalist, with his articles typically appearing in digests or at times reprinted in translation. Just as frequently, he is quoted as a major thinker or public figure. Since these articles consider him a figure of authority whose name they invoke in support of their own arguments, their debate is not with Koestler himself or what he stands for. The third group, on the contrary, engages in polemics with Koestler's views. This is not too surprising, given not only the progressive Communist takeover of the press in the period but also Koestler's own tendency to polarize public opinion. Yet another group of texts aims to provide Hungarian readers with an overview of the foreign reception of Hungarian literature, including literature produced in exile. And, finally, in the very last category, Koestler is used as a public scapegoat: a famous ex-Communist renegade who can thus be publicly humiliated in connection with various cases and issues, whether or not he himself is related to them or involved in them.

14 There is no mention of either Jan Valtin or his book in any of Koestler's autobiographies (Koestler 1952; 1954; Koestler and Koestler 1984). His name does not appear either in his biographies (Hamilton 1982; Cesarani 1998; Scammell 2009; Saunders 2017; Buckard 2004; Laval 2005; Márton 2006; Körmendy 2007), nor is any such event mentioned in books specifically devoted to anti-Communist fiction otherwise covering both Koestler and Valtin (Fleming 2009; Rohrwasser 1991). Neither does Mamaine Koestler's published correspondence with her twin sister covering exactly this period mention Koestler's alleged involvement in the trial (Koestler, M. 1985). Finally, no such claim is made in either of the two extended articles on Jan Valtin's credibility as a historical source: Bourgeois (2011), Margain (2015).

With his own entry in two major encyclopaedias and his name appearing in thirty-one articles published in seventeen different periodicals over a period of four years, in early post-war Hungary, Koestler is hardly the invisible or taboo author one would imagine him to be based on most biographies. On the contrary: he is more visible than before or during the war. Granted, this is a transitional period, years during which Communist power is merely being established. Yet the change observable is hardly that of his name being mentioned progressively less frequently. On the contrary, he is just as much in the public eye towards the end of the period, only his assessment changes from mostly positive to overwhelmingly negative. This could potentially forecast his presence also in the period immediately following this one, the Rákosi era, but no such claim could be made without a similar analysis of Koestler's presence in the Hungarian press between June 1948 and October 1956, the topic of the article planned as a follow-up to the present one.

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