

“From now on, Kolozsvár is always the way the train takes us home...”

(The appearance of the Trianon theme in contemporary Hungarian fiction)

Júlia Vallasek* 

Department of Journalism and Digital Media, Faculty of Political, Administrative and Communication Sciences, Babeş-Bolyai University, Romania

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Received: April 11, 2022 • Accepted: November 2, 2022

Published online: February 28, 2023

© 2022 Akadémiai Kiadó, Budapest



ABSTRACT

One characteristic of fiction is its ability to shape collective knowledge of the past, to create images of the past that can persist for generations – and as a consequence, for generations without direct experience, these images embody the past. In my study, I seek to answer the question how the memory of the transitions of power that ended the First World War is represented in contemporary Hungarian novels (published after 2000), and what other concepts are linked to the notion of the Treaty of Trianon. In the novels of Barbara Bauer, Zsuzsa Selyem, Magda Szabó, Andrea Tompa, János Térey and Gábor Vida, the theme is conveyed with different approaches, a varying significance, in a prose language that is distinctly different in each case, but at the same time is integral to the individual oeuvre of each author.

KEYWORDS

First World War, Trianon, contemporary prose, cultural memory, Pál Závada, Magda Szabó, Andrea Tompa, Gábor Vida, Zsuzsa Selyem, János Térey, Barbara Bauer

* Corresponding author. E-mail: julia.vallasek@ubbcluj.ro

Under the 1920 Treaty of Trianon, which ended the WWI, Hungary lost 67% of its territory and 58% of its population. Of the more than 10 million people living in the territories annexed to the surrounding countries, 3.2 million were Hungarian. Because of the enormous losses, the incomplete application of the principle of nationality and the situation of the Hungarians who became a minority, the Treaty of Trianon grew into one of the most sensitive points of Hungarian historical consciousness and is still a vastly disputed topic today.

In my paper, I seek to answer the question how the memory of the transitions of power that ended WWI is represented in contemporary Hungarian novels (published after 2000).¹

With only one exception (Magda Szabó, who herself was only two and a half years old when the Treaty was signed), the authors of these works cannot have had any personal experience of the events of the period; the theme is conveyed in their works with different approaches, a varying significance, in a prose language that is distinctly different in each case, but at the same time is integral to the individual oeuvre of each author, and even (in the case of Barbara Bauer) in a different literary register.

A century has passed since the signing of the Treaty, which means that the generation of eyewitnesses has passed, and likewise there are fewer and fewer people still alive who grew up on the revisionist propaganda which prevailed between the two world wars and who encountered the word ‘Trianon’ in a fundamentally grievance-based approach. In other words, we have arrived at the point in time where, as Jan Assmann writes, with the extinction of personal memory, a local cultural memory has arisen, which is meant to express a particular group and its values, and which is now a predominantly written form of memory, mediated and shaped by professional institutions of tradition and information transmission (Assmann, 1999). In Assmann’s model, the fading of personal memory is accompanied by a dampening of the feelings associated with particular events, a kind of processing and closure. No one has personal memories of Trianon, yet we cannot speak of a clear resolution, let alone of forgetting.

Gábor Gyáni attributes the cult of Trianon, which continues to this day, and has in fact even gained new momentum after the turn of the millennium, to the interaction of four circumstances: it can be physically experienced, the Treaty is prominently present in communicative memory, it fits seamlessly into the narrative that traditionally sees Hungarian history as a series of tragic events and it can be inserted into a larger system of relations that interprets the relationship between Hungary and the West, in which the concept of the West is associated with the image of a power that is indifferent or downright hostile to the fate of the Hungarian nation (Gyáni, 2012, p. 369).

The word ‘Trianon’, which recalls the events of 1920 and now also invokes an official day of remembrance, is in fact a *place of remembrance*, whose purpose, as Pierre Nora poetically puts it, is “to stop time, to prevent forgetting, to record the state of things, to immortalise death, to incorporate death into spiritual matter in order to extract the maximum of meaning from minimal signs.” (Nora, 1999) As a metaphor, it is obviously open to interpretation, the speaker’s intentions and personal choices determining the specific meanings and attitudes assigned to it.

¹I use the following works for this purpose: Magda SZABÓ: *Für Elise*, Európa Könyvkiadó, Budapest, 2002, Andrea TOMPA: *Fejtől s lábtól. Kettő orvos Erdélyben (Head to Toe. Two Doctors in Transylvania)*, Kalligram Kiadó, Bratislava, 2013, Gábor VIDA: *Ahol az ő lelke (Where His Spirit Is)*, Magvető Kiadó, Budapest, 2013, ZSUZSA SELYEM: *Moszkvában esik (It’s Raining in Moscow)*, Jelenkor Kiadó, Budapest, 2016, Barbara BAUER: *Porlik, mint a szikla (Crumbles Like a Rock)*, Jaffa Kiadó, Budapest, 2017 és János TÉREY: *Káli holtak (The Dead of Kál)*, Jelenkor Kiadó, Budapest, 2018.



In Hungarian public discourse, the Trianon metaphor is predominantly “organised around the experience of unexpected loss and defeat. Since it is a metaphor, the concrete object of the loss does not have to be named; it is open for any notion to be inserted: territory, population, position in the imperial centre, economic and social resources, etc.” (Kovács, 2010).

Trianon, the place name of the treaty that ended WWI, functions as an ethnocentric metaphor, its prevailing interpretation in public discourse obviously being valid solely from the Hungarian nationalist perspective, while other interpretations are ignored (The Trianon metaphor in Romanian public discourse, for example, is much more an evoker of Hungarian irredentism than of the events that ended WWI.)

Balázs Ablonczy also raises the possibility of unfolding the complex meaning of the Trianon metaphor in the foreword to the second edition of *Trianon Legends*. “Is it not possible that Trianon is the name of *something else*? Or at least of something else *as well*? The imbalanced development of Hungarian history and the Hungarian middle class, the sum or sense of individual and collective suffering?” (Ablonczy, 2015).

Fiction, which already often operates with metaphors, plays a crucial role in the unfolding of this *something else*, in its structured communication to the audience and in its placement in the collective memory.

In the following, I will examine how the transition of power following WWI, represented by the Trianon metaphor, appears in some contemporaneous prose works; what sort of thematic approaches are used in order to unfold and unravel this metaphor and which of the above-mentioned variations of prose poetics are used for this purpose.

The centenary of the event and the prominent presence of the subject in the public discourse would justify a significant increase in the number of works of fiction on the theme of Trianon and the era. Nevertheless, we cannot speak of a mass publication of Trianon novels, and it could even be argued that the subject is rather underrepresented in contrast to its prevalence in the public discourse. The agenda (and consequently the language) of politics and the press does not seem to be reflected in the window displays of the better literary bookshops, probably because the agenda-setting mechanisms of art function differently. The theme has a markedly stronger presence in various pseudo-scientific, popular and factual literatures, both on- and offline. It is therefore important to underline that the output of books which attempt to explore the Trianon theme tends to a large extent not towards fiction but towards non-fiction (preferring memoirs, autobiographies, or possibly autobiographically based prose over fiction).

“Trianon offers a topos for public history in which the commercially based memory industry can easily be combined with the intense interest shown therein by the agents of state, local government, civil society and political movements,” writes Gábor Gyáni (Gyáni, 2012, p. 363). This ‘intense interest’ can be seen in the reception of the buzzword ‘Trianon’, not so much in professional criticism, but rather in press products that are more sensitive to topicality (news, reports, etc.) which can, however, strongly influence the reading of the works in question. The reasons for this are obviously complex, but the aim of the present study is not to seek a sociological explanation for the relatively small number of Trianon novels written by Hungarian authors in the early 21st century, but rather to examine how and by what poetic means the theme is portrayed when it appears in novels.

In this sense, *A röpülő falu. Magyar írók Trianon novellái* (*The Flying Village. Short Stories on Trianon by Hungarian writers*) (Körössi, 2002), published in an anthology series by Noran Kiadó, is of symbolic significance. The selection contains short stories related to the theme by



writers of the first half of the 20th century, i.e. authors who knew the subject *first hand*, so to speak, and who therefore approached it on the level of communicative memory. The volume, which contains short stories by Endre Ady, Mihály Babits, Sándor Hunyady, Sándor Kacsó, Frigyes Karinthy, Károly Kós, Dezső Kosztolányi, Gyula Krúdy, Géza Laczkó, József Nyirő, Áron Tamási and Lajos Zilahy, suggests that the metaphor of Trianon does not have a clear interpretation; the way in which it is decoded and understood depends on the free interpretation of the recipient, who in fact tries to evoke the striking absence in the course of interpretation and to identify it with various concepts.

In the following I will discuss, in the order of their appearance, some works in which the theme is given prominence, as well as some where the sub-themes invoked by the word 'Trianon' play only a secondary role, but the works/authors in question have (or may have) a significant canon-forming power. The authors (with the exception of Barbara Bauer) all occupy a significant place in the contemporary literary canon, as proven by their professional recognition (various professional awards, contracts with prestigious publishers, significant professional reception), but also by the popularity of their books and the fact that they are well known in outside their own professional circles. I have chosen Bauer's novel for analysis because of its symptomatic value, since here the rhetoric of grievance so often associated with the subject of Trianon, and in a sense also the choice of subject, is overridden and nuanced by the specific traditions of the sub-genre (*historical chick-lit*). Nevertheless, this selection is not intended to be a monographic overview, but merely a brief review of contemporary prose on Trianon.

Although published a few years before the period under research here, Pál Závada's 1997 novel *Jadviga párnája (Jadviga's Pillow)* (Závada, 1997) can be considered an important starting point. The novel, departing from a monoethnic perspective, depicts the break-up of a family and the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy through the everyday life of a Slovak community in Hungary at the turn of the century in a pluriethnic and multilingual (Slovak, Hungarian, German) world. While the protagonist, András Osztatní, is trying to repair his marriage to Jadviga, a country is falling apart in the background. History only provides a background for the protagonists, while specific historical events (e.g. the Hungarian Soviet Republic, the Romanian invasion, the Treaty of Trianon, Slovak national movements) are only referred to indirectly, mainly through the subjective reflections of the diarist, and the diary form allows the private lives of the characters to remain in focus throughout the novel.

Für Elise, Magda Szabó's popular quasi-autobiographical novel published in 2002, is the story of the socialisation of a girl of irregular talent in Debrecen between the two world wars. The child's perspective is constantly counterpointed by the commentary of the adult narrator, who moves backwards and forwards in time, describing not only the events but also their future consequences, and the present and future of the settings. The theme of Trianon is explicitly linked in the novel to the figure of the fictional sister Cili, the "Trianon orphan", and is supplemented by interpretations such as amnesia and regression to a state without language as a result of the trauma and the injury of her wounded body. Injury is manifested primarily in the representation of war wound, through images of crippled children seen on the street; and of soldiers maimed, blinded or limbless after the World War; while the notion of war loss is precipitated around the Trianon metaphor. The perspective of the child narrator, through turns of phrase that recall the rhetoric of the inter-war vernacular, shows the process by which the French place name becomes a metaphor for both a lack and the complex social problems of the post-war period of the 1920s.



“The French place name has become a slogan, an element of our everyday speech, (...) Even for me, who experienced no direct grief over Trianon, the dream in my childhood memories sometimes brought back the monsters I saw in the streets, who were kept alive in a way that was unacceptable, only the remaining head and limbless torso being walked in a peculiar pram-like trolley shaded with an umbrella. The French place name was a more common word on our lips than sugar; we didn’t know chocolate, nor exotic fruits.” (Szabó, 2002, p. 33).

Andrea Tompa’s novel *Fejtől s lábtól. Kettő orvos Erdélyben* (*Head to Toe. Two Doctors in Transylvania*) contextualises and nuances, and thereby dismantles the predominantly traumatic image of Trianon present in the language of Hungarian memory politics partly by means of fiction (narrative editing, conflicts, rhetoric) and partly by means of extremely thorough research (environmental geography, contemporary geography, and the use of language).

Through the life stories of her physician heroes, the image of an ‘envisioned Transylvania’ (György, 2013) of predominantly Hungarian ethnicity and culture is questioned, and instead she presents a world of high ethnic, linguistic and religious complexity in which parallel life strategies and self-interpretations do not necessarily intersect, but complement each other. At the same time, in contrast to monolithic readings, it also points out the decisive role played by the individual’s social background, socialisation and, not least, gender in the way he or she interprets a given situation and the life choices he or she makes. Trianon and everything connected with it is presented in the novel primarily through bodily metaphors, justified in this case by the professional experience of the physician-narrators. “It is true that not only hands and feet can be mutilated, but also a country. [...] The greatest mutilation possible to the body of Hungarians has taken place: we have been cut off from our own mother, our homeland, and thrown to another country” (Tompa, 2013, p. 320).

The metaphor of *Mutilated Hungary*, which has been flourishing in the rhetoric of Hungarian memory politics to this day, thus appears in a way that is authenticated by a professional perspective and that way placed in a concrete context.

Gábor Vida’s novel, *Ahol az ő lelke* (*Where His Spirit Is*), which fits into the picaresque tradition, operates a pathos-free, deheroised, under-rhetoricised, yet personal and intimate discourse. Acquiescence to the changes brought about by historical facts, a new beginning in a new situation and prosperity are expressed not through a heroic stance, but through quiet, everyday gestures. The theme of Trianon, as in Andrea Tompa’s work, is presented here in the context of finding a home, but this time the professional ethos of action is absent from the motivation, and is replaced by sobriety linked to everyday practice on the one hand, and a more abstract, spiritual approach to searching and finding home/self on the other.

The author’s untitled preface and commentary preceding the plot itself is spoken from an external perspective which indicates that Werner’s search for home will not develop along the narratives associated with Trianon in Hungarian public discourse. Although the speaker initially speaks on behalf of an assumed Hungarian *we* and evokes the typical rhetoric of grievance, by the end of the introduction the focus has shifted to the first person singular and the rhetoric of grievance is dissolved through the figure of the ‘assumed’ grandfather repeating everyday gestures.

“... even though it is not my task to answer the question of how it was possible for this to happen, or more precisely, why we allowed the loss of Transylvania, I will briefly state, to avoid any misunderstanding, that we did not need it, and we will never get it back because we would not know what to do with it anyway. We, Hungarians, thus, in the first person plural.



However, my grandfather fed his horse that sad, dark Christmas, and every day for fifty years afterwards. Provided he had hay or fodder. Provided he had a horse. Provided I had a grandfather.” (Vida, 2013, p. 5).

Zsuzsa Selyem’s novel *Moszkvában esik* (*It’s Raining in Moscow*) is a fragmented family history told by changing (mostly non-human) narrators, in which realist narration is mixed with postmodern text-play and text-collages from various interviews, memoirs, etc.

In the two chapters linked to the period, the Trianon theme is presented in a strongly ironic approach as a rhetorical element of a nationalist-patriotic discourse that is becoming empty and merely decorative. The Transylvanian myth presented as a Fairy Garden and the Trianon metaphor are dismantled through parody, while the plot of the novel is metaphorically linked to Trianon through the loss of land, which symbolises the loss of the country. Here, the loss of property/land is not resolved in the process of finding a home in the changed circumstances, of adapting oneself to these circumstances, but is placed in a broader (temporal) framework through the reflections of the non-human characters, who focus on general, biological necessities. It is in this framework that the ecological aspect appears, for the time being only as a suggestion, which places the image of the forest/spruce image of transylvaniam and even the schematic representation of Transylvania prevalent in the public consciousness in a radically new context.

Alex Csáky, the actor hero of János Térey’s novel *Káli holtak* (*The Dead of Kál*), takes the lead role in a radically new production of Hamlet, set in Kolozsvár at the time of the Treaty of Trianon. At first, he has no interpretation of his own, leaving the interpretation of the ideological *double entendre* of the role of ‘Hamlet of Trianon’ to the director; however, by the time of the epilogue, taking place in Kolozsvár, he has his own reading of Trianon, which is partly the result of his own inner development and his own adversities, and partly of his interpretation of the media echo he obsessively follows. Thus, Alex Csáky rejects the patriotic rhetoric manifesting in formalities and the loss-based narrative of Trianon which is associated with it, and becomes open to new perspectives, including those of the other side (in this case, the Romanian side). For this, he needs to dismantle his illusions and accurately assess the present situation (for example, that the Hungarian audience, who were assumed to be united in 1919, no longer exists, and that Kolozsvár is now a liveable but “barely Hungarian” city), while remaining unable to dismiss completely the role of pain. In this sense, then, it remains within the interpretive framework of the trauma narrative, since it is suffering that can be interpreted at both the community and individual level, regardless of cultural embeddedness.

“Do we need this shanty-town?”, Alex asks himself as he walks through the streets of Kolozsvár, examining the city through the eyes of an objective or critical outside observer, and then offers, as an alternative, an emotional attitude to the city (more broadly, obviously, to Transylvania, or even than the territories annexed to other countries at the end of WWI) that is not based on possession or ownership, but is reception-centred, yet irrational. “We will always need this *shanty-town*. Even if it is lost to us. We don’t need it for our sanity, that’s for sure. And what do we need it for? To watch it. To know it. To love it. And yes, to live.” (Térey, 2018, p. 516).²

²Ibid., p. 516.



In *Káli holtak*, one theatre review calls the director's concept of placing Hamlet in a Trianon setting a "show bakery". The title of Barbara Bauer's novel, *Porlik, mint a szikla* (*Crumbles like a rock*), refers to the song known as "the Szekler anthem". The novel conceals the story of a family fleeing from Szeklerland and settling in Hungary as a result of the shifting of the national border in the background of the narrative of establishing a genuine show bakery. Bauer's novel is written in a literary register different from that of the previous novels, thus providing an example of how the Trianon theme appears in contemporary literature.

Porlik, mint a szikla (*Crumbles like a rock*) belongs to the genre of the romantic novel targeted at younger women, a genre that became prominent at the end of the 20th century and has been called 'chick-lit' in English speaking criticism since the second half of the 1990s. The genre includes works (usually written by women for women readers) in which the heroine, who lives in the big city, builds a career, makes friends, and meets men in search of a possible soulmate. Self-actualisation is an important element in these works, but unlike traditional romance novels, a career and inner self-construction are as important as finding a worthy love partner (Ehriander, 2015).

In Bauer's book, the present alternates with the past, and the events of Amanda's journey of self-discovery alternate with the first-person narrative of the life of the grandmother who sends the heroine on her way. Thus, it is from the perspective of Mamuska/Ilon that we learn, through the tragic events in the life of a Transylvanian Szekler peasant family, about the Romanian invasion of 1916, the Treaty of Trianon, the subsequent flight, repatriation, and the brief period following the Second Vienna Award. Without exception, all of these events are linked to tragic incidents, usually the violent deaths of family members, which Ilon invariably witnesses, first as a child, later as a young woman.

Mamuska's recollections are shaped by the traumatic, grievance-based narrative of Trianon, which is strongly alive in public discourse, and which also asserts Hungarian cultural superiority. Amanda is conspicuously ignorant of the territories annexed to other countries; moreover, as a teenager she rebelled against her own family's past and the cult of Szeklerland. Nevertheless, she tries to prepare herself for the journey of searching for her identity and unravelling mysteries by studying the history of the region. In the event, however, she only perceives the Hungarian aspects of contemporary Transylvania, and thus her image of it is shaped by the nostalgia of the Fairy Garden (explicitly expressed in the text) and by the mythical ancestral power of the *pure source*.

Barbara Bauer's book does not question the Trianon clichés of public discourse, but incorporates them organically, with all their characteristic rhetoric and phraseology, into the love story of a chick-lit heroine struggling for self-actualisation. However, this promising meeting of genre and subject matter finally results in a text of radically different aesthetic quality compared to those discussed above, precisely because of its lack of reflection. The indisputable merit of the book is that it (unintentionally) shows with pinpoint accuracy how easily the numerous recurring panels referential to Trianon and present in contemporary Hungarian public discourse can slip into national kitsch in the absence of reflection.

In contemporary novels concerned with the Trianon theme we can observe the predominance of an empirical approach and the use of the first-person singular narrative which reinforces the perception of credibility (Závada, Szabó, Tompa, Selyem, Térey), or the application of the stream of thought technique (Vida). This is complemented by the use of the diary form as a preferred mode of communication, which allows for self-reflection, and the use of guest texts



(press, specialist books) or even fictional guest texts, which can play a key role in the construction of an authentic chronography.

From a thematic point of view, it is important to underline how difficult it is to apply the Trianon theme on its own, and how it cannot be narrowed down to an issue of the shifting of the national border and its related issues. Apparently, Trianon can only be “written about in itself” on the level of popular literature, and the need for aesthetic authenticity requires that it should not be detached from a series of questions such as the losses entailed by the World War and the social changes that followed, the revival of revisionist public discourse and rhetoric between the two World Wars after the turn of the millennium, the relationship with the neighbouring peoples (in the books discussed here, especially the Romanians) and the possible ways of coexisting with these nations, and finally the issues related to the Second Vienna Award and the Holocaust. The abandonment of the monoethnic perspective and the reflective incorporation of the pluriethnic use of space and language also become important in these novels.

Depending on whether the narrative is built on the basis of an *external* or an *internal* reading, two different ways of relating to the Treaty of Trianon and the lost territories are outlined in the novels. The *external reading* (i.e. when the narrator approaches the issue from an *external*, ‘motherland’ perspective) is articulated to a significant extent in terms of absence and loss. For example, in Térey’s novel Transylvania/Szeklerland/Kolozsvár is presented as an entity that is no longer what it should be (see the reflections of Térey’s hero on Kolozsvár), yet it is still an intrinsic value in its own right.

In cases of internal reading (Vida, Tompa, Selyem), on the other hand, the narrative is based primarily on a sense of homeliness, although the plot is mostly shaped in these novels at the time of the Treaty of Trianon. Such internal reading is characterised by the operationalisation and value creation already familiar from novels featuring the transition of power between the two World Wars which rely partly on a professional ethos (see *Tompa’s doctors* or *Selyem’s master*) and partly on a broader, more irrational sense of homeliness (Vida).

In fact, in contemporary prose there have been attempts of considerable aesthetic potential aiming to bring about some kind of resolution or closure with regard to the Trianon theme in our cultural memory in the Assmannian sense. Nevertheless, the word ‘Trianon’ itself functions as such a strong metaphor, and its layers of meaning in the public discourse are still so strongly linked to concepts of trauma, loss, defeat, and lack, that for the time being (at least in the Hungarian cultural sphere) it seems to be a task beyond the scope of literary possibilities to bring resolution.

REFERENCES

- Ablonczy, B. (2015). *Trianon-legendák, (Legends of Trianon)*. Jaffa, Budapest, p. 15.
- Assmann, J. (1999). *A kulturális emlékezet, (The cultural memory)*. Atlantisz, Budapest.
- Bauer, B. (2017). *Porlik, mint a szikla (Crumbles Like a rock)*. Jaffa, Budapest.
- Ehriander, H. (2015). Chick lit in historical settings by Frida Skybäck. *Journal of Popular Romance Studies*, 8.
- Gyáni, G. (2012). Nemzet, kollektív emlékezet és public history, (Nation, collective memory and public history). *Történelmi Szemle*, 3: 369.



- György, P. (2013). *Állatkert Kolozsváron. Képzelt Erdély. (A zoo at Cluj. The imagined Transylvania)*. Magvető, Budapest.
- Kovács, É. (2010). 'Trianon és a történelmi emlékezet', ('Trianon and the historical memory'). *Limes*, 4: 51.
- Körössi, P.J. (Ed.) (2002). *A röpködő falu. Magyar írók Trianon novellái (The flying village. Short stories on Trianon by Hungarian writers)*. Noran, Budapest.
- Nora, P. (1999). 'Emlékezet és történelem között. A helyek problematikája' ('Between memory and history. Les Lieux de Mémoire'). *Aetas*, 3: 142–157.
- Selyem, Zs. (2016). *Moszkvában esik (It's raining in Moscow)*. Jelenkor, Budapest.
- Szabó, M. (2002). *Für Elise*. Európa, Budapest.
- Tompa, A. (2013). *Fejtől s lábtól. Kettő orvos Erdélyben. (Head to Toe. Two Doctors in Transylvania)*. Kalligram, Bratislava.
- Térey, J. (2018). *Káli holtak (The dead of Kál)*. Jelenkor, Budapest.
- Vida, G. (2013). *Ahol az ő lelke (Where his soul is)*. Magvető Kiadó, Budapest.
- Závada, P. (1997). *Jadviga párnája (Jadviga's pillow)*. Magvető Kiadó, Budapest.

