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# Historical Truth in Alternate History Science Fiction. A Historiographic Approach to *Swastika Night*

Andrea Rodríguez\*  
Universidad del Salvador  
Argentina

## Resumen

La historia alternativa como una forma de ciencia ficción constituye un tipo de narrativa especulativa que requiere la construcción de una historia mundial divergente. Para transmitir esta historia al lector, los autores crean toda clase de artefactos tales como documentos oficiales, rituales e incluso ficción dentro de la ficción. Al usar herramientas y métodos que también se aplican en la disciplina histórica, las narrativas de historia alternativa pueden ser analizadas a través de un lente historiográfico. El presente trabajo analiza en detalle la novela *Swastika Night* de Katharine Burdekin e introduce ideas del Historicismo Alemán y los Estudios Subalternos que pueden resultar útiles para el análisis de los artefactos que introducen la línea temporal alternativa al lector como aquellos que revelan nuestra propia línea de tiempo a los protagonistas de la narrativa en cuestión.

**Palabras clave:** historia alternativa, ciencia ficción, ficción especulativa, ucronía, distopía, realidad alternativa, contra fáctico, Segunda Guerra Mundial.

## Abstract

*Alternate history science fiction constitutes a form of speculative narrative that demands the construction of a divergent world history. To convey such history to the reader, authors create all sorts of artifacts ranging from official documents, rituals and even fiction within fiction. As alternate history uses tools and methods that can also be found in the discipline of history, it is possible to analyze these narratives through a historiographic lens. This article closely examines Katharine Burdekin's novel *Swastika Night* and introduces ideas from German Historicism and Subaltern Studies that can be helpful for the analysis of the artifacts that both introduce the alternate timeline to the reader and reveal our timeline to the protagonists.*

**Keywords:** alternate history, science fiction, speculative fiction, uchronia, dystopia, alternate reality, counterfactual, WWII.

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## Introduction

Imagining what could have been has often concerned narrative. Moreover, the tendency of speculating with new realities has increased on the verge or after major turning points in history. It

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\* Licenciada en Lengua Inglesa por la Universidad del Salvador. Correo electrónico: rodriguez.andrea@usal.edu.ar  
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is from this counterfactual exercise that a singular form of alternate reality fiction emerges. It is due to its particularities that it becomes necessary for the authors to design a number of artifacts that can legitimize their narratives or that can provide background to the events that unfold differently from the reality we know.

Alternate history (AH) constitutes a form of speculative narrative produced within the realms of science fiction. What is more, AH forges chronologies using in the process concepts and methodological tools that find their origin in social sciences. Of all these tools, the means for constructing and conveying history are of ~~our~~ interest. What is included and what is left out of the historical sources and where to look for agency are problems of historiography also tackled by AH. Alternate history, then, interacts inevitably, one could argue instinctively, with this discipline. We believe, then, that it is possible to approach alternate history science fiction historiographically.

In the present work we pursue such a line of analysis in Katharine Burdekin's novel *Swastika Night* which, although published in 1937, two years before the outbreak of WWII, imagines a world reconfigured as a product of Germany's victory in the fictitious 1930s' Twenty Years War. More than a dystopia, Burdekin's image of Europe presented itself as an ominous portrayal of a future that might actually become real to the eyes of the Western nations which, at the time, seemed unable to contain the actions of Adolf Hitler. Due to its complexity, manifold studies exist for this novel with topics ranging from its use of propaganda to gender and feminist approaches. We will focus on the devices the author designs to communicate a divergent national history and to introduce an erased past. What sources does Burdekin create to construct her alternate future? What is their function in the narrative? And what historiographic currents are useful to read them?

In order to answer these questions, we will start by addressing the foundations of the genre, providing a definition for alternate history science fiction, and consequently, exploring existing classifications. We will then proceed to consider AH's constitutive elements, among which we will pay special attention to what we will call the "revealer." Secondly, we will observe these features in motion in *Swastika Night* and we will examine two revealers in detail. A final step will lead us to suggest two historiographic currents we deem appropriate for the analysis of the novel: the ruling one at the moment of publication and one of the possibilities now available for a 21<sup>st</sup> century readership. We will consider German Historicism and Subaltern Studies to observe the ad-hoc sources and the protagonist's agency. Each current will be explained and then connected to Burdekin's work with the aim of illustrating the interaction between fiction and history in the narrative. This will allow us to offer conclusions about speculative fiction centered in history and *Swastika Night*.

### Features and Classification of Alternate History

A first step in venturing any conclusions will be to define our object of study. Alternate history science fiction narratives explore divergent timelines that arise as a product of the non-occurrence or alteration of certain historical events. In other words, authors hypothesize realities in which specific world history turning points have not taken place or have occurred in a different manner. These hypotheses then revolve around the question "what if...?" Whether alternate history is a stylistic resource, a genre or a subgenre is a debate that exceeds the scope of our work. We will regard alternate history, though, as part of science fiction supported in the fact that some of the means of achieving a new outcome for our historical chronology come from the genre itself (time travelling and parallel universes, for instance). In addition, *Swastika Night* is considered a sci-fi work as well.

All alternate histories introduce an *alternate timeline* (ATL) that differs from our timeline as we know it. To achieve this, it is necessary to have a clear turning point that provokes reality to unfold differently. The event that triggers the divergence receives the name of *Jonbar hinge*.<sup>1</sup> After the Jonbar hinge occurs, our timeline is no longer possible and the alternate history per se is then constructed.

Two authors have attempted a classification of alternate history narratives. William Joseph Collins (1990) distinguishes four types: “pure uchronia,” a pure alternate history which exists in isolation; “plural uchronia,” featuring two co-existing realities; “infinite presents,” or parallel worlds; and “time-travel alteration” in which a time traveler induces the changes. Karen Hellekson (2001) classifies AH in three types: the nexus story, which occurs at the moment of the break<sup>2</sup>; the true alternate history, occurring after the break of our timeline; and the parallel world that for the author implies no Jonbar hinge whatsoever. While Collins seems to pay attention to the place and time of the protagonist (and the reader in the case of the pure uchronia), Hellekson focuses on the Jonbar hinge and its place in the narrative.

Out of the features and available classification, another element becomes of the utmost importance in AH: The agent through which the actual history of the alternate world is explained. We will refer to this element as the “revealer”. How is the ATL revealed to the reader? In the case of the stories that use the divergence point also as a starting point for the narration (nexus stories in Hellekson), the events and the reader’s engagement with the narrative occur simultaneously. In the rest of the AH, where the divergence point is long gone by the time the plot takes flight, the “revealer” is most of the time a text of various origins and genres. At times, it is a history book, or a set of official documents and even fiction.

A great part of the experience of reading alternate history is discovering how the ATL came into existence. Katherine Singles (2003) recognizes that AH “require[s] a specific kind of competency from the reader, who must be able to identify the alternative version of history as alternative and reason about the variance between that alternative and history” (p. 9). This demands that both author and reader share a code built of historical contexts. While everyone can approach alternate history, not everyone may be able to understand it in full. The more the reader knows about actual history, the more enjoyable the alternate universe created around it will be.

Because of its recurrent addressing of armed conflicts as divergence points, AH has been accused of “suffer[ing] from militarism” and of being “right wing” (Duncan, 2003, pp. 216-217). We consider these arguments debatable as we believe it is not so much about a fixation with war but a recognition of an event that affects many and that carries effects that linger for decades. Catherine Gallagher explains that:

wars are believed to be full of unpredictable turning points, meeting the criteria of both contingency and plausibility; wars have long-range and wide-spread ramifications that affect all citizens in the nation, meeting the criterion of self-evident significance; and military histories themselves often stress not only the importance of contingency but also the vastness of the catalogue of alternatives used in planning. (2007, p. 57)

Wars themselves involve a great deal of speculation, which is the point of AH.

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1. The term comes from the 1938 science fiction series *Legion of Time* by Jack Williamson and has been adopted as a convention. Karen Hellekson (2001), however, will prefer the term *nexus*.

2. An example of this type is Kim Stanley Robinson’s short story “The Lucky Strike” which takes place at the precise moment in which the Enola Gay is about to drop the first atomic bomb over Japan.

One more consideration has to be made regarding AH and wars. For an alternate history narrative to succeed in its purpose, the reader must be acquainted with the real outcome of a specific event in our timeline so as to be able to spot the divergences in the ATL. Major wars are known by the majority of the public, thus permitting the AH narrative to be accessible to more readers.

### Revealing History

*Swastika Night* by Katharine Burdekin<sup>3</sup> was published in 1937, two years before the outbreak of WWII, hence being a “retroactive” alternate history that acquires meaning as it is read post Germany’s defeat. This novel can be classified, following Hellekson, as a “true alternate story” in which a world 700 years after the victory of Germany in WWII is depicted. The Europe of this alternate reality is now known as the Holy German Empire, also referred to as Hitlerdom, and it has replaced all official religious practice with the cult of an omnipotent deity named “God The Thunderer,” who is claimed to be Adolf Hitler’s father. Citizens of the German Empire meet at Swastika churches to engage in politics turned into dogma.

In this society women are reduced to the sole role of breeders. They live in ghettos with almost no interaction with men except for sexual intercourse, which is reduced to pure utilitarianism. In addition to being excluded from all types of social and political participation, women are deprived of all means of aesthetic embellishment: They are forced to wear rags, to shave their heads, and furthermore forced into subsistence diets with the minimum food needed to carry a pregnancy to term. Although excluded from most activities, women do attend church services, which seems to serve a twofold purpose: on the one hand, it continues to break the female spirit, and on the other hand, it permits men to see women’s impurity and ugliness further accentuating a one-sided gender hatred. German men, on the contrary, are not only free to circulate but also to access to “education” mostly consisting of daily physical exercise. Literacy is not necessary since the Empire has made sure that all books have been destroyed. The society the author imagines is a militaristic one in which war values have become the norm and in which men are numbed intellectually but trained physically to become perfect Aryan soldiers who will never question authority.

There are three revealers in *Swastika Night*, each playing a different role within the narrative. The first revealer is the thorough description of the religious service at one of the Swastika churches. This service and, especially, the prayers and songs used in it present the ATL to the reader. The second revealer is the only surviving photograph of Adolf Hitler in which he can be seen accompanied by a beautiful young girl. The final revealer is a vast and rudimentary manuscript written by a member of an aristocratic German family. The last two artifacts contain information only relevant for the protagonist of the novel, the young British technician Alfred. Therefore, while the religious service affects the reader, the last two revealers affect the actual characters.

The second and third revealers, however, are not to be accessed so easily by the inhabitants of the Empire. They are soundly protected by an important German aristocrat, the Knight von Hess. As part of a secret pact both items have passed from generation to generation of the von Hess family waiting for the right moment for them to finally see the light. Why should these objects be maintained in absolute secrecy? Because they threaten the core of the Holy German Empire’s doctrine. The photograph of a human Adolf Hitler is material evidence of the actual fabrication of his divine nature. In addition, the young girl proves that women have not always been pariahs and, more important, that they can be objects of desire. The von Hess manuscript, supposedly one of the last books on Earth, contains the history of the world since the beginnings of human civilization. As such, it challenges the Empire’s efforts to erase all history prior to the advent of Hitlerdom. Through

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3. *Swastika Night* was originally published under Burdekin’s pseudonym Murray Constantine.

the von Hess manuscript Alfred discovers our timeline, which will determine his mission in the novel: When the time is right, Alfred must spread historical truth and challenge the Imperial system.

Let us first look at the institutionalized Swastika ritual in detail. The religious service introduces readers into a monthly worshipping ceremony at the Holy Hitler chapel. Here the German “congregation” unites in collective prayer conducted not by a priest but by a Teutonic Knight. The first thing we will learn from this future reality is that there is no institutional distinction between government and church. Nation and congregation are one. The beginning of the of the prayer states:

I believe (...) in God the Thunderer, who made this physical earth on which men march in their mortal bodies, and in His Heaven where all heroes are, and in His Son our Holy Adolf Hitler, the Only Man. Who was, not begotten, not born of a woman, but Exploded! (Burdekin, 1937, p. 5).

And I believe that when all things are accomplished and the last heathen man is enlisted in his Holy Army, that Adolf Hitler our God will come again in martial glory to the sound of guns and aeroplanes, to the sound of trumpets and drums (Burdekin, 1937, p. 6).

From these two fragments we learn that, in becoming the most important German deity’s son, Hitler has been transformed into a Jesus-like figure. But, unlike Jesus, this messiah does not have a human nature: he cannot be allowed a human birth since that would imply a fully corrupted act due to the unavoidable female participation. The son of God’s second coming is expected when the infidels are finally defeated. In an interesting reversal of fortune, in this Empire it is the Christians who are the pagans.

The Hitler Cult has blurred the line between religion and civil society so much that even during mass the Knights find a moment to revise the so-called “fundamental immutable laws of Hitler Society”:

As a woman is above a worm,  
So is a man above a woman.  
As a woman is above a worm,  
So is a worm above a Christian.  
(...)  
As a man is above a woman,  
So is a Nazi above any foreign Hitlerian.  
As a Nazi is above a foreign Hitlerian,  
So is a Knight above a Nazi. (Burdekin, 1937, p. 7)

The passage provides a glimpse into the hierarchy that organizes this dystopian society. As in the prayer, the hierarchy is marked by a combination of gender and religious strata: German/Hitlerian men above all, followed by women and Christians on the lowest levels of the social ladder. The hierarchy is crowned by no other than God the Thunderer himself. This passage furthermore evidences the construction of an “other” employed to achieve cohesion within the Empire. Otherness is then constituted by those who are not part of the Empire, that is, those who are neither German, nor profess German religion, nor are men.

Our next revealer, the von Hess Book, is introduced in the novel’s fourth chapter when Alfred and his German friend Hermann are invited to have dinner at the von Hess residence. The revelation of one of the last books on Earth is an event itself due to its artistic uniqueness and also to its being an object that nobody in the world has seen for centuries. Time seems to be suspended as its owner draws from under his desk “a huge book of deep yellow colour” with parchment leaves that make “a peculiar thick crackling sound, unlike the rustling of paper” (Burdekin, 1937, p. 73) and as the

astonished guests discover that the text is “written all by hand in the smallest possible German letter, but still as legible as print, every letter being perfectly formed and perfectly spaced” (Burdekin, 1937, p. 74). The magnificent manuscript has been brought to life by Friedrich von Hess, a Teutonic Knight of the Empire who lived 150 years after Hitler’s death and who also acquired the photograph. Distressed by an imperial book-burning campaign, the knight embarked on the task of recording world history from its very beginning. While the official discourse is that before the German empire there was only “darkness and savagery” (Burdekin, 1937, p. 74), the von Hess manuscript shines a light on all the civilizations that have ever set foot on Earth. While the German Empire states there is nothing worth remembering, the von Hess manuscript says “There was history” (Burdekin, 1937, p. 74). The Knight von Hess faces the danger of dying heirless, which also implies the end of the family line of custody. To ensure the survival of the manuscript, Alfred is then invited to be its next guardian. By accepting, the young British man becomes the protector of history: he needs to make sure that *there will be history*.

### Historiographic Analysis

Because of the revealers’ deep connection with the portrayal or the disclosing of history, we believe it suitable to examine them through the prism of historiography. In the present section, we will introduce two historiographic currents we deem appropriate to explore *Swastika Night*, and we will connect them with the artifact that most suits them.

Subaltern Studies emerged as a historiographic approach in the year 1982 amidst the struggle for South Asian representation in a predominately Eurocentric historical rhetoric. Up until then, the national histories of South Asia had been written by scholars from the Cambridge School and by a reduced group of local national historians, resulting in the idea that both the colonial powers and the national elites had planted the seeds of independence in the south of the Asian continent. These interpretations seemed to be purposefully ignoring the existence of the rest of the population. With this in mind, historian Ranajit Guha announced “a new approach to restore history to the subordinated” (Prakash, 1994, p. 1477) that would put an end to the supremacy of the two former elitist discourses. Inspired by notions of what is known as “history from below”<sup>4</sup> and Marxist historiography, Guha’s primary critique to Cambridge was “its failure to acknowledge the Subaltern as the maker of his own destiny” (Guha, 1982, p. 3). The Subaltern Studies’ aim then became “to produce historical analyses in which the subaltern groups were viewed as the subjects of history” (Chakravarty, 2002, p. 7). But who is a subaltern? Guha adopts Antonio Gramsci’s definition of those who are subordinated “in terms of class, caste, gender, race, language, and culture” (Prakash, 1994, p. 1477) and who have unwillingly been functional to the delimitation of relations of power and dominance.

The religious service and prayers depicted in *Swastika Night* represent the ideas of those in power and express the existing prejudice about all those who do not meet the requirements of the perfect German unity of citizen-soldier-parishioner. Being a manifestation of the master narrative, such ideas crush the possibilities of the development of a dissident discourse. The Empire is deaf to the voices of both the subjects and the oppressed.

Imperial power depends on rigid social stratification at home and in the conquered lands. The construction of a subaltern otherness is paramount for maintaining domination. In *Swastika Night* the German Empire’s defining, discriminating and silencing of the subaltern becomes a state policy. Alfred’s subalternity is determined by his British nationality; he is part of the defeated in war and he does not have a single drop of Aryan blood in him. The system makes sure he knows his place

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4. Representatives of this current are the British Marxist historians EP Thompson and Eric Hobsbawm, among others.

through the limitation of his freedom and especially through the exclusion from the cult of God the Thunderer. Far from being an obstacle, this segregation keeps Alfred safe from imperial brainwashing and allows him to observe German society from afar. Observation brings our protagonist to conclude that the Empire is hiding something. Although practically invisible for the Empire, Alfred has agency and his actions have the potential of bringing the charade of the Holy German Empire to an end.

The second historiographic current we will consider is German Historicism, which first entered the scene in 19<sup>th</sup> century Germany with a modernizing project for history. According to Jacques Bos (2012), historicism proposes two central ideas: the first one being that of a rethinking the importance of this discipline for human experience with the conviction that “the essence of social and cultural phenomena lies in their history,” the second idea is that “the study of history should be an empirical discipline” (p. 131). The last point derives in the active work of the subscribers to the school to achieve the professionalization of the practice of history. Such was the importance and the influence of German Historicism that Georg G. Iggers considers it as “the main tradition of German historiography and historical thought which has dominated historical writing, the cultural sciences, and political theory in Germany (...) until the recent past” (1968, p. 4). One of the school’s most remarkable representatives is historian Leopold von Ranke.

For the German historicist scholar, the world is in constant movement, which implies that each action is unique and unprecedented. As a result, the only way of making sense of this state of constant development is to observe the acts of the past. History “thus becomes the only guide to an understanding of things human” (Iggers, 1968, p. 5). However unstoppable the flow may be, it is possible to find a degree of balance in what Iggers calls “centers of stability” (1968, p. 5) embodied in individuals of political or military relevance and in states or state institutions. This notion leads German Historicism to focus its attention on “the adoption of an individualizing instead of a generalizing perspective” (Bos, 2012, p. 132). As a consequence, these historians will be mostly devoted to the study of great men and great powers, that is, great nation states. In tune with the aim of professionalization, Ranke would favor a scholarly approach to history devoid of all personal opinions and judgement in which historical events then could be presented “*wie es eigentlich gewesen*” (Ranke, 1824, p. VI) or as they really were.

The author of the von Hess manuscript in *Swastika Knight* is no scholar but a man who has read enough so as to reconstruct a journey through the history of the world<sup>5</sup>. Then, it is interesting to see that although we are not in the presence of a professional historian, Friedrich von Hess is a member of the aristocracy with enough power to change the course of history itself, one of the great men of German Historicism. Although the manuscript does not seem to be making use of any methodology, as there are really no sources other than von Hess’s memory, it could be argued that still there is a degree of objectivity since the intention of the manuscript is to prevent history from being forgotten. Therefore, even lacking the tools of the discipline, von Hess is determined to present world history without any type of intended judgement as it really was.

In chapter five of *Swastika Night*, Alfred is introduced to the fact that there had been other empires prior to the German as he discovers “The Assyrian, the Babylonian, the Persian, the Egyptian, the Greek, the Roman, the Spanish and the British” (Burdekin, 1937, p. 77). It is relevant to mention how the traditional teleology of the national master narratives implies an evolution from a fragmented land to an integrated and mostly homogenous nation. The von Hess manuscript seems

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5. Since von Hess writes his magnum opus in exile, it is pertinent to remark that historian Henri Pirenne wrote his *History of Europe* while imprisoned by German forces, and with only his memory as an archive. Pirenne’s work was first published in 1939, some years after his death and two years after *Swastika Night*.

to propose a movement in an opposite direction, though, from the homogeneity of the German Empire to the rediscovery of the multiplicity of empires from the past. An element of the Rankean tradition remains in that the disclosed heterogeneity only considers nation states but does not really include the social heterogeneity of the population within them.

Even though Alfred is a subaltern, he is interested only in the existence of other great empires and not at all in the history of those who are victims of imperial rule. It seems that for Alfred a British national cause is pre-eminent over the actual independence from colonial rule and the liberation of all subjects. It could be that what the protagonist is actually looking for is an imperial pride of his own that can make him feel against the established social order. The Empire is attractive when you are the one in power. However, the Knight von Hess warns Alfred of the dangers of imperial belonging by putting Hermann as an example:

Look at that poor clod Hermann here – he daren't face anything, believe anything, he hardly dares to *hear* anything, he's a shrinking, shaking *coward*, not so much because he believes in Hitler, not so much because he's a *German*, but because he's got an Empire! (Burdekin, 1937, pp. 77-78)

Perhaps the ultimate solution is to do without an empire whatsoever.

A final stage of the mission takes Alfred and Hermann to England, where they can protect the von Hess Book. Tragically, they fall into the hands of the Germans. At the hospital, Alfred manages to have a final encounter with his son Fred, who will become the next guardian of the manuscript. Alfred has failed his mission and has been punished for desiring an empire for himself. His experience shows that he is not prepared to start a revolution since what he craves for is not really freedom but to be on the other end of the hierarchy. His agency as a subaltern has been frustrated.

## Conclusions

Alternate history has warned at times of the dangers of a passive approach to certain political conflicts. It has also included a great deal of social criticism in questioning both gender roles and religious practices. Moreover, AH narratives produced after WWII have sought many times to bring some justice to those most damaged by the war.

In 1937, Burdekin seemed to be warning about probable consequences of the Nazi regime. Today, her plea for caution becomes a lesson in light of what is known about the outcome of WWII. The author also addresses ever-present issues such as the idealization of extreme political figures and imperialism as a source of inspiration for aggressive territorial conquest, projects which, in turn, end up erasing regional identities and enforcing foreign and cruel social orders. Even when the novel reflects historiographic ideas present in the 1930s, Burdekin seems to be anticipating a future historiographic moment in which subaltern agency might be possible.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak once asked, "Can the subaltern speak?" (1988, p. 271). For *Swastika Night* the answer is: not yet. Subalterns can neither speak nor be heard and are yet unready to become agents of change. But the potential lies within them. Alternate history science fiction presents itself as an incredibly complex form of narrative where the historical imagination is put to the service of fiction to create a world where history and story meet.

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