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MA and the Rupture of the Avant-garde 1917–18: Reconstructing Aesthetic and Political Conflict in Hungary and the Role of Periodical Culture¹

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ABSTRACT

The first major quarrel within the Hungarian avant-garde, which took place on the pages of its periodical *MA [Today]* in 1917–18, had a long-lasting impact on Hungarian leftist intellectual and cultural life, and on radical modernity in Hungary and beyond. This article highlights some of the most important elements of this quarrel: its main actors, the debated subjects, the arenas in which this controversy took place, as well as the question of audience in 1917–18. It also describes the afterlife of this controversy in a variety of discursive and ideological contexts throughout the twentieth century.

KEYWORDS

Hungarian avant-garde; communism; audiences; gender imbalance; Russian revolutions; October Revolution 1918; Hungarian Soviet Republic; stigmatization

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The first major conflict in the Hungarian avant-garde and the subsequent secession in 1917–18 had a long-lasting impact on radical modernism and even on the entire intellectual and cultural life of the Hungarian Left. This article provides a critical examination of this early and decisive controversy in the avant-garde journal *MA* [*Today*], published in Budapest, that led to a decisive split of the avant-garde into separate aesthetic and political factions in the long run. It reconstructs this crucial moment of rupture, examining its main actors, its audiences, the subjects that were debated, and the arenas in which the controversy took place. And as I shall demonstrate, this was no short-lived moment of conflict: rather it experienced a protracted afterlife through selective historical narratives and their omissions. And throughout it was periodical culture that played a decisive role.

Hungarian Avant-garde Journals and the Secession of 1917–18

While in general in Europe all the leading avant-garde movements (Cubism, Expressionism, Vorticism) were either destroyed or transformed by the First World War² — except for Futurism which became even more militarized — it was precisely the collapse of the pre-war culture that generated the avant-garde in the Hungarian part of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy (henceforth Hungary) in October 1915. ‘The sense of European culture tearing itself apart [could also have] radicalized the critical impulse’,³ as in the case of the German expressionist journal *Die Aktion*, an important inspirational model for Hungarian avant-garde in its earliest phase. Accordingly, an experienced modernist writer, Lajos Kassák launched its first journal, *A Tett* [*The Action*], in Budapest inspired by French and German modernist influences: ‘*A Tett* lent Hungary a new literary voice, markedly different from the urban aestheticism of the dominant literary monthly *Nyugat*’, ‘in its language and contents, *A Tett* appeared coarse, jagged, and courageously innovative’.⁴ Last but not least, the journal represented an energetic anti-war stance which distinguished it and put it in a position of dissidence. *A Tett* was banned in October 1916, accused of ‘undermining warfare objectives of the country’, notably the first among the few Hungarian journals to be banned during the First World War. Kassák immediately launched a new journal, initially with the more cautious subtitle ‘journal of literature and art’, and concentrated more on the visual arts, music, and theatre than he had in *A Tett*.⁵ As another strategy to avoid censorship, he published proportionally fewer foreign authors up until the end of war than he had in *A Tett*, particularly from the enemy countries.⁶ This new avant-garde journal was launched under the name of *MA* expressing ‘a profound desire to seize hold of the present and give shape to the future’.⁷

The causes of this important rift in the history of the Hungarian avant-garde is generally interpreted by two main motivations: the four secessionists — namely József Révai, Aladár Komját, Mátyás György, József Lengyel — are considered to be very much the juniors of the 30-year-old Kassák (Révai was the youngest, 19 years old) and

2 Paul Wood, ‘The Avant-garde in the Early Twentieth Century’, in *The Challenge of the Avant-Garde*, ed. by Paul Wood (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999), pp. 183–203 (p. 202).

3 Paul Wood, ‘The Revolutionary Avant-gardes: Dada, Constructivism and Surrealism’, in *The Challenge of the Avant-Garde*, ed. by Wood, pp. 226–56 (p. 229).

4 See Éva Forgács and Tyrus Miller, ‘The Avant-Garde in Budapest and in Exile in Vienna’, in *The Oxford Critical and Cultural History of Modernist Magazines: Volume 3: Europe 1880–1940*, ed. by Peter Brooker and others (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 1128–56 (p. 1129).

5 Forgács and Miller, p. 1131.

6 Eszter Balázs, ‘Avant-Garde and Anti-Militarism: *A Tett*’, in *Signal to the World: War, Avant-Garde and Kassák*, ed. by Gábor Dobó and Merse Pál Szeredi (Budapest: Kassák Foundation, 2016), pp. 12–51 (p. 50).

7 Forgács and Miller, p. 1131.

were initially trying to prevent Kassák from defining the character of journal. So, it has essentially been viewed as a generational revolt,⁸ an approach had been also typical to Hungarian literary history since the nineteenth century. Another well-known detail stressed in historical narratives is the political motive of their breakup: the aftermath of the second Russian revolution of 1917 forced political radicalization because they all adhered to revolutionary socialist and communist ideas. Also well-known is the precise date of the secession. It happened immediately after the second Russian Revolution, around the 15 November 1917.⁹ As a result, at least according to historical narratives, the secessionists did not publish in *MA* any longer and instead prepared an introductory text intended for a new but eventually censored journal, named in homage to the Bolshevik Revolution *Kilenszáztízennéhét* [1917]. Finally they successfully published their own anthology of avant-garde poems a year later, in October 1918, called *1918 — Szabadulás* [1918 — *Liberation*]. The secessionists' political itineraries are well known too. In 1918 Révai, Komját, and Lengyel produced anti-militarist texts and joined the revolutionary socialists, an anti-militarist group of the Galilei Circle, an association composed of free-thinkers as well as Marxist university students and secondary school students. After the armistice, at the end of November 1918, all of them were founding members of the Party of Communists of Hungary (KMP). During the Hungarian Soviet Republic, from March to the end of July 1919, all the secessionists occupied important functions in communist media and agitprop groups.¹⁰

The rift of 1917 appears in every historical account of the Hungarian avant-garde but it has never been analyzed as a polemic in its own right that was only followed by the secession. Its interpretation was for a long time formed by ideological and teleological narratives during the communist era, the dispute and subsequent secession represented as obligatory steps away from the 'literary anarchy' characterized by Kassák and towards the legitimate revolutionary socialism adopted by the secessionists. Although communist narratives no longer hold sway, the story has remained the same: a group of younger, radicalized writers stood up against the older Kassák and joined the communist movement. In what follows I shall re-examine this historical narrative by placing primary focus on the terms of the polemic itself and its relationship with the subsequent secession.

Reconsidering the 1917–18 Secession

There are a number of elements of the avant-garde rupture that have not been made explicit until now. For one thing, this was not one particular quarrel *inter pares* but rather a series of articles and publications in *MA* that presented various interpretations of the role of art and the artist in society. For another, it was a rift with an considerable afterlife. So we have to deal with a long-run process of dispute that reveals the balance of power, institutional positions, and social network of the avant-garde group gathered around Kassák.¹¹ Another detail never considered is the question of audience, even though polemics are frequently triadic in nature.¹² Three of the secessionists — Révai,

8 Károly Urbán, 'Mozgalom és elmélet: Vázlatok Révai József felszabadulás előtti pályaképehez' ['Movement and Theory: A Draft of József Révai's Itinerary before 1945'], in *A magyar filozófiai gondolkodás a két világháború között* [Hungarian Philosophical Reflections between the Two World Wars], ed. by István Hemann and others (Budapest: Kossuth, 1983), p. 380.

9 Urbán, p. 379.

10 Farkas József, *Etika és forradalmiság Lengyel József művészetében* [Ethics and Revolutionary Ideas in the Art of József Lengyel] (Budapest: Akadémiai, 1977), p. 548.

11 Cyril Lemieux, 'A quoi sert l'analyse des controverses?', *Mil neuf cents: Revue d'histoire intellectuelle*, no. 25 (2007), 191–212 (p. 191).

12 Lemieux, p. 201.

Komját, and Lengyel — belonged to the progressive Galileo Circle.¹³ Kassák himself was well-connected to this circle, sharing the same philosophical orientation with the membership: they all read Ernst Mach, Ernst Haeckel, Oswald Spengler, and the Hungarian Henrik Singer. Most of the readership of *A Tett* and *MA* was also recruited from the Galileo Circle.¹⁴ Nevertheless, when Kassák was invited to hold a lecture and recite his poems in the Galileo Circle on 3 December 1916, he was hissed off the stage.¹⁵ According to Kassák himself in his ulterior autobiographic novel a couple of young men and women — according to Kassák, ‘provocateurs’ among several hundred students¹⁶ — condemned his lecture as ‘synthetic literature’ and provoked a scandal.¹⁷ This description is confirmed by the poet Árpád Szélpál, a future contributor to *MA*, who also stressed that listeners had rejected the ‘incomprehensibility’ of Kassák’s lecture and poems.¹⁸ So this time it was not the avant-garde artists themselves who created the scandal, but their audiences. Kassák also noted in his autobiographic novel that his collaborators in *MA* present at the evening had become ‘pale and excited’ when the scandal broke out and remained in shock for a while.¹⁹ In his later narration Kassák claimed for himself the performative element of the evening from his ‘provocateurs’. What is more, while the secessionists left the journal, Kassák claimed that the leading provocateur of the evening, the young writer Sándor Barta, was becoming his most important ally at *MA* in Budapest against secessionists.

When dealing with the story of the break, it is impossible to avoid that very controversial evening. It was a severe critique of the central figure of the avant-garde in a public forum, in the presence of both his readership and collaborators. This event certainly left its mark on Révai, Komját, and Lengyel; Révai even joined the Galileo Circle officially in 1917, so after Kassák’s lecture.²⁰ Even within his presumed public they were able to perceive Kassák’s ambiguous position. After the rift Kassák seemed reluctant to stress any antagonism within the avant-garde, but the planned foundation of the journal *Kilencszázötvenhét* by the secessionists demonstrates, on the contrary, Komját and his fellows’ intention to manifest their separation and to seek approval for their political and artistic authority to the larger public.

A third major omission of historical narratives concerns the gender and thus the number of secessionists. Komját’s fiancée, Irén Rónai, had been a contributor to *MA* in Budapest under the penname ‘Irén Réti’²¹. She also left the journal after November 1917, but her status as the fifth secessionist has remained unknown until the present essay. Here, two factors are at play in her omission: the subsequent construction of the cult of her future husband as the very first emblematic communist writer with whom

13 Aladár Komját’s brother, the engineer Marcell Komját (Mór Korach), was an important figure of the Circle. Péter Csunderlik, *Radikálisok, szabadgondolkodók, ateisták: A Galilei kör története (1908–1919)* [*Radicals, Free Thinkers, Atheists: History of Galilei Circle (1908–1919)*] (Budapest: Napvilág, 2017), pp. 70 and 162.

14 When Kassák wrote in his journal that the ‘youth was theirs’, he definitely thought of them. See Lajos Kassák, ‘Szintetikus irodalom: Részlet a Galilei Körben December 3-án tartott előadásomból’ [‘Synthetic Literature: From my lecture on 3 December’, *MA*, 1.2 (December 1916), 18–21 (p. 19)]. ‘Synthetic literature was ‘an investigative, socially conscious literature’. Forgács and Miller, p. 1132.

15 Kassák, ‘Szintetikus irodalom’, p. 19.

16 Lajos Kassák, *Egy ember élete* [*Life of a Man*], 2 vols (Budapest: Magvető, 1983), p. 315.

17 Kassák, *Egy ember élete*, p. 317.

18 Árpád Szélpál, *Forró hamu* [*Hot Cinder*] (Budapest, Magvető, 1984), 251–56.

19 Kassák, *Egy ember élete*, pp. 318 and 327–28. That Kassák had published his lecture early in 1917 in the second issue of *MA* proved his self-confidence.

20 Urbán, p. 378.

21 Kassák, *Egy ember élete*, p. 390; Györgyi Földes, ‘Avantgárd, nők, háború: Újvári Erzsi és Réti Irén az avantgárd folyóiratokban’ [‘Avant-garde, Women, War: Erzsi Újvári and Irén Réti in Avant-garde Journals’], in *Emlékezés egy nyár-éjszakára: Interdiszciplináris tanulmányok 1914 mikrotörténelméről* [*Recalling a Summer Night: Interdisciplinary Studies on the Microhistory of 1914*], ed. by András Kappanyos (Budapest: MTA-BK, 2015), pp. 195–208.

she was fully involved; and the heroic and masculinised narration of the secession from a communist point-of-view. Also, avant-garde authors never pronounced her name among the secessionists, a product of the 'gender imbalance that marked [the avant-garde] in practice'.²² It is perhaps also worth noting that all the secessionists were of Jewish origin, as were the majority of the collaborators on *MA* except for Kassák.²³ Here we find another possible factor in their attraction to revolutionary socialist ideas based on 'revolutionary messianism'.²⁴

Generally the secession has been described by historical narratives as a brutal rupture, and not without reason. It took place around the 15 November 1917, so right after the Russian Bolshevik revolution, 'the most profound change to the European social order since the French Revolution' that has been a noted influence in the development of the avant-garde.²⁵ While communist historical narratives widely used a rhetoric of rupture rooted in political divisions, Lajos Kassák privileged instead internal differences in his autobiographic novel written in the 1920s.²⁶ Consideration of the periodical *MA* reveals the following: first, that no issues of the journal appeared between 15 October 1917 and January 1918; second that Komját's and György's names as main collaborators on *MA* were omitted after 15 October 1917;²⁷ and finally that Kassák employed the painter Béla Uitz as a second editor after the second number of *MA* in 1918. As we have already noted, the secessionists also founded their own journal *Kilencszáztizenhét* in December 1917. However, even this apparently abrupt nature of the rift can be nuanced. What is not stressed in historical narratives is that all of the secessionists still continued to publish their poems and studies in the next monthly issue of *MA*, in January 1918. They had previously published altogether with Kassák in *MA*'s first avant-garde anthology in February 1917, and Komját's own poetry selection from October 1917, *Kiáltás* [*Cry*] with its mainly Expressionist and Anti-militarist poems, was itself a *MA* edition and was welcomed in *MA*. However, the secessionists' own anthology, published a year later was another collection of mainly expressionist poems and was already heavily criticized by Barta in *MA*.²⁸ Accordingly, one of the secessionists, Lengyel used the word 'differentiation'²⁹ in 1929 to invoke a less sudden separation instead than that generalized in communist historical narratives, probably thinking also about their cooperation during the Soviet Republic in 1919 — as detailed below.

Beside lectures in the presence of the public, avant-garde journals themselves were very particular arenas for controversy and conflict. Internal conflicts proved that the avant-garde in Hungary also developed as an 'institution' on the model of European avant-gardes: it was 'a community with shared interests, values and even internal conflicts'.³⁰ *A Tett* argued intensively with pro-war writers, artists, and intellectuals, constituting its radical anti-war stance in contrast to the popular press. It even stressed its critical endeavour through the reproduction of the graphic work *The Debate* by the Russian futurist artist Nikolai Kublin.³¹ But the journal's inner polemics are little known. In the almost complete absence of correspondence concerning the avant-garde for the period of the First World War, are only evidence for the internal polemics of *A Tett* is

22 Paul Wood, 'Introduction: The Avant-garde and Modernism', in *The Challenge of the Avant-Garde*, ed. by Wood, pp. 7–33 (p. 9). See also Kassák's opinion on mysoginy: Kassák, *Egy ember élete*, p. 360.

23 This was noted by Kassák himself in *Egy ember élete*, p. 350.

24 See Michael Löwy, *Pour une sociologie des intellectuels révolutionnaires — L'Évolution politique de Lukács 1908–1929* (Paris: PUF, 1976).

25 Wood, 'The Revolutionary Avant-gardes: Dada, Constructivism, and Surrealism', p. 237.

26 Kassák, *Egy ember élete*, pp. 396–97.

27 Back cover page of *MA*, 2.12 (15 October 1917), p. 196.

28 Sándor Barta, 'Szabadulás 1918' ['Liberation 1918'], *MA*, 3.11 (20 November 1918), p. 135.

29 József Lengyel, *Visegrádi utca* [*Visegrád Street*] (Budapest: Kossuth, 1968), p. 28.

30 Wood, 'The Revolutionary Avant-gardes', p. 227.

31 Nikolai Kublin, 'A vita' ['The Debate'], *A Tett*, 2.16 (1 August 1916), p. 283.

partial testimony. The secessionist Lengyel, for example, claimed in his memoirs that the poet Vilmos Rozványi had broken up with Kassák in 1916 for their divergent views in anti-war poetry.³²

However, thanks to its relative stability, Kassák's second journal, *MA*, provided more fertile ground for internal polemics. When considering its publications in 1916–17, it becomes clear that an important divergence in views on the role and functions of art and the artist in society preceded the break. As in other avant-garde journals of the times, this divergence within *MA* was based on a tension between the artistic avant-garde and the collective nature of socialist politics.³³ While in the first avant-garde journal artistic programmes were less important,³⁴ in *MA* Kassák published from the very beginning a charismatic vision for artistic innovation. From the summer of 1917, Kassák and Révai held different views on art and artists. While Kassák stressed a romantic acceptance of the 'new artist' as a counterpoint to the 'sober bourgeois',³⁵ Révai argued for a 'warrior-like, combatant' writer in the spirit of the February Russian Revolution. Furthermore, while according to Kassák art had to express the chaos of modernity, for Révai literature — he preferred this word to 'art' — had to be tendentious and exclusively social. In October of the same year, when the Bolshevik revolution took place in Russia, the latter demanded that writers should have proletarian origins, a view at odds with Kassák's focus on the artist. Révai also declared that the form was a 'sin' against content, another element that put him in opposition to Kassák. In the name of joining art and society, Kassák was rejecting what he saw as institutionalised bourgeois high art; but Révai was rejecting Kassák to urge a more radical politicization in keeping with the political pressures of the times.

Initial Prolongation of Polemics in 1918–19

A notable prolongation of the Kassák–Révai polemic took place beyond the moment of secession. Révai wrote a programmatic text at the end of 1917 with Komját and another revolutionary socialist, the engineer Gyula Hevesi, devoted to their planned journal, *Kilencszáztizzenhét*.³⁶ While the journal was banned immediately, the programmatic text aimed at collecting subscribers was published in the new communist periodical *Internationale* [*International*] in January 1919.³⁷ According to the authors, everything in literature and science had to be destroyed if it set back 'the idea of 1917'. There followed in the second part of the text a clear polemic with *MA*: '[We] mercilessly attack every old theory and dogma in the service of socialist redemption if these run contrary to a scientific critique based on the observation of social facts. We tolerate neither fetish

32 Lengyel, p. 28. Testimonies and memories have to be treated with caution for reasons of bias. József Lengyel's memoirs written in Germany in 1929, but first published in 1932 in the USSR, contains important details that one should consider one by one. In his autobiographical novel written in the 1920s, Kassák recalled Rozványi's exit. Kassák, *Egy ember élete*, p. 398.

33 Wood, 'The Revolutionary Avant-gardes', p. 233.

34 Kassák published a programme text in the sixth issue of *A Tett*. Lajos Kassák, 'Program', *A Tett*, 1.10 (20 March 1916), 153–55. English translation in Éva Forgács and Timothy O. Benson, eds, *Between Worlds: A Sourcebook of Central European Avant-gardes, 1910–1930* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), pp. 160–62.

35 See Eszter Balázs, 'Artist and/or Public Intellectual? Hungarian Avant-Garde Polemics on 'New Art' and the Artist's Role and Responsibilities During the First World War', in *Local Contexts/International Networks: Avant-garde Journals in East-Central Europe*, ed. by Gábor Dobó and Merse Pál Szeredi (Budapest: Kassák Foundation, 2017), pp. 6–23.

36 József Révai, *Ifjúkori írások (1917–1919)* [*Youth Writings (1917–1919)*], ed. by Auguszta F. Majlát and Péter Agárdi (Budapest: Akadémiai, 1981), pp. 197–98.

37 József Révai, 'Program — Kilencszáztizzenhét' ['Programme — 1917'], in *Ifjúkori írások*, pp. 43–44.

in our camp. We want to eradicate false truth.³⁸ It was already clear from their text that the secessionists wanted to subordinate literature and art to ‘socialist revolution’.

The secessionists also changed their look and behaviour. In contrast to the eccentric clothes and look of Kassák and his group, Lengyel and his fellow writers preferred ‘the most modest and not at all extraordinary forms’ of dress.³⁹ In fact, Kassák had been publicly wearing a Russian, anarchist type black shirt since as early as 1915.⁴⁰ An eccentric look was part of the avant-gardes’ inclination to provocation, as in the case of both Italian or Russian Futurists. The break was also acted out in the social spaces of the magazines: as Lengyel indicates, his group opted for a new café as a meeting point, the *Kovács Café*, instead of the *Fészek* that remained the territory of Kassák and the *MA* writers.⁴¹

While in terms of look and café their roads seemed to bifurcate, the mapping of their accommodation suggests a common topology. In 1918 Lengyel’s revolutionary group rented rooms with Révai in the same corridor of the same building where *MA* had moved to in August 1918, at 15 Visegrádi Street in the old fifth district in Budapest,⁴² which was then in the outskirts of the capital. It was at this time that Lengyel and Révai joined the group of revolutionary socialists — the so-called leftist faction of Galilee Circle whose leader was Otto Korvin,⁴³ and throughout 1918 they wrote and distributed anti-war tracts mainly to soldiers.⁴⁴ However, according to Lengyel, Kassák closed his eyes to what was happening at the other end of the corridor to his own rented accommodation, his room, and an exhibition room for *MA*. Gradually Lengyel’s accommodation was transformed from November 1918 into the headquarter of the KMP until its seizure of power on 21 March 1919. Kassák remembers things differently: he was well aware of Communist Party activities, but he ignored that fact that the KMP hid weapons there as well.⁴⁵ While their recollections may have diverged, this coincidence in locations shows the presence of a common social capital and network in their cases, even after their public rupture.

During the First Hungarian Republic established in the wake of the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy a theoretical journal, *Internationale*, appeared under the direction of Komját and Révai at the end of December 1918 that then from February 1919 became the official theoretical organ of the KMP.⁴⁶ This journal virulently attacked the bourgeoisie with the intention of eliminating it. Révai took aim at ‘bourgeois’ pacifism while Komját published a poem entitled *Új internacionálé* [*New Internationale*] in 15,000 copies that proclaimed ‘class struggle to the death’ as well as hatred of the ‘bourgeoisie’.⁴⁷ This general political radicalization also affected *MA*, and it initially published several articles and manifestos demanding ‘a communist republic’ and

38 József Révai, ‘Program — Kilencszáztizzenhét’, p. 44.

39 Lengyel, pp. 21 and 29.

40 See photo of him by Dénes Rónai from the mid-1910s. The writer Gyula Illyés described him in his autobiographical novel as wearing, in the early 1919, a Gorki-type black shirt with a flap-hat style ‘Carbonari’. See Gyula Illyés, *Beatrice apródjai* [*Page Boys of Beatrice*] (Budapest: Szépirodalmi, 1979), p. 305.

41 Lengyel, p. 28; Kassák, *Egy ember élete*, p. 305.

42 Lengyel, pp. 35–36.

43 Csunderlik, p. 331.

44 Lengyel, p. 33.

45 Kassák, *Egy ember élete*, p. 470.

46 Urbán, p. 384.

47 On Révai’s collaboration, see Urbán, p. 384; Aladár Komját, ‘Új internacionálé’ [‘New Internationale’], in *Megváltó viharban: Az 1918–1919-es magyar forradalmak irodalmából* [*In a Redemption Storm: A Selection from Literature of Revolutions 1918–1919*], ed. by Farkas József (Budapest: Szépirodalmi, 1979), pp. 149–50; and Aladár Komját and Andor Réz, ‘Megjegyzések a magyar proletárodalom platformtervezetéhez’ [‘Comments on the Platform Project of Hungarian Proletarian Literature’], *Sarló és Kalapács*, 3.12 (December 1931), 60–62 (p. 61).

a ‘world revolution’.⁴⁸ However, its rhetoric was different to that of communist organs. Like many other avant-garde movements of the times, *MA*’s principal aim was ‘to break down the distinctions between the world of art and that of everyday life’,⁴⁹ a project the collaborators saw as even more relevant as a result of the Russian revolutions and the end of the First World War. Consequently *MA* published ideological special issues featuring, for example, the new Soviet constitution of 1918, Lenin’s *State and Revolution*, and an homage to Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht.⁵⁰ These issues manifested ‘a complex interplay between political and aesthetical radicalisation’.⁵¹ The Hungarian avant-garde was similar to Berlin Dada in terms of ‘a connection [that] was asserted between the critique of culture under capitalism and the revolutionary political critique of capitalism as such’.⁵² It also had some similarities with Russian Futurists willing ‘to fuse artistic projects to social and political commitment’.⁵³ However, no doubt because *MA* had to face pressure from left-wing political parties, articles from January 1919 onwards had argued that art should be ‘revolutionary’ but not ‘party-political art’.⁵⁴ In this respect, Barta’s review of the secessionists’ poetry volume in November 1918 had been a direct antecedent, claiming that the artist should not follow any party dogmas but should espouse ‘social art’.⁵⁵ According to Barta, the secessionists themselves attributed the break to ‘their more intensive social standpoint’.

A change came in *MA*’s standpoint with the creation of the Hungarian Soviet Republic in March 1919 and the union of the Communist and Social Democratic Parties. Now Kassák and his fellow writers stopped defending themselves against Communist Party politics despite their previous articles. By stressing ‘the final reckoning with bourgeois art’ they rather turned against writers close to the Social Democratic Party (SDP).⁵⁶ This attitude of *MA* writers reflected above all a critique of the union between the KMP and SDP which was also disapproved of by Révai, the young collaborator on *Vörös Újság* [*Red Newspaper*].⁵⁷ In this way, the standpoints of *MA* writers regarding Social Democrats during the Republic of Councils was, in fact, not very far away from that of the secessionist Révai.

While Kassák had serious debates during the Hungarian Soviet Republic with Social Democrats, and less so with communists,⁵⁸ *MA* obtained an eminent status among periodicals and Kassák himself adopted important roles within communist cultural institutions. He contributed to the work of the Literary Directorate, a state

48 See, for example, *Kiáltvány a kommunista köztársaságért!* [*Manifesto for the Communist Republic*], signed by *MA* artists; Sándor Barta, *Világforradalom — világburzsoázia és program* [*World Revolution — World Bourgeoisie and Program*]. Both of these articles appeared in an explicitly ideological special issue of *MA*, November 1918. For an English translation of the manifesto, see Benson and Forgács, pp. 212–13.

49 Gail Day, ‘The Futurists: Transcontinental Avant-gardism’, in *The Challenge of the Avant-Garde*, ed. by Wood, pp. 204–25 (p. 215).

50 On the ideological special issues of *MA* in 1918, see Márton Pacsika, ‘Purposeful Player of the New Instrument — Lajos Kassák and the Budapest *MA*’, in *Art in Action: Lajos Kassák’s Avant-Garde Journals from A Tett up to Dokument* (Budapest: Petőfi Literary Museum — Kassák Museum, Kassák Foundation, 2017), pp. 71–87 (pp. 81–83).

51 Hubert Van den Berg and others, eds, *A Cultural History of the Avant-garde in the Nordic Countries (1900–1925)* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2012), p. 14.

52 Wood, ‘The Revolutionary Avant-gardes’, p. 230.

53 Wood, ‘The Revolutionary Avant-gardes’, p. 225.

54 Balázs, ‘Artist and/or Public Intellectual?’, pp. 6–23.

55 Barta, ‘Szabadulás 1918’, p. 135.

56 See, for example, the activist artists’ leaflet entitled *Forradalmárok!* [*Revolutionaries!*] (25 March 1919), Archives of Petőfi Literary Museum — Kassák Museum, Budapest, Lajos Kassák fond, KM — 1645.

57 Urbán, p. 387; József Révai, *Tiszta proletárpolitikát!* [*Clear Proletarian Politics!*] (4 April 1919).

58 ‘A *MA* folyóirat köré csoportosult aktivisták memorandumuma a Magyarországi Kommunista Pártjához’ [‘A memorandum to the Hungarian Communist Party of activists gathered around *MA* magazine’], signed by Lajos Kassák, Béla Uitz, Sándor Bortnyik, Erzsébet Újvári, and Sándor Barta, no date [after May 1920], Archives of Petőfi Literary Museum — Kassák Museum, Budapest, Lajos Kassák fond, KM-an. 14001.

body responsible for literature, and for a while he even served as a censor of street posters.⁵⁹ However, because Kassák wanted to maintain his independence as a writer and editor,⁶⁰ the attitude of the communist leadership towards *MA* tightened. In June 1919 Kassák felt obliged to personally defend artistic autonomy against Béla Kun, *de facto* leader of the proletarian regime, who criticized *MA* at the general party assembly as ‘decadent’ and questioned whether avant-garde art was appropriate for the masses.⁶¹ As Paul Wood explains regarding new post-war revolutionary regimes, ‘under pressure of the populism attendant upon socialist revolution, the intrinsic difficulty of avant-garde art was easy to reinterpret as “élitism”’.⁶²

After his polemic with Kun, Kassák wrote an unpublished manifesto claiming that if artists of *MA* ‘were not servants of the bourgeoisie in the past, neither do they want to serve any class in the future, even if this class is called the “proletariat”’.⁶³ As Éva Forgács and Tyrus Miller summarize, ‘Kassák and the *MA* group wanted the impossible: as old-time socialists, to play a leading part in the official culture of the Commune and, at the same time, to be entirely independent of its political leadership’.⁶⁴ The core of these debates had been rooted back in the 1917–18 secession.

So this break was rather a first, but decisive, step in the process of split between the artistic and political avant-gardes in Hungary. All the secessionists had been radicalized politically from 1917 and consequently transformed into party intellectuals. First, a rivalry began between the two sides of the avant-garde: the artistic and the politically minded, and between the ‘artist’ and the ‘warrior artist’, the latter becoming the party intellectual. During the Hungarian Soviet Republic, there was more cooperation than confrontation when running the communist institutions, but later, in the emigration after the failure of the proletarian regime, a vicious fight began to decide who would dominate art and literature in the radical left side of the Hungarian cultural field. In Pierre Bourdieu’s terms, what was at the stake was whether communist writers and artists, from their heteronomous position, would be able to dominate the artistic avant-garde in their autonomous position.

Afterlife of the 1917–18 Secession

Diachronic analysis reveals that the break had a long-lasting afterlife. After the fall of the Hungarian Soviet Republic at the end of July 1919, many protagonists of the proletarian regime fled from the country to Vienna, capital of the newly founded independent Austria. Along with Kassák, who had been arrested and imprisoned in the autumn of 1919 for his activities during the Commune, all of the secessionists — the Komjás, György, Lengyel, and Révai — went to exile in Vienna, as well as those artists who had joined *MA* group after the secession of the Komjás and his followers: Barta, Uitz, or János Mácza. Similarly, the illegal Hungarian KMP leadership moved there, and by 1925, one year before moving back to Hungary, Révai had become a key figure of the Hungarian KMP, which was illegal in Hungary, in Vienna.⁶⁵

59 Forgács and Miller, p. 1135.

60 Forgács and Miller, p. 1135.

61 Lajos Kassák, ‘Levél Kun Bélához a művészet nevében’ [‘Letter to Béla Kun in the name of art’], *MA*, 4.7 (15 June 1919), 146–48. See also Forgács and Miller, p. 1136. There is an English translation of the letter in Benson and Forgács, pp. 230–33.

62 Paul Wood, ‘Conclusion: For and against the Avant-garde’, in *The Challenge of the Avant-Garde*, ed. by Wood, p. 259.

63 ‘A világ új művészeihez!’ [‘To the New Artists of the World’] (June 1919?), Archives of Petőfi Literary Museum — Kassák Museum, Budapest, Lajos Kassák fond, KM-an. 13001.

64 Forgács and Miller, p. 1136.

65 Urbán, p. 393.

After an early and short-lived connection to the illegal KMP in Vienna, Kassák disagreed with communist writers, and once again it was periodical publications that provided the forum for that conflict. Since May 1920 Kassák had edited a new version of *MA* from Vienna, at a distance from another Viennese Hungarian journal with a more orthodox communist character, *Egység* [Unity].⁶⁶ *Egység* was led by Komját and Uitz, both of whom had been ex-collaborators in *MA*, Komját was also a secessionist, and now he and Uitz broke with Kassák to join the illegal KMP in Vienna. Polemics between the aesthetic avant-garde and communist intellectuals and politicians became harsher here than they had been during the Republic of Council. Indeed, for the illegal KMP and communist writers running journals and publishing articles became ‘the only proof of their existence’.⁶⁷ At this point they still believed in a forthcoming world revolution, and this eager optimism necessarily shaped their rhetoric.⁶⁸ At the same time, Kassák was accused of being individualistic and subjective, only to respond in defence of his own journal and his revolutionary credentials.⁶⁹ In order to stress Kassák’s detachment from revolution and society, he was labelled a ‘petty-bourgeois-anarchist’ and a ‘counter-revolutionary’. If the denunciation as an ‘anarchist’ was rooted back in Kun’s attacks in June 1919, the accusation of being ‘counter-revolutionary’ was a new stigmatization.⁷⁰ As Wood explains, after the First World War and the subsequent revolutions, the existing tension between the individualism of the artistic avant-garde and the collective nature of socialist politics was deepened and the relationship between avant-garde and revolution shifted. Consequently, ‘individualism and subjectivity had become a hallmark of the avant-garde’.⁷¹

This anathema and stigmatization became entrenched in the long run: in 1926 in Vienna and in 1931 in Moscow the newly-founded communist periodicals passionately repeated the same accusations with only minor changes.⁷² Until his return to Hungary in September 1926, Révai was editorial secretary of *Új Március* [New March],⁷³ the official review of the illegal KMP, edited by Hungarian communists in Vienna, and he remained a prominent figure in the journal for some time. In November 1926 Kassák was condemned, probably by Révai himself, as ‘a clog of the Hungarian communist movement’ being only an occasional ‘revolutionary’.⁷⁴ Kassák was like any other ‘petty-bourgeois intellectual’ who, disappointed after the failure of the revolution, turned towards the decadence he had once rejected.⁷⁵ This also shows why those writers who did not become renegades of the ‘revolution’ finally broke with Kassák. *Együtt* and *Új Március* wanted to renew and redirect Hungarian literature and culture in exile during the 1920s, and Kassák had no place in such a renewal.

66 On the *Egység* group, see Forgács and Miller, pp. 1142–43.

67 Urbán, p. 389.

68 See, for example, Andor Rosinger, ‘A *MA* ‘forradalmi’ ideológiája’ [‘The ‘Revolutionary’ Ideology of *MA*’], *Egység*, 1.2 (1922), 14–16.

69 Lajos Kassák, ‘Válasz (sokfelé) és álláspon[t]’ [‘Response (to many) and Position Statement’], *MA*, 7.8 (30 August 1922), 50–54.

70 In 1923 *Egység* extended their criticism even to their fellow renegades from Kassák’s orthodoxy taking on Sándor Barta recently founded journal of political Dada, *Akasztott ember* [Hanged Man]. Forgács and Miller, p. 1143.

71 Wood, ‘The Revolutionary Avant-gardes’, p. 233.

72 Meanwhile in 1925 *Népszava*, the Hungary-based Social Democratic daily opened its pages to a series of articles by Kassák, part of a strategy to prepare Kassák’s return to Hungary which took place in the autumn of 1926. See József M. Pásztor, *Új írók, új írások, 1920–1944: Irodalomelméleti viták a szocialista magyar munkásmozgalomban* [New Writers, New Writings, 1920–1944: Literary Debates in the Socialist Hungarian Workers’ Movement] (Budapest: Múzsák, 1988), pp. 10–62.

73 Urbán, p. 393.

74 Anon. [József Révai?], ‘Kassák Lajos’, *Új Március*, 2.11 (November 1926), 675–78 (p. 675). The use of the term ‘intellectual’ is similar to Révai’s previous texts.

75 Anon., ‘Kassák Lajos’, p. 678.

The proletarian literary movement appeared in Russia after the October revolution and gained more influence as the revolution became isolated and Stalin extended his control over the communist parties.⁷⁶ As part of this process, in 1931, the Moscow-based Hungarian communist political and literary review *Sarló és Kalapács* [*Sickle and Hammer*] (1929–33) claimed for itself a leading position in the proletarian literary movement in the Hungarian language. Like many other journals belonging to the proletarian literary movement and founded in the USSR such as *Left* and *Na postu* [*On Post*], for example,⁷⁷ they were more concerned to define the movement to which they belonged to than to publish proletarian literature themselves. The task of the proletarian literary movement to train ‘the working class to assume its dominant role in cultural production’ was seen by around 1930 as a partial failure and a fight initiated against so-called ‘bourgeois influences’.⁷⁸ Crucially, the avant-garde was targeted as a source of just such influences. The *Magyar proletárirók platformtervezete* [*Hungarian Proletarian Writers’ Platform Project*] (1931),⁷⁹ published by the Hungarian section of the Moscow Association of Proletarian Writers (MAPP, founded in 1922), but mainly the work of the writer János Matheika,⁸⁰ retrospectively designated the avant-garde journals of the First World War as antimilitarist and anarchistic platforms of ‘the petty-bourgeois revolutionary intelligentsia’, lost in the ‘revolution of forms’. The Platform Project was signed, among others, by Barta, Kassák’s former ally in *MA* who had since moved to the Soviet Union. It also evoked previous antagonisms between *MA* and *Egység* from Viennese exile by drawing a stark contrast between them: Kassák’s journal was ‘petty-bourgeois’, while Komját’s was ‘a first serious step towards serving the class struggle’.⁸¹ Kassák was defined as a writer ‘directed via Dada towards the counterrevolution’, while Komját was presented as Kassák’s perfect antithesis, ‘ideologically the purest’ poet of the crisis period. In October 1931 Matheika dedicated a whole article to Komját, ‘the oldest Hungarian Proletarian poet’ as well as ‘the first Hungarian communist poet’.⁸² He claimed that Komját had been the first to recognize ‘the petty-bourgeois, anarchist character of the majority of *MA* writers’, as well as ‘Kassák’s road towards counter-revolution’. Two issues later a ‘resolution’ of the Platform Project was published in *Sarló és Kalapács* prompting a more decisive condemnation of Kassák by stressing his ‘counterrevolutionary attitude’ that had been discernible already during the Commune of 1919.⁸³ Komját, now living in Germany, personally commented on the Platform Project and invoked the standpoint of the Kharkov congress (1930) when he described those who had left *MA* in 1917 as ‘early birds of proletarian literature’. In order to construct a dominant position for himself in the proletarian literary movement, Komját stressed the importance of ‘the explosion

76 Wood, ‘Conclusion: For and against the Avant-garde’, p. 259.

77 Emily Finer, ‘A Rift on the Left Front?’, *Left* (1923–25) and *Na postu* (1923–25), in *The Oxford Critical and Cultural History of Modernist Magazines: Volume 3: Europe 1880–1940*, ed. by Brooker and others, pp. 1319–40 (p. 1319).

78 Finer, p. 1320.

79 Sándor Barta, Antal Hidas, Béla Illés, Emil Madarász, János Matheika, and Máté Zalka, eds, ‘A magyar proletáriródlom platformtervezete’ [‘The Platform Project of Hungarian Proletarian Literature’], *Sarló és Kalapács*, 3.6 (June 1931), 50–55 (p. 53).

80 He took part in the Republic of Councils, arrested after its fall, and released to the Soviet Union via an exchange programme of prisoners in 1924. He represented the official line of ‘Soviet literature’ in the Hungarian-language press in the USSR. The fact that he was the principal author of the Platform Project was stressed by Mózes Kahána. See Mózes Kahána, ‘Levél a szerkesztőséghez’ [‘Letter to the editor’], *Sarló és Kalapács*, 3.12 (December 1931), 62–63.

81 Barta and others, eds, ‘A magyar proletáriródlom platformtervezete’, pp. 53–54.

82 János Matheika, ‘Komját Aladár: Mindent akarunk: Versek’ [‘Aladár Komját: We Want Everything: Poems’], *Sarló és Kalapács*, 3.10 (October 1931), p. 62.

83 MAPP, ed., ‘Határozat az irodalmi platformtervezetéhez’ [‘Resolution of the Platform Project’], *Sarló és Kalapács*, 3.12 (December 1931), 58–59 (p. 58).

of the Kassák front' in 1917 and also later in exile.⁸⁴ Here, too, another secessionist was present in person; this was Lengyel, who settled in the USSR in 1930 and who in the same year became a member of the editorial board of *Sarló és Kalapács*⁸⁵, although he remained silent on *MA* and Kassák in his published comment on the Platform Project.⁸⁶ A year earlier he had written a memoir in Germany entitled *Visegrádi utca* [*Visegrád Street*], first published in Moscow in 1932 with a preface by Béla Kun. There, referring to the '1917 secession', he had described Kassák with irony as 'revolutionary at least in "form"' and as 'the ever resentful arch-revolutionary'.⁸⁷ When evoking their break, Lengyel stressed that the secessionists, including himself, had not believed that 'any poem with "revolutionary form" could also be a revolutionary act' and that they had wanted to subordinate poetry as a means to revolutionary aims.⁸⁸

The whole offensive against Kassák in 1931 in *Sarló és Kalapács* was an attack aiming to discredit him as the central figure of the avant-garde in Hungary and one which notably seemed to ignore the end of the first wave of avant-gardism in Hungary in 1928 when Kassák himself had switched to a more political form of journal-making with his socialist review *Munka* [*Labour*]. This attack should also be understood in a context in which 'the avant-garde came under increasing attack in the Soviet Union from a variety of what usually claimed to be "proletarian" perspectives' and when consequently all competing art groups in the Soviet Union were dissolved by decree.⁸⁹ Eventually even Proletarian writers' platforms would be amalgamated into the USSR Union of Writers, established in 1932.

However, these attacks, as harsh as they appeared, were still coming from writers; that is, from 'peers' and rather than the 'profane', as it were.⁹⁰ A new level would be attained in the late 1930s when even the 'profane' — politicians and not writers — would intervene and the attack against Kassák and the aesthetic avant-garde would reach a first climax. In 1937, an anonymous author in *Dolgozók Lapja* [*Workers' Journal*], the official journal of the illegal KMP edited in Prague between April 1937 and June 1938, used Komját's poems written against 'imperialistic warmongering' to explain the prohibition of *A Tett* in 1916.⁹¹ And in the Moscow-based *Sarló és Kalapács* an obituary signed collectively by prominent KMP figures bade farewell to Komját, as 'a splendid example for revolutionary writers of today' whose poetry during the First World War had been 'a protest against imperialistic war'.⁹² On the same page Barta returned to the question of the secession in 1917–18: Komját had felt that 'behind Kassák's fear of politics was hidden the petty-bourgeois fear of revolution'.⁹³ Meanwhile, in the Czechoslovak *Magyar Nap* [*Hungarian Day*] Barta stressed the unusual elements of Komját's trajectory and poetry, namely his bourgeois origins and the unintelligibility of his poetry. Notably,

84 Komját and Réz, p. 61.

85 Lengyel had distanced himself from the Hungarian KMP in Vienna, but after the death of Lenin in 1924, he joined the illegal party again and in 1930 he travelled to the Soviet Union where he joined the editorial board of *Sarló és Kalapács*. Later, in 1938, he was arrested together with Béla Kun and other Hungarian communists in Moscow and deported to the Gulag from where he was eventually liberated only in 1955. Farkas, *Etika és forradalmiság*, pp. 548–50.

86 József Lengyel, 'A platformtervezet politikai hibái: Hozzászólás a tervezet első pontjához' ['Political Errors of the Platform Project: Comments on the First Point'], *Sarló és Kalapács*, 3.10 (October 1931), p. 61.

87 Lengyel, 'A platformtervezet politikai hibái', pp. 22, 28, and 36.

88 Lengyel, 'A platformtervezet politikai hibái', pp. 28–29.

89 Wood, 'Conclusion: For and against the Avant-garde', p. 260.

90 On peers and profanes in polemics, see Lemieux, pp. 200–01.

91 Anon., 'Komját Aladár' [obituary], *Dolgozók Lapja*, 1.1 (April 1937), p. 32.

92 Anon. 'Komját Aladár halálára' ['To the Death of Aladár Komját'], *Sarló és Kalapács*, 9.3 (February 1937), p. 53.

93 Sándor Barta, 'A proletárforradalom költője' ['The Poet of the Proletarian Revolution'], *Sarló és Kalapács*, 9.3 (February 1937), p. 53.

this latter element was an aspect for which all the above-mentioned articles reproached Kassák but on which they remained silent when it came to Komját.⁹⁴ These obituaries, by communist politicians as well as by communist writers, not to mention a memorial evening dedicated to Komját organized by the Hungarian section of Club of Foreign Workers in Moscow,⁹⁵ can be seen as the very beginning of the construction of a literary cult around Komját. Having died the year before in Paris, where he moved from Germany in the meanwhile, he was now positioned in opposition to Kassák as the first emblematic communist poet. This same opposition was reflected in the construction of a new communist literary canon, where the first avant-garde journal of 1915–16 (*A Tett*) acquired a central role in stressing the origins of the opposition between Komját, ‘communist’ and ‘revolutionary poet’, and Kassák, the figurehead of the ‘bourgeois’ avant-garde. During the antifascist period of communist politics in the second half of the 1930s, antimilitarist activity in the First World War gained a new interest and communists were trying to expropriate memory about it. So *A Tett*, which had been banned for its antiwar stance, became important for Hungarian communists who wanted to associate it only with Komját’s name, a contributor to the review, while completely ignoring any role of Kassák, even though he was the editor-in-chief.

The journal *Dolgozók Lapja* was launched in Prague in April 1937 under the direction of Révai. Révai had worked in Moscow for the Executive Committee of the Komintern, and was now sent to join the temporary central committee of the illegal Hungarian KMP.⁹⁶ Between 1937 and 1938 Révai published regularly in every issue of *Dolgozók Lapja*. Even though his article attributing the prohibition of *A Tett* to Komját remained anonymous, there can be no doubt about Révai’s contribution. Indeed, Révai had already launched a virulent attack against Kassák in an unpublished pamphlet with the title ‘Lajos Kassák: In the service of the counter-revolutionary Trotskyism’,⁹⁷ following the latter’s defence of Karl Radek in the Hungarian *Népszava*, edited in Hungary.⁹⁸ Révai accused Kassák of being a genuine ‘Trotskyist agent’ and to stress his argument he came back to the 1917–18 secession: Kassák had represented since the First World War only ‘formal radicalism’ and had fought against ‘the revolutionary orientation of literature’ as well as ‘the left of Hungarian workers’ movement’. While this most extreme of attacks remained unpublished, the communist attitude to Kassák in public returned the original denunciatory rhetoric of the ‘petty-bourgeois’ and ‘counter-revolutionary’, pointedly ignoring his role in the anti-war *A Tett*.

During the early post-war years after the Second World War when free elections took place and a temporary democratization began in Hungary, partly controlled by the Soviets, Lajos Kassák occupied important functions in cultural politics. At the same time, the stigmatisation of the avant-garde by communists relented in these years until its severe revival after the communists’ rise to power in 1948. Socialist realism became

94 Sándor Barta, ‘Komját Aladáról’ [‘On Aladár Komját’], *Magyar Nap*, 2.22 (January 1937), p. 4.

95 Anon., ‘Komját Aladár emlékeste’ [‘Memorial Evening: Homage to Aladár Komját’], *Sarló és Kalapács*, 9.3 (February 1937), p. 55.

96 This ‘exile’ from Moscow was sudden since another key Hungarian-speaking emigrant to the USSR, Béla Kun, was to be arrested in June 1937 by the NKDV (The People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs) and then killed by Stalin in 1939. Matheika, Lengyel, and Barta — all of them ex-*MA* writers — would also be arrested and imprisoned in the Stalinist Soviet Union in 1937–38.

97 József Révai, ‘Kassák Lajos, az ellenforradalmi trockizmus szolgálatában’ [‘Lajos Kassák in the Service of Counterrevolutionary Trotskyism’], Hungarian Academy of Sciences (MTA), Budapest, József Révai fond, Ms. 10.469/5. Kassák faced repression in the USSR in the 1930s and was critical of writers such as Ehrenburg, Barbusse, Gorky, and Gide. See Forgács and Miller, p. 1156.

98 Lajos Kassák, ‘Arccal Moszka felé’ [‘Facing Moscow’], *Népszava*, 65.27 (2 February 1937), p. 5. Kassák considered the show trial of 1936 as the Soviet Union’s turn to the right and he (wrongly) considered Radek a rebel against this turn. See Éva Standeisky, ‘Az ön(át)értékelő Kassák’ [‘Kassák (Re)considering himself’], 2000, 15.11–12 (2003), 110–24.

dominant, which put Kassák in a very marginalized position until the 1960s. In 1949, for example, the literary historian Imre Waldapfel defined Kassák as an enemy of the new communist order: ‘his petty-bourgeois opportunism made Kassák the official “proletarian writer” of the counterrevolution whose poetry mirrored right-wing social-democratic politics’.⁹⁹ This public condemnation of Kassák was also shared by Révai in his leading cultural and ideological position between 1948–53, as Kassák was made to personify the intrinsically transnational, that is ‘Western’, character of the avant-garde.¹⁰⁰

However, between the revolutions of 1956 and 1989, Kassák underwent an ambiguous reassessment, one element of which was the interpretation of his role during the First World War and his association with Komját.¹⁰¹ A literary history of the First World War, first published in 1957, defined Kassák as ‘the most important poet among antimilitarist writers’, notably without referring to the avant-garde and its journals.¹⁰² Kassák’s reassessment as an ‘antimilitarist poet’ did not mean, of course, his full rehabilitation and especially not the acceptance of the avant-garde. The break of 1917 was still interpreted in line with the official communist position as an antagonism between ‘formalism’ and ‘the ideas of October’,¹⁰³ and the word ‘avant-garde’ was still used with negative connotations. Hevesi, a former member of the revolutionary socialists’ group in 1918, omitted Kassák’s name altogether in his 1959 memoirs when he discussed *A Tett*.¹⁰⁴ Indeed, in 1960 the influential literary historian István Király was still defining Kassák as ‘a petty-bourgeois avant-gardist rebel’ whose rebellion was opposed to Komját’s ‘socialist revolutionary’ stance.¹⁰⁵ This ambivalence continued through the 1960s. In 1964, for example, there was an increasing scholarly interest in Kassák’s oeuvre,¹⁰⁶ Kassák himself noted in his diary ‘a changed voice’ towards him¹⁰⁷ that paralleled a major breakthrough for avant-garde movements in the West.¹⁰⁸ By 1969, the second, reworked edition of Farkas József’s literary history still stressed the ambiguity of Kassák’s position in *A Tett*, identifying a supposed Janus-face attitude in the journal that rested on established Communist dichotomies between the ‘true’ and ‘apparent’ revolutionary and between ‘revolutionary proletarian’ and ‘anarchist petty-bourgeois’ literature.¹⁰⁹

In this way, a set of narratives were established and developed by ex-secessionists and ex-1918 revolutionary socialists from the late 1930s that sought first to separate the

99 Imre Waldapfel, ‘Magyar irodalom’ [‘Hungarian Literature’], *Irodalomtörténet*, 37.1 (1949), 193–204 (p. 202).

100 [A]vant-gardism became by this time a touchstone of all that was wrong with modern western culture’. Wood, ‘Introduction: The Avant-garde and Modernism’, p. 10. At the same time György Lukács, Marxist philosopher living in Hungary, rejected avant-gardism as a decadent form in his *Wider den missverständlichen Realismus* (1958). Peter Bürger, *Az avantgárd elmélete [The Theory of the Avant-garde]* (Szeged: Universitas Szeged, 2010), p. 98.

101 Although Kassák received the most prestigious state prize for a writer, the Kossuth Prize, his literary and artistic canonization remains ambiguous. The first monograph on him was published in 1967 in Yugoslavia by the Hungarian author Imre Bori, *Kassák irodalma és festészete [The Literature and Painting of Kassák]* (Budapest: Magvető, 1967).

102 See Farkas József, ‘*Robanunk a forradalomba*’: *A modern magyar irodalom útja (1914–1919)* [‘*We Are Dashing Over to the Revolution*’: *The Road of Modern Hungarian Literature (1914–1919)*] (Budapest: Kossuth, 1957), pp. 63–64.

103 József, ‘*Robanunk a forradalomba*’, p. 196.

104 Gyula Hevesi, *Egy mérnök a forradalomban [Engineer in the Revolution of 1919]* (Budapest: Kossuth, 1959), p. 71.

105 István Király, ‘Az első magyar kommunista költő — Komját Aladár költői fejlődése’ [‘The First Communist Poet: The Development of Aladár Komját’s Poetry’], *Társadalmi Szemle*, 15.3 (1960), pp. 60–61.

106 Farkas József and György Szabó, ‘Kassák Lajos: Vita Kassák Lajos munkásságáról’ [‘Lajos Kassák: Polemics on Kassák’s Œuvre’], *Kritika*, 2.1 (January 1964), 9–26.

107 Lajos Kassák, ‘Szénabölglya: Naplójegyzetek 1955. március–1956. február’ [‘Haystack: Diary Notes, March 1955–February 1956’], *Alföld*, 37.7 (July 1986), 22–33 (p. 31).

108 Van den Berg, p. 15.

109 József, ‘*Robanunk a forradalomba*’, pp. 62 and 69.

antimilitarist *A Tett* from its avant-gardist aesthetics and from the specific persona of Lajos Kassák.¹¹⁰ In reality, *A Tett* was banned by Hungarian authorities in October 1916 because of its transnational character that could not be tolerated by prevailing nationalist attitudes. Even in the beginning of the 1980s, Komját's widow Irén Róna stressed the 'heated debates because of 1917' that multiplied between Kassák and her former husband.¹¹¹ In her opinion, still matching the official communist narratives, their disputes contained the beginnings of the antagonism between 'anarchist-individualist' and 'socialist' poetry.¹¹² Of course this text did not use expressions such as 'petty-bourgeois' or 'counter-revolutionary' any more, but still the denomination 'avant-garde' was absent.¹¹³ In spite of systematic official attempts to instrumentalize Kassák's legacy since the 1970s, including a museum dedicated to him in 1976, the rejection of the avant-garde and the refusal to recognize journals in those terms held sway until the very end of the communist regime in Hungary. As a result, communist narratives continued rejecting Kassák's activities and his journals which were major media of the avant-garde.

Conclusion

On the one hand, this case study shows that the avant-garde is a movement which is supposed to continuously renew itself and transform itself into the next '-ism'. As a result, it acts provocatively through its media debates and even inspires rifts through its manifestoes and directives.¹¹⁴ On the other hand, this very individual case took place in a specific political and cultural context and the force of those rifts was out of the ordinary. Examining this particular rift in the early avant-garde and its far-reaching consequences also involves consideration of a wide variety of discursive and ideological contexts through which this journal activity was shaped. This involves analyzing the role of the Hungarian avant-garde not only within the aesthetic field, but also within the broader political context, focusing on the links between party politics and the avant-garde, and more particularly its connections with the socialist revolutionary movement during the First World War, and the evolution of the communist movement from its brief period of power in 1919, through exile, and then in power again after 1948. From the starting-point of the secession, we have seen all too clearly how the avant-garde was stigmatized by Hungarian communists, first for its perceived elitist unintelligibility and later as a non-communist but leftist *other*, a counterpoint especially in the 1930s to the continually more repressive Soviet cultural politics which also came into force in communist Hungary after 1948. In all respects journals had a key role to play, not only as sites for ideological and aesthetic discourse, but also as social spaces in which key actors exercised their agency, and notably over an extended chronological period and with an overt awareness of their own history.

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110 Aladár Komját's anti-war poetry was only one element among many others that could rise the authorities' attention to *A Tett*'s anti-war stance during 1915–16. See Balázs, 'Avant-Garde and Anti-Militarism: *A Tett*'.

111 Irén Komját, *Egy költői életmű gyökerei: Komját Aladár verseinek keletkezéstörténete* [*The Roots of the Poetry: The Genesis of Aladár Komját's Poems*] (Budapest: Szépirodalmi, 1981), p. 37.

112 Komját, *Egy költői életmű gyökerei*, p. 38.

113 Komját, *Egy költői életmű gyökerei*, pp. 37 and 39.

114 I took inspiration for the conclusion from certain formulations and models in the preface to Van den Berg and others, eds, *A Cultural History of the Avant-garde in the Nordic Countries, 1900–1925*, pp. 12 and 17.

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