

Hammerstein, Judit. 2022. *Oroszok és magyarok. Magyar írók Oroszország-/Szovjetunió-tapasztalata az 1920–1930-as években* (Russians and Hungarians: Hungarian Writers' Russian/Soviet Experience during the 1920s and 1930s). Budapest: Örökség Kultúrpolitikai Intézet. 444 pp.

Reviewed by Peter Pastor¹, Montclair State University

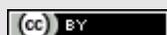
Although numerous monographs in Western historiography have examined the visits of Western writers and other knowledge workers to interwar Soviet Russia and the Soviet Union, no similar works have appeared about Hungarian visitors until the publication of Veritas Institute's Research Fellow Judith Hammerstein's book.

The subchapters within the unnumbered chapters can be read and enjoyed independently, as the book is a loosely connected anthology of essays. It is the last chapter, "Mérleg és kitekintés" (Summary and Conclusion), where the author deals with the similarities and differences the Hungarian visitors experienced as reflected in their travelogues. Here the author points out that the visitors' impressions were colored by their family background and their worldview.

Hammerstein's introduction provides an overview of the types of travel undertaken by foreign visitors in interwar Soviet Russia/Soviet Union. The consolidation of Soviet power following the Civil War led to the arrival of curious Westerners interested in the New Russia. The authorities also welcomed foreigners with technical know-how to share, such as the engineer József Popper. The author points out, and the proof is Popper's travel experience, that during the New Economic Policy (NEP) era, most visitors had a chance to freely visit places of their choice. By the thirties, visitors were limited to showcasing itineraries. The places and people they encountered were intended to demonstrate Soviet superiority to the Western "pilgrims" seeking to confirm their "cult of the Soviet Union" (11). Doubters were also escorted along the same route, and their hosts expected that they would be won over to the cause by what they saw. The tours were conducted by the All-Union Society for Cultural Ties (VOKS) (37), or by Intourist. The reports and diaries of the Hungarian travelers, as described and analyzed in the book, indicate that most left the USSR openly or secretly disillusioned by what they saw.

Hammerstein's Hungarians writing about the 1920s include the Hungarian-born German novelist Arthur Holitscher; the engineer József Popper; the general Nándor Taróczy; and the two former Austro-Hungarian Hungarian POWs, Rodion Markovits and Artúr Munk. Those who

¹ pastorp@montclair.edu



reported during the 1930s were independent Hungary's first prime minister then president, the exiled Count Mihály Károlyi, his wife Countess Catherine Károlyi, the reporter Rezső Szirmai, the economist Zoltán Magyary, the polymath Arthur Koestler, the populist writers Gyula Illyés and Lajos Nagy, and the communist novelist Ervin Sinkó.

The author explains why she omitted from her book two other writers who published their Russian experience: József Lengyel, because he was an émigré living in the Soviet Union (13); and Zoltán Nagyiványi, because his 1935 memoir *Idegenlégiótól a Szovjetunióig* (From the Foreign Legion to the Soviet Union) is not limited to his Russian experience. Nagyiványi's exclusion is surprising because in her 2019 article on Nagyiványi, Hammerstein observed that his memoir could be "included in the interwar travel reports or travelogues (Rezső Szirmai, Lajos Nagy, Gyula Illyés, etc.) about the Soviet Union" (Judit Hammerstein, "Vörös begoniák" (Red Begonias), *Kommentár*, no. 4 (2019), 31]. Two other Nagyiványi books, about Russia, likewise go unmentioned.

In the first chapter's subchapter Hammerstein examines the writings of Petr Chaadaev. His *Philosophical Letters* (1829) initiated the Westernizer-Slavophil controversy, which stresses the uniqueness of Russian civilization in all its negativity and the messianic role of the Russian people. Justification for its inclusion and for regress to the early nineteenth century is the desire to demonstrate continuity in Russian history. She writes: "Ultimately Bolshevism can be perceived as a messianic experiment to restore universal unity" (24). However, the Russian socialist root of Bolshevism, populism, is missing from the book, and this may be more important to understand the Russia of the 1920s and 1930s than the earlier intellectual debates by aristocrats.

Along with Chaadaev, who saw nothing positive in Russia, Hammerstein also discusses the travelogue *Russia in 1839*, by his contemporary, the French Marquis de Custine, which is equally critical of the despotic tsarist empire of Nicholas I. According to Hammerstein, Custine's negative image of Russia survived in the turn-of-the-century writings of Westerners, "but also appears in the writings of visitors to interwar Russia" (27). True, but not because they read his totally inaccurate account.

Interwar visitors reached their conclusions independently. For example, the cultural critic Walter Benjamin, who is mentioned by Hammerstein in passing (34), visited Moscow in 1926. There he met up with his Austro-Hungarian-born writer-friend Joseph Roth, then a correspondent for the *Frankfurter Zeitung*. In his *Moscow Diary* Benjamin noted that Roth was one of those who "had come to Russia as a (nearly) confirmed Bolshevik and was leaving it a royalist."

The Hungarian-born writer Arthur Holitscher visited Soviet Russia in 1920. He lived in Germany during most of his creative life, wrote and published in German, did not like Hungary, and did not identify himself as Hungarian (215–217). Hammerstein's thirty-nine-page essay goes far beyond the examination of Holitscher's Russia. Holitscher's *Drei Monate in Sowjet-Russland* was published in 1921. Holitscher was looking for utopia in Soviet Russia, but because of the unacceptable compromises the Bolsheviks had to make, he concluded that Bolshevism would be

unrealizable (232–233). Holitscher was also disappointed because the messianic aspect of communism was not realized, and the Bolsheviks remained only a political rather than a religious sect (241).

Hammerstein terms the 1925 Russia visit of General Nándor Taróczy unique because his travel had military and diplomatic significance. In his unpublished report for his superiors, he concluded that the NEP represented the end of Bolshevism. Hammerstein attributes the general's conclusions to his wish to see the establishment of diplomatic relations between Hungary and the USSR. He saw the Soviet Union as a potential supporter of Hungary's territorial revisionism. The National Assembly and Regent Miklós Horthy, however, did not favor rapprochement at that time (121–122).

The Hungarian POWs were not travelers, but the two selected publications by former POWs provide testimonies not only about camp life but also about how Russian society was shaped before, during, and after the 1917 revolutions. In this subchapter Hammerstein details the roman à clef of Rodion Markovits and the diary of Artúr Mink. By then POW life had its historian in Katalin Petrák. Her two monographs are noted by Hammerstein (51). There is no reference, however, to the most comprehensive Hungarian book about POW life in Russia, the 582-page second volume of *Hadifogoly magyarok története* (History of Hungarian Prisoners of War), published in 1930. The second volume bears the title *Az oroszországi hadifogság és a Magyar hadifoglyok hazaszállításának története* (The History of Hungarian Prisoners of War in Russia and Their Repatriation).

Mihály Károlyi has been depicted as the black sheep in histories and political tracts written during the Horthy regime and the communist Rákosi era. The Orbán regime removed his statue from the vicinity of the parliament building. Hammerstein is highly critical of Károlyi and his wife Catherine. They appear as unrepentant fellow travelers who first visited Russia in 1931 and published glowing reports in the avant-garde French *Vu* magazine. She judges them unrepentant because in their postwar memoirs they explained and justified their multiple visits to Stalin's Russia.

Another pilgrim who gave high marks to what he saw in the USSR was Arthur Koestler, who left Budapest for Vienna in 1916 as a child. He kept in touch with Hungarian intellectuals in Hungary and in emigration throughout his life. As a fellow traveler, he visited the Soviet Union twice, in 1931 and 1932–33. Hammerstein provides a fascinating and detailed analysis of Koestler's USSR-related writings, and early in the essay points out that his travelogue glorifies the Soviet Union and could be considered propaganda literature (266). After leaving Russia in 1933 Koestler wanted to leave the communist movement and would have done so had it not been for the accession of the Nazis to power in Germany (295).

According to Koestler's memoir, he soured on communist Russia, not during his visits as others did, but three years later, "when the Russian purges began to assume the proportions of mass terror. 1936–1937 was the turning point." (*The Invisible Writing*, 193). Thus, when Hammerstein covers Koestler's activities all the way to the 1940 publication of his famous anti-

communist novel about the purges, *Darkness at Noon*, she goes far beyond the intended theme of the book, the description and analysis of travel writings of Hungarian writers about the Soviet Union. It may be of interest, though, that Catherine Károlyi's review praised the book, and Koestler even sent her a letter of appreciation. The positive comments by Mrs. Károlyi indicate that due to the purges, the Károlyis had soured on Russia and were not unrepentant fellow travelers.

Another subchapter examines the travel writings of the Hungarian populist writers Gyula Illyés and Lajos Nagy, who visited the Soviet Union in June 1934 and whose accounts appeared first in journals in serialized form in September and October, respectively. Illyés's travelogue was also printed in book form and was a bestseller. Nagy's travelogue was published as a book only in 1989. Hammerstein compares their travel reports with the travelogue of André Gide, who visited the Soviet Union for three months in 1936. His negative account was first published in November 1936. For Hammerstein the common denominator of the three publications is disappointment. This Hammerstein study was first published in 2007. It would have been better to do a rewrite and drop Gide for the sake of tightening the book's focus.

Hammerstein points out that Illyés and Nagy had to adjust the narrative of their travelogues to the realities of governmental policies and the resultant anti-Soviet nature of public opinion, saturated with the "hysterical fear" of Bolshevik propaganda (325). What is surprising, however, is that Hammerstein finds "debatable the reference" (360 n. 826) to the interwar atmosphere of anti-Semitism, which also influenced the language of the two travelogues. (See my article in *Hungarian Cultural Studies*, 2018.) There is no mention by Hammerstein that Illyés (and Nagy) shared in the kind of anti-Semitism some of the populist writers embraced (Ágnes Széchenyi, "Illyés Gyula 1956-os naplója," *Múltunk* 62, no. 1 [2017], 197, 202).

The last visitor discussed in the book is Ervin Sinkó, a Hungarian writer from Yugoslavia. He spent two years in Moscow, from May 1935 until April 1937, when he and his wife were forced to leave the USSR. The author provides a biography of Sinkó rather than just an analysis of his writing about his Russian experience. He arrived in the Soviet capital from his Parisian exile, intending to settle in Moscow. His main goal was to have his novel about the Hungarian Soviet Republic of 1919, the *Optimists*, published in Russian.

While in Moscow Sinkó had kept a diary for a year and a half. He rounded out his Moscow diary from memory in Paris after the Sinkós returned there following their expulsion from Moscow. Added to the manuscript were commentaries written between 1953 and 1955, and the final draft, *The Novel of the Novel*, was first published in 1955 in Zagreb in Serbo-Croatian, and in 1961 in Novi Sad (Újvidék), in Hungarian. As far as its genre is concerned, Hammerstein considers it a diary, an autobiography, and a documentary novel (367) and provides a fine description of its contents.

Reflecting on Sinkó's novel, Hammerstein writes, "As we read his diary entries, our impression is that the author only had negative experiences in the Soviet Union." (384). She

notes that Sinkó painted a darker picture of the Soviet Union than Lajos Nagy did, yet she assails Sinkó for not criticizing publicly the Soviet Union in 1937 the way Gide did (386).

Hammerstein also makes an unnecessary detour to the history of the Hungarian Soviet Republic and states that Sinkó's role was exceptional, as he objected to revolutionary violence, unlike Tibor Szamuely, who, she claims, "rode on his death train and practiced [killing] on an industrial scale." Meanwhile "the chief ethicist,' Georg Lukács ordered the decimation of a Red Army corps" (395). The extent of Szamuely's and Lukács's violence is debatable, and a reader of Hammerstein's book might wonder if her real aim is to blacken Károlyi's reputation further by quoting him out of context, thereby depicting him as a devotee of Szamuely (395). It would have been more appropriate to mention that according to the *Novel of a Novel*, Károlyi was devastated by the Moscow show trials and declared, "To hell with socialism if twenty years after the revolution, Stalin must do the same that Hitler did at the beginning of his reign when he killed his own one-time friends." (Ervin Sinkó, *The Novel of a Novel*, ed., and tr. George Deák [Lanham: Lexington Books, 2018], 312).

Hammerstein condemns Sinkó for being the defender of Tito's dictatorship after he exposed the true nature of Stalin's terror in his novel (366, 399). She fails to mention, however, that, as some argue, Gyula Illyés was willing to be co-opted by every autocratic or dictatorial regime, from Horthy to Rákosi to Kádár.

In conclusion, despite the identified shortcomings, the book, which is freely accessible online in similar form as the author's 2020 dissertation, is recommended reading. It is interesting, well researched, and well written.