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### “EVERYBODY IS GIVEN A CHANCE, MY BOY ... EVERYBODY WHO IS WILLING TO WORK FOR SOCIALISM”: AN OVERVIEW OF ENGLISH TEXTBOOKS IN THE POSTWAR PERIOD IN HUNGARY

#### Abstract

The main aim of this paper is to provide an insight into English textbooks published in Hungary after 1945, when the newly formed political commission (Communists) took control over education. The intention is to show how the ideology and political climate of the age was reflected on their pages, i. e. how English textbooks were used for the purpose of the Communists' objectives and interests. For the purpose of this paper, there have been selected three textbooks, considered as the most representative. The first textbook is dated from 1953. This is the period of the greatest dictatorship under the regime of Rákosi, the period well-known as the period of the *Red Terror*. The second and the third textbook represent the period after the Hungarian revolution in 1956. The former one was published in 1957 and the latter one in 1961. All three textbooks were intended primarily for the secondary school children (gymnasium) but were not used only to teach English language. The research has shown that all textbooks were imbued with the ideological ideas, strongly promoting the Soviet Union, socialism, community work and perfect Communist society. The author concludes that these kinds of sources can be very useful in recovering this turbulent period of Hungarian history.

*Keywords:* Hungary, English language, textbooks, Communism

#### Introduction

The main aim of this paper is to provide an insight into English textbooks published in Hungary after 1945, when the newly formed political commission (Communists) took control over education. The intention is to show how the ideology and political climate of the age was reflected on their pages, i. e. how English textbooks were used for the purpose of the Communists' objectives and interests. For the purpose of this paper, there have been selected three textbooks, considered as the most representative. The first textbook is dated from 1953. This is the period of the greatest dictatorship under the regime of Rákosi, the period well-known as the period of the *Red Terror*.<sup>1</sup> The second and the third textbook represent the period after the Hungarian revolution in 1956. The former one was published in 1957 and the latter one in 1961. All three textbooks were intended primarily for the secondary school children (gymnasium) and were published by the National Publishing Company situated in Budapest. It was the only centralized publisher.

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<sup>1</sup> Matyás Rákosi (1892 – 1971) participated in the communist government of Béla Kun, the leader of the 1919 Hungarian Soviet Republic. After the WW2 he was posted as a Soviet puppet and held a position of General Secretary of the Hungarian Communist Party and was in office from 1945 till 1956. Inspired by Stalin's regime and his political purges, Rákosi imposed totalitarian rule on Hungary.

One of the main characteristics of the period under research was the fact that, by taking control over the education, the Communist regime decided about teachers' political suitability (they had to attend political seminars to be educated in the Marxist-Leninist spirit). At the time lots of them were away for various reasons: death, military imprisonment, emigration (Mészáros et al., 2000, p. 403). Because of this, many schools did not have any foreign language classes at all (Romsics, 2005, pp. 325-327). The regime also introduced censorship of curriculum and all other printed matter (the so-called politically incorrect texts were replaced, and new texts were inserted). Until 1949 when the new curriculum, which favoured the Russian language, was introduced, there was obvious orientation toward German language. More than 80 % of primary school children learned German language.<sup>2</sup> Followed Latin and English represented with 8 % and 6.5 %. The Russian language, which was until 1949 facultative, was represented with only 1 % (Faludi (ed.), 1960, p. 306.). The introduction of the new curriculum caused a radical decrease in number of hours of English and other languages (they were considered as an imperialist/bourgeois), while Russian became obligatory. Since then, the textbook publishing was under the monopoly of the Communist regime. The Ministry of Education did not have any formal power. It was only the *transmission belt* for processing the will of the Communist Party (Mészáros, 2000, p. 409).<sup>3</sup> Under all these circumstances, we can only imagine the working conditions of English language teachers. They had to adapt to the new political circumstances. They were forced to learn Russian language in a very short term; otherwise, they would lose their jobs. They also had to adapt to the English textbooks from which they taught. In all of them we can notice several typical topics.

### Stories inspired by the Soviet leader Stalin

Most of the textbooks contained numerous stories about the Soviet leader Stalin. For instance, in the textbook published in 1953, we find the story entitled *Comrade Stalin's Childhood and Youth*. The text was written in occasion of Stalin's 70th birthday, celebrated "not only by the Soviet people, but also by the whole progressive world". "His name is the symbol of friendship among nations, the symbol of freedom, peace and Socialism." Pupils were furthermore taught that "for us Hungarians Stalin means our very life, our liberation and happy future. He is the great friend of Hungarian people". Follow the details from his biography, the most

<sup>2</sup> The Communists explained the reason for such a great popularity of German language: „As for the reactionist and counter-revolutionary class aspirations, their adequate path was the propagation of the fascist political systems.” (Faludi (ed.), 1960, pp. 295-296.)

<sup>3</sup> The official contemporary documents stated that each kindergarten, school, college or university has to become the construction sight of the newly-built socialist society, and teachers, as socialist workers, must break up with the harmful past, and start with building of the socialist future. According to the resolution of the Hungarian Central Committee dated from March 29<sup>th</sup> 1950. “our schools are not in relation to real life and production [...] People's Democracy is heavily burdened with bourgeois ideology and clerical reactionary influence [...] Causes for these are the undermining and saboteur work from the part of the enemies [...] the enemy has focused its energy to the cultural front, especially on the educational field; therefore, the main task is firstly to expose and make them inoffensive, and later, to correct the mistakes.” (Mészáros et al., 2000, pp. 410-411)

important one the fact that Stalin was “still a boy of fifteen when he became acquainted with Marxists and began to read Marxists literature”. The story ends with Rákosi’s words that Stalin is “Lenin of our days”, “the example of every Communist, Socialist and honest democrat” (Zentai & Korenchy, 1953, p. 80). Obviously, English textbooks served not only to teach language but also to teach great political lessons.

### **Stories inspired by Lenin and other great revolutionaries of the age**

This story about the Stalin and the Soviet Union is not the isolated case. We also find the stories about the Great October Socialist Revolution, the story *On the way to Communism*, the story *Comrade Rákosi meets Lenin*, and the story *For the Freedom of Our People* (Zentai & Korenchy, 1953). All of them have similar political vocabulary. For instance, the latter had the task to teach pupils about great deeds of Comrade Rákosi<sup>4</sup> who was very appreciated by Lenin:

Lenin confirmed the criticism and self-criticism with a nod of his head. Then he said: “We shall not forget the lessons of the Hungarian Soviet Republic. We shall learn from the mistakes. We shall not repeat them. Hungary is too small to face its enemies alone. But the Hungarian people fighting for freedom will be victorious. Comrade Rákosi, you will see the victory of the Hungarian revolution.” Krupskaya, Lenin’s wife, spoke of this conversation in 1925 when Comrade Rákosi faced the court of the Horthy fascists. At the meeting organized to save the life of Rákosi, she said: “Lenin was very fond of Rákosi. He appreciated him very much. Vladimir Ilyich knew men well. At their first meeting, Lenin’s opinion was that it is comrades such as Rákosi who bring the cause of the people to victory all over the world.” (Zentai & Korenchy, 1953, pp. 31-32.)

It is important to mention that all these stories were always followed by the detailed questions which examined whether pupils correctly and fully understood them and, of course, whether they understood the messages they conveyed:

1. What happened in 1919 in Hungary? 2. Why had Comrade Rákosi to leave the country? [...] 5. What was Lenin’s reply to Comrade Rákosi’s request for help to release the Hungarian Communists from prison? [...] 9. Has Lenin’s prophecy concerning Hungary become true since? [...] 11. What was the opinion of Lenin about such types of man as Rákosi? (Zentai & Korenchy, 1953, p. 32.)

The same pattern of text and questions we can find in many other texts, such as the text *Reminiscences of Marx*, published in the textbook dated from 1961 (Báti & Véges, 1961, pp. 77-83).

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<sup>4</sup> Rákosi was imprisoned in 1925 by Horthy’s regime. He was released as a part of a deal with contemporary Hungarian government. During his stay in the Soviet Union he was thoroughly prepared for the Communist takeover in Hungary in 1945.

### **Working class as the boss of its faith**

Furthermore, all the textbooks are imbued with teaching that working class should be the boss of its faith. For instance, in the textbook published in 1957 there can be found the text *The country is ours*. John Szabo, the key figure, is a Stakhanovite whose "average production record is 300 per cent." The text describes him as a determined figure who knows what is at stake – the first Five Year Plan and the survival of the People's Democracy. "He knows where the product of his work goes." Also, the clear vision of the bright future is depicted here: "If one speaks to him, he always says: our plant, our ministry, our Five Year Plan" [...] Such are Stakhanovites. [...] "When you speak to them, you get a clear picture of the opportunities what all young people have in a socialist society. They have the work and do it well, because they know that our People's Democracy has made the workers masters of the country. There is no boss who exploits them, at his plant the worker is now the boss." As many other texts, this one ends with a set of questions, such as: "Why do people work more willingly in Socialism than in Capitalism?" or "What did they learn from their Soviet comrades?" (Báti & Véges, 1957, pp. 86-87). The intention is obvious. Such stories about endless opportunities for workers are typical for all analysed textbooks.

### **The importance of social work: good and bad examples**

Furthermore, the textbooks taught of the great importance of the community work, which was one of the most important features of socialism. The spirit of community can be seen even in the covers of the textbooks. All of them had on their back cover the following instructions, which witness the attitude toward the common property:

You should know that this book is also the weapon of science. Respect it, keep it clean, as soldier does with his weapon. You should also recognize that 25 people worked on this book, either at desk or with printing machines. Respect their work [...] do not write into this book. [...] At the end of the year, pass it on to other student. A good book is a weapon in your quest for knowledge!!! (Báti & Véges, 1957)

Thus, everything belongs to everyone – school textbooks, even factories. We can often find explanations that all, including factories and factory libraries, belong to "all of us", that is, it is in the collective ownership. The text is written in a very idealistic tone. Women are diligently working, their children are playing around the factory, and the factory library is big and available to everyone... (Zentai & Korenchy, 1953, p. 44).

Hungarian children were taught that their role in building up the country in socialist spirit is very important. As a good example serves us the story of the Pioneer Railway, where it is clearly stated that "all the boys and girls were perfectly aware of their part in the building up of their country". Moreover, one of the girls says that we have accomplished three year plan and we are starting another one (Zentai & Korenchy, 1953, p. 67). The fact that she uses the personal pronoun "we", confirms the mentioned thesis.

Negative examples also served the same purpose: to educate children about the importance of social work. There is one story which takes place in a British youth camp. George, a British boy, who was one of the participants, was lazy, unwilling to work as others did, only waiting for lunchtime. Everybody laughed at him. Péter, his Hungarian colleague, warned him that everybody works except him, which “is not nice and it is not social ...” (Zentai & Korenchy, 1953, p. 62). Of course, here Hungarian boy serves as an example of good behavior and honesty. In many lessons we find that the British do not have developed idea of importance of the community work unlike the Hungarians.

### **Capitalism as the greatest of all evils**

However, while socialism and socialist ideal were greatly promoted, capitalism seemed to be the greatest evil. This witnesses the lesson *Little slaves of capitalism*, which deals with the Industrial Revolution of the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Although industry grew at the time, it produced a great many evils. One of the most important is the employment of children. However, such evils, story says, are even characteristic of many contemporary capitalist countries:

While we build nurseries and schools, the Pioneer Railway and theaters for our youth to make their life carefree, happy and gay, in the capitalist country children have already to bear burdens and miseries indivisible from Capitalism. (Báti & Véges, 1957, p. 57)

Capitalism is always depicted as the negative system. For instance, the main characters of the textbook printed in 1953 are the Davises, the British family. We have already mentioned George, their son, who was trying to avoid helping his colleagues in the British camp. His mother was described as an unemployed woman from the working class. His father works in factory for a very low wage. Practically, they are very poor. While speaking with her Hungarian guests, the British lady is astonished by the fact that in Hungary ration cards are not used any more and that they have plenty of food at their disposal (Zentai & Korenchy, 1953, p. 26). In addition, there is another scene. While visiting Hungary and Hungarian factories, the British boy learned the lesson: unlike in Britain, in Hungary, a good worker may achieve anything, even good education, supported by the Government of the People’s Democracy. “Everybody is given a chance, my boy ... indeed everybody who is willing to work for socialism,” told him his Hungarian host. Thus, while life in Britain, as a capitalist country, was depicted as far from perfect, life in socialist Hungary was described almost ideal. The purpose of that was to convince young Hungarians that their country stands certainly on the right path (Zentai & Korenchy, 1953, pp. 68-69).

### **Conclusion**

The analysis of selected English textbooks published in the period covered by this paper showed that textbooks are indeed very valuable historical sources. We can state that the Communist regime put a lot of effort in suppressing reactionists and counter-revolutionary propaganda on all levels. The English language, considered bourgeois and regressive, was one of the main targets. All analyzed textbooks

showed the same pattern of teaching the English language through the ideas of promoting Soviet Union, socialism, community work and perfect Communist society. Moreover, this was even clearly stated in their forewords: "Our goal is, also, that words from certain texts should be repeated as much as possible in order to achieve productive learning, also certain philosophical and political messages should not be left untapped." (Báti & Véges, 1957, p. 3) On the other hand, there is a strong criticism of Western societies which were depicted as evil and not suitable for good and happy life promised in Hungary as the socialist country.

Certainly, further researches, which would include the English textbooks published in Hungary in the later period, would certainly shed an additional light on the political circumstances and the influence which the Communists had over the education system. Of equal importance would be to explore the attitude of the English teachers and learners toward the political climate reflected in textbooks and the way English language was taught at the time. This would certainly show to what extent the Communist regime was successful in their attempts to shape the minds of their citizens according to their beliefs and their ideology.

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