Hungarian Rhapsodies: A Survey of the Alternate Histories of an Isolated Literary Corpus

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Introduction

It is oft repeated that humankind is growing into a global village, and that seems certainly true for speculative fiction. We may pick up translated works from regions otherwise unfamiliar to us, but easily disregard their exotic origin, for the tropes of science fiction and fantasy therein will likely be of universal appeal. Science fiction, in particular, tends to be cosmopolitan in outlook and converge around contemporary or future-oriented concerns that are instantly recognizable to readers across the world. But what if a sub-genre were to buck this trend towards homogenisation and prove to be a wellspring of narrative diversity? Which brings us to the central premise of uchronia: "what if." Alternat(iv)e history, as it is better known, remains much more closely tied to national psyche and historical memory, thus appealing to familiarity with a local body of knowledge within an ethno-cultural setting which the author presumably shares with the reader. Within this context, Hungarian alternate history provides an interesting case study into the speculative preoccupations of a relatively isolated cultural topography. Examining the uchronia dreamt up by practitioners of a linguistically insular body of literature may help to shed fresh light on paths less frequently trodden in the dominant English mainstream of the sub-genre.

Alternate History à la hongroise?

Hungarian attempts to define the nation's identity in terms other than language made the search for its place in history a recurring theme in all literary genres. The second half of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are generally considered a golden age of Hungarian narrative literature, a period that gave rise to several masterworks of early SF and future history (e.g., by Frigyes Karinthy and Mór Jókai, respectively). Apart from a few tentative examples in short prose form, however, works of genuine alternate history did not emerge until the second half of the twentieth century. The sub-genre developed throughout the 1900s against a backdrop of a cultivated sense of insularity within the Magyar microcosm surrounded by unrelated languages and hostile political entities, and subsequently as part of speculative literature being one of the few available outlets of counter-culture seeking to skirt the censorship prevalent in Soviet-occupied Hungary. This led to uchronia arising as a form of patriotic literary introspection, enticing readers with visions of how history could (or 'should') have turned out for the better.

While the uchronic sub-genre itself is rarely the subject of academic discourse, the very existence of a Hungarian ethnocultural island in a sea of Indo-Europeans is at times perceived to be akin to the setting of an alternate history scenario. As historian Ferenc Glatz puts it in István

Szakály's 2001 documentary *1000 évről 100 percben* [Across 1000 Years In 100 Minutes], Hungary lost every war over the past three centuries and yet it still exists: What is that if not an unlikely success story?

Historiography (the writing of history) is, among other things, also about claiming ownership over the historical narrative, particularly in societies where one's interpretation of the past actively informs their political allegiances. Alternate history, then, certainly in a Hungarian context, is a means of challenging 'mainstream' (commonly accepted) historical narratives by imagining that familiar turning points could have had radically different outcomes or by committing cultural sacrilege through the injection of satirical melodrama into previously hallowed historiographic subjects. As János M. Rainer puts it in his essay *Mi lehetett volna, ha…?* [What could have been, if…?], the resilience of "communicative memory" is a reason for the ongoing popularity of alternate histories: history remains "the terrain onto which political forces seek to map their identities," and use the debates of the present day to "offer historical closure for their voters in a manner they consider most beneficial to their respective cause" (Cserna-Szabó, 2016, 228).[1] Alternate history, in this sense, is therefore a form of applied hindsight, often tinted with a blend of melancholia and ideology.

The Dawn of Alternate Hungarys

The sub-genre itself may be further subdivided by themes, but also by the temporal mechanisms whereby the author introduces the alteration. Therefore, before addressing the historical themes themselves, it is interesting to note that according to the narrative taxonomy, almost all Hungarian alternate histories fall into either of the two categories of pure uchronia or time-travel alteration.[2] In the former, a past event unfolds differently from the reader's historical continuum, but for the purposes of the fictional universe and its inhabitants, their timeline is the only real one (as opposed to multiverse fiction). In the latter, our consensus reality may be the baseline, but a significant change is introduced by means of time travel, and the story explores the branching paths thus established.

The earliest example in Hungarian literature that we can consider uchronia intimates no interference by time travellers, but features another form of alternate science: alchemy. *Két Hajó* [The Two Ships] by Frigyes Karinthy, published in 1915, describes the point of departure as follows: in 1492, Columbus agrees to a wager with the mystic Synesius, and instead of Christian missionaries, he takes alchemists on his voyage to the New World. In this proto-uchronia, however, while the voyage itself is narrated, the consequences are merely hinted at in passing. Incidentally, this early example was also odd in its cosmopolitan focus—with the tragic consequences of World War I and Hungary's subsequent territorial division and economic impoverishment, the country's writers soon turned inwards to past glories and missed opportunities closer to home. Thereafter, the main themes covered by the emerging corpus of Hungarian uchronia ranged from the arcana of medieval and religious history (including the

Reformation and Islamic Conquest), to alternate outcomes of the 1848 Spring of Nations, the World Wars, and the Cold War.

During this process of accumulation, the Hungarian alternate history sub-genre accomplished its arguably most notable 'achievement': it brought forth the world's earliest known example of a novel based on the premise of an Axis victory in World War II, which can be properly considered alternate history.[3] László Gáspár's *Mi, I. Adolf* [We, Adolf the First] is undeservedly obscure. The novel fits into a long tradition whereby the amount of attention received by a work often stands in no direct relation to its literary merit. Previously unreviewed by Western philology, Éric B. Henriet estimated in 2004 that this was likely the earliest 'Hitler wins' story (205), though he was unable to quote it or provide a full reference. The novel is remarkable not only because of its genre pioneer status, but also for its stylistic choices. If one were pressed to draw parallels, Olaf Stapledon's seminal masterpiece Starmaker (1937) would come to mind, but with a healthy dose of satire reminiscent of Karel Čapek's *Válka s Mloky* [War with the Newts] (1936). Dialogues are secondary, and where they appear, take the form of transcripts of official proceedings, quotes attributed to famous personalities, or long, descriptive exposés. Thus, world-building (or, in this case, constructing the intricate political, geostrategic and technological details of this alternate timeline) takes centre stage. The novel itself follows the course of a much longer and even more devastating World War II which carries on with varying intensity (including an intermittent period of 'Cold War,' another first use of a trope which has since become commonplace in alternate history, c.f. Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle*) until March 1965, culminating in a thermonuclear exchange which destroys Berlin and indirectly leads to Adolf Hitler's death.[4]

The original edition was published in November 1945, under forbiddingly challenging circumstances amidst the ruins of the Hungarian capital. Given the noticeable number of spelling mistakes (corrected in later print runs) and the author's apparent familiarity with the effects of urban warfare (the 100-day Soviet siege of Budapest in the winter of 1944), and the atomic bombs, it is very likely that the manuscript was completed in the summer and autumn of 1945, and rushed to press as soon as printing capacity was available. It remains a mystery whether the author (or his publisher) was aware of the truly pioneering nature of his work.

The Threefold Path of Hungarian Uchronia

In the post-war decades, which we might call the Modern Era of Hungarian publishing, with large, state-owned (or state-sanctioned) printing houses and popular, annual book fairs providing a steady stream of new titles, alternate histories start to appear on a more regular basis. These take the form of both novels and short stories, the latter particularly in journals such as Galaktika, the leading Hungarian speculative magazine at the time.[5] Allowing for a measure of abstraction, uchronia of the Modern Era tend to follow one of the following three common narrative approaches:

'Serious' alternate history

At the 'academic' end of alternate history that still falls within the realm of fiction, works in this category explore the consequences of major historical departure points, not for satirical nor purely narrative reasons, but as an earnest thought experiment, with story or plot development, if any, being purely secondary. The most notable Hungarian-language example of 'serious' alternate history in epistolary form was a fictional essay written around the 1960s—in prison. Hungarian politician and academic István Bibó was held by the Socialist regime in the Vác penitentiary for political crimes, particularly his role in the 1956 Uprising. The memorandum in question, which was only published posthumously in 1990 after the abolition of Soviet censorship, purports to summarize a debate between the Canon of Vác and a bishop set in an alternate timeline wherein the Roman Catholic church managed to reconcile its internal differences in the sixteenth century and thus avoided the schism of the Reformation.

In a couple of brief pages, the essay then scales a dizzying landscape of historical, philosophical, and social ideas that shape a Central Europe radically different from (and, certainly from the author's perspective, more liveable than) the reality of the 1960s. Brimming with delicious irony and duplicitous references (what today one would call 'Easter eggs'), from the Communist Manifesto turning into a Papal Encyclical to a Hungarian constitutional monarchy ruled by a branch of the Polish Catholic dynasty, Bibó's work even provides a sort of meta-definition of uchronia itself, before concluding with a (theologically) devastating twist.

National self-irony

Perhaps the most prevalent form by volume of publications, satirical alternative history attempts to draw attention to the vicissitudes of past or present circumstances while 'taking the edge off' through enveloping its message in an oft melancholy, yet ultimately ironic tone. This can often be seen as the least confrontational manner in which to engage critically with events in the more recent past, which may be inextricably linked to personal tragedies in the families of many readers.6 A prime example of this gently ironic approach is Csaba Gábor Trenka's *Egyenlítői Magyar Afrika* [Hungarian Equatorial Africa] published in 1988. Narrated in the form of a retrospective diary, the author recounts the narrator's adolescence and adult career as a lowly government official raised and employed in a forlorn Central African colony allocated to Hungary by a German Reich victorious in World War II. Hungary, a landlocked state with little previous naval or colonial experience, is (at times comically) exposed as a half-hearted administrator of an overseas territory larger than its home provinces. Readers at the time were unlikely to miss the irony pervading the novel, as a thinly veiled criticism of the ostensibly benevolent, yet blatantly incompetent and counterproductive Socialist regime forced onto Hungary by its Soviet occupiers throughout the author's life up to the publication of his novel.

Colonial literature is almost entirely absent in the Hungarian literary corpus, yet there is little evidence of the author 'borrowing' from Western European models. Rather, the distinct self-irony of Eastern European dissident voices from the era of the Iron Curtain is transplanted

into an exotic, yet familiar environment, where one-party rule allocates favours and scarce resources on the basis of party loyalty as well as social and ethnic classes. It is interesting to note that the same author explores another fairly unusual historical scenario in a much more recent novel: *Place Rimbaud* (2013) embeds Hungary in a Europe where France is both politically and culturally dominant after its victory in the Napoleonic Wars. On account of its recourse to magic and somewhat implausible 'deus ex machina' elements, one could arguably include the novel with the earliest point of departure in this category as well: *Ezüst félhold blues* [Silver Crescent Blues] (1990) by András Gáspár (no relation to László Gáspár). In the first century BC, tectonic plate movements open up a permanent body of water between Africa and the Middle East. With the direct land connection between Egypt and the Holy Land thus removed, the direction of the main thrust of Islam's early expansion takes a different direction and Muslim conquest arrives earlier in Eastern Europe than in our timeline. Long centuries of occupation and the successful assimilation of the Balkans lead to twentieth-century Hungary being a firmly integrated part of the Islamic world, with Buda-Pest as its Western-most outpost.

At the other end of the spectrum, stories and novels with the most recent point of departure are those where the Socialist regime never falls—and these inevitably tend to include ironic elements. One such endeavour at novel length is Zoltán László's *Hiperballada* [Hyper Ballad] first published in 1998, and in reworked forms in 2005 and 2011, where the historical timeline follows real-world events until the 1960s, but thereafter imagines a Soviet Union which undertakes the necessary reforms to ensure its lead in the technological space race. Therefore, its satellites, such as the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party, remain in power well into the twenty-first century.

Consolation literature

Although rarely played 'straight,' a third strand of uchronia attempts to offer comfort and compensation, at least in imaginary form, for perceived historical slights or calamities. Such stories, due to their tendency to entice and titillate readers with particularly strong patriotic leanings, often choose to eschew abstractions and opt for a relatively uncomplicated style with a straight-forward narrative. Among such works, the best-selling novel is Bence Pintér and Máté Pintér's *A szivarhajó utolsó útja* [The Airship's Last Journey] (2012). The novel conjures up a Golden Age of political prowess and economic might following Hungary's counterfactual victory in its War of Independence (1848–49) to leave the Austrian Empire. The events of the book are set two generations later, in the "Danube Confederation," a federal republic founded by Lajos Kossuth (the ill-fated leader of Hungary's nineteenth-century revolution). The story itself employs the tropes of conventional spy thrillers, here centred around the pursuit of secret military plans for building a fleet of armed airships.

Aimed at a younger readership, the adventurous plot is nonetheless punctuated with fictional newspaper reports and quotes from in-universe history books to build an alternate geopolitical landscape consistently upbeat about Hungary's prospects in this 'better timeline.' A map included in the print edition shows the territory of the Confederation stretching from Bavaria to the Black

Sea, and one of the quotes in the book describes the state as having been richly endowed with resources and one of the fastest developing economies in Europe at the end of the nineteenth century, strong enough to embark on an attempt to colonise Egypt. These clearly address many of the 'pain-points' of Hungarians who tend to be dissatisfied with the historical achievements of the country when compared to its Western European cousins.

Latest Development: Alternate History Moves into the Mainstream

In recent years, the most significant development in the sub-genre's Hungarian field is the public success and critical acclaim garnered by two alternate history anthologies which had finally put this arcane creative niche firmly on the literary map. The first of the two was published in 2016 by Cser Kiadó under the title *A Másik Forradalom – Alternatív Ötvenhat* [The Other Revolution – Alternative '56]. Its appearance was timed to commemorate the sixtieth anniversary of the 1956 Uprising against the socialist dictatorship imposed by the Soviet occupation of Hungary after World War II. While the anthology included a wide range of approaches and angles, and about half the stories therein would rather fall in the categories of secret histories, period parodies, magical realism, and time-travel tales, the themed volume nonetheless contained noteworthy contributions to the alternate history genre.

For instance, Tibor Bödőcs's pastiche with the rather complex title of *Márai Sándor: Napló – részletek – (Részlet)* [Sándor Márai: Diary Excerpts – An excerpt], falls into the epistolary sub-genre. The famous emigré author Márai exercises his biting social critique not in self-imposed Italian and American exile, but in a Hungary 'liberated' by the Western Allies and inundated with the vicissitudes of Capitalist consumerism. In *Foxtrott*, György Dragomán imagines the victory of the 1956 Uprising ensured by the simultaneous rising of 'forest brothers' and criminal gangs hiding out in the Carpathian Mountains, whose insurrection hinders the counter-attack of the Soviet war machine. In a particularly interesting piece, *Forradalmi Naptár* [Revolutionary Calendar], Viktor Horváth offers a chronological account, broken down by calendar days, of the 1956 Uprising. While the revolution is ultimately defeated, it comes about through the Red Army mobilizing indentured people of colour against the indigenous Magyar population, thus the reader eventually pieces together that a major point of historical alteration must have occurred much earlier, since Hungarian society is portrayed as being stratified along class distinctions and racial lines reminiscent of nineteenth-century America—thus in effect constituting a work of demographic uchronia.

The publishing house timed its second anthology for the centenary of the Treaty of Trianon, which led to the loss of up to two-thirds of Hungary's territory and population, and became the cornerstone of Hungarian historical grievances for a century. Including historical studies and uchronic fiction from the *crème* of Hungarian speculative authors, the 2020 anthology sets the tone with its title *Nézzünk bizakodva a múltba!* [Let Us Hope For A Better Past!]. The volume's stories range from straight-forward consolation literature to metaphysically challenging pieces,

like Sándor Szélesi's *A volt-kávéfolt* [The Ex-coffee Stain], which uses the negotiation of the post-war order as the backdrop of its extrapolation of higher forces taking the reins of human history.

In *Expanzió* [Expansion] by László Csabai, the insurgents who declare a "Hungarian People's Republic" in 1919 receive military support from Lenin's nascent Soviet Union, which intervenes in the Carpathian basin despite still fighting its own civil war in Russia. The implied result hinted at in the story is an enduring radical socialist state in Central-Eastern Europe allied to the USSR, decades before the start of the Cold War in real history. By stark contrast, in Réka Mán-Várhegyi's *Szívek közönye* [The Indifference of Hearts], the aging members of a Hungarian urban resistance group reluctantly continue a low-intensity insurrection against the governments of neighbouring countries amongst whom the entirety of Hungary's territory was divided post-World War I. Yet positive alterations are far from absent. *Szani tévedése* [Szani's Mistake] by László Imre Horváth is akin to uchronia wrapped within another ambiguous alternate history scenario, wherein Miklós Radnóti (a prominent poet murdered by National Socialists in the closing months of World War II) becomes prime minister and the persecution of Hungarian Jews during the Holocaust haunts only the dreams of the eponymous character. Both levity as well as consolation are offered by *III. Péter király szövegírója* [King Peter III's Speech Writer] by Zsolt Kácsor, one of the highlights of the anthology. The epistolary piece, heavily laden with historical irony, imagines Péter Eszterházy (a postmodern author of aristocratic lineage) as king of Hungary in the 1970s. The tale itself takes the form of the royal speech writer's resignation letter, setting out the absurdity of King Péter's intention to publish a piece of alternate history that would detail the timeline as it came to pass in reality, complete with the abolition of the monarchy and the country's long Soviet occupation.

By gathering some of Hungary's best-selling authors, the above two volumes have almost single-handedly propelled the alternate history genre into the limelight. The establishment of uchronic writing within the literary mainstream was confirmed by the prominent reception and even anticipation of the second anthology by the Hungarian literary press, from *Élet és Irodalom* to *Magyar Hang*, from *Népszava* to *Magyar Narancs*.[7] In this context, it is worth noting that ancillary sub-genres such as secret histories are thriving, too, a prime practitioner of which is Sándor Szélesi, one of the most widely read contemporary Hungarian SF authors. In his explicitly satirical 2016 novel co-authored with László Erdős, *Sztálin aki egyszer megmentette a világot* [Stalin Who Once Saved The World], the infamous Soviet leader survives into the 1980s and shapes the history of the Cold War from behind the scenes. Thus, the novel navigates the slipstream between alternate history proper and secret history, with the overt intention to keep the reader guessing which of the sprawling list of personae are historical and which are imaginary, along with the cultural references to places, events, even signature dishes of a restaurant most Hungarian readers would be familiar with (the *Gundel* in Budapest).

To Be Continued . . .

As we have seen, alternate history appears to meet different needs or demands in a relatively small, isolated literary corpus, as compared to large languages that have at some point played a

dominant role on the world stage. In Hungarian literature, the uchronic niche serves a threefold purpose: (a) as a means for seriously exploring what might have been; (b) as a vehicle for satirical or melancholy introspection, and (c) as a source of bitter-sweet consolation. Surveys of the alternate histories of other rarely treated literary corpora might reveal similar tendencies, which are however tempered by different national circumstances. This is the case for Romania, for instance, whose territorial gains in the twentieth century's two great wars left its literature with different issues to deal with as compared to Hungary's experience of defeat and crippling losses of land, population and status.8 Of similar interest would be cross-referencing the alternate histories of 'dominant' versus 'isolated' corpora with uchronia focussing on nations and states that aren't merely diminished in importance, but have ceased to exist altogether as geopolitical entities, e.g., Byzantine or Native American alternate histories. Perhaps in an alternate timeline, this essay would have surveyed the rich tomes of Constantinople's Eastern Roman National Library, searching for imaginary tales about a long-forgotten Finno-Ugric people who had once inhabited the Carpathian basin.

As my essay above demonstrates, however, these various approaches would arguably all lead to a rather counterintuitive conclusion. Uchronia, in their multitude of insular voices, often do not speak to a common cosmopolitan audience, but rather address the retrospective concerns and regrets of specific communities. Thus, it is precisely by virtue of its localised focus, and limited accessibility to those unfamiliar with the given cultural context, that the alternate history sub-genre makes a unique contribution to the diversity of speculative fiction.

Notes

1. All translations from Hungarian works are my own.
2. See Karen Hellekson's taxonomy: (1) "the nexus story, which includes time-travel-timepolicing stories and battle stories"; (2) "the true alternate, which may include alternate histories that posit different physical laws"; and (3) "the parallel worlds story." (2001, 5).
3. This contrasts with speculative or future history, i.e., works about a theoretically possible National Socialist victory written while the war was still ong.
4. For a detailed plot synopsis and a confirmation of Henriet's hypothesis as to Gáspár's being the earliest such known uchronic work, see my essay on Hungarian alternate history in *Revista Hélice*, vol. III, issue 6.
5. Note, meanwhile, that to this day Hungarian cinema remains almost entirely untouched by alternate history.
6. Call to mind, for instance, the mass sexual violence and arbitrary deportation prevalent during the breakdown of society that ensued in the wake of Hungary's Soviet invasion, which traumatized wide swathes of the population and would have informed readers' attitudes during the following decades.

7. For some of these reviews available online (in Hungarian), see: https://nepszava.hu/3080433_vala-jovendo-nezzunk-bizakodva-a-multba--alternativ-trianon; https://www.es.hu/cikk/2020-05-22/karolyi-csaba/trianon-novellak.html.
8. For an overview of comparative developments in Romanian SF, see Rodríguez, "A Note on Romanian Science Fiction Literature from Past to Present", in: *Sci Phi Journal*, 2019/3

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