SUMMARY OF DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

THE HISTORY OF THE STATE-OWNED ENTERPRISE
LITERARY FICTION PUBLISHERS
1950-1956

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The aims and topic of the dissertation

The dissertation discusses the history of the state-owned enterprise Literary Fiction Publishers during the period of ’high-Stalinism’ until the revolution in 1956.

The state-owned publishing enterprise under the name Literary Fiction Publishers, one of the then established four adult education and cultural management publishers, came to life on 1 November 1950, supervised by the Ministry of Adult Education and Cultural Management. Its profile was to cover the publishing of contemporary international and Hungarian literary works.

The present work is primarily a history of a state-owned publisher, however, in order to provide a full picture it is necessary that the story be placed in a wider context, thus, the cultural policy of the era is also included. As the history of publishing can only be interpreted in that wider framework, the first part, one-third, of the dissertation is devoted to an introduction of the institutions in charge of publishing in the Rákosi-era.

To provide a background, the starting point opted for is the onset of the communist rule, the year when the tide turned,
1948, thus the history of institutions in the two years preceding the creation of Literary Fiction Publishers is also discussed in order to provide a unitary picture of the role and function of publishing in the cultural policy of the dictatorship. Finally, the outbreak of the revolution in 1956 was an obvious choice as a natural endpoint to the dissertation given that the revolution marked new political beginnings which, though did not eradicate the previous system completely, did interrupt its mechanisms and practices of publishing.

Apart from introducing the organisations controlling publishing, the main part of the present study is devoted to the history of the publisher in a stricter sense.

The history of Hungarian publishing and its mechanisms after 1948 constitute an almost entirely blank page in the research on history. Apart from a monograph ideologically outdated by today in many respects titled 'The History of Hungarian Publishing and Book Trade between 1945 – 1957' by Sándor Varga, only fragments in articles or chapters marginally touching on the subject in other monographs are available in the literature. In fact, the operation of individual publisher enterprises from the perspective of institutional, sociological and economic history, and the interpretation thereof in a wider
context are still target to future research in the study of the history of books.
The choice of topic on the author’s part has, in actual fact, been motivated by the aim to describe the history of Literary Fiction Publishers in terms of the above mentioned aspects of history, and, in turn, through this description, through an insight into a segment of the system that used to exist, the structure and operation of an organisation for culture control in a dictatorship may be examined as seen through the operation of publishing.
The dissertation provides a detailed discussion on the employees that counted as members of the intelligentsia-class: it includes a separate chapter on publisher’s readers. As publishing was based on their work, one of the research questions of the dissertation is exactly the scrutiny of how the attitude towards them reflects the workings of literary policy in a dictatorship.
Yet another aim of the present study is to demonstrate the step-by-step process of publishing through actual examples, in other words, to describe how the practice of the ruling power in the ’50ies interfered with the natural flow of events in turning a manuscript into a book at as many phases of production as possible.
Sources

Given the very nature of the present work, the primary method of gathering information was research in archives. The corpus potentially relevant for the topic is vast and heterogeneous, including documentation on cultural management policy and literary policy in a broader sense ranging from official directives to more confidential notes. More specifically, the dissertation draws on documentation available in the Hungarian National Archives on the Agitation and Propaganda Department of the Hungarian Working People’s Party (HWPP), the Culture Department of HWPP, the Ministry of Adult Education and Cultural Management, and documents available on the rule of prime ministers József Révai and József Darvas. In addition, as inevitable for a work on the history of publishing, material on the Literature Department and the Publishers Department established later were also studied. However, the basic source of information was provided by documentation on Literary Fiction Publishers found in the Hungarian National Archives. Undisclosed legacies such as that of István Vas in the National Széchenyi Library, that of Endre Illés as part of the legacy of
György Aczél, and the up till now unpublished memoirs of Béla Köpeczi and Tibor Bartos have also provided valuable contributions to the research.

As the topic of the dissertation concerns the history of recent past, information gathered through oral history has also been included. Oral memoirs available in the Media Collection of the Petőfi Literary Museum and the Oral History Archive of the 1956 Institute have made it possible to conduct research through a lens radically different from that offered by written sources. However, in the case of the latter sources especially, given our current knowledge about the political period, it was necessary to treat the content with criticism.

The present study focuses exclusively on publishing, bookselling and distribution lie beyong its scope, as during the period the latter two were not undertaken by publishers.
Summary of the Results

Research Thesis 1

Publishers were institutions built into the ideological superstructure, organising their state- and political control was one of the most important tasks in the given period. It was one of the outstanding characteristics of the restructuring beginning in 1948 that the policy towards the intelligentsia was gradually narrowed down to ideological supervision with special emphasis on culture and literature. That meant that on one hand the presumed impact of literature was overwhelmingly exaggerated, while, at the same time, its integrity and freedom were greatly reduced.

Changes in the strict control of literature have delimited possibilities also in the book trade as, when official policies did not apply extreme methods to terrorise, they still could manage to shepherd authors towards displaying the expected attitude by publishing or banning their works.

Publishing, thus, can be conceived of as a tentacle of the literary policies of the periods, the terrain where actual measures could be taken. The situation is best summarised by a statement
attributed to Béla Köpeczi, according to which: ’They’d rather outsource the State Security Authority than publishing.’

The first part of the dissertation is devoted to how the supervisory organisations imposed on publishing were brought to life. The history of organisations in control of publishing begins with the process of communisation starting in the year 1948. The chapter discusses the establishment of the National Book Office, the operation of the Literature Department of the Ministry of Adult Education and Cultural Management, and the foundation of the Publishers’ Council and its reorganisation under the name General Directorate of Publishers.

**Research Thesis 2**

During the dictatorship, due to a lack of professional cadres, publisher’s readers and editors were tolerated. They were the ’slaves of the book trade’, intimidated through various means so that the cultural policy could exercise ideological control, forced to base their decisions about literature on reasons other than aesthetic value.

There were two major groups of employees at the publishers: professional staff and administrative staff.
Of all the departments of the publishers, the dissertation discusses the readers’ department at more length than others because that provided the very essence of the operation of publishers, it was those who work there that, as professionals, used their sound aesthetic judgement in deciding which manuscript was fit for publication.

Publisher’s readers and editors, however, were treated as second-class citizens in the era, their superiors demanded critical professionalism of them while, at the same time, the same superiors tried to ensure that their professional opinion was completely in line with the then current guidelines for literary policy in every respect. Methods to exercise control included setting the format and requirements on content of readers’ reports, fixed salaries, constant assessment of political knowledge and ideological consciousness, interfering with the relationship between readers and authors, controlling the extent to which manuscripts could be altered.

**Research Thesis 3**

The activities of publishers centred around making plans on publishing works, providing a methodology for planning and fulfilling the plan. Continuously having and controlling
general, forward-looking plans on publications was supposed to ensure that publishing was ideologically well-founded and that the theoretical framework was in place. Superior authorities have interfered with the whole process of publishing from the very first phase, planning. They determined which works authors were to offer for publication, which manuscripts publishers were to accept for publication and which they were to refuse, thus, publishers were not independent, not even at the start. There existed a number of formats for plans, which were prepared at various intervals. The publishers’ plans were summarised and tailor-made to fit ideological expectations by superiors at the ministry who, in turn, compiled yearly publication plans. In order for the plans to adhere to party policies and cultural policies, ratios for subject matters were set. These plans and ratios were then constantly modified but the extent to which they were realised was hardly ever checked.

Research Thesis 4
Through the description of certain representative samples of publishing it is possible to understand the behind-the-scenes working of the complex system of requirements of the literary policy.
As no underlying document or plan existed that would determine what was accepted and what was kept away from the reading public, only certain case studies may provide a proper description of how publishing worked in practice.

It should be noted, however, that, similarly to plans, where losing contact with reality was also observable, in the majority of the actual cases, objections to a given manuscript were not based on some well-founded problem with publishability such as aesthetic reasons or reasons of profitability. In other words, criticisms on manuscripts were to a large part the individualistic whims of those actually in charge of publishing in any given period.

All that also meant that the rules to be observed were in constant change. This net of taboos, bans and expectations that people were supposed to work in, was rightly labelled ’Chinese court hierarchy’ by Mátyás Domokos. Thus, on one hand everything was totally soaked in ideology while, mysteriously, cadres were also selected, that is, there were actually authors who could publish provided a so-called ’red tail’ or ’cutter’, foreword and/or afterword with a pejorative undertone (comments on how to interpret the work in line with socialist realism), was also included, or the works were shortened to varying extents, as
length was also part of the hierarchy. Publishers tried to convince prestigious literary historians, who actively participated in creating the main literary trends, to contribute via these forewords and afterwords. The dissertation groups the samples according to interfering with the publishable work, attitude to translations, assessment of distributability for the published manuscript and elevating the manuscript as a central ideological issue.

**Research Thesis 5**
The way the will of the leaders defining literary policies influenced the day-to-day practice of publishing is best reflected in its complexity by the history of the publication of the *Shakespeare-series* launched by the publishers.

In accordance with general expectations in the literature on publication history, in the present work, after introducing series launched by Literary Fiction Publishers, the phases of the publication of the *Shakespeare-series* are described, which provide an ideal illustration of the complex relationship between publishing and cultural policy in every respect. The publication history of the *Shakespeare-series* sheds light on how ideological control was executed in a more heterogenous
scenario with multiple players, where ideological requirements appeared more indirectly under various aesthetic and literary protectivist disguises, or where even individual preferences also attempted to surface in the form of ideological slogans.

**The practical value of the findings**

In the historical period scrutinised by the present work the increasingly tyrannical public policy invaded the operation of intellectual areas to an extent never experienced before, gradually undermining relative professional integrity (from economy through criminal justice to science, education and culture) to completely subdue them. The overall result of the dissertation is the demonstration of how all that happened in publishing, one of the key areas of culture. The detailed description of the operation of a publisher provides a picture of the inescapable paths in the era.
Publications related to the topic of the dissertation:

1. Bella Katalin: Kérem, ne legyen túl érzékeny! Irodalompolitika és könyvkiadás Révai József minisztersége idején. 