

A NEW BEGINNING?
HUNGARY IN THE ERA OF THE PROVISIONAL NATIONAL ASSEMBLY,
1944–45

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ON COVER
The lower embankment of Pest in early 1945,
with the Royal Palace of Buda in the background.
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FOREWORD AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The transition between 1944 and 1945 was one of the most critical and harrowing chapters in 20th-century Hungarian history, yet it also proved decisive in paving the way for a new beginning. A little over eighty years ago, in the winter of 1944, Debrecen – traditionally known as the “Cívis City” – became the centre of the country’s political rebirth: it was here that the Provisional National Assembly convened, marking a symbolic milestone in the reconstruction that followed the devastation of Second World War. The 80th anniversary of this pivotal event provided the occasion for the academic conference held on 21 November 2024, at the University of Debrecen.

This volume presents the expanded written versions of the papers delivered at the conference. Since the transformations in Hungary in 1944–1945 offer key insights not only for domestic historical research but also for the broader academic community, the editorial board decided to publish these original Hungarian-language presentations in English. Our primary goal is to disseminate the most recent scholarship in the fields of political and social history. We hope these studies will broaden the existing understanding of this historical era, making fresh perspectives accessible to a global audience of scholars and university students.

The studies in this volume can be organized into three major thematic sections, ranging from macro-level political and demographic changes to micro-level social reality and everyday life. The volume commences with a study by Balázs Ablonczy (Eötvös Loránd University, Institute of Historical Studies), which examines the dramatic population movements, resettlements, and waves of refugees in 1944, mapping out the social restructuring caused by the war. Ákos Bartha (ELTE Research Centre for the Humanities, Institute of History) analyses attempts to establish alternative state power structures, with a particular focus on the activities of the Hungarian National Uprising Liberation Committee (Magyar Nemzeti Felkelés Felszabadítási Bizottsága) in November 1944. Levente Püski (University of Debrecen, Institute of History) explores the issues of political continuity and disintegration, tracing the fate of the Party of Hungarian Life (Magyar Élet Pártja) – the last ruling party of the Horthy era – following the German occupation. Károly Szerencsés (Ludovika University of Public Service) assesses the Provisional National Assembly and the Provisional National Government themselves, evaluating their formation, political scope, and historical potential. Róbert Barta (University of Debrecen, Institute of History) offers a glimpse into a unique diplomatic lobbying campaign by presenting Judit Márffy-Mantuano’s advocacy in Great Britain on behalf of Miklós Béla Dálnoki.

The second half of the volume addresses the repercussions of the war and the challenges inherent in social transformation. Tamás Stark (ELTE Research Centre for the Humanities, Institute of History) investigates wartime human losses, re-

flecting on Lajos Für's seminal study published forty years ago. Zsombor Bódy (Eötvös Loránd University, Institute of Sociology) situates the year 1945 within a broader, international comparative framework, critically reassessing the canon of Hungarian social history. In her paper, Mária Palasik (Jean Monnet Professor for European Studies, retired head of Department of Scientific Research at the Historical Archives of the Hungarian State Security) sheds light on the violent aspects of the political transition; by tracing a series of political murders in 1945, she reveals the dark underbelly of the exercise of power.

The volume's final essays delve into the daily realities of the capital and the sphere of urban crime. Roland Perényi (Budapest History Museum, Kiscelli Museum) conducts an examination of the relationship between extraordinary circumstances and everyday criminal acts in Budapest between 1944 and 1947. Finally, Róbert Kerepeszki (University of Debrecen, Institute of History) analyses the blurring boundaries between legality and illegality, highlighting the challenges posed by the black market, theft, criminal gangs, and law enforcement in Budapest in 1945.

Providing a concluding international perspective, Anssi Halmesvirta's (University of Jyväskylä) essay presents the Finnish experience during that era, drawing parallels with the historical changes in Hungary.

We hope that this English-language volume will make a meaningful contribution to Hungarian historical scholarship and facilitate the integration of research on these critical years into the international academic discourse. Furthermore, we extend our gratitude to the institutions that played an instrumental role in organising the conference and producing this volume: University of Debrecen, Institute of History; the History Working Group of the Debrecen Regional Committee of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Hungarian Academy of Sciences' Subcommittee on the History of Second World War. Last but not least, we wish to express our deepest appreciation to all the contributing authors, whose rigorous research has given this volume its exceptional depth and breadth.

The Editors

POPULATION MOVEMENT, POPULATION TRANSFER, AND DISPLACEMENT IN HUNGARY IN 1944

One might not tend to think of the spring and summer of 1944 as a time of ominous foreboding (on the contrary, one would see it as a period of ever stronger hope that the cataclysmic war would soon come to an end), yet it already foreshadowed a new upheaval to come, as unprecedented numbers of people took to the road. In Hungary, there had not been population movements of this magnitude since the First World War, and perhaps never in such a short period of time. In the discussion below, I offer an overview of the directions of and participants in this highly complex, violent (forced) migration, without forgetting that the population movement did not stop there, but rather continued in 1945, with deportations to the Gulag and GUPVI galaxy, the Czechoslovak-Hungarian population exchange, the expulsion of Germans from Hungary, and the resettlement of Greek refugees in 1948–1949. The final act of the violent state-orchestrated population transfers was the odyssey of those deported in 1950–1951 from Budapest and the southwestern border region of Hungary to the Great Plain (*Alföld*).

Below, I summarize the characteristics of this wartime population movement and highlight some of its lesser-known aspects in order to make it easier to understand. As part of similar movements between 1938 and 1951, to what extent did the population movements (or displacements) in 1944 transform the ways in which society thought and to what extent did it contribute to the social cataclysms in Hungary and the reactions to them, which largely explain the emergence of authoritarian-dictatorial regimes.

I would not have the space here to describe the events of the Holocaust in Hungary, but I will highlight a few aspects that are relevant to the topic of this discussion. One direct consequence of the German occupation of Hungary, which began on 19 March 1944, was that the Hungarian state administration and the gendarmerie ghettoized and then deported the rural Jewish population. In rural Hungary, this meant that the Jewish citizens living in the villages were transported to collection camps in the district seats or larger settlements with the assistance of the gendarmerie. From there, they were taken to ghettos or entrainment centers, usually in the county seats, and from there to the death camps. In addition to the 437,000 people who were deported in the spring and summer of 1944, many Jewish men had already been conscripted into labor battalions, but new, massive conscription took place. These units suffered far higher casualty and

fatality rates the combat units. (It is also worth noting that by late 1944, Jewish women were also conscripted into labor battalions, primarily in Budapest.) The tens of thousands of men conscripted all had very different prospects, but their chances of survival were clearly far better than those of the people deported to the death camps, and indeed they were also better than the chances of those who had served on the front lines in 1942–1943. There were still many instances of mass murders in several cities (Cservenka/Crvenka, Kiskunhalas, Debrecen-Apafa, Pusztavám), and poet Miklós Radnóti (1909–1944) was executed by his compatriots in arms near Abda during a death march, but a significant proportion of those called up for labor service in the spring of that year survived the Holocaust, while the vast majority of their deported family members did not.¹ The number of Jews (or those defined by the laws at the time as Jews) who remained in Budapest and had not yet been deported is estimated at 200,000–220,000, with a few thousand exceptions in the rural parts of the country.² (After the Arrow Cross takeover in November–December 1944, some 50,000 Jews, the overwhelming majority of them from Budapest, were deported to the west to take part in fortification work in the Hungarian-German border zone under inhumane conditions).

The bombings also prompted significant movement within the cities. Those whose homes had been damaged or destroyed often moved to new residences within the city, and those who felt that their lives were in danger tried to find safer neighborhoods. The city administrations often moved people who had lost their homes to the bombings into the homes of recently deported Jews. These relocations sometimes meant going from bad to worse. The Tolnai family, who had moved from Pesterzsébet to escape the bombings, ended up a few hundred meters from the Kelenföld railway station, from where they later had to a rural community due to the bombings.³ Women who had been working in the city often had to return home to help their parents with household chores, replacing the men who had been drafted. At the end of August, these rapidly moving masses were joined by refugees from Transylvania who had fled the eastern part of the country to escape the front.

“I just bought a calf, we slaughtered it at home, so we have meat for a week. But I really don’t know what I’ll do after next week.” These words were spoken by Márta Holló, a teacher and camp leader at the Budapest municipal resort in Bakonyoszlop. Holló was describing the problems at the camp entrusted to her

¹ For more recent information on the murders and atrocities committed against labor service workers and their demand for payment, see László Bernát Veszprémy, *Piszkos munka. A munkaszolgálat és a keretlegények története a népbíróságon* (Jaffa, 2024). On the whole issue see: Randolph L. Braham, *The Politics of Genocide. The Holocaust in Hungary* (Columbia University Press, 2016).

² See Tamás Stark, *Zsidóság a vészorszakban és a felszabadulás után, 1939–1955* (Történettudományi Intézet, 1995), 20–33.

³ János Tolnai, *Gyermekeim a második világháború zivatarában* (Published by the author, 2005) 21.

care to the Budapest department supervising her in June 1944.⁴ The former Esterházy castle was home to roughly eighty children who had been sent from the capital and for whom Holló was struggling to provide care.

The resorts and forestry schools in the capital were also used to accommodate children who had been evacuated. Dozens of children were sent on vacation to children's camps in Bakonyoszlop and Rozsnyó/Rožňava (today in Slovakia and at the time part of the territory that had come under Hungarian control following the so-called First Vienna Award). According to documents from the period, as time went on, it became increasingly difficult to provide for the children in these places, which were often isolated from the outside world. It was challenging to provide not only eggs and meat but also footwear and bedding. As Benedek Roboz, a camp leader in Rozsnyó/Rožňava, wrote at the end of August, "I respectfully report that the children's footwear is completely worn out. Autumn is coming and the children are without shoes, and we are unable to repair the shoes that are in poor condition due to a lack of materials. I therefore ask the center to kindly send the leather and nails needed to repair the children's shoes to the camp."⁵ The Budapest Municipality made approximately 1,220 places available to the Evacuation Government Commission (*Kiürítési Kormánybiztosság*) in seven large holiday camps, where only 808 children had been placed by the end of June 1944, mainly between the ages of 3 and 6, though there were also some children between the ages of 4 and 15 according to the head of the social policy department of Budapest Municipality.⁶ At the same time, similar children's camps were operated by the Child Protection League (*Gyermekvédelő Liga*), and the government commission also used other association resorts. In addition to association properties, the government commission placed more children, a total of about 33,000, in rural communities, sometimes with relatives and sometimes with rural families.⁷ Some reports put the number of people involved in the evacuation at 150,000 or even 200,000.⁸ (The most comprehensive Hungarian encyclopedia on the Second World War puts the number of displaced persons at 200,000 to 300,000, although the author of the entry put a question mark at the end of his estimate.⁹) If this figure is accurate, and we deduct the few thousand displaced persons from large rural

⁴ Budapest Főváros Levéltára (Budapest City Archives, thereafter: BFL), IV.1507.a 6. kisdoboz, "Holló Márta levele Budapest Székesfőváros Gyermek- és Ifjúságvédelmi Hivatalának," Bakonyoszlop, 17 June 1944.

⁵ BFL, IV.1507.a, 7. kisdoboz, "Roboz Benedek a Hivatalnak," Rozsnyó, 27 August 1944.

⁶ BFL, IV. 1409. i., 17. doboz, "Fővárosi Polgármesteri Hivatal iratai, havi jelentések, 1943–1944, IX. osztály jelentése," 27 June 1944.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Gábor Thorma, *A Thorma-család krónikája* (Thorma János Múzeum, 2012), 300. (The author's father, Tibor Thorma, was a police councilor and head of the government commissioner's department of law enforcement.) The figure of 150,000 is emphasized by György Németh, "A pesti gyerekek közel hozzák egymáshoz a várost és a falut," *Pesti Hírlap*, 2 August 1944. 3.

⁹ The data is presumably from Iván Pataky, *A Magyar Polgári Védelem (légoltalom) története, 1935–1992* (Polgári Védelem Országos Parancsnoksága, 1992), 32.

towns, we are still left with a huge number of people, between 10 and 20 percent of the population of the capital at the time.

However, the figures for the evacuation are much higher when it comes to children, with a total of 60–80,000, compared to 33,000.¹⁰ Moreover, many of the children who left did not return to the capital. In September 1944, the number of school enrolments was one-third of what it had been a year earlier.. Residents in the apartment buildings in Budapest were more afraid of the bombings than anything else, especially those who lived in the upper floors. Those who were unable to move to a rural community tried to find accommodation on the lower floors.

In a 1945 issue of the urban policy journal *Városi Szemle* (Urban Review), a scholarly author attempted to summarize data on population movements in Budapest during the war years. He did not pay particular attention to the effects of the bombings, but he noted that population of Budapest, which had been growing in the first years of the war, stopped growing and even declined after the German occupation. For a while, those who fled to rural communities were replaced by refugees from the eastern parts of the country, who arrived in the city in the autumn. However, according to the census of 25 March 1945, the population of Budapest decreased by more than half a million (546,762 people) during the last year of the war.¹¹ This decline was naturally influenced by those who were conscripted, fled, deported, killed, taken prisoner of war, or forced into labor battalions, and the statistician even highlighted domestic servants (maids) who returned to the rural communities from which they had hailed. These factors do not entirely explain the population decline, however. Residents who had been deported to rural parts of the country and did not return before the siege of Budapest must also be taken into account.

In the summer of 1944, it was not only the inhabitants of the capital and the larger cities who were on the move. Although the arrival of the Red Army still seemed distant and uncertain, many people set off for the west due to the financial pressures and anxieties caused by their husbands having been called up for military service, the proximity of the eastern border, and other factors. The writer and literary historian Lóránt Czigány, who later became a prominent figure in the Hungarian émigré community in Great Britain, left Sátoraljaújhely with his family as a child and moved to Gyöngyös because his father, who had been drafted into the army, could no longer support the family. The increasingly frequent air raids on the entire region of Zemplén and perhaps also the local prison riot on 22 March made their situation in the county seat of Zemplén increasingly uncertain.¹²

One day after the first major air raid on Budapest, the air defense commissioner issued orders to evacuate the capital. Similar orders were given over the course of the following days. The evacuation affected not only Budapest, which at the time

¹⁰ In Budapest, this number was 75,000 in September 1944: BFL, IV. 1409. i. 18. doboz, "Jelentések 1944–1946, a IX. társadalompolitikai osztály jelentése az év augusztusáról," October 1944 (draft)

¹¹ Dr. István Török, "Budapest népességének vándormozgalma a háború alatt és az ostrom után," *Városi Szemle*, 1945. 140.

¹² Lóránt Czigány, *Ahol állok, ahol megyek* (Kortárs, 1998), 58–61.

consisted of 14 districts, but also the industrial suburbs from Újpest to Csepel. Those who were not allowed to leave the city or who were compelled to remain at a distance that would allow them to commute to work were divided into 24 categories. Individuals not classified in the public service category were permitted to leave the city if they so wished. The regulations only referred to forced evictions in the case of apartments rendered uninhabitable by the bombings. Those who wanted to leave the capital could do so on evacuation trains starting on 7 April, with discounted tickets and a maximum of 150 kilograms of luggage. However, this departure was simple only on paper. Those who sought to leave had to go through a series of torturous administrative processes, from obtaining housing vouchers to having their food stamps stamped, before they could leave Budapest.¹³

Unfortunately, most of the documents of the Evacuation Commission were destroyed, and only a few of the books of the registry remain. However, these books clearly show that, beginning in the spring of 1944, large numbers of private individuals, mainly women living in rural areas, many of them widows, applied to take in two or three children.¹⁴ They were presumably prompted to do so both by a natural sense of compassion but also by the fact that older children could provide useful labor in peasant households where there were very few men. Moreover, after some initial wrangling, the capital paid five pengős a day for each child taken in, which was another argument in favor of applying.

The history of the air raid evacuations has yet to be written. These evacuations affected huge numbers of people in the capital, but apart from scattered biographical references, only a study published in Slovakia in 2007 has dealt with the subject in depth. According to a summary of the events in Komárom County, in the spring and summer of 1944, more than 1,300 displaced persons (including almost 400 children) arrived in the Somorja district (today Šamorín in Slovakia) in the Csallóköz/Žitný ostrov region alone. This is a remarkable number.¹⁵ These settlements were presumably populated by people evacuated from Győr. In a report dated 1 September 1944, the chief bailiff (*főszolgabíró*) of Kunszentmiklós put the number of people left homeless by the bombings in his district and subsequently evacuated at 4,234, although he also included military units in his count. This huge number (the district had a population of just over 46,000 in 1941) can certainly be attributed to its proximity to Budapest and the Budapest-Kelebia railway line.¹⁶ But some 54 people ended up in Szakály in Tolna County, and there were still 46 in Véménd in Baranya County in early 1945. Outside Budapest, Győr and Szeged are the two Hungarian cities where there are traces of such events, although the

¹³ See: "Április 7-én reggel indulnak meg a kiűritő vonatok," *Új Nemzedék*, 7 April 1944. 1.

¹⁴ Magyar Nemzeti Levéltár Országos Levéltára (Hungarian National Archives Central Archives, hereafter: MNL OL) K 663, "A légoltalmi és kiűritési kormánybiztosság iratai," Vol. 2. (July 1944)

¹⁵ László Bukovszky, "Menekültügy Komárom vármegyében a második világháború végén," *Fórum Társadalomtudományi Szemle* 9, no. 2 (2007): 37–38.

¹⁶ Katalin Bálintné Mikes, "Bács-Kiskun megye 1944–1945-ben," in *Így kezdődött. Dokumentumgyűjtemény Bács-Kiskun megye 1944–45. évi történetéhez*, ed. Bálintné Mikes Katalin and Szabó Sándor (Bács-Kiskun Megyei Tanács V. B. Művelődésügyi Osztálya, 1971), 15.

sparse sources off precious little data and we do not know the number of those relocated as a proportion of the local population.¹⁷ There was also an evacuation in Miskolc, relatively late, and the group of people to be relocated was not really defined.¹⁸ As the front grew nearer, residents of smaller towns increasingly moved to surrounding settlements and farms, especially when Soviet aircraft began bombing smaller settlements (alongside the British and American planes, which were concentrating for the most part on larger targets). Mihály Veress, a farmer on the Harkányi estate near Mezőtúr, recalled that by September, “almost all of the townspeople had sought refuge on farms.”¹⁹

According to the surviving documents of the evacuation committee, the camps for evacuated children were distributed quite unevenly across the region. They were all located near a railway line leading to Budapest, in fairly small settlements of little military importance, mostly in the northern and western parts of the country. A significant number of settlements were used in the area north of the Danube, in the Little Hungarian Plain (*Kisalföld*), the Csallóköz and the Párkány region (for example, Csallóköztárnok/Trnávka, Garamvezekény/Vozokany nad Hronom, and Dunaszerdahely/Dunajská Streda, now in Slovakia), in an arc stretching from the mouth of the Ipoly River to Kassa/Košice (from Helemba/Chl’aba to Nagyida/Velká Ida and even Abaújkér), in the resort villages of Bükk, Mátra, and Mátraalja, as well as in the resort settlements around Lake Balaton and in the Bakony Mountains (Devecser, Zirc, Farkasgyepű—the latter location was presumably chosen because the children sent to Balatonalmádi were relocated there due to the bombing of the industrial plant in Balatonfűzfő). Nagykőrös is the only settlement in the Great Plain on the list. There were no mass air raid evacuation camps in either eastern Hungary or Transylvania.

Major General Lajos Szurmay, who took over the leadership of the Air Defense Government Commission in July 1944 from Major General Géza Vörös (brother to the Chief of the General Staff), had a rather unusual career. He began his career in 1911 as a high school teacher specializing in Greek and Latin. He was probably one of the few humanities graduates and the only Eötvös College alumnus to join the Hungarian general staff.²⁰ He certainly had a better sense of marketing than his predecessor. In July 1944, newsreels followed him as he visited children’s homes in northern Hungary, and the once liberal *Pesti Hírlap* (Pest Herald) reported on this tour in an elegiac account stretching over several issues.²¹

¹⁷ See also “Győr légtálcái kiürítése,” *Győri Nemzeti Hírlap*, 15 April 1944. Also: “Mindenüket elvesztett győri bombakárosultak kisgyermekai nyaralnak már négy hét óta a soproni vöröskeresztes üdülőben,” *Győri Nemzeti Hírlap*, 28 June 1944. 5. About Szeged, see Ferenc Kanyó, “Bevezető tanulmány,” in *A második világháború szegedi hősei és áldozatai*, eds. Júlia Dunainé Bognár and Ferenc Kanyó (Csongrád Megyei Levéltár, 1996), 86–87.

¹⁸ *Magyar Élet*, 28 August 1944. “A kitelepítettek száma: 60 035 fő,” *Ibid.*, 11 August 1944. 6.

¹⁹ Lajos Nagy, *Egy uradalmi cseléd életregénye* (S. n., 1994), 22.

²⁰ Sándor Szakály, “Tábornok az Eötvös Collegiumból,” *Magyar Napló* 23, no. 4, (2011): 44–49.

²¹ Németh, “A pesti gyerekek közel hozzák.” See also: György Németh, “Így élnek a pesti gyerekek falun,” *Pesti Hírlap*, 29 July 1944. 3. Cf. “Kitelepített gyermekeket látogatott meg

Although the newspaper articles offer images of an idyllic situation and noted the alleged harmony between “the village and the capital,” reporting that the children were gaining two or three kilograms in the fresh air of rural Hungary, the displaced children were not always enthusiastic about their new homes. There were some holiday camps from which a striking number of children fled (such as Jolsva/Jelšava in the territory ceded to Hungary after the aforementioned First Vienna Award, now part of Slovakia). They were usually brought back by the local gendarmerie, but the more experienced children managed to escape. After having failed to escape himself, László Kollárik, who was between 10 and 12 years of age, based on his handwriting, encouraged four other companions to leave Jolsva in February 1944. Two of these children were caught by the gendarmes in Miskolc, but Kollárik and two of his companions managed to reach Budapest in a freight car. From there, Kollárik wrote a somewhat sarcastic letter to his companions and siblings who had been left behind, addressing it to “Jolsva, koplalda, mosléktelep” (Jolsva, slum, slop kitchen). He cited poor food and physical abuse as the main reasons for his escape: “Because I didn’t go hungry at home like I did there, because they fed us like swine. But at home there was a finger’s width of fat in the soup.” With one sentence, he crafts a vivid picture of the everyday lives of these orphanage and war factory children: “We are fine, only mother is sick.”²² It should be added that I found no instances of physical abuse among the evacuees ordered to relocate by the passive air defense after 3 April 1944. However, the young Kollárik and the others fellows who fled with him (and the latter were taken back to the camp) were not among the evacuees. They had been raised in institutions in the capital (orphanages, apprentice homes, etc.) and had been sent to forestry schools by the capital’s institutions during the school year. The places of residence of those who participated in an earlier escape attempt were preserved in the documents. Four of them had had permanent addresses in the Mária Valéria settlement, and one had lived in “Dzsumbuj,” an impoverished settlement on Illatos út in Budapest’s ninth district.

Those who were relocated in April did not belong to the higher social classes. Rather, they were mostly children of working-class families whose parents were employed in the industrial plants threatened by the bombings. This is probably why there are fewer personal sources about this population movement. Diary writing was less common among them than among the children of middle-class families. Reports of starvation or poor nutrition are tempered by a menu from Bakonyoszlop dating from April 1944. This document indicates that children were given five meals a day, including a mid-morning snack of bread with lard or seasoning, lunch usually consisting of three courses (with staple dishes such as pea stew and bean soup), and also scones with cracklings and crumble cake. Meat was served four to five times a week, which was no mean feat for the camp

vitéz Szurmay Lajos vezérőrnagy,” *Magyar Világhíradó*, no. 1068, August 1944 (<https://filmhiradokonline.hu/watch.php?id=5785>, downloaded on 25 August 2025).

²² BFL, IV.1507.a. 6. kisdoboz, “A jolsvai üdülő iratai, Kollárik László levele,” Budapest, 9 February 1944.

operators under the circumstances.²³ At the same time, the camp leaders complained constantly about supply difficulties, which became increasingly serious as time went on. The procurement and refrigeration of large quantities of milk was a particularly challenging problem.

With the reopening of schools in October 1944 (albeit for a short time), the children who had been evacuated to the camps had to return to their homes. This did not include all the children, however. At the end of September 1944, there were still 200 children and about 20 staff members in the camp in Balatonzamárdi, and there were 200 children and 50 staff members in the camp in Helemba. This camp was closed, however, when the subprefect (*alispán*) of Bars-Hont County informed the authorities responsible for the resorts that the camp, located next to a vital railway line and built in the interwar period as Czechoslovak military barracks, stood out from its surroundings and could easily be a target for bombing.²⁴ As Szob, Helemba, and the railway bridge over the Ipoly River were hit by several Allied air raids in the summer and early autumn of 1944, the people living here were uneasy. The subprefect encouraged the Budapest authorities to consider moving the children to one of the county's castles, so the camp was evacuated, and the Hungarian soldiers took everything that could be moved in December, much to the indignation of Károly Jávör, the camp's director. In Jolsva, the camp administrators were preparing for some of the children to stay in the autumn, so they made sure they had potatoes. However, the situation there was even more unsettling than elsewhere from a public safety perspective. The day after the Hungarian attempt to leave the German alliance, in mid-October 1944, Slovak partisans took over the settlement, and some of the employees at the resort joined them. The camp leader had to flee, and he contended in a letter to Budapest that the situation in Rozsnyó was similar. Later, German soldiers cleared the settlements, but those who had been evacuated did not return. As the front approached, these buildings were seized by Hungarian or German soldiers or were used to house refugees arriving from the east. In late autumn 1944, refugees also arrived in Bélatelep near the Balaton Lake, and Gábor Mátyay, the settlement leader and secondary school teacher in Zamárdi, was instructed by his boss to give the refugees nothing more than beds and straw mattresses, as they were not entitled (Mátyay's boss claimed) to anything else.²⁵ However, children remained in Bakonyoszlop even at the end of the year. Here, the camp leader continued to fight with the Budapest headquarters to have the capital pay the local parish priest for special Hungarian-language masses for the children. "I need not detail the disadvantages of this," the aforementioned Márta Holló wrote concerning the dangers of attending a German-language mass in the largely German-speaking village in the Bakony mountains.

²³ Ibid. 7. kisdoboz, "Krisztel Bálint feljelentése-pallium, Petik Kálmán igazoló jelentése a főpolgármesterhez," Budapest, 12 June 1944.

²⁴ Ibid. "Bars és Hont k. e. e. vármegye alispánja a Budapest Székesfőváros Gyermekek és Ifjúságvédelmi Hivatalának," Léva/Levice, 22 September 1944.

²⁵ Ibid. 7. kisdoboz, "A zamárdi üdülő iratai, Kováts József hivatalvezető Mátyay Gábornak," Budapest, 18 October 1944.

It seems that these remote yet relatively easily accessible holiday resorts also provided refuge for those who knew of their existence. Some of the resorts served (or would have served) as shelters for family members who had lost their homes to the bombings, but furthermore, in the summer of 1944, the position of resort supervisor must have seemed attractive for people fleeing the Allied air raids.

However, it was not only those under the age of 15 who ended up being relocated to communities in rural Hungary. The 1943–1944 school year was brought to an early end, and as a consequence, at the beginning of April, the government conscripted university students and upper secondary school students into the national defense labor service. University and student labor service, based partly on German and partly on other European models, had been present in the thinking of Hungarian education policymakers since the 1930s. Pál Teleki was one of the more prominent supporters of the idea during his tenure as Minister of Culture. The establishment and operation of the student labor service units were closely intertwined with the social reform attempts of the 1930s and the efforts of the Turul Association (a right-wing or far-right-wing student association bearing the name of a fictional bird of prey that had become part of a nationalistic mythology) efforts to gain influence.²⁶ For some mysterious reason, the government under Prime Minister Döme Sztójay (which was installed after the German occupation of the country) abolished the University Volunteer Labor Service (*Egyetemi Önkéntes Munkaszolgálat*) and the Student National Defense Service (*Diákok Honvédelmi Munkaszolgálat*) was established instead. This organization extended national defense service obligations not only to students in higher education but also to secondary school students, and thus 16-year-old and 17-year-old students were also found working on certain construction sites and at other jobs. This meant regular conscription, with students working in military camps, and if they did not report for duty, they were threatened with the sanctions of the 1939 Defense Act II. Thousands of students set off to meet this new obligation. In the summer of 1944, some 550 secondary school students from southern Hungary (Tolna, Baranya, and Somogy counties) built the Kaposvár airfield.²⁷ There were schools in the region where two-thirds of the student body was called up for such tasks, for instance in Mohács and Dombóvár. Students were sent from Mezőtúr, Kisújszállás, Karcag, and Szolnok to help build the airfield in Szanda, which was one of the most exposed military airbases in Hungary at the time and was bombed several times. Some 300 students worked over the course of the summer on the construction of the runway in Pápa. Their camp was only completed at the end of September.²⁸ Another 100 students from Pécs worked in the Mecsek Mountains lumbering trees.

²⁶ See: András Szécsényi, *A korszellem hálójában. Az egyetemi önkéntes munkaszolgálat rendszere, működése és nemzetközi beágyazottsága Magyarországon (1935–1944)* (Gondolat, 2016).

²⁷ Szilárd Mohr, “A második világháború (1939–1945) és a háborús körülmények hatása a Baranya vármegyei gimnáziumok életére,” PhD-thesis. (PTE, 2022): 100–108. (<https://pea.lib.pte.hu/bitstream/handle/pea/34631/mohr-szilard-phd-2022.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>, downloaded: 25 August 2025.)

²⁸ “A diákmunkaszolgálat befejezése,” *Pápa és Vidéke*, 1 October 1944. 3.

200 students from the University of Pécs were sent to Transylvania to build fortifications. The total number of students sent to northern Transylvania (which had come under Hungarian rule after the Second Vienna Award) was probably much higher. Their camps were dispersed at the last minute, before the Soviet troops crossed the Carpathians, and the residents of these camps were then allowed to return to the interior of Hungary.²⁹

The conditions under which these young people worked were far from ideal. The nature of the work, the tools provided, the food, the accommodations, and the treatment they received all left much to be desired. The students were housed in barns and with local residents, some of whom they developed cordial relationships with.

Some cultivated even closer bonds. Two of the students from Kaposvár, for instance, contracted venereal diseases over the course of their three-month labor service. At the same time, as consequence of the lack of food, the absence of a mobile kitchen, the hour-long walk from their accommodations to their workplace, and the hard work itself, the students generally lost weight. In addition, there was only one shower for several hundred people. The students used make-shift solutions to try to improve the situation.³⁰ András Szécsényi, in his monograph on university volunteer labor service, quoted a camp resident, presumably also from Pécs: “I have to write quickly because the man who is traveling home to Pécs is about to leave. This is the only way I can write honestly, because the letters are censored. The situation is almost as bad as it can be. There is a lot of work, eight to nine hours a day, we are chipping away at rock. The food is very poor, almost no fat. People can hardly stand the work anymore. The accommodations are also quite awful, we shiver at night. [...] Now there is a new order: the shifts are 10 hours long.”³¹ Students working on the expansion of the Szolnok airfield labored under similarly poor conditions. The barn they were given as lodging was infested with lice and cockroaches, and the entire camp had to drink from a well they themselves had dug, the water of which was in fact unfit for drinking. In the mornings and evenings, they had to walk an hour and a half between their accommodation and their workplace, and they did not have the right tools for heavy manual labor.³²

The far-right newspaper *Egyedül Vagyunk* (We Are Alone) reported in a brief article on the approximately 1,000 high school students who were sent from the capital to Karcag to dig ditches. According to the article, some of the students complained that the mutton stew they were served for lunch had upset their stomachs,

²⁹ “Így éltek és dolgoztak Erdélyben a munkaszolgálatról hazatért pécsi egyetemisták,” *Dunántúl*, 10 September 1944. 4.

³⁰ Mohr, *A második világháború*, 105–106.

³¹ Quoted by Szécsényi, *A korszellem hálójában*, 321.

³² László Mucsi, “Tetű nincs, de bolha és svábbogár annál több.” Jelentés a szolnoki repülőtéren szolgálatotteljesítődiákokhelyzetéről,” Magyar Nemzeti Levéltár Jász-Nagykún-Szolnok Vármegyei levéltárának honlapja, 28 May 2021. (https://mnl.gov.hu/mnl/jnszml/hirek/tetu_nincs_de_bolha_es_svaabogar_annal_tobb_jelentes_a_szolnoki_repuloteren, downloaded on 25 August 2025.)

which is why they had ended up in the infirmary.³³ Fortunately, the thousands of students and university students sent to dangerous places did not fall victim to the bombings or to the fighting on the advancing front. They were evacuated from Transylvania in time and did not fall into Soviet or Romanian captivity.

In 1944, many Hungarian citizens got a glimpse of what awaited them in the very near future. Preparations for the Bagration Offensive (a massive Soviet offensive that devastated the German forces in eastern Europe and turned the tide decisively against Nazi Germany) set the masses living behind the front lines in motion, and in late spring 1944, a wave of refugees reached Hungary, first in northern Transylvania. In some sections of the press and other public fora, these masses were referred to simply as “Ukrainians” (if they wore fur hats, they were called “Cossacks” in the villages). Keen observers noticed, however, that these refugees were not all neighboring Slavs, but also people of various nationalities from across the Soviet Union. The government proposal that paved the way for their admission referred to them as Kyrgyz, even in mid-May.³⁴

It was immediately clear to anyone, once the first camels came into view, that many of these people came from distant communities in the Caucasus. The refugees, who were completely destitute, often sold the skinny cows they had with them for food during their journey, and we even know of camels being bought from refugees in Alsócsernáton/Cernatul de Jos (also part of the territory ceded by Romania to Hungary after the Second Vienna Award).³⁵

The tightly controlled Hungarian press reported extensively on the passage of the refugees, generally in a compassionate tone. Columnists and photo reports described the sufferings of Ukrainians fleeing Bolshevism, and one even finds personal portraits in these articles, which emphasized the helpfulness of the Hungarian population.³⁶ Coverage was not confined to the print media. Newsreels, despite an abundance of competing wartime subjects, reported twice on the arrival of refugees from the east, lingering in particular on the striking images of camels.³⁷ Nor was this population movement merely a matter of transit. Over the course of the following months, news spread of families being settled in smaller or larger groups (1,600 such families in Bács-Bodrog County, for in-

³³ Zoltán Gódey, “Vidám órákat a karcagi mezőn ezer pesti diák-munkás körül,” *Egyedül Vagyunk*, 28 July 1944. 7.

³⁴ MNL OL K 27, “Minisztertanácsi jegyzőkönyvek,” 17 May 1944, agenda entry no. 48.

³⁵ Lajos Sylvester, “Háromszéken átvonuló ‘ukrán’ menekültek,” in *ibid*, *Ojtoz völgye a hadak útján*. Sepsiszentgyörgy, (Charta, 2008): 190–191. See also: József Nagy, *Békeévek Mars árnyékában. A Székely Határvédelmi Erők története (1940–1944)* (Kriterion, 2021), 215–219.

³⁶ - a, “Tündérmese a nagy viharban,” *Ellenzék*, 7 June 1944. 5.; Széfeddin Sefket bey, “Lovas kozákok, teveháton utazó kalmükök beszélnek a Szamos partján menekülésük viszontagságairól,” *Új Magyarság*, 7 May 1944. 9–10.

³⁷ “Menekültek Erdélyben,” *Magyar Világhíradó*, no. 1061, June 1944 (<https://filmhiradokonline.hu/watch.php?id=5743>), “Orosz menekültek magyar földön,” *Magyar Világhíradó*, no. 1071, August 1944 (<https://filmhiradokonline.hu/watch.php?id=5804>, downloaded on 25 August 2025).

stance).³⁸ The rumors were based on the fact that Edmund Veesenmayer had indeed approached the aforementioned Sztójay in July with a request that Hungary accept 50,000 to 100,000 Belarusian refugees (the Ukrainians were intended for Slovakia). Even the staunchly pro-German Sztójay considered this excessive, and he asked the Council of Ministers to reject the plan. Minister of Interior Andor Jaross was more receptive to the idea. He saw the Slavic refugees as a source of labor.³⁹ According to press reports, 200,000 people poured into Hungary in May and June 1944, but the numbers given in these sources can hardly be considered precise.⁴⁰ Some of these refugees were able to remain in Hungary, as suggested by scattered newspaper reports of crimes, an accident involving a 13-year-old Ukrainian girl in Sárvár, and various job advertisements.

The government's goodwill had its limits, however. In September, the Ministry of Interior issued a circular instructing the authorities "under no circumstances to admit refugees of Romanian nationality, Gypsies, Ukrainians, or Jews. They must be turned back at the border along their route of entry."⁴¹ According to the document, Russians arriving from the Balkans ("white Russians emigrants") could be admitted, but they had to be kept under strict police surveillance. Under the provision, new arrivals could obtain refugee certificates at one of the sixteen control centers, which entitled them to food and accommodation. A separate structure was established for Germans arriving in the country. They were received at a center in Zombor/Sombor in the Bácska/Bačka region, if only for the few weeks in the fall of 1944 when the city itself was still under Hungarian control (the region had been seized by Hungarian forces in April 1941, but with the arrival of the Red Army, the Hungarian forces were compelled to flee and the region was later again made part of Yugoslavia).

The reason why the Hungarian government, even in its weakened state, was so hostile to the arrival of Belarusian and Ukrainian refugees is clearly explained in a response to another German inquiry in August. Berlin demanded that Hungary accept and settle the 7,000 soldiers of the so-called Kamenczky Brigade (a Hungarian military formation active in 1944–1945 and associated primarily with anti-partisan operations and rear-area security during the final phase of the war) and some 23,000 of their relatives, if possible on the northeastern border. Bronisław Kaminski, a Soviet-born engineer of German-Polish origin from Bryansk, began collaborating with the Germans at a very early stage. He was first appointed head of a local administrative unit, Lokot, and its militia. His unit was then renamed the Russian National Liberation Army (RONA), and in 1944, this

³⁸ "Menekült ukrán családokat telepítenek Kerekegyházára," *Kecskeméti Közlöny*, 26 August 1944. 4. And See also: *Dunántúl*, 12 August 1944. 7.

³⁹ MNL OL K 27, "Minisztertanácsi jegyzőkönyvek," 12 July 1944, agenda entry no. 4/a.

⁴⁰ Béla Z. Szabó, "Kétszázezer orosz menekült el a Szovjet elől Magyarországon át," *Magyarország*, 14 June 1944. 5.

⁴¹ MNL PML (Hungarian National Archives, Pest County Archives), IV. 401. a. főispáni bizalmas iratok, 81. dob. 266/1944, "Sándor Jenő belügyminisztériumi tanácsos körlevele," Budapest, 12 September 1944.

force was incorporated into the Waffen SS. Kaminski and his men committed the most brutal atrocities in Russia and Belarus and also during the suppression of the Warsaw Uprising. Kaminski and his men were unwelcome in Hungary not on human rights grounds, however, but because “his Excellency the Regent [Horthy] is strongly opposed to this, as he believes that there are already too many Slavs in Hungary.” Or at least so Minister of Finance Lajos Reményi-Schneller interpreted the message from the head of state.⁴²

There was another group of people in the country the members of which left their homes not entirely of their own free will. With the permission of the Hungarian government, the third wave of Waffen SS recruitment began among ethnic Germans in Hungary in April 1944. This recruitment campaign was based on a written agreement between Germany and Hungary. By September, between 55,000 and 60,000 people had been drafted from across the country, mostly into newly formed units. Those who refused to enlist were rounded up by the gendarmerie. These soldiers retained their Hungarian citizenship but were also given German citizenship for the duration of their service.⁴³ The conscription lists were compiled on the basis of the records of the local Volksbund organizations. However, since the agreement contained vague formulas according to which anyone who, “based on his lifestyle and ethnic characteristics, presents himself as German or voluntarily declares himself to be German” was considered German, neither side actually insisted on precise ethnic criteria. The Hungarian army was very reluctant or even refused to release recruits of German nationality and even conscripted young Swabians to prevent them from being recruited by the SS recruitment committees. Many German men between the ages of 17 and 50 in Hungary were in fact more willing to join the Hungarian army. (Recruitment could also extend to German women between the ages of 17 and 30, who could be called up for the Waffen SS Helferinnen Korps, an auxiliary women’s service.) Complaints in the archival sources suggest, furthermore, that the SS tried to conscript men who did not speak German and did not even have German names, and that those affected protested desperately.⁴⁴ Berlin was dissatisfied with the results of the recruitment campaign and viewed the Germans in Hungary as insufficiently committed to the war effort.

In the late spring and summer of 1944, even the most conservative estimates put the number of people forced to leave their homes at 1–1.5 million. Obviously, it is impossible to compare the masses of Jews taken to death camps, the people deported to labor camps, conscripted soldiers, Germans drafted into the army, children sent to rural parts of the country, city dwellers who fled spontaneously to the rural towns and villages to escape the bombings, and the refugees who began

⁴² MNL OL K 27, “Minisztertanácsi jegyzőkönyvek,” 17 August 1944. agenda entry no.10.

⁴³ Norbert Spannenberger, *A magyarországi Volksbund Berlin és Budapest között 1938–1944* (Lucidus, 2005) 362–369. Most recently: Beáta Márkus, “A német-német kapcsolatok egy sajátos példája: magyarországi németek a Waffen-SS-ben,” *Regio* 31, no. 1 (2023): 59–68.

⁴⁴ MNL PML IV. 401.d., a főispán országmozgósítási iratai, 1941–1945, bizalmas, 2. köt, 282/1944, “Czóbel Béla alagi főjegyző levele Sági József alispánnak,” Alag, 24 July 1944.

to flee westward in the autumn of 1944. But for many, the images evoked scenes from the end of the First World War and the subsequent revolutions and foreign occupations. These shocks further shattered the already fragile sense of social solidarity. When the people suffering these upheavals were then confronted with the fates of the tormented Ukrainian and Russian refugees passing through the country, it painted an ominous picture of terrible times ahead.

The table below summarizes the population movements in the enlarged territory of the country (after the First and Second Vienna Awards) in 1944:

Group name	Number	Period
Deportation of Jews in towns and villages other than Budapest	437,000	May–July 1944
Conscription of Jewish men (and women) into forced labor battalions	approx. 60–80 thousand	From April 1944
Relocation to houses marked with a yellow star (in Budapest)	Approximately 170,000	June 1944 (closed ghetto from November)
SS conscription (Germans in Hungary)	55,000–60,000	From April 1944
High school and university students in national defense labor service	5,000–10,000	May–August 1944
Air raid evacuees and people forced to abandoned bombed buildings	150,000–200,000	From April 1944
Spontaneous flight to rural Hungary	?	From March 1944
Military conscription	30–40,000	From April 1944
Refugees arriving in the country from southern Russian and Ukrainian territories	150,000–200,000	May–July 1944
Refugees from within the country	Approximately 500,000	From September 1944
Deported to Soviet labor camps (prisoners of war and civilians)	Approximately 600,000	From September 1944

It is hardly worth adding these figures together, as there is so much uncertainty surrounding the individual numbers. For example, even intensive research in recent years has only been able to estimate the number of people deported to the Soviet Union, and there are still huge gaps in our knowledge.⁴⁵ However, if we add to these figures the soldiers who were already at the front and those who were later taken prisoner in the west, the group of people who were displaced and in many cases killed during the last year of the war can be estimated to have numbered some two or three million. When we talk about the victims of the last year of the war, we must not only count the dead. Many of the survivors were also victims of the war, and many were marked for life by those few months, whether they spoke about it later or not. This year showed the terrible power that the state can exert on society, and how, in addition to the suffering caused by the war, it can inflict so much hardship on its own citizens by imposing its worldview or pursuing its own narrow material interests.

⁴⁵ Tamás Stark, “Bevezető,” in “*Akkor aszt mondták, kicsi robot.*” *A magyar polgári lakosság elhurcolása a Szovjetunióba korabeli dokumentumok tükrében*, ed. Idem (BTK, 2017), 75–84.

AN ATTEMPT TO CREATE AN ALTERNATIVE ORGAN OF STATE POWER IN NOVEMBER 1944: THE HUNGARIAN NATIONAL UPRISING LIBERATION COMMITTEE*

The Arrow Cross takeover following the German SS coup of 15–16 October 1944, which overthrew the Horthy government after its attempt to exit the war,¹ not only fundamentally changed Hungarian political life but also reshaped the functioning of the Hungarian resistance. Before 16 October 1944, however fragmented the resistance was, the main goal had been to persuade Miklós Horthy to break with the Germans and leave the war. With Horthy's resignation and the transfer of power to Ferenc Szálasi, whose rule depended on the German occupying force, this was no longer feasible. From this point, the primary aim of the resistance was to organize an armed uprising. However, there was no more time for this than there had been in May 1944 for the creation of a political umbrella organization, when the Magyar Front (MF), the principal political coalition of the resistance, was formed (with unusual speed, by international standards). By 3 November 1944, Soviet troops had advanced to within six kilometers of the Hungarian capital, marking the beginning of the Battle of Budapest, which would last for more than one hundred days. In an effort to defend the Hungarian capital and organize the armed anti-Nazi uprising, the MF and the smaller illegal groups set up an action committee called the Hungarian National Uprising Liberation Committee (Magyar Nemzeti Felkelés Felszabadító Bizottsága, or MNFFB). This study examines the creation, functioning, and fate of this organization on the basis of the available primary sources and secondary literature.

The establishment of the MNFFB

The resistance groups chose Endre Bajcsy-Zsilinszky to serve as president of the MNFFB. Bajcsy-Zsilinszky, who was almost 60 years old, had been released from

* This study is a revised, abridged English version of a chapter from my book published in 2021 (Ákos Bartha, *Véres város. Fegyveres ellenállás Budapesten, 1944–1945*. [Jaffa, 2021]), rewritten based on the latest secondary literature.

¹ Krisztián Ungváry, *Kiugrás a történelemből. Horthy Miklós a világpolitika színpadán* (Open Books, 2022), 85.

captivity on 15 October 1944. His name first came to public attention in 1911, when he and his brother took the life of peasant leader András L. Áchim in a local conflict. A young man of fierce temperament, Bajcsy-Zsilinszky made a name for himself as a leading propagandist for the racist political community during the counterrevolutionary period in the decades after the First World War. Unlike many of his colleagues, Bajcsy-Zsilinszky believed fanatically in what he was doing. From the late 1920s onwards, he became one of the most vocal proponents of the idea of a “Germanic threat” to Hungary. First, he tried his luck by founding his own party (the National Radical Party). Later, he joined the already heterogeneous Smallholders’ Party, where he had a small group of supporters. In part because of his complicated past and in part because of the inconsistency of his political views, Bajcsy-Zsilinszky had a diverse network of contacts which included figures as prominent as the Regent Miklós Horthy, László Endre (who, as an undersecretary in the Ministry of Interior in 1944, played a central role in organizing the deportation of Hungarian Jews during the Holocaust), Tibor Eckhardt, who campaigned in the United States for Hungary’s independence, and various populist (“népi”) writers (including socialists) who fought for radical reforms.

In early November 1944, Bajcsy-Zsilinszky was in hiding near Vác. He was visited here on 4 November by the Peasant Party politician Imre Kovács and explosives expert Miklós Makay, who was the director of the Nitrokémia Ipartelepek Rt. (Nitro-Chemical Industrial Plants Ltd.). Kovács later recalled the invitation he extended to his host: “I came to ask you to be the leader of the national resistance.” Bajcsy-Zsilinszky accepted the invitation, and he was in Budapest the next day, where he and his wife frequently changed hiding places.² He also met with Gyula Kállai, who represented the communists at the time.³ The aforementioned Makay, a relative of Gábor Sztehlo (a Lutheran pastor who saved Jews) and Gusztáv Hennyey (who had served as Minister of Foreign Affairs in the short-lived government of Géza Lakatos), was an influential behind-the-scenes figure in the MNFFB. He put his villa and office at the service of the resistance, and thanks to his position, he was able to transport organizers safely between various hiding places for a long time. Nothing better reveals the potential he had, through his extensive connections, as a subversive figure than the fact that a communist-led action group used explosives obtained from Makay to blow up the statue of Gyula Gömbös in Budapest on 6 October 1944.⁴

It is relatively easy to answer the question as to why Bajcsy-Zsilinszky was asked to lead the political organization of the resistance. As noted above, as a politician who had taken up arms against the Germans on 19 March 1944, he had a uniquely wide network of contacts and had also been notoriously anti-German and anti-Arrow Cross for many years. Furthermore, he was viewed as having the courage to take on a dangerous post. And he did. Bajcsy-Zsilinszky could draw some reas-

² Imre Kovács, “A legbátrabb ember volt, akit ismertem,” in *Kortársak Bajcsy-Zsilinszky Endréről*, ed. Károly Vigh (Magvető, 1984), 418–424.

³ Gyula Kállai, “Legfőbb szövetségünk: Zsilinszky,” in *Kortársak*, 366.

⁴ Ákos Bartha, “Makay Miklós,” in *Ellenállók 1944–45*, eds. Ákos Bartha, Réka Kiss and Nóra Szekér (Nemzeti Emlékezet Bizottsága, 2025), 279–283.

surance from the presence of familiar faces and also from the involvement of the MF in Horthy's attempt to withdraw from the war, as well as from recent organizational changes. The MF had established good relations with several smaller resistance groups, and even the highly fragmented student resistance had been organized into a united front. A wide range of political and social forces were represented in the work of the MNFFB through delegates, including the Smallholders' Party, the Social Democratic Party, the Communist Party, the National Radical Peasant Party, the Christian Democratic People's Party, the Hungarian Independence Movement, the Freedom Alliance of Hungarian Patriots, the Hungarian Association of Friends of the Soviet Union, the student resistance network, certain legitimist groups, Reformed Church organizations, trade unions, and various military officer circles.⁵

The Objectives of the Liberation Committee

Formalized on 9 November 1944, the MNFFB was created after long negotiations.⁶ "The parties of the , which was the political power of the rising nation, and the delegates of the militant organizations, which had already done a great deal of work and had earned merit," were created "to organize and launch the national uprising and the struggle for freedom as quickly as possible and to ensure the most complete success in the struggle."⁷ The committee envisaged the unfolding of the uprising according to five principles: 1. "Expulsion of the German and fascist collaborators from the country and organization of a national uprising in cooperation with the glorious Red Army. 2. Creation of a free, independent, democratic Hungary. 3. Preparation of fundamental social changes. 4. Close cooperation with all the neighboring states. 5. Closest friendly cooperation with our powerful neighbor, the Soviet Union." The committee called on all political parties, organizations, and social associations to join.⁸

An undated pamphlet signed by the "Liberation Committee of the National Uprising" also outlined the legal framework of the Hungarian state as they envisioned it. According to this pamphlet, "Hungary's legitimate head of state is still Regent Miklós Horthy, who is recognized by the vast majority of the nation in revolt." At the same time, however, it argued that, given Horthy's "inability to act," for the present, the MF was "the broadly and firmly established political basis of the national uprising, the representative of the majority of the nation." The authors of the appeal stressed that, in the anti-German struggle, the nation must fight "as decisively as possible" and in "full political harmony with the Allies' war aims." Only in this way, they contended, would they "be able to claim as our own

⁵ Országos Széchényi Könyvtár, Kézirattár (abbreviated to OSZK Kt) 28. fond 199.; István Pintér, "Adatok a Magyar Nemzeti Tanács Felszabadító Bizottságának történetéhez," *Hadtörténelmi Közlemények* 8, no. 2. (1961), 436.

⁶ János Csorba, "Bajcsy-Zsilinszky Endre a felszabadítási Bizottság élén," in *Kortársak*, 458.

⁷ OSZK Kt 28. fond 38.

⁸ OSZK Kt 28. fond 39.

a Hungary of the size and type that we will achieve with this last opportunity, given to us by our own efforts and at the cost of our own blood as sacrifice.” In other words, the pamphlet saw the Budapest uprising as an impending act of necessary self-sacrifice.⁹ On 10 November, the MNFFB addressed a manifesto “to the Hungarian nation” calling for resistance against Arrow Cross rule: “Death to the German occupiers! Death to Szálasi! Long live an independent, free, democratic Hungary!” With a bold proclamation that can hardly be historically justified, the pamphlet, which presented an idealized portrait of Horthy, stated that, “since 19 March 1944, the rising free Hungary represented by the MF has been in a state of war with the invading National Socialist Empire, which occupied the country.”¹⁰

The military staff of the insurrectionist forces

In the first half of November, the Military General Staff of MNFFB was also set up. Several names were put forward to take charge of military affairs. Ultimately, retired Lieutenant General János Kiss, an old friend of Bajcsy-Zsilinszky’s, accepted the invitation.¹¹ Kiss had been seriously wounded in the First World War and he walked with a limp. He nonetheless had had a successful career, and he had been decorated with numerous medals. He had also enthusiastically attended lectures by the renowned anti-German writer Dezső Szabó on Marczibányi Square in Budapest.¹² Kiss was regarded as one of the best close combat training officers and one of the best prepared team officers in the Hungarian army. He had served for 37 years and had retired as a lieutenant general in 1939.¹³ In the early 1940s, he had been active as a main organizer of the National Association of Turanian Hunters, one of the most important organizations for anti-German Hungarian racialists. Here, Kiss had stressed above all the importance of loyalty to the Regent.¹⁴ In the meantime, he occasionally had appeared on the radio and had written essays. In the autumn of 1942, he had warned that Germany’s military fortunes were likely to shift and that it was imperative for Hungary to organize its own self-defense

⁹ Prime Minister Pál Teleki was troubled by similar concerns in the summer of 1940. Teleki feared that if Hungary were to gain new territory without blood sacrifice, this would result in the growing influence of a great power (in the case of Nazi Germany) in Hungary. Balázs Ablonczy, *Pál Teleki: The Life of a Controversial Hungarian Politician* (Helena Press, 2024), 229.

¹⁰ OSZK Kt 28. fond 38.

¹¹ Károly Vigh, *Bajcsy-Zsilinszky Endre. 1886–1944. A küldetéses ember* (Szépirodalmi, 1992), 55–56.

¹² Sándor Kiss, *Emlékeim Kiss János altábornagyról* (Zrínyi, 1979) 141–142.

¹³ Sándor Szakály, “Nyugállományú altábornagy a magyar katonai ellenállási mozgalom élén: vitéz Kiss János (1883–1944),” in *Natio est semper reformanda. Tanulmányok a 70 éves Gergely András tiszteletére*, ed. László Anka et al (Károli Gáspár Református Egyetem – L’Harmattan, 2016), 500–501.

¹⁴ Ákos Bartha, *Törzsökösök, rongyosok, turániak. Németellenes magyar fajvédelem, 1938–1945*. (Ludovika, 2023), 184–226.

forces.¹⁵ The following year, he was already working on a plan for military resistance to a potential German invasion, but his work was considered too optimistic by authoritative anti-German circles.¹⁶ In the autumn of 1943, Kiss was given a very sensitive assignment: he was appointed judge advocate in the case of the reopened proceedings against officers accused of disloyalty in the wake of massacres in Újvidék (a series of killings carried out by Hungarian military and gendarmerie units in January 1942 in the Bačka region, then under Hungarian control, centered around the city of Újvidék, or by its Serbian name, Novi Sad).¹⁷ The accused, however, fled to the territory of the German Empire. In the days before the German occupation of Hungary, Kiss and Bajcsy-Zsilinszky unsuccessfully tried to persuade Prime Minister Miklós Kállay to take military counteraction and arm Hungarian workers.¹⁸

At the beginning of November 1944, the conspirators brought Kiss from his home in Kőszeg to the capital through “Turanian hunter” contacts.¹⁹ Here, the retired Lieutenant General “explained that there was not much that could be done, except to convince the troops to lay down their arms,” thus enforcing the regent’s proclamation of 15 October 1944. Bajcsy-Zsilinszky wanted to assemble “at least one partisan battalion,” and Kiss promised to try to do so. The hierarchy of the Military General Staff was also clarified. Officers were selected who had been known for their anti-German sentiments for many years. . The General Staff of MNFFB was commanded by János Kiss. His deputy and Chief of Staff was Colonel Jenő Nagy (alias “Szűcs”), and retired Captain Dr. Vilmos Tartsay was responsible for coordinating the candidates.

Jenő Nagy was a Ludovika and Military Academy graduate.²⁰ He had made sneered comments on German military performance during his service in Kolozsvár in 1940.²¹ In 1943, a more serious scandal surrounding him broke out in Kassa, when he celebrated the failed siege of Stalingrad with a champagne dinner. Nagy was given a suspended prison sentence and was a forced residence in Budapest.²² Before the German occupation, Nagy and Kiss contrived a plan according to which, during a military exercise in Transdanubia, a reliable part of the Hungarian army should flee to the Balkans to join Tito’s partisans in a clash with

¹⁵ Loránt Tilkovszky, “Kiss János nyugalmazott altábornagy tanulmánya Magyarország honvédelmi helyzetéről 1942 novemberében,” in *Vasi Honismereti Közlemények* 18, no. 1 (1991), 11–21.

¹⁶ Gyula Kádár, *A Ludovikától Sopronkőhidáig* (Magvető, 1978), 481–482. Bajcsy-Zsilinszky’s correspondence. Compiled by Károly Vigh with the help of Miklós Lackó. (Typed copies.) István Bethlen to Bajcsy-Zsilinszky Endre. 15 Nov 1943. and János Kiss to Endre Bajcsy-Zsilinszky. 17 November 1943.; OSZK Kt 28. fond 91. Letter from Endre Bajcsy-Zsilinszky to Miklós Kállay. 16 March 1944.

¹⁷ Árpád von Klimó, *Remembering Cold Days: The 1942 Massacre of Novi Sad and Hungarian Politics and Society, 1942–1989* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2018), 71.

¹⁸ Miklós Kállay, *Magyarország miniszterelnöke voltam* (Európa, 2012), vol. II., 181.

¹⁹ Elek Karsai, “Történelem – hangszalagon.” *Valóság* 8, no. 4 (1965), 3.

²⁰ Hadtörténelmi Intézet és Múzeum Hadtörténelmi Levéltár (abbreviated to HIM HL) AKVI 13909, Jenő Nagy.

²¹ Edgár Balogh, *Szolgálatban. Emlékirat, 1935–1944.* (Kriterion, 1978), 232–235.

²² Jenő Thassy, *Veszélyes vidék* (Balassi, 2006), 254–279.

the Germans. These forces (they hoped) could then compel the Allies to land in the Adriatic. After the Germans were defeated, Horthy would march on Budapest and liberate the country from German occupation, thus saving the country from Soviet occupation. Kiss and Nagy sent memoranda to Horthy on this and similar topics.²³ Imre Kovács knew that Kiss would also have collaborated with Draža Mihailović, the leaders of the Chetniks.²⁴ In 1942–1943, Turanian hunters held large anti-Arrow Cross campaigns and marches in Újvidék and its surroundings,²⁵ while prime minister Miklós Kállay's circle awaited the Anglo-Saxon landing in the Balkans (which would never come).²⁶ However, instead of the Anglo-Saxons, it was the Germans who arrived in Hungary on 19 March 1944. After the German occupation, Nagy tried to spread the word about the Hungarian resistance by sending French officers to the West. He began to organize anti-German officers into a united front in Budapest, and he managed to establish contacts with members of the MF and government circles working on plans to withdraw from war.²⁷

The third member of the General Staff, Dr. Vilmos Tartsay, had also been trained at the Ludovika Academy and the Military Academy. He had then served in the I Corps Headquarters in the autumn of 1938 and as a team officer during the movement of Hungarian forces into northern Transylvania in 1940.²⁸ In the meantime, he also attracted attention as a military writer. At the time of Germany's greatest victories, he argued that these spectacular successes were not the result of some revolutionary military strategy or new means of combat. Rather, he argued, they were the product of thorough organization, planning, determination, and confidence in the army, which in his assessment were all factors that could be learned. As he wrote in 1940, "The detailed and comprehensive definition of tasks and the artistic coordination of the various forces at work in time and space, and the conscious and persistent pursuit of objectives within this relatively narrow framework form the path of self-activity to victory."²⁹ He certainly must have held this view in November 1944. Although Lieutenant General Gusztáv Jány considered the characterful Tartsay one of the five best general staff officers, Jány's intervention did not save Tartsay from discrimination within the military on the basis of "race." Tartsay, a forty-year-old captain with Jewish ancestors, finally requested permission to retire in 1941.³⁰ He then went on to obtain a doctorate and became a businessman, as, for instance, the owner of a canning factory. His was

²³ Kiss, *Emlékeim*, 163. In broad terms: Thassy, *Veszélyes vidék*, 256–257.

²⁴ Kovács Imre-interjú (1978, készítő: Bokor Péter). Gépelt. Országos Széchényi Könyvtár, Történeti Interjúk Tára (abbreviated to OSZK TIT), TITInt 286. 41.

²⁵ Bartha, *Törzsökösök, rongyosok, turániak*, 214–219.

²⁶ András Joó, *Kállay Miklós külpolitikája. Magyarország és a háborús diplomácia* (Napvilág Kiadó, 2008).

²⁷ Mihály Laczkó, "Nagy Jenő, a magyar antifasiszta ellenállási mozgalom mártírja," *Honismeret* 16, no. 6 (1988), 46. Thassy, *Veszélyes vidék*, 356–360.

²⁸ János Bene and Péter Szabó, *A magyar királyi honvéd huszár tisztikar* (Jósa András Múzeum, 2003), 257.

²⁹ Vilmos Tartsay, "A német hadvezetésről," *Magyar Katonai Szemle* 10, no. 3 (1940), 349.

³⁰ Krisztián Ungváry, "Tartsay Vilmosról," *Népszabadság*, August 7, 2001, 14.

also known outside of Budapest. He was one of the first people Raoul Wallenberg contacted after his arrival in the Hungarian capital.³¹

Organization

When the military line was launched, “illegal life became more active,” Imre Kovács said.³² Budapest was divided into four districts. District 1 was Csepel, District 2 was from the Little Danube to Kerepesi Street, District 3 stretched from Kerepesi Street north to the Danube, and District 4 was Buda.³³ Colonel Zoltán Kaffka was appointed commander of the first district and Major Róbert Schreiber of the second.³⁴ The General Staff’s primary objective was to save the capital, and the first step was to take Elisabeth Bridge and arm the workers. The MNFFB met daily at first, then every two days, and finally less frequently, while informal meetings and recruitment attempts by officers were also constantly underway. The MNFFB did not limit itself, in these efforts, to active military officers. Its representatives also contacted the military leaders of the Communist Party (Kommunista Párt, or KP), György Pálffy-Österreicher and László Sólyom. The cooperation between the two groups was fraught with ongoing tensions. János Kiss urged patience and asked the communist cells to moderate their acts of sabotage in order to unite forces and make it possible to time military acts precisely. The communists, however, showed no interest in a carefully strategized uprising.³⁵ The plan for a “coup-like,” “push-button” changeover was later condemned in the resistance historiography, following the 1944 illegal communist press.³⁶ Yet Lenin himself had once stressed the need “to choose the right time for the uprising, to organize the ranks of the insurgent divisions, to seize strategic political and military points, to mobilize the armed workers, and to liquidate the enemy leaders.” In Lenin’s own words, “a large overwhelming force must be concentrated in the decisive place and at the decisive moment, otherwise the enemy, which is better trained and better organized, will destroy the insurgents.”³⁷

Timing was indeed an issue of primary importance, and in this respect, both the communists and the officers referred to the sad example of the Warsaw Uprising, which had been brutally crushed. The Hungarian press of the time reported on the destruction of Warsaw with illustrated accounts, providing ample images of what those who took up arms against the Germans could expect.³⁸ The fact that

³¹ Ingrid Carlberg: “Itt egy szoba, és rád vár...” – Raoul Wallenberg története (Noran, 2020), 45.

³² For details see Imre Kovács, *Magyarország megszállása* (Vörösváry, Toronto), 123–126.

³³ Pintér: *Adatok*, 443.

³⁴ Csíkszenti-Schreiber Róbert visszaemlékezése. HIM HL Ellenállási Gyűjtemény, Magyarország, 244. (The sources do not reveal the names of the other district commanders.)

³⁵ Pál Almásy, “Bajcsy-Zsilinszky Endre és a katonai ellenállási mozgalom,” in *Kortársak*, 430–435.

³⁶ *Szabad Nép*, 1944, no. 4, 1.; István Pintér, *A Magyar Front és az ellenállás (1944. március 19.–1945. április 4.)* (Kossuth, 1970), 220–222.

³⁷ Lenin, Vlagyimir Iljics, “Egy kívülálló tanácsai,” in Lenin, Vlagyimir Iljics: *Válogatott művek II.* (Szikra Könyvkiadó, 1949). 146. .

³⁸ *Képes Vasárnap*, September 12, 1944, 556. September 19, 1944, 568. October 31 1944, 625.

the MNFFB military leadership did not take the risks of being active members of a conspiracy seriously (risks that they presumably failed to grasp) also caused ongoing tension. Many of them slept in their own homes at night or even held meetings in public places or, in worse cases, in their own homes, with dozens of invited guests. There was no consensus on the sensitive issue of the military authority of the workers' militias. Bajcsy-Zsilinszky often tried to mediate between the parties, although he himself did not renounce his Anglo-Saxon orientation, and his views were shared by several conspiring officers.³⁹ On the meeting of 14 November, the parties essentially decided that everyone could do as they pleased. Subsequently, the communist "line" withdrew from the officers' organization. As Jenő Nagy said after his arrest, "The military organization broke off contact with the Communist Party after the third meeting, i.e., after about 12 November, because the members of the Communist Party, fearing the risk of being exposed, broke off contact completely, and they did not come forward again, despite further urging."⁴⁰ The communists were not the only ones who were pessimistic about the prospects of the officers' organization. Géza Soos, representing the Reformed Church organizations, also distanced himself from the MNFFB because of the danger of being caught.⁴¹

According to Soos, "the communists of the resistance said that the general [Soviet] attack was expected on 15 November. Everything was prepared for that date."⁴² Two days earlier, Major General Ernő Simonffy-Tóth had set off with his colleagues to Szeged to take the MF's memorandum written by Zoltán Tildy, Árpád Szakasits, and Gyula Kállai. This was not the first attempt to establish contact with the Red Army. On 14 October 1944, General Loránt Utassy, on behalf of Horthy, had a (not very worthwhile) exchange of views with Rodion Malinovsky (a key commander in the Red Army) in Deszk.⁴³ On 6 November 1944, after the Arrow Cross had already taken control of the government in Hungary, László Körmendy (later a well-known radio announcer), at the instruction of Captain Károly Fodor, fled across the front at Vecsés. He wanted to ask the Soviets for weapons and "advice on how to cooperate" on behalf of the MF. Körmendy had to refer to the new police commander in Szeged, the communist Mihály Komócsin, but his dangerous mission still almost ended in tragedy. The Soviets regarded him

³⁹ Ákos Hamza D.: *Harcunk a szabadságért. A "Nemzeti Ellenállás" egyik csoportjának részvétele a felszabadítási küzdelemben* (Faust, 1947), 22. Statement by János Kiss, December 1, 1944. Állambiztonsági Szolgálatok Történeti Levéltára, 3.1.9. V-145705/1, 374.

⁴⁰ Statement by Jenő Nagy, 30 November 1944. HIM HL Honvéd Vezérkar Főnökének Bírósága. 1944 – H. 2089. I. Cf. Guidó Görgey, *Két Görgey* (Helikon, 2004), 122. Thassy, *Veszélyes vidék*, 466.

⁴¹ VERITAS Történetkutató Intézet és Levéltár Oral History Archivum, 198. sz. Csicsery-Rónay István-interjú. Készítette: Kozák Gyula. Bécs, 1989. 111.

⁴² *Evangéliumot Magyarországnak. Soos Géza emlékkönyv 1912–1953*. Ed. Soos Gézáné Tüdős Ilona et al. (Ráday Gyűjtemény, 1999), 137.

⁴³ László Erdeős, *A magyar honvédelem egy negyedszázada (1919–1944). II. kötet.* (Attraktor, 2007), 134.

as a spy and held him for several weeks before releasing him from Szeged. He was only able to return to Budapest with the Soviets..⁴⁴

Regarding the MNFFB, it is worth dwelling for a moment on the Simonffy-Tóth mission. Simonffy-Tóth had to depart from a poorly guarded airport near Siófok on the morning of 13 November. The plane was ready, and two cars were on the way from Budapest to take the delegation to the airport. Simonffy-Tóth was one of the passengers. This car had been driving around the area for an hour and a half before the agreed time. The other car, the MF delegation, was late (the delegation included Henrik Hives, former secretary to the prime minister, Oszkár Zerkowitz, a wine merchant, and the communist Gábor Péter). According to recollections, when they arrived, they had been faced with many German troops. "The plane landed," Gábor Péter wrote in 1961, "but it did not dare come closer, it turned back."⁴⁵ As a result, the passengers of that car never boarded. The Simonffy-Tóths made it to Szeged, although they won little thanks for their brave act. The Major General took the twelve sheets of maps detailing the military defenses of Budapest to the headquarters of the Soviet 46th Army, but he was received there with the same disinterest as he was later shown at Malinovsky's headquarters and in Moscow. In any case, thanks to Simonffy-Tóth, Malinovsky was able to learn about the MF's military ideas and its capabilities. And perhaps a little more. The Hungarian "military resistance movement could already at this moment provide effective assistance if the 2nd Ukrainian Front attempted to attack the capital from the march," Simonffy-Tóth informed Malinovsky. Historian John Lukacs saw a copy of the letter in which General Malinovsky was asked by the MNFFB to „undertake a tank operation which would be directed against Central Budapest”. As pointed out in the letter, this operation should not necessarily be part of a Russian offensive; the mere fact of a reported Soviet armored thrust would enable us to rise against the German forces within Budapest and hold the city and her vital bridges until the Soviet forces take over”..⁴⁶

These ideas proved impossible to put into effect. Although Stalin was about to force his generals to take Budapest from the march, by the time Simonffy-Tóth arrived, the operation had long since stopped. The Soviets had been unable to achieve a breakthrough, so on 4 November, they halted the 46th Army's attack and planned a much wider frontal assault. The new operation was launched on 11 November from the Cegléd area, and initially it had considerable momentum. The attackers also captured Jászberény on 15 November and Gyöngyös on 18 November. However, again the stubborn defensive efforts of the German-

⁴⁴ Ernő Bajor Nagy, "Felejtethetlen küldetés," *Tükör* 12, vol. 8 (1975), 4.

⁴⁵ Cited by Rolf Müller: *Az erőszak neve: Péter Gábor. Az ÁVH vezetőjének élete* (Jaffa, 2017), 98. 42–43. About the mission: András Simonffy, *Kompország katonái. Történelmi kollázsregény* (Magvető, 1981).

⁴⁶ John A. Lukacs, "Political Expediency and Soviet Russian Military Operations," *Journal of Central European Affairs*, January 1949, 406. (According to Lukacs, the original letter was written in French.)

Hungarian troops prevented the Soviet forces from reaching the capital.⁴⁷ We do not know precisely what János Kiss actually knew of all this, but recollections say that he was timing the Budapest uprising for December.⁴⁸ His plan was to storm the German headquarters (the Astoria, Royal, Ritz, and Wien hotels), the investigation centers at Svábhegy, the German embassy, the ministries, and the Arrow Cross center on Andrásy Street 60, using recruited troops and armed civilians. The post office and the railway headquarters, railway stations, railway junctions, and Danube bridges would be captured. Meanwhile, in the southern part of Budapest, these forces would liaise with the Soviets and would hold out until they had jointly destroyed the German and Arrow Cross units.⁴⁹ The plans were the brainchild of Major General Miklós Balássy, Captain General István Tóth, Major General István Beleznay, and Captain General Zoltán Mikó.⁵⁰ Tartsay is said to have devised three versions of the plan to start the uprising, and Jenő Nagy also provided the password and the means of transmitting it.⁵¹ The Budapest uprising was to be launched with the slogan “small bear,” the national one with “big bear.” Participants in the Budapest uprising would have worn white armbands, while those in the national one would have worn armbands in the Hungarian national colors.⁵²

The plan naturally required troops, weapons, ammunition, and officers. There was perhaps no shortage of the latter. In the Institute of Military Technology, Pál Almásy, a lieutenant colonel in the military engineering staff, recruited dozens of his comrades, and his position as head of the ammunition department of the Central Receiving Committee gave him almost unlimited access to ammunition, which he used to his advantage. Almásy found his way to the MNFFB through one of the founders of the MF, Gyula Dessewffy.⁵³ False orders were used to supply arms to the conspirators,⁵⁴ and a large quantity of submachine guns was obtained through Lieutenant Colonel Tibor Urányi, the director of the Hungarian Ammunition Works. They also managed to involve the senior officers of several units stationed around Budapest, including the 12th Division, an anti-aircraft unit in Tatabánya, the heavy artillery unit in Hajmásker, and the Hussar unit stationed in the southern part of Csepel Island. There were groups in the Ministry of Defense, the Air Ministry, the Maria Theresia Barracks, the City Command, the 207/1–2 air defense battery, a transport squadron in Buda, and a railway station

⁴⁷ Ákos Bartha and Béla Nagy: “1944. Budapest bekerítése,” Last modified: 25 April 2025. Online: <https://tti.abtk.hu/terkepek/terkepek/1944-budapest-bekeritese>.

⁴⁸ Gazsi, *A Felszabadító Bizottság*, 195.

⁴⁹ Pintér, *Adatok*, 444.

⁵⁰ Sándor Szakály, “Tenni akartunk... Almásy Pál a magyar katonai ellenállási mozgalomról,” *Magyar Hírlap*, November 17, 1984, 9.

⁵¹ Kálmán Révay, *A szabadság négy vértanúja* (Szikra, 1947), 10.

⁵² Pál Demény, “A párt foglya voltam” (ELTE MKKE, 1988), 138.

⁵³ István Ötvös, “Almásy Pál,” in *Ellenállók 1944–45*, 21.

⁵⁴ Csorba, *Bajcsy-Zsilinszky Endre a felszabadítási Bizottság élén*, 460.

guard.⁵⁵ The commander of VIII Corps, Lieutenant General Béla Lengyel, and the commander of the 10th Infantry Division, Colonel Sándor András, did not refuse the request.⁵⁶ The Mapping Institute and the River Guard joined in, though most of the ships were not available.⁵⁷ Several high-ranking officers were approached, and small civil resistance groups were channeled into the organization.⁵⁸

This was an encouraging start. But there was no way of knowing how many people would risk their lives if or when fighting broke out. Nor was there a solution to the deployment of the troops to be redeployed. Lieutenant Colonel Laszlo Bobiss-Selmeczy, who was negotiating with Kovács, summarized this dilemma: “Look, I can forge marching orders, open orders, just tell me where to go. But I can’t carry my howitzers in my pocket, we need to go somewhere.”⁵⁹ Concerning the rank and file, the MNFFB counted on the (untrained and unarmed) men in the Jewish and minority labor units stationed around the capital, as well as the Auxiliary Security Forces (KISKA). It also depended, of course, on the industrial workers.⁶⁰ This faith in the willingness of the latter to join the struggle was probably an illusion, as industrial workers for the most part had not been ready to support Horthy’s (poorly organized and badly executed) attempt to withdraw from the war a month earlier.⁶¹

The Liberation Committee and the Communists

As noted in the discussion above, there were many tensions between MNFFB and the members of the KP, who, interestingly, were said to be “loved” as Hungarians and “respected” (for their political determination) by the Arrow Cross press. In an unusually long editorial printed in the most important state newspaper the day before MNFFB was liquidated, communists were encouraged to join the Arrow Cross.⁶² It is difficult to say who might have been expected to respond to this exhortation, since by the late autumn of 1944 there were at least three communist parties operating in Trianon Hungary. In addition to the KP (the former Békepart or Peace Party) based in Budapest, the “Muscovites” who had arrived in Szeged set up the Hungarian Communist Party (Magyar Kommunista Párt = MKP), while in the capital Pál Demény was organizing his own party, sometimes under

⁵⁵ József Gazsi, “A Felszabadító Bizottság,” in: *Magyarország 1944. Fejezetek az ellenállás történetéből*, ed. M. Kiss Sándor (Nemzeti Tankönyvkiadó, 1994), 197–198.; Pintér, *A Magyar Front és az ellenállás*, 204.

⁵⁶ Sándor Szakály, “A katonai ellenállási mozgalom Magyarországon a második világháború éveiben,” *Honvédségi Szemle* 41, no. 7 (1987), 16.

⁵⁷ Pál Demény, *Rabságaim* (Magvető, 1989) vol. II, 287–288.

⁵⁸ Péter Gosztonyi, “A magyar ellenállási mozgalom történetéből (1944),” *Új Látóhatár* 8, no. 2. (1965), 106.

⁵⁹ Kovács Imre-interjú (1978, recorded by Bokor Péter). Gépelt. OSZK TIT, Jelzet: TITInt 286. 40.

⁶⁰ Gazsi, *A Felszabadító Bizottság*, 197–199.

⁶¹ Ákos Bartha, “Van-e szándék? Az 1944. októberi kiugrási kísérlet és a »megbízható« munkásság felfegyverzése,” *Betekintő* 18, no. 2 (2024), 65–91.

⁶² Ősi Antal, “A kommunistákhoz,” *Összetartás*, 21 November 1944, 1–2.

the name of the Communist Party of Hungary, not to mention the smaller groups. The officers did not put all their eggs in one basket. Vilmos Tartsay had already established contacts with Demény's communist movement, which would be persecuted as a "faction" after 1945, at the end of August, and the MNFFB military leadership was also in contact with them. From a military-strategic point of view, this may have been the most serious communist connection, since Demény and those around him were far more numerous than the Budapest KP led by László Rajk. Demény and his supporters wanted to open a corridor for the Red Army in their own stronghold, Csepel Island, and the officers had similar plans (as noted above).⁶³

Rajk and his party comrades turned with mixed feelings of hope towards Szeged. They were filled with great optimism about the unstoppable advance of the Red Army but it was not difficult for them to grasp that the Hungarian communists who had arrived in the country with the Red Army were rivals for power and influence. This was particularly clear after Kossuth Radio, run by the Moscow émigrés, failed to mention even the name of Békepárt, which they had founded in 1943.⁶⁴ Ernő Gerő, József Révai, and others, who had been in the Soviet Union and had now returned to Hungary, did not have much regard for the successor to the Békepárt, the KP. On 5 November 1944, the MKP was founded in Szeged, followed by the legal counterpart of the MNFFB, the coalition Hungarian National Independence Front (Magyar Nemzeti Függetlenségi Frontot = MNFF). The first issue of the new periodical *Délmagyarország* (Southern Hungary), published on 19 November, presented itself as the newspaper of the MNFF.⁶⁵ The MNFF's program was almost word for word the same as the program of the MKP published in *Néplap* (People's Herald) in Debrecen on 30 November 1944,⁶⁶ which had already been essentially worked out in Moscow.⁶⁷ Operating in territory occupied by the Red Army, the organization even had a partisan oath. Participants had to make the following pledge: "I will fight with all my might for the complete liberation of the Hungarian people against our ancient enemy: the German and the traitor Horthy and his followers."⁶⁸ This stood in sharp contrast to the portrait of the former rege offered by MNFFB.

Nevertheless, the obvious differences did not cause any significant problems, because contacts between MKP and KP were established after the MNFFB was liquidated. István Kossa arrived in Szeged on 22 November, and he and Sándor Sárközi were almost immediately sent to Budapest.⁶⁹ However, after a dif-

⁶³ Demény, "A párt foglya voltam," 138–139.

⁶⁴ Lajos Fehér, *Így történt* (Magvető, 1979), 382.

⁶⁵ *Délmagyarország*, 19 November, 1944, 1.

⁶⁶ "Magyarország demokratikus újjáépítésének és felemelkedésének programja. A Magyar Kommunista Párt javaslata," *Néplap*, 30 November, 1944, 1.

⁶⁷ *Magyarországi politikai pártok lexikona 1846–2010. I. kötet*. Ed. Vida István (Gondolat – MTA-ELTE Pártok, Pártrendszerek, Parlamentarizmus Kutatócsoport, 2011), 310.

⁶⁸ Partizáneskü – Nemzeti Függetlenségi Front, Magyar Szabadságharcos Szövetség. HIM HL. Ellenállási Gyűjtemény Magyarország, 37.

⁶⁹ "A püspök vendégei," *Magyarország* 21, no. 45 (1984), 21.

ficult journey, they only contacted the KP Central Committee in Budapest at the beginning of December.⁷⁰ Towards the end of the siege, the Budapest branch of MNFF declared that until the Provisional National Government of Debrecen came to Budapest, the MNFF would “take over the administration, the maintenance of order, and the management of the reconstruction works.”⁷¹ MKP thus clearly had no confidence in the MF, the MNFFB, or the KP. Apró Antal may have played a role in this. Apró, a member of the Central Committee of the KP, was the first of the Budapest communists to make his way from besieged Budapest to Debrecen, where he thoroughly discredited his former party colleagues at a meeting of the Central Executive Committee of the MKP on 12 January 1945.⁷²

We do not know what information the MNFFB had about the developments in Szeged. The sources suggest that its members tried to go their own way, and the delegates imagined postwar Hungary in an array of strikingly different ways. On Sunday, 19 November 1944, a large meeting of the committee was held in the building of the aforementioned Nitrokémia Rt. on Nádor Street.⁷³ It was attended by some delegates of the MF, military and civilian members of the resistance, and several representatives of the illegal press. The meeting took place because the committee was trying to get out of the diplomatic arena and wanted to send a delegation to Moscow. Bajcsy-Zsilinszky presented a draft memorandum to People’s Commissar for Foreign Affairs Vyacheslav Molotov and a letter to General Malinovsky, who was not far from Budapest at the time. The participants discussed and finalized the drafts.⁷⁴ Several versions of the texts, which were later not entirely identical, have survived.⁷⁵ We have used the version found in the written bequest of Endre Bajcsy-Zsilinszky, since this version is definitely original and was made in November 1944.

The memorandum stated that MNFFB wanted to work closely with the Soviet Union and the Red Army to liberate Hungary as soon as possible. The President of the MNFFB therefore asked Molotov kindly to welcome the delegation. The Committee made the following five requests to the Soviet People’s Commissar for Foreign Affairs: 1. Hungarian troops who open the front for the Soviets should not be taken prisoner but should be allowed to take part in the fighting as a separate Hungarian unit under Hungarian command. 2. Hungarian soldiers who have been captured by the Soviets since 1941 should be recruited here. 3. The Hungarian army corps should be supplemented by partisans and workers fighting in parts of the country that had not yet been liberated, creating a “Hungarian liberation army,” which should urgently be equipped with

⁷⁰ Sándor Sárközi, “A párt futára,” in *A szabadság hajnalán* (Kossuth, 1965), 97.

⁷¹ *A Magyar Front*. Ed. Gyula Kállai, István Pintér and Attila Sipos (Kossuth, 1984), 321.

⁷² István Papp, *A magyar kommunisták, 1918–1989*. (Jaffa, 2024), 175–176.

⁷³ Statement by Miklós Makay, 1 December 1944. HIM HL Honvéd Vezérkar Főnökének Bírósága. 1944 – H. 2089. I.

⁷⁴ Almásy, *Bajcsy-Zsilinszky Endre és a katonai ellenállási mozgalom*, 435–436.; Csorba, *Bajcsy-Zsilinszky Endre a felszabadítási Bizottság élén*, 461–462.

⁷⁵ Pirooska Póth, *Bajcsy-Zsilinszky Endre levelei Malinovszkij marsalhoz és Molotovhoz* (1944. november 19.). *Békési Élet* 23, no. 3 (1988), 376.

modern weapons. 4. The Hungarian civil administration, including law enforcement forces, should remain in place in Hungary following liberation. 5. The parties should establish “practical harmony and cooperation” with each other. The letter addressed to Malinovsky added that Zoltán Csűrös, an instructor at the technical university, would be sent to Moscow on behalf of the MF and the MNFFB “to prepare political and military coordination and cooperation with the Soviet Union.”⁷⁶ In sum, the two documents can be seen as an attempt to legitimize the Committee as an organ of state power and to link the Hungarian resistance to the anti-fascist coalition, much as the MNFF had sought to do in Szeged.

On 20 November 1944, several members of the MNFFB’s leadership and sympathizers gathered at the apartment of lawyer Tamás Szőnyei, hardly suspecting that this would be their last successful meeting. Endre Bajcsy-Zsilinszky, Gyula Dessewffy, István Bethlen Jr., Jenő Nagy, Imre Radványi, Gyula Kállai, György Dallos, Zoltán Bay, and Albert Szent-Györgyi also attended the gathering, which was held in a building on Bertalan Street. Iván Boldizsár and Géza Péntes were also present, and they undertook the translation of the text into French and Russian.⁷⁷ According to the late versions of the Malinovsky letter and the Molotov memorandum, Albert Szent-Györgyi was ultimately chosen as the leader of the delegation.⁷⁸ Szent-Györgyi considered the memorandum “very bad,” but he considered it important to establish contact with the Soviets.⁷⁹ The flight was due to take off from Székesfehérvár airport on 23 November, and 40 000 pengő were provided for the journey.⁸⁰ In the meantime, according to the memoirs of Domokos Szent-Iványi, who was negotiating in the Soviet Union, Bajcsy-Zsilinszky was regarded as the foreign minister of the future Hungarian government,⁸¹ and Miksa Fenyő was counting on him to serve as the head of the government of postwar Hungary.⁸² But this was little more than wishful thinking rather than realpolitik at the time.

Failure and retaliation

The letters did not even reach the addressees. The meeting, called for the evening of 22 November at the apartment of Vilmos Tartsay at 29 Andrásy Avenue, was attended by unexpected guests: gendarmerie detectives. The person responsible for the betrayal was Tibor Mikulich, a captain who had been brought in on the plot. A qualified pharmacist, Mikulich was not a convinced Nazi, and he had saved

⁷⁶ OSZK Kt 28. fond 38. and 199.

⁷⁷ The certifying minutes of Tamás Szőnyei. 26 May 1945. Politikatörténeti és Szakszervezeti Levéltár (abbreviated to PtSzL) II. 682 fond. 1. ő. e. 487–488. Demény, *Rabságaim*, vol. II. 270–271.

⁷⁸ Póth, *Bajcsy-Zsilinszky Endre levelei*, 380–383.

⁷⁹ Nóra Szekér, *Fedőneve: Marslakó. Világhírű magyar tudósok állambiztonsági megfigyelése* (Jaffa, 2023), 203–204.

⁸⁰ The certifying minutes of Tamás Szőnyei. May 26, 1945. PtSzL 682 fond. 1. ő. e. 487–488.

⁸¹ Domokos Szent-Iványi, *Visszatekintés: 1941–1972*. (Magyar Szemle, 2016), 330. and 335.

⁸² Miksa Fenyő, *Az elsodort ország. Naplójegyzetek 1944–1945-ből* (Park, 2014), 393. (entry 11 November 1944)

people during the war. He had come into contact with Jenő Nagy through his service with the International Red Cross, and another illegal contact (Captain Károly Fodor) had brought him to the head of the Military Investigation Division of the so-called National Accountability Detachment (Nemzeti Számonkérő Különítmény, or NSZK). Mikulich could not stand the pressure for long, however, and he ultimately became an informer for the NSZK. He also shared the password of the 22 November meeting with the authorities (“cinema”).⁸³

Thus, on the afternoon of 22 November, the first detective arriving at 29 Andrásy Avenue was easily able to get in and was soon followed by his colleagues. They invaded the apartment, arrested all those present, and then arrested the newcomers one by one, while encouraging those who had called by phone to come. Vilmos Tartsay, Jenő Nagy, Pál Almásy, Miklós Balássy, Róbert Schreiber, István Belezna, Kálmán Révay, and many others were captured. Among the civilians, Miklós Makay, Sándor Szalay, László Garai, and Iván Boldizsár were also caught. Due to the large number of arrests, the bus used by the gendarmes had to make three trips. In the evening, those who had not yet been taken to the army prison on Margaret Boulevard could hear gunshots. Two officers of the conspiring 207/2 Air Defense Battalion, reserve lieutenant Dr. János Messik and reserve ensign Count Pál Széchenyi, engaged in a firefight with the detectives in the building and lost their lives.⁸⁴

That same night, János Kiss and Endre Bajcsy-Zsilinszky were also arrested, and the number of those arrested continued to grow because of the brutal interrogations. The repressive machinery of the Arrow Cross dealt brutally with the captured resisters, who were subjected to torture at the center on Naphegy Square and the center on Margaret Boulevard.⁸⁵ Bajcsy-Zsilinszky was bound and hung from the ceiling by his right ankle.⁸⁶ No better off were János Kiss, Vilmos Tartsay, and Jenő Nagy, who were electrocuted and beaten beyond recognition.⁸⁷

Between 6 and 8 December 1944, the Court of the Chief of the General Staff of the Hungarian Army conducted proceedings against those arrested on charges of disloyalty. These proceedings were marked by serious formal irregularities, not unrelated to the rival authorities.⁸⁸ The most important official participant was Major General Vilmos Dominich, but the trial also involved Arrow Cross state power. Though in principle the proceedings were a close trial, the NSZK was represented.⁸⁹ General Ferenc Feketealmay (Deputy Minister of Defense), who was

⁸³ István Végső: “Egy feledhetetlen áruló – Mikulich Tibor háborús bűnös “emlékezete” (2022),” Last modified: 25 April 2025. Online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PcV7IuHn25A>.

⁸⁴ Tamás Gusztáv Filep, *Koszorú, hiányzó emléktáblákra. Tanulmányok* (Gondolat – TK, 2022), 139.

⁸⁵ Tamás Kovács, “A Nemzeti Számonkérő Különítmény,” *Múltunk* 51, no. 3 (2006), 76. and 81.

⁸⁶ József Fahidy, “Radó Endre csendőrszázados beismerte az ellenállási mozgalom hőseinél megkínzását,” *Világ*, 27 February, 1946, 3.

⁸⁷ “Népbíróság előtt a nyilas számonkérő szadisták,” *Kossuth Népe*, April 18, 1946.

⁸⁸ For the most serious irregularities, see József Domokos, *Két per egy kötetben* (Magvető, 1978), 407–411.

⁸⁹ “Hajnácskőy László csendőr ezredes, volt haditörvényszéki tag, gyanúsított kihallgatási jegyzőkönyve a Magyar Államrendőrség Budapesti Főkapitánysága Politikai Rendészeti

one of the defendants in the 1943 proceedings against the murderers who had taken part in the massacres in Újvidék, was also able to follow the events closely. Later, he himself approved the harshest sentences, including death sentence of his former judge, János Kiss.

Eleven people were brought to the court on charges of disloyalty. The officers were accused of “conspiring to commit armed resistance against the military activities of the Allied German forces and the actions of the Hungarian government in Budapest, directly behind the theater of operations, to prevent the German forces from detonating any explosives that might be necessary in the event of a retreat, and to fight together against the Germans after unification with the Russian army.”⁹⁰ On 6 December, the first day of the trial, the chairman of the MNFFB was the only person who was questioned. He tried to downplay both his own role and the importance of the conspiracy, but he was not allowed to speak at length. His defense attorney pointed out the court’s attention to his client’s mandate as a member of parliament, meaning he can only be brought before a court if the parliamentary immunity committee grants permission. . Bajcsy-Zsilinszky’s co-defendants also described their organization, which they saw as rudimentary, as a means of maintaining public order and security in the event of an interregnum. They mentioned, furthermore, that their goal had been to save Budapest (above all the bridges) from destruction.⁹¹

The court ultimately handed down six death sentences. Pál Almásy, Miklós Makay, and Kálmán Révay had their sentences commuted to fifteen and ten years in prison. János Kiss, Vilmos Tartsay, and Jenő Nagy, however, were not pardoned. They were hanged in the courtyard of the army prison on Margaret Boulevard on the afternoon of 8 December. Bajcsy-Zsilinszky was handed over for court martial by parliament on 9 December. His trial was held in Sopronkőhida, where the people held in the Budapest prison had been taken before the siege of the capital. The death sentence, handed down on 23 December, was carried out the next day, using volunteers inexperienced in hanging.⁹²

Summary

The MNFFB was beheaded before it could mount any serious armed resistance. But the stakes of this heroic attempt were high. General Friessner was concerned about a possible uprising on 23 November 1944, because he believed that the

Osztályán. 7 December 1945,” in *Iratok az igazságszolgáltatás történetéhez*. Ed. Szabó Győző et al. (Közgazdasági és Jogi Könyvkiadó, 1992), 63.

⁹⁰ The indictment against the military officers is quoted in Pintér, *Adatok*, 453.

⁹¹ A m. kir. honvéd vezérkar főnökének bírósága III. tárgyalási jegyzőkönyve és ítélete Bajcsy-Zsilinszky Endre és társai elleni terrorperben. HIM HL Ellenállási Gyűjtemény Magyarország, 290. (The minutes were written down afterwards, in Sopronkőhida.)

⁹² Ákos Bartha, *Bajcsy-Zsilinszky Endre. Életút és utóélet*. (MTA BTK TTI, 2019), 475–484.

forces at his disposal would not be able to crush a rebellion.⁹³ The German troops were “severely understrength and could hardly have held an external and an internal front,” József Gazsi wrote.⁹⁴ However, it is not entirely clear that the Hungarian resistance would have been able to count on the support of the “external front” at all, and without this front, the members of this resistance would have had little chance of success and probably would have been massacred. Paris was liberated by Allied troops at a cost of less than 1,800 Allied soldiers, partisans, and civilian lives. In Warsaw, in contrast, 18,000 resistance fighters and some 180,000 civilians were killed during and after the defeated uprising.⁹⁵

The example set by the Red Army when it watched the Warsaw Uprising be brutally crushed on the far side of the Vistula and the example set by the failed attempts at Hungarian-Russian cooperation warn that it is worth being skeptical about the reliability of this “external front.” The Soviet show of restraint was based not only on great power (imperialist) ideas (any real discussion of which was taboo before 1989), but also on military considerations. The arriving Red Army hardly wanted to make the emerging urban struggle even more chaotic by permitting the outbreak of a guerrilla war with local forces. And no army is keen to align its own (changing) objectives with the interests of others. “The position and direction of movement of the main military forces could not be changed [...] for the sake of uncertain, untested armed forces,” Gyula Kállai said in 1965, allegedly quoting Malinovsky, and quite possibly accurately.⁹⁶

According to contemporary documents, the MNFFB tried to act as a representative of the Hungarian state power and aimed to establish diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union. However, neither the Soviet Union nor the Hungarian communists returning from the Soviet Union had any claim to this. The latter had set up their own organization as an alternative to the MF and the MNFFB, although the MNFF did not operate illegally, but under the security of the Red Army. Both the MF and the MNFFB were illegal grand coalitions and operated according to a completely different logic than the MNFF. However, no serious rivalry ultimately developed between the two power centers due to the early collapse of the Budapest organization.

⁹³ Telegram from General Friessner to the OKH. 23 November 1944. Last modified: 30 April, 2025. <https://militaria.hu/adatb/leveltariuj/sites/default/files/Er%C5%91d%20a%20Duna%20ment%C3%A9n%202.pdf>.

⁹⁴ Gazsi, A Felszabadító Bizottság, 197.

⁹⁵ Olivier Wieviorka, *The Resistance in Western Europe, 1940–1945* (Columbia University Press, 2019), 333.

⁹⁶ Gyula Kállai, *Életem törvénye* (Kossuth, 1980), 665.

THE PARTY OF HUNGARIAN LIFE AFTER THE GERMAN OCCUPATION

In the second half of the 1930s, the Hungarian political stage bore witness to the rise of various extreme right-wing movements, a development which hardly left the ruling party untouched. One important milestone in this process came in November 1938, when some of the representatives of the National Unity Party, in alliance with opposition parties, attempted to overthrow Prime Minister Béla Imrédy, who was shifting towards right-wing radicalism.¹ They failed in this attempt. Imrédy was ultimately forced to resign in February 1939, but the new head of government, Pál Teleki, committed himself to working with him for the time being. As part of this process, Imrédy's movement was absorbed into the ruling party, which took the name Party of Hungarian Life (*Magyar Élet Pártja*, MÉP).² In the parliamentary elections held at the end of May 1939, MÉP won a landslide victory, gaining 181 of the 260 seats (69.6 percent). Although the faction was divided into different groups, the overwhelming majority of MPs were now supporters of right-wing radicalism.

However, In 1939–1940, the government's support in the House of Representatives changed in other areas as well, largely as a consequence of the First Vienna Award, which in 1938 had seen Hungary regain territories which had been lost to Czechoslovakia after the First World War, and the capture in March 1939 of territories in Transcarpathia after the collapse of Czechoslovakia. In November 1938 and then at the end of June 1939, 26 people from these reclaimed territories were invited to become members of the National Assembly. They first formed their own organization (the Hungarian Party of Upper Hungary) and then merged into MÉP on 15 March 1940. On 30 June 1939, ten people from Transcarpathia were invited to join the House of Representatives. Nine of them acted as a formally independent but practically pro-government group (*Magyarország Képviselők Klubja*, or the Club of Hungarian-Russian Representatives). In the autumn of 1940, the National Assembly allocated 63 seats to the territories in northern Transylvania (which in the wake of the Second Vienna Award had come under Hungarian control), 46 of which were filled in the manner described above. Most of the 46 repre-

¹ Péter Sipos, *Imrédy Béla és a Magyar Megújulás Pártja* (Akadémiai Kiadó, 1970), 70–80.

² Csaba Keresztes Csaba, "A Magyar Élet Pártja megszervezése 1939 tavaszán," *Levéltári Szemle* 61, no. 3 (2011): 47–49.

sentatives summoned also formed their own party (the Transylvanian Party), but this party was also pro-government.³

During this period, the struggle between Teleki and Imrédy, which had previously been going on in the background, turned into an open conflict. Because of this, Imrédy and his direct supporters left MÉP and went on to strengthen the far-right opposition camp (Party of Hungarian Renewal). This was followed by a significant realignment of the ruling party's leadership. The practice of the prime minister being the party leader remained unchanged. The position of party leader was also important, as it was his task to ensure the loyalty of the parliamentary group to the government in practice. Specifically, the party leader convened and chaired party meetings and directed the work of party organizations and officials. At the end of 1940, Béla Lukács replaced László Vay, who had been in office until then.⁴ Béla Lukács was not considered a strong figure, but he was an agile politician who had previously strengthened the party's agrarian side, as a result of which he headed the State Secretariat of the Ministry of Agriculture from the end of 1938 until his election as party leader. According to Lukács (and this contention was confirmed by many of his contemporaries), Teleki had recommended him for this position,⁵ and the selection of him for this role proved an excellent move. Lukács's activities were primarily determined by his loyalty to Miklós Horthy, which was linked to his relationship with Horthy's wife's family. Alongside Lukács, the party leadership consisted of deputy party leader Ferenc Bárczay and two vice-presidents, János Bárczay and Ferenc Kölcsey. However, the latter two were relatively insignificant, their activities being completely subordinate to Lukács and Ferenc Zsindely, who was well informed about party affairs. Of the two, Ferenc Kölcsey was considered the party leader's right-hand man.⁶ Lukács was always ready to support Teleki and to appease discontent within the party, as evidenced, among other things, at the MÉP meeting in Tolna County on 2 February 1941.⁷

Based on the above, the situation of MÉP became clear by the end of 1940. First and foremost, although Imrédy was a popular figure among the MPs, only a few wanted to follow him into opposition. In fact, some of his supporters, including Count Mihály Teleki, former Minister of Agriculture, preferred to remain with Pál Teleki. The sources reveal little concerning whether any anti-government activities took place within MÉP from the end of 1940 onwards. In the spring of 1941, László Bárdossy succeeded (Pál) Teleki as Prime Minister. The Bárdossy

³ Levente Püski, *A Horthy-korszak parlamentje* (Országgyűlés Hivatala, 2015), 44–50.; *Magyarországi politikai pártok lexikona 1846–2010*, ed. István Vida (Gondolat Kiadó, MTA-ELTE Pártrendszerek, Parlamentarizmus Kutatócsoport, 2011), 52–53. 161–162.

⁴ Cf. Balázs Ablonczy, *Teleki Pál* (Osiris Kiadó, 2005), 485.

⁵ Budapest Főváros Levéltára (Budapest City Archives, thereafter: BFL), VII. 5. e. 1949. 1976. Lukács Béla népbírósi anyaga (Béla Lukács's people's court material), 44., 126., 132.

⁶ *Miniszter a frontvonalban. Zsindely Ferenc naplója. 1941. február 25. – 1946. március 9*, ed. Nóra Szekér (Kronosz, 2023) 297.

⁷ MTI könyvmatos, napi tudósítások, 1941. február 2. 37. <http://lib.hungaricana.hu> Downloaded on 10 December 2024

government committed itself to continuing a kind of radical reform policy in many areas, and it was at this time that Hungary became a belligerent on the side of Nazi Germany. This government policy was in line with the views of the majority of MÉP representatives, who were therefore prepared to support Bárdossy.

In March 1942, Bárdossy was forced to resign, largely due to pressure from Horthy. He was replaced by Miklós Kállay. Although Kállay publicly promised to continue the existing political course, it was widely assumed, and rightly so, that his views were much closer to those of István Bethlen, who was known for his anti-Nazi stance. Sources indicate that there was a certain degree of dissatisfaction with Kállay, even within the ruling party, which he largely defused through confidential negotiations with the party leadership.⁸ Kállay promised the parliamentary representatives that he would continue the pro-German foreign policy, while his policy was aimed partly at loosening dependence on Germany and partly at establishing and then strengthening secret relations with Great Britain.

Based on his activities and speeches, Béla Lukács did not follow the prime minister's line and, if he knew about the negotiations with the Western powers at all, he certainly rejected them. However, since Horthy clearly supported Kállay, his loyalty to the government was never in question. Lukács therefore sought to suppress any critical action within the party, and in return, in addition to his position as party chairman, he also joined the government as a minister without portfolio on 17 April 1942. Ferenc Zsindely stated in his diary that whatever happened in the party usually reflected the will of Béla Lukács, and that Kállay was indebted to him.⁹ As a result, a small group of moderate elements formed within MÉP in 1943, led by Géza Bencs and Dezső Laky,¹⁰ but Lukács kept his distance from them. On one occasion, he showed greater agility, which, incidentally, fitted in well with the above. In October 1942, he allegedly made a proclamation in the MÉP Grand Council that the memorial law perpetuating István Horthy's vice-regency was only the first step, to be followed by a propaganda campaign for the coronation of the regent's grandson.¹¹

Any potential act taken by the far-right opposition and pro-government representatives could, of course, have led to unpleasant situations, which Kállay resolved by postponing parliamentary sessions for a long time, with Horthy's help. Between December 1942 and March 1944, the body held meetings in only two short periods.¹² Under such circumstances, only the mass resignation of MÉP representatives could have shaken the head of government's position, but MÉP did not take this drastic step.

⁸ Miklós Kállay, *Magyarország miniszterelnöke voltam 1942–1944*, Volume I, (Európa, 2012) 93–95.

⁹ *Miniszter a frontvonalban*, 232–236.

¹⁰ BFL, Lukács Béla népbírósi anyaga (Béla Lukács's people's court material), 55.

¹¹ Lajos Olasz, *A kormányzóhelyettesi intézmény története (1941–1944)* (Akadémiai Kiadó, 2007), 408.; Róbert Kerepeszki, "Some Candidates for the Vacant Throne of Interwar Hungary: International Approaches to Finding a Resolution," *Royal Studies Journal* 9, no. 2 (2022): 96.

¹² Püski, *A Horthy-korszak parlamentje*, 325.

As a result, the government's parliamentary base consisted mainly of MÉP members and representatives from the reclaimed territories. The number of the latter continued to grow after 1942, following the recapture of territories to the south, as all the representatives from those areas joined the Party of Hungarian Life.

Territorial returns and legislation

Region	Number of mandates
Post-Trianon Hungary	260
Territories ceded to Czechoslovakia and recaptured in 1938	26
Transcarpathia	10
Northern Transylvania and the Székely Laad	46 (63)
Recaptured territories from Yugoslavia	26
Total	368

The government's support in the House of Representatives during each period was as follows, considering any transfers and deaths:

End of 1940: MÉP/185 + Transcarpathia group/9 + Transylvanian Party/41 (326).

October 1942: MÉP/211+Transcarpathia group/7+Transylvanian Party/39 (370).

October 1943: MÉP/223+Transcarpathia group/Transcarpathia group/6+Transylvanian Party/36 (371).¹³

The situation was similar in March 1944, before the German occupation, when MÉP had 222 seats.¹⁴ Ultimately, therefore, the various governments always had a significant parliamentary base, and even the departure of a few representatives would not have led to the formation of a minority government.

In 1943, there were increasing signs that Miklós Kállay's public statements were far from consistent with his actual policies. However, this did not bother Lukács. More precisely, he did not concern himself with the issue. For him, the situation was simple: as long as the governor supported Kállay, he would do the same. He became so important to the prime minister that in early 1943, the latter considered entrusting Lukács with a more serious task, namely the leadership of the Ministry of Agriculture.¹⁵

¹³ *Magyarország évkönyve. 1940*, ed. Ferenc Felkai (Stádium Sajtóvállalat Részvénytársaság, 1941) 22.; *Pesti Hírlap*, 20 October 1942. 6.; *Ellenzék*, 25 October 1943. 8. The current total number is given in brackets.

¹⁴ *Magyar Élet Pártértésítője*, 15 June 1944. 2.

¹⁵ *Miniszter a frontvonalban*, 310.

At the same time, far-right MPs who were dissatisfied with the head of government's actions began organizing within MÉP as early as 1943, reaching a peak in February 1944. Some 35 MPs drafted a memorandum strongly criticizing the government. They stood by the German alliance and rejected any kind of Anglophile policy. They also attacked the Ministry of the Interior for giving left-wing parties more room for maneuver, and they criticized the government's press policy for giving space to pro-peace propaganda. They even called for further anti-Jewish measures.¹⁶ Béla Lukács politely accepted the memorandum and forwarded it to Kállay, but he did nothing substantive to implement its contents. If we consider that the memorandum was signed by only 35 MÉP representatives, among whom former minister Bálint Hóman was the only influential figure, it is clear that before 19 March 1944, the party's parliamentary group had no chance of exerting any real influence on Kállay, despite its grumblings. A clear sign of this was the meeting held by MÉP on 9 March 1944 to commemorate the second anniversary of Kállay's premiership. Two party leaders, Béla Lukács and Pál Cselényi, gave welcoming speeches at the event, and not a single critical remark was made about the government's policies.¹⁷

The German occupation of Hungary on 19 March 1944 brought significant changes to MÉP, as it did for most of the political parties. There had previously been a loosely organized group within the party that was dissatisfied with the one-sided pro-German foreign policy, but they did not voice their opinions in public forums. Now they held discussions about the situation at László Magasházy's apartment. Understandably, they did not dare take any action, but Count Nándor Zichy approached Lukács with a request that the party reject any kind of merger with other far-right organizations and remain passive in protest against the German invasion.¹⁸ Lukács rejected this request, but it was impossible to stop there. The far-right opposition parties and especially the Nazi leaders were clearly demanding a purge of the party,¹⁹ which soon took place. At the MÉP meeting on 5 April, four members were expelled (Miklós Kállay, Ferenc Keresztes-Fischer, Dezső Laky, and Gyula Somogyváry). They were undoubtedly the most prominent figures in the anti-German group, as was confirmed by the fact that the Nazi police had already arrested three of them and Kállay had fled to the Turkish embassy.²⁰ 14 other representatives left the party, followed by others in May. (All sources listed János Makkai among those who left, even though he was arrested along with the others.) It seems that the MÉP leadership had no interest in mak-

¹⁶ *Függetlenség*, 5 April 1944. 3–4.; *Új Magyarország*, 7 April 1944. 2.; Antal Czettler, *A mi kis élethalál kérdéseink. A magyar külpolitika a hadba lépéstől a német megszállásig* (Magvető Kiadó, 2000), 469.

¹⁷ *Reggeli Magyarország*, 11 March 1944. 3.

¹⁸ BFL, Lukács Béla népbírósi anyaga (Béla Lukács's people's court material), 55.

¹⁹ *Miniszter a frontvonalban*, 511–515.; *A Wilhelmstrasse és Magyarország. Német diplomáciai iratok Magyarországról 1933–1944*, ed. György Ránki and Ervin Pamlényi (Kossuth, 1968), 814.

²⁰ Kállay and Keresztes-Fischer became prime targets because of their government activities. Dezső Laky was considered one of the informal leaders of the anti-Nazi group within the party, while Somogyváry was put on the list because of his speeches on the radio.

ing a big political issue out of this. On the contrary, it sought to settle the matter quietly and with as little conflict as possible. Therefore, the MÉP leaders were not formally expelled, but either resigned voluntarily or were informally asked to do so. Different publications provided varying and inaccurate data on the number of those who left. Based on a comparison of data from the Hungarian Telegraph Office and relevant press sources, it all likelihood, a total of 32 representatives left MÉP, consisting of the following individuals: László Angyal, Zoltán Bencs, Géza Bornemissza, Pál Cselényi, Sándor Csorba, Aladár Demel, Sándor Ember, István Gajzágó, András Gergelyffy, László Gunde, Ferenc Hunyady, Pál Kossuth, Endre Lukács, László Magasházy, János Makkai, Imre Martsekényi, Lajos Mezey, Jenő Padányi-Gulyás, József Pálffy, Milán Popovits, Nándor Peták, Lajos Rosta, István Roszner, Gyula Szabó, Pál Szakáts, József Takách-Tolvay, László Tost, András Tóth, Imre Turchányi, László Várady, Aladár R Vozáry, and Nándor Zichy.²¹

Only in two cases can it be proven that the departure of a representative from MÉP was related to his extreme right-wing views, beyond his conflict with Sándor Tukats, the chief “ispán” (*comes* or government commissioner) of Szeged. Peták and Rosta eventually joined Imrédy.²² For the others, the decisive factor was undoubtedly that they had not want to commit themselves to supporting the government under Döme Sztójay, who had been installed by the German occupying forces as prime minister.

However, the purge within MÉP did not stop there. Lukács remained in his position for the time being and tried to adapt to the new situation. On 1 April, he issued a statement attacking the left-wing parties and condemning those who had “conspired” against official foreign policy.²³ He emphasized that the party’s policy was to continue along the path laid out by Gömbös and to maintain an alliance with the Germans. He made a single sentence indicating that he was not necessarily a supporter of the political events that had come in the wake of the occupation: “The path and the goal are still shown by our regent.” Furthermore, at the party meeting on 5 April, a decision was reached according to which MÉP was open to a merger with other far-right parties, and László Vay, formerly known as an Imrédy supporter, was entrusted with the preparations for this merger.²⁴ The decision was partly due to German pressure and partly to tactical considerations. The MÉP leadership could base its policy on the fact that, since they clearly had the strongest faction in parliament, they would be able to play a leading role in the coalition that would be formed through the merger.²⁵

²¹ MTI könyomatos, Magyar Országos Tudósító, 5 April 1944, 19 and 26 May, 3. <http://lib.hungaricana.hu> Downloaded on: 10 December 2024. *Magyar Élet Pártértéstitője*, 15 June 1944, 2.

²² “Vágfalvi Zoltán Csaba, Tukats Sándor főispáni tevékenysége Szegeden (1939–1944),” *Szegedi Műhely – várostörténeti szemle* 47, no. 4 (2008): 377–379.

²³ MTI könyomatos, Magyar Országos Tudósító, 1 April 1944. 82. <http://lib.hungaricana.hu> Downloaded on: 10 December 2024.

²⁴ *Magyarország*, 6 April 1944. 5.

²⁵ György Ránki, 1944. március 19. *Magyarország német megszállása* (Kossuth, 1968), 131.

Lukács therefore remained in his position for the time being, which he explained in 1948, during his trial before the People's Court, by saying that he had already notified Sztójay of his resignation at the beginning of April, but that at the latter's request, his resignation had been put on hold until a successor was found.²⁶ Zsindely's diary also confirms that Lukács's resignation was indeed discussed at the above date, and he ultimately did resign one month later. There are two possible explanations for this postponement. First, Lukács still enjoyed the confidence of the regent,²⁷ who probably preferred to keep him on as his favorite. Second, there may have been some uncertainty within the parliamentary group. Sztójay did not concern himself with the party's internal affairs at all, and there is no evidence that the MPs had any definite ideas about a change in leadership. Finally, Lukács's resignation did indeed take place at the meeting on 3 May, which the German press commented on, saying that his departure could facilitate the aforementioned merger.²⁸ With this in mind, no new leadership was elected. Instead, a three-member committee was appointed to lead the party.²⁹ All three of these politicians (Mihály Teleki, Béla Marton, and Kálmán Bocsáry) were considered advocates of right-wing radical ideas, but no concrete steps were taken towards the actual creation of a unified far-right party, and in fact the issue was essentially removed from the agenda. Imrédy and Baky initially welcomed the idea, which was promoted by Vay on the former's behalf, but by early May, it had become clear that neither of them saw any particular advantages in the merger.³⁰ In order to promote its success, former Prime Minister László Bárdossy joined the preliminary negotiations at the end of April, but he was also unsuccessful in his efforts. German Reich Commissioner Edmund Veessenmayer had never entertained much hope concerning the initiative. Now, seeing his pessimistic assessment of the situation confirmed, he wrote the following in his report of 2 May: "I considered this endeavor hopeless from the outset... As expected, the latest merger negotiations have failed. It is possible that further attempts will be made, but I do not attach any significance to them in the future either."³¹

The German occupation and the events that followed rendered the role of the National Assembly completely insignificant, but the Sztójay government insisted that the support of the House of Representatives be ensured, at least formally. To this end, the parliament held a few sessions between 24 May and 2 June. At these sessions, the term of the National Assembly, which had expired in the meantime, was extended, and Sztójay gave a short introductory speech, which the representatives accepted without debate. The convening of parliament also

²⁶ BFL, Lukács Béla népbíróági anyaga (Béla Lukács's people's court material), 47.

²⁷ This is confirmed by the fact that at the end of March, László Baky wanted to find out through Lukács whether the governor would accept his position as Secretary of State for Internal Affairs. *Az Endre-Baky-Jaross per*, ed. László Karsai, Judit Molnár, (Cserépfalvi, 1994) 86.

²⁸ MTI könyomatos, napi tudósítások (MTI lithographic daily reports), 6 May 1944. 43. <http://lib.hungaricana.hu> Downloaded on: 10 December 2024.

²⁹ *Keleti Újság*, 5 May 1944. 5.

³⁰ *Miniszter a frontvonalban*, 529. Ránki, 1944. március 19, 130–131.

³¹ Ránki, 1944. március 19, 131–132.

provided an opportunity to clarify the balance of power, as most daily newspapers published data of this nature, presumably based on the seating order in the House of Representatives.

The political composition of the House of Representatives at the end of May 1944³²

Organizations	Number of seats
Party of Hungarian Life	183
Transylvanian Party	33
Party of Hungarian Renewal	27
Hungarian National Socialist Party	17
Arrow Cross Party	15
Christian Economic and Social Party	6
Autonomous Party of Rusyns in Transcarpathia	7
Group of German representatives	7
Other small parties	3
Unaffiliated	76
Total	374

It should be noted that the above breakdown is a touch misleading and hypocritical, as the House of Representatives' office, which drew up the seating plan, simply did not take into account the fact that a number of MPs had already been arrested. In the case of MÉP, the resignations meant that the party lost its majority, albeit by a small margin. Of course, this was only of theoretical significance, as most of the parliamentary groups supported the government, even though the previously expected major party unification had not taken place. Strictly speaking, the Arrow Cross Party and the unaffiliated were the two largest blocs that could not be considered pro-government. In the latter case, the exceptionally high number was probably due to the fact that the representatives of the banned left-wing parties were all included in this category, as were those who had left MÉP. It is worth making a few comments regarding the party divisions. Of the three former far-right opposition groups, none was able to stand out by 1944. The Arrow Cross Party, which still appeared very strong after the 1939 elections, lost several seats. From 1941, Imrédy and Baky's parties formed a kind of close alliance and emerged as the strongest opposition force, but cooperation between them came to an end on 22 May. Thus, the Party of Hungarian Renewal and the Hungarian National Socialist Party operated independently in the sessions of the House of Representatives. The events of the war also affected the representatives

³² *Magyar Élet Pártértésítője*, 15 June 1944. 2.

of national minority communities. Some of the Transcarpathia Ruthenians sought openly to express their Rusyn identity, even in their names, and the Germans signaled through separate organizations that the occupation of the country would give them greater room for maneuver.³³

As for the representatives who left MÉP, most of them opted for retreat and political passivity, with only a few committing themselves to some form of anti-fascist action in the future. Among them, József Pálffy became the best known, who, as a representative of political Catholicism, had joined the Hungarian Front in the summer of 1944, an organization that brought together banned anti-Nazi opposition parties.³⁴ Alongside him, László Tost also merits mention. Tost was the first prominent figure to criticize publicly the Sztójay government, which he did on several occasions. At the end of 1944, he began organizing anti-German activities in the city of Kassa (or Košice by its Slovak name), as a result of which he was shot by members of the Arrow Cross Party on 2 January 1945.³⁵ The claim was made that several of these figures resigned from their parliamentary seats, but the sources offer no clear confirmation of this claim.³⁶

The situation of MÉP became clear at the meeting held on 30 June 1944. The party finally gave up on unification without discussing the reasons for the failure of these efforts. Under the circumstances, it seemed appropriate to end the transitional period, which included the election of a new leadership. By unanimous decision, Mihály Teleki became president, and Kálmán Bocsáry and Endre Hunyady-Buzás became vice-presidents.³⁷ All three had been involved in the February memorandum campaign, so their presence alone clearly signaled the direction of the party's policy. Mihály Teleki had served as Minister of Agriculture from 1938 to 1940, and he was considered a supporter of Béla Imrédy. At the end of 1940, however, he did not join the opposition, and he even accepted his removal from the government without comment. Later, he belonged to the party's agricultural group. His prominence in late June 1944 was probably due more to his value as a figure whose name was widely known, as many of his contemporaries believed that he lacked significant political qualities. In his speech after his election,³⁸ he could only say that the party would continue on the path set out by Gyula Gömbös and would fully support the government. Döme Sztójay was also present at the event, but he did not engage in any activity that could be considered party leadership. In addition to the presidency, a broader body was also established, to which 24 representatives were delegated, alongside the party's ministers and state sec-

³³ *Képviselőházi napló 1939–1944*. Volume 19, 255–256.

³⁴ Jenő Gergely, *A keresztényszocializmus Magyarországon 1924–1944* (Typovent, 1993), 140.

³⁵ For more on the life of László Tost, see: Veronika Szeghy-Gayer, *Tost László, Kassa polgármestere* (Kassai Magyarok Fóruma, 2022).

³⁶ Cf. Gergely, *A keresztényszocializmus*, 167.; Ránki, 1944. március 19, 119.

³⁷ MTI könyomatos, Magyar Országos Tudósító, 30 June 1944. 118–119. <http://lib.hungaricana.hu> Downloaded on: 10 December 2024.

³⁸ *Miniszter a frontvonalban*, 527.; *A Wilhelmstrasse és Magyarország*, 544.; BFL, Rátz Kálmán tanúvallomása a Lukács-perben, Lukács Béla népbírósi anyaga 64.

retaries, but it was not given any actual function.³⁹ Presumably, Béla Lukács was also included in the latter body as a demonstration of unity, but there is no evidence in the sources that he himself participated in this meeting at all.

Over the course of the summer, the new MÉP leadership showed a relatively high degree of agility. It convened representatives for discussions on several occasions, held so-called club days, and organized groups of specialists. It also sought to discredit those who had previously left the party by highlighting their accumulation of corporate positions and activities incompatible with their positions as representatives as reasons for their departure. The accusations were not unfounded, as 20 of the 32 representatives who had left also sat on the boards of several companies.⁴⁰ However, the hypocrisy of this argument is evident in the fact that it was raised only long after their actual departure. Moreover, it only became an issue in the case of Aladár Demel, who was forced to resign from his position as deputy CEO of the National Land Mortgage Bank.⁴¹ It is also worth noting that when the accusations came to light, one of the representatives concerned, Jenő Padányi-Gulyás, immediately refuted them, stating that, “the reason for my departure is exclusively political in nature.”⁴² There was only one other case in which another representative left the party. At the end of July, a press report appeared stating, without further explanation, that György Donáth, the vice-president of the party’s Budapest organization, had been expelled from the party. This claim, however, cannot be convincingly substantiated, as it was reported by only one daily newspaper.⁴³

Mihály Teleki’s activities met initial expectations. In his statements, he enthusiastically supported the Sztójay government, and in his zeal, he even went so far as to condemn the assassination attempt on Hitler at the end of July during one of the MÉP club meetings.⁴⁴ To strengthen his position, he managed to become editor-in-chief of one of the best-known daily newspapers, which was published in several editions, from 12 August.⁴⁵ At the beginning of August, however, Imrédy and his colleagues left the government, and Sztójay concluded from their move to the opposition that the multiparty system would only cause difficulties for the government. At the MÉP meeting on 11 August, he made the following blunt statement: “Party work serving particular interests must cease in the country, and political

³⁹ MTI könyomatos, Magyar Országos Tudósító, 30 June 1944. 119-120. <http://lib.hungaricana.hu> Downloaded on: 10 December 2024.

⁴⁰ *Nagy Magyar Compass 1944–45*, ed. Miklós Galánthai Nagy, Volumes 1–2 (Miklós Galánthai Nagy, 1944).

⁴¹ *Esti Újság*, 2 June 1944. 1–2.; *Magyar Élet Pártértésítője*, 15 June 1944. 2.; *Esti Újság*, 24 June 1944. 3.

⁴² *Nemzeti Ujság*, 21 June 1944. 8.

⁴³ *Magyarország*, 28 July 1944. 3. This refers to György Donáth, who was later executed in 1947 in a show trial. See: Nóra Szekér, *Titkos Társaság. A Magyar Testvéri Közösség története* (Jaffa Kiadó, 2017).

⁴⁴ *Magyarország*, 21 July 1944. 3.; 28 July 1944. 3.

⁴⁵ It was about the morning, evening and Monday editions of the daily newspaper *Magyarország. Reggeli Magyarország*, 12 August 1944. 3.; *Pesti Hírlap*, 13 August 1944. 6

agitation dividing forces must be silenced.”⁴⁶ Teleki tried to take the edge off the statement by saying that MÉP remained open to all kinds of efforts towards unity.⁴⁷ The prime minister greatly appreciated Teleki’s loyalty and wanted to include him in his government. In the end, nothing came of this or other personnel proposals. The only concrete change was that, at the regent’s firm wish, Miklós Bonczos replaced the departing Andor Jaross (who shared the radical far-right views of Bela Imrédy) as Minister of the Interior.⁴⁸ On 23 August, the government issued Decree No. 3080/1944, which banned all party activities and even declared the dissolution of all political parties.⁴⁹ According to Géza Lakatos, who would soon serve (briefly) as prime minister, the decree was drafted and issued by Minister of Interior Géza Bonczos on behalf of the ailing Sztójay. This does not rule out the possibility, however, that it was Sztójay who initiated the decision.⁵⁰

The party leader, who fully supported the Sztójay government, was probably surprised when Géza Lakatos formed a government on 29 August in preparation for the break with the German alliance, but his views did not change. In its 2 September issue, *Reggeli Magyarország* (Morning Hungary) published a lengthy article condemning Romania’s change of allegiance.⁵¹

Although the aforementioned decree did not result in the actual dissolution of the parties, it did make it impossible to hold various events and gatherings. Under these circumstances, the only option seemed to be for members of parliament to try to create some kind of substitute organization. In early October, Béla Lukács and a few of his colleagues visited Lakatos and warned him that a politically dangerous action was being plotted.⁵² As a countermeasure, the head of government asked Mihály Teleki to prevent the initiative, which he agreed to do, but he probably did nothing and may even have joined the efforts. Ultimately, on 9 October, the National Association of Legislators was officially formed, which members of parliament had to join individually.⁵³ By mid-October, 112 members

⁴⁶ *Reggeli Magyarország*, 12 August 1944. 1.

⁴⁷ *Függetlenség*, 17 August 1944. 3.

⁴⁸ *A magyar Quisling-kormány. Sztójay Döme és társai a népbíróság előtt*, ed. Irén Simándi (1956 KHT, 2004) 436.

⁴⁹ *Magyarországi rendeletek tára 1944.* 1637–1638. Online https://library.hungaricana.hu/hu/view/OGYK_RT_1944/?pg=0&layout=s Downloaded on: 10 December 2024. The decree did not mention suspension. Cf. Rudolf Paksa, *Magyar nemzetiszocialisták. Az 1930-as évek új szélsőjobbaldali mozgalma, pártjai, politikusai, sajtója* (Osiris, MTA Bölcsészettudományi Kutatóközpont Történettudományi Intézet, 2013), 280.

⁵⁰ Géza Lakatos, *Ahogy én láttam* (Európa-História, 1992), 116.

⁵¹ *Reggeli Magyarország*, 2 September 1944. 3.

⁵² Lakatos, *Ahogy én láttam*, 153.; *A magyar Quisling-kormány*, 369. In his testimony at the People’s Court trial, Béla Lukács stated that he opposed the formation of the alliance because of its “anti-government stance,” among other reasons. BFL, Lukács Béla népbíróági anyaga, 47.

⁵³ The founding charter of the alliance is published in: Paksa, *Magyar nemzetiszocialisták*, 285–286. According to Lukács, the initiator of the organization was the president of the House of Representatives, András Tasnádi-Nagy. Budapest Főváros Levéltára, Lukács Béla népbíróági anyaga, 47. Tasnádi’s prominent role in the alliance is confirmed by other sources as well. *A magyar Quisling-kormány*, 369. 404.

of parliament had joined the association, and by the second half of November, this number had risen to 140, and a group representing the upper house was also formed. The association primarily expressed its position in favor of continuing the war and maintaining the German alliance. At the same time, there was concern that members of the legislature would become completely passive participants in political life and that important political decisions would be made without them. In the absence of a precise list of names, it can only be assumed that the majority of those who joined the alliance were members of MÉP. The MÉP leadership did not play a decisive role in the creation and operation of the alliance, but they did join, and Teleki and Borcsa even took seats on the 16-member standing committee. The two vice-presidents, Jenő Szöllősi and Andor Jaross, represented the Arrow Cross Party and the Party of Hungarian Renewal, while the leader (in line with the discussion above) was Jenő Szász, who, however, owed his position more to his government career, as he had not been actively involved in MÉP until then. The organization immediately sought to exert pressure on Prime Minister Lakatos to prevent any possible defections, but its activities were limited to this, apart from its more or less regular meetings. After Ferenc Szálasi took power, the Arrow Cross Party did not assign Szász any political role, just as no party other than the Arrow Cross Party was given the opportunity to reorganize legally. Thus, the former MÉP representatives were left with only one role: to assist Szálasi's reform plans and provide a veil of legitimacy for the Arrow Cross state.

THE ESTABLISHMENT AND POTENTIAL OF THE PROVISIONAL NATIONAL ASSEMBLY AND THE PROVISIONAL NATIONAL GOVERNMENT

There is extensive secondary literature on the establishment and functioning of the Provisional National Assembly and National Government.¹ Therefore, it is not my intention here to examine the circumstances surrounding the formation of the parliament and the government, nor will I analyze the government's decrees or debates, or the laws and sessions of the National Assembly. This would be superfluous also simply because both the diary of the Provisional National Assembly and the minutes of the government have been published.² There is almost unanimous agreement that this government was established in Moscow, but that the interests of the Allies (the United States and Great Britain) were also considered to some extent. Molotov later made no secret of this: "I created this government," he proclaimed.³ As preparations for the government had been underway since October 1944, the main consideration was to bring Hungary over to the side of the Allies and separate it from the military system of the Third Reich, thus facilitating military advances in the Carpathian Basin. It is worth noting that at this time, Regent Miklós Horthy had already sent his armistice delegation to Moscow. This delegation arrived in Moscow amid serious adversity and attempted to separate Hungary from the Third Reich (15 October 1944). As we know, this was unsuccessful. At the same time, between 9 and 18 October 1944, the infamous meeting between Churchill and Stalin took place in Moscow, where Britain (with the consent of the US) essentially made concessions to encourage the Soviet about-turn, renouncing Central Europe and handing it over to Stalin and the Soviet Union on a plate. (Contrary to popular belief, this did not happen in Yalta.) Hitler had been unwilling to make this generous gesture in November 1940, when Molotov had

¹ Mihály Korom, *Magyarország Ideiglenes Nemzeti kormánya és a fegyverszünet (1944–1945)* (Akadémiai, 1981); *Az Ideiglenes Nemzetgyűlés és az Ideiglenes Nemzeti Kormány 1944–1945* (Politikatörténeti Alapítvány, 1995). (Includes studies by Sándor Balogh, Mihály Korom, István Vida, György Gyarmati, and István Feitl). Also: Péter Gosztonyi, "Az Ideiglenes Nemzeti Kormány megalakulásának előzményeihez," *Új Látóhatár*, 1971, no. 5.

² *Az Ideiglenes Nemzetgyűlés és az Ideiglenes Nemzeti Kormány megalakulása* (Kossuth, 1984). And: Minutes of the Council of Ministers of Miklós Béla Dálnoki's Government (Provisional National Government) 23 December 1944–15 November 1945. Volumes A–B (MOL, 1997).

³ Published by István Vida, "Orosz levéltári források az 1944 őszi kormányalakítási tárgyalásokról," in *Az Ideiglenes nemzetgyűlés*, 54.

submitted his new demands under the Molotov-Ribbentrop (i.e. Hitler-Stalin) Pact.⁴ All this meant that the occupying powers were essentially given a free rein in the territory, including the Soviet Union in Hungary, and only a few disputed areas remained, such as Greece, Austria, and Germany itself. In these areas, there was civil war (Greece), agreement (Austria, but only ten years after the end of the war), and “peaceful” division and sharing (i.e. the division of Germany).

The preparations for the Provisional National Assembly and National Government thus began in Moscow against the backdrop of these complicated circumstances. Molotov saw three groups as potential partners: the Hungarian armistice delegation, the group of military officers who defected on 15 October, and the large communist émigré community living in Moscow. After the unsuccessful defection, with the establishment of the Arrow Cross regime and due to the defensive policy of the Hungarian National Assembly (first in Budapest, then in Sopron), the military officers became the most important group. This explains why Colonel General Béla Miklós was at the head of the Provisional Government and why two other generals were also able to participate in the government.⁵ The main goal was to break Hungarian military and political resistance and facilitate rapid advancement so that the Red Army could reach the actual territory of the Third Reich by the summer of 1944. Furthermore, at the turn of 1944–1945, the Soviet Union’s primary goal was not the rapid Sovietization of Hungary and its integration into the empire. It sought, rather, merely to break Hungary’s ability to resist militarily. On one side stood the dignified, valiant commander-in-chief of the cavalry, Colonel Béla Miklós, and on the other, Ferenc Szálasi (or Szalosján, which was the name used by his grandfather), an ex-major of uncertain origin and nationality.⁶ The situation may seem clear, but it was not. The fundamental reason for this was the German occupation. This caused the country to become a theater of war for six months, which meant immeasurable suffering for Hungarian soldiers and civilians from the spring of 1944 to the spring of 1945. All this also affected the Soviet occupying force. Their brutality reached unimaginable levels. It also affected the leaders in the Kremlin. The first question to arise would be the following: did the Provisional National Assembly and the Provisional National Government meet the most fundamental expectations and perform their essential function, which was simply to reduce suffering by shortening the war? The answer, clearly, was no. Similarly, did the Provisional National Government manage to resolve Hungary’s dire political and international isolation? Again, the answer

⁴ Molotov was already looking towards Romania, Hungary, Yugoslavia and Turkey, after Poland, Lithuania, Estonia, Latvia, Finland, and Bessarabia. The documents are published by: Attila Seres, Péter Sipos and István Vida, “Kontinentális blokk vagy keleti hadjárat? Iratok V. M. Molotov 1940. novemberi berlini látogatásáról,” *Századok* 139, no. 1 (2005): 135–199.

⁵ Béla Miklós was commander of the First Hungarian Army in 1944, János Vörös was chief of the General Staff, Gábor Faraghó was lieutenant general and inspector of the gendarmerie and then the police, and in the autumn of 1944 he was colonel general and head of the armistice delegation.

⁶ On the attacks concerning Szálasi’s ancestry and citizenship, see: Károly Szerencsés, *A nemzeti demokráciáért* (Zagora, 2009.)

was no. Was it able to create the conditions for lasting democratic development? Unfortunately, again, the answer was no.

Why, one could ask, did this provisional government prove such a failure? Fundamentally, the explanation lay in the Soviet occupation. No less important was the fact that the victorious Allies (the US and Great Britain) were forced to recognize Stalin's Soviet Union as a "democratic" state. This lie proved fatal for the states of Central Europe, regardless of whether they emerged from the war victorious or defeated. As had been the case in the wake of the First World War, a "positive goal"⁷ was once again presented to the Western Allies: the goal of creating democratic states in the region. Victory in the war, however, could only be achieved with the help of the Soviet Union (which would mean a far lower cost, from the perspective of human casualties, for the West). It followed, or rather was made to appear, that this positive goal (democratic states) was also embodied by the Soviet Union itself. For countries such as Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Poland, there was little escape from this dilemma. Each possessed its own historical traditions and aspirations for a form of democracy rooted in the European political order. Yet in practice, it was Kliment Voroshilov who defined what "democracy" would mean, as he made clear to Béla Miklós. As the leader of the Allied Control Commission (ACC) in Hungary, Voroshilov very deliberately separated political and military supervision. "Since there are currently Soviet occupation troops in Hungary," he explained, "[the Soviet High Command] continues to announce its demands for their maintenance. The ACC will not interfere in this."⁸ With these "demands," it was possible to blackmail the Hungarian government to the utmost. Furthermore, almost the entire mandate of the Provisional National Government fell to frontline combat, when essentially all activities fell within the jurisdiction of the front commanders (from the seizure of factories, roads, and railways to the deportation of people and the plundering of the country). Logically, Hungary could expect no real help from the West. Matters much more important to the United States and Great Britain still had to be resolved, and these two states were hardly entirely successful in their attempts to address these issues (which included the futures of Germany, Persia, China, Japan, etc.).

The composition of the Provisional National Assembly did not reflect the true political will of the Hungarian nation, as parties considered left-wing enjoyed excessive representation. On 21 December 1944, the Hungarian Communist Party and the Social Democratic Party held almost 58 percent of the seats. However, this was merely symbolic, because after two days in December, the Provisional National Assembly could only meet once more in September 1945 to approve the government's most important measures. More frequent meetings were prevented by

⁷ The formulation of the "positive goal" led to one of the most repulsive lies of the First World War, the complete indifference to the right of peoples to self-determination. The term was one of the great inventions of T.G. Masaryk. It was adopted by the USA and the Entente. It rested on the notion of the "liberation of enslaved nations." This is why Masaryk gave his famous book the title *World Revolution*.

⁸ *A magyarországi Szövetséges Ellenőrző Bizottság jegyzőkönyvei 1945–1947* (Napvilág, 2003), 57.

the ACC, which, as noted above, was under Soviet control. In the meantime, the Political Committee of the Provisional National Assembly took charge of affairs. The “democratic” parties of the Hungarian National Independence Front participated in the National Assembly and the government’s hinterland. This raises another fundamental question: were these parties really democratic? The answer is no. The Hungarian Communist Party (MKP) and Social Democratic Party (SZDP) had already formed an alliance in October 1944. The aim of this alliance was to establish a dictatorship, liquidate parliamentary democracy, establish socialism, and merge the two parties.⁹ The leadership of the National Peasant Party joined them, forming the Left Bloc. The activities of this alliance led to the elimination of the Hungarian experiment with democracy. These parties were therefore not democratic in terms of their goals. This raises the question of internal functioning, or in other words, of political practice. For the communists, “democratic centralism” presupposed military discipline towards the leadership, but neither the Social Democratic Party nor the Peasant Party functioned democratically. The party leadership prevented democratic internal party life, expelled those who disagreed from the party, and then pursued them as criminals by bringing false accusations, holding show trials, etc. The cases of Károly Peyer, Imre Kovács, and others later illustrated this. The Smallholders’ Party was democratic in terms of its goals, but the same cannot be said of its internal life. Those who disagreed with the leadership’s policies were also expelled from the party (Dezső Sulyok, Zoltán Pfeiffer, István B. Szabó, etc.). All this is important from the point of view of the topic under discussion here simply because it makes blatantly clear that there was no real democratic party background behind the government, let alone a democratic international background. The power occupying Hungary clearly sought to establish a dictatorship based on imperial logic. Hungary was a defeated, non-sovereign state, where the central organ of the occupiers (the ACC) had absolute power, as did the city commanders (who appointed the mayors) and factory commanders at the local level. Under such circumstances, it would have been very difficult to expect this government to establish a successful democratic framework. Most of the prominent members of the government, however, did originally have this intention. A few names should be mentioned here. Initially, alongside Béla Miklós, a member of the government, one found István Vásáry, who was one of the most outstanding members of the national democracy, as well as Pál Teleki’s son Géza Teleki and Ágoston Valentiny, a true social democrat of European stature. It cannot be a coincidence that Vásáry and Valentiny were missing from this list by 1 August 1945. This was a decisive turning point. National and democratic interests were pushed into the background. Alongside the communists, social democrats and peasant party members were included who were known to be “crypto-communists” or who cooperated with Rákosi’s party to the very end (figures such as Sándor Rónai, Ferenc Erdei, and István Ries). This change already signaled that the Provisional National Government now had a different task, as the

⁹ *A Magyar Front* (Kossuth, 1984), 249.

war was over and the original goal was a thing of the past. Now, the primary task was to build up party positions.

The Provisional National Government ruled by decree. This is how it implemented land reform. Few questioned the need for this. But how should the estates be divided up? Should they be divided into what were economically unviable plots of land, and should this process be accompanied by the brutal liquidation of the entire Hungarian aristocracy? Ultimately, these solutions were adopted, but they served political interests, not the economic interests of the country. The aim was to prepare for collectivization.

A framework for accountability was also established. Almost everyone agreed that this was also a necessary step. But questions again arose about the process. Should courts run by the political parties (so-called People's Courts) be given judicial authority? This, ultimately, was the solution adopted.¹⁰ The government then drafted the electoral law, which was passed by the National Assembly. Again, some electoral law was also necessary, but the law that was passed essentially made it impossible for any party apart from the governing parties to run. There was no thus significant opposition—no Christian Democrats, no conservative parties, etc.¹¹ There was also a clear need for some transformation of the bodies of public administration. The solution adopted, however, left the organizational structure in place but did not allow local elections,¹² meaning that rural authorities were established based on the notion of “parity.” This meant that the Left Bloc was in the majority everywhere, even until the introduction of the council system in 1950. The government declared war on Germany in December 1944 and then concluded an armistice, but it failed to organize an army. The ACC also determined the theoretical size of the Hungarian army, although Béla Miklós considered this to be unlawful. The number was set at 25,000.¹³ There were specific reasons for this, but the main point was that the Russians did not insist on it either. The government banned far-right organizations, including the former ruling party.

They also dealt with the question of the head of state, but the form of government was left for later. Horthy was removed from power in October and thus his place was no longer on the agenda. A collective organization, the High National Council, was established until the republican bill was passed.¹⁴ The Provisional National Government had almost no contact with the West, but it was in continuous contact with the Soviet occupying forces. This included the ACC and, alongside it, the occupying Soviet Army. The Provisional National Government recognized their claim to reparations, the dismantling of factories, etc., and it also

¹⁰ For my opinion on this, see Károly Szerencsés, *Az Ítélet, Halál!* (Kairosz, 2002.)

¹¹ The National Committee approved or rejected candidates running in the elections. The ruling parties had almost 100 percent control over this. They did not give permission to any other significant political force.

¹² Except in Budapest on 7 October 1945. Here, the Smallholders' Party won an absolute majority.

¹³ The minutes of the SZEB, cited work, 102. See also: Gyula Balogh, *A Magyar Honvédség a Szövetséges Ellenőrző Bizottság felügyelete alatt* (Magyar Honvédség Vezérkara, 1991), 51.

¹⁴ 1 February 1946.

recognized border changes in accordance with the armistice. This did not bode well for Hungary in the peace negotiations. In addition, the Provisional National Government concluded a Soviet-Hungarian economic agreement (not to be confused with the reparations agreement), thereby clearly tying the Hungarian economy to the Soviet Union. In the absence of authorization, the agreement was signed in Moscow by Ernő Gerő and Antal Bán.¹⁵ A huge debate ensued as Prime Minister Béla Miklós himself took a written stand against this agreement (which essentially surrendered the Hungarian economy to the Soviet Union through joint companies, etc.). Most of the government was also against it, but once again, realpolitik prevailed. The essential goal was simply not to provoke the Soviet Union. Factories and companies remained under the control of the Red Army until July 1945, the railways were only returned in October, and industry was only exempted from the direct obligation to supply the Red Army in November.¹⁶ The agreement should have been ratified by the parliament elected on 4 November 1945, but this was circumvented, and in the end, the High National Council ratified it, with the Smallholders and the Communists.¹⁷ However, this did not win any real shows of goodwill on the part of the Soviet Union. On the contrary, it subjected the Hungarian economy to the whims of the empire to the east for the next forty years.

The Provisional National Government took on the task of governing the country at a time when it had become clear that the Soviet empire was extending its sphere of influence to Central Europe, including Hungary. This limited this government's options from the outset. Its room for maneuver was further restricted by the fact that the West had no military or political presence in the region, or only to a minimal extent. In the absence of sovereignty, therefore, the goal could only be to meet expectations. But what were those expectations? And here it is worth asking the question: was everything decided in Tehran, when it became clear that there would be no Western landing in the Balkans, but only in Normandy? Or was everything decided in Moscow, when Churchill cynically threw Central Europe (including Budapest, Prague, and Warsaw) to Stalin by informally dividing influence with Stalin using percentage shares (the so-called Percentages Agreement)? Or was everything decided at the moment when the Soviet army occupied Hungary? And was that when the communist reign of terror began? The answer is no and partly yes. No, because Moscow kept Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Austria, and Finland in reserve for major negotiations. In these countries (and only in these countries) elections were held that were almost free, and civil, Christian, and democratic forces formed the majority in parliament. Hungary offers a clear example of this. Of course, this also means that from the end of 1944 and the beginning of 1945, the Soviet occupiers sought to establish positions from which they could guarantee their future interests and prevent hostile interests from prevailing. This included the appropriation of the polit-

¹⁵ 27 August 1945. For the text, see: Margit Földesi, *A megszállók szabadsága* (Kairosz, 2002), 375.

¹⁶ *Dálnoki Miklós Béla kormányának jegyzőkönyvei*, op. cit. p. 14.

¹⁷ Ferenc Nagy, Béla Varga, László Rajk. The counter-signatory was Prime Minister Zoltán Tildy. (20 December 1945)

ical police, the plundering of the economy, its restructuring in line with imperial interests, the establishment of conditions for the administration of justice, the definition of the party structure, etc. The issue of the political police proved decisive, and the Communist Party, with the help of the occupiers, appropriated this force its entirety. Gábor Péter even explained to his rival (also a communist) András Tömpe that no one in Budapest recognized the Provisional Government, from which Tömpe had received his “authorization.”¹⁸ The Soviet secret police (NKVD-People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs) and the Soviet military court (Chief Directorate of Military Tribunals of the Soviet Army) were active in Hungary throughout this period.¹⁹ Under such circumstances, it was impossible to speak meaningfully of legality. Minister of Justice Ágoston Valentiny was removed precisely because he refused to assist in this.

But in these early days, democracy definitely had some chance. That is, until the West and the Soviet Union turned against each other fatally, which happened in the winter of 1946 or the spring of 1947 at the latest. Finland and Austria were able to take advantage of the opportunity presented by this turn of events. Other countries received military support from the West (Greece). However, during the mandate of the Provisional National Assembly and the National Government, the Cold War had not yet assumed a clearly defined form. Cooperation between the three great allies still seemed unbroken.

Did democracy have any real chance in Central Europe? The simple answer to this question is only if Europe had acted in concert against Soviet ambitions. If a United States of Europe had been realized at that time,²⁰ it would have been at least as important to Paris and London as it was to Budapest and Prague. This did not happen, but it was not entirely the fault of the states of Central Europe. The actions of the United States could have counterbalanced Soviet expansion, but the power and ambition of the US was only enough to save Western Europe, the Far East, and Greece. There was another chance: cooperation and alliances among and joint resistance launched by the peoples of Central Europe. But after the astonishingly foolish decisions with which the First World War came to an end, this vision of a united Central Europe was a mirage at best. The course of the Second World War did not help either. There were failed attempts at a Hungarian-Romanian customs union, and the possibility of Czechoslovak-Hungarian cooperation was even raised. Josip Tito’s ideas for a Central European federation were also on the agenda, and even the idea of a Bavarian-Austrian-Hungarian neutral zone was raised, but nothing came of these notions. Instead, there was hostility, deportations, population exchanges, assimilation, “chained dogs,” etc.

¹⁸ “Tímár István visszaemlékezései,” in *Szálasiék bilincsben* (Lapkiadó Vállalat, 1986), 85.

¹⁹ These bodies sentenced Péter Szaléz Kis, among others, to death on 10–14 September 1946. (Rehabilitated: 18 October 1991.) This court could also impose sentences that sent Hungarian citizens to the Soviet Gulags.

²⁰ The idea was first raised in the Hungarian Parliament by Dezső Sulyok, leader of the Hungarian Freedom Party. ÁBTL K-1447/1

In September 1945, the Provisional National Assembly enacted the government's provisions into law, and based on Act VIII of 1945, the National Assembly elections could be held. The government resigned on 15 November 1945. Béla Miklós stated that the new government's "only task in the field of democratic order is to further develop the established democratic discipline and defend it from attacks from all sides."²¹ As we know, this failed. Not because of the fascist threat, which was trumpeted daily by communist and other left-wing newspapers, but precisely because of communist aspirations.

In 1947, Béla Miklós became one of the leaders of the Hungarian Independence Party led by Zoltán Pfeiffer, as did Béla Zsedényi, the president of the Provisional National Assembly.²² Neither was willing to leave his homeland. The prime minister died of a heart attack in 1948, and Zsedényi was arrested in 1950 and died in prison in 1955 due to lack of medical treatment. Ágoston Valentiny, former Minister of Justice, was also imprisoned from 1950 to 1955, as was János Vörös, Minister of Defense, from 1950 to 1956.

Returning to the fundamental question: was there any chance that Hungary might emerge from the war as a democratic state in 1945? My answer is still yes. Were we to answer no, we would be exonerating those who betrayed and attacked this democracy as collaborators, as well as those who, as "realpolitikers," were unwilling to fight to defend it with skill and courage. We would also sweep the final efforts of thousands of people and the clearly expressed will of millions of Hungarians under the carpet with the outdated idea that everything that takes place in the course of history could only have happened as it did. If we were to do so, we would forget the great struggle fought by politicians, artists, public figures, priests, and pastors for democracy between 1945 and 1948. And we would also confuse the responsibility of the dictatorship's Quislings with the actions of those who fought for freedom. To prevent this, let us remember with gratitude those who, under incredibly difficult circumstances, tried to change Hungary's fate for the better. Among them were Béla Miklós of Dálnok, Béla Zsedényi, Dezső Sulyok, Zoltán Pfeiffer, István Vásáry, and others. They failed at the time, but the lessons learned then remain relevant today, both in 1990 and in the twenty-first century.

²¹ *Dálnoki Miklós Béla kormányának jegyzőkönyvei*, op. cit. 564

²² István Vásáry, Minister of Finance of the Provisional National Government, became one of the leaders of this short-lived national democratic movement, but after the change of regime, he chose internal exile. Géza Teleki, Minister of Culture, committed suicide in the United States in 1983. Gábor Faraghó died in forced residence in 1953. Imre Nagy, Minister of Agriculture, was executed by his own comrades in 1958.

BÉLA MIKLÓS DÁLNOKI: “THE HUNGARIAN DARLAN” – THE ACTIVITY AND LOBBY WORK OF JUDIT MÁRFFY-MANTUANO IN BRITAIN

Preface

If one were to venture an overview of the work and efforts of pro-Hungarian British intellectual Carlile Aylmer Macartney¹ in the interwar period, it would be essential to take into consideration his official and unofficial connections in Britain, as well as his ties to Hungary, which included not only his connections with part of the political and intellectual elite of pre-1945 Hungary but also his ties to Hungarians living in Great Britain or elsewhere and, whether officially or semi-officially, acting on behalf of the Hungarian state or as private individuals. The discussion below focuses on the career and activities of Judit Márffy-Mantuano (Judith Listowel), who was linked to Macartney’s career on several occasions, not only as a “Hungarian lobbyist” but also as a member of Macartney’s wider circle of acquaintances in Great Britain. It offers a preliminary overview and case study of the entire network of connections mentioned above. The name Judith Listowel appears several times in the archival documents concerning Macartney’s career, clearly revealing that they were indeed well acquainted. In January 1945, Macartney, as an expert at the Foreign Office, commented on foreign affairs documents relating to the Hungarian Provisional National Government and the Hungarian Council in London, including Lady Listowel’s letter to the editor of *The Economist*, published on 13 January 1945, in which she defended the provisional government, especially Béla Miklós Dálnoki.² Macartney’s personal archive contains a three-page letter sent by Lady Listowel from Lisbon on 4 April 1944, summarizing the history of the anti-Nazi Hungarian resistance with the undisguised aim of persuading Macartney to support the Hungarian cause in the Foreign Office.³

¹ On the career and works of Carlile Aylmer Macartney, see: Róbert Barta, *A magyarság vonzásában. Válogatás Carlile Aylmer Macartney írásaiából és beszédeiből* (Debreceni Egyetem Történelmi Intézete, 2021). Second revised edition in English: Róbert Barta, *In the Attraction of Hungarians. Selected Writings and Speeches by Carlile Aylmer Macartney* (University Press of Eastern Finland-Jyväskylä Yliopistopaino, 2025).

² New Hungarian Government and Hungarian Council in London. The National Archives (TNA), FO/371/48461. Southern, 1945, Hungary, File No. 26. To. pp. No. 6167

³ Memorandum on the Hungarian resistance by Judit Countess of Listowel, Lisbon, 4/4/44. Carlile Aylmer Macartney’s Papers Ms. Eng. c. 3290. Box 11. Doc. 4. fols. 30–32.

Judith Listowel participated in Macartney's lecture delivered on 18 March 1946 at the Royal Institute of International Affairs.⁴ Listowel asked Macartney about the Hungarian secret police and the relationship between the communists and the smallholders. All this indicates that Judith Listowel, as a regular visitor to the lectures at the Royal Institute of International Affairs, remained in contact with British foreign policy experts, including Macartney, even after 1945. Some members of the Hungarian aristocracy who were involved in politics and public life, taking advantage of their family connections, were actively involved in international undertakings in the twentieth century. Although their efforts were not always beneficial for Hungary, they undoubtedly shaped and influenced the image of Hungary abroad. Judit Márffy-Mantuano belonged to this circle, and, to use a term that is fashionable today and popular in English-language historiography, she was a non-conformist aristocrat.⁵ This was not primarily because she gained international recognition as a woman, but rather because of her adventurous career, which differed from the expected and customary aristocratic lifestyle, as well as her wide-ranging domestic and foreign connections and the fact that she had a "bourgeois" occupation (she was an economist and journalist) which was her main source of income for most of her life.⁶ Judit Márffy-Mantuano's career, network of contacts, and activities in England also prove that Western-oriented, Anglophile personalities formed a significant part of the politically active Hungarian aristocracy between the two World Wars and, to some extent, after 1945, even though their activities took place largely in the world of informal contacts and on the second and third lines of high politics and diplomacy.⁷

Bodleian Library-Weston Library, Oxford.

⁴ C. A. Macartney, Conditions in Hungary. 18 Marc 1946. Royal Institute of International Affairs (RIIA), Chatham House, London. Library of RIIA, 8/1209.

⁵ Original meanings of the word: 1. a person who does not conform to an established church especially: one who does not conform to the Church of England 2. a person who does not conform to a generally accepted pattern of thought or action. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/nonconformist> (Downloaded on 22 January 2019.) Among the British aristocracy of the time, this term was most often applied to W. S. Churchill. For more on this, see: John Charmley, *Churchill: The End of Glory* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1993), 7–139.

⁶ No comprehensive historical work has yet been written about the life and work of Judit Márffy-Mantuano. Her English-language book, published in London in 1943 (*This I Have Seen*), is autobiographical in nature and covers the first phase of her career. For further reading, see also: Tamás Lajos Z., *Egy rendkívüli utazás* (Novum Publishing GmbH, 2017); András D. Bán, *Hungarian-British Diplomacy 1938–1941. The Attempt to Maintain Relations* (Routledge, 2004), 73–74.; Andrea Orzoff, *Battle for the Castle. The Myth of Czechoslovakia in Europe, 1914–1948* (Oxford University Press, 2009). "Judith, Countess of Listowel." *The Telegraph*, 22 Jul, 2003. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/1436725/Judith-Countess-of-Listowel.html> (Downloaded on 24 September, 2018.) "Egy kalandos életű magyar származású újságíró harcos száz éve." https://24.hu/belfold/2003/07/31/egy_kalandos_elet_369_magyar/ (Downloaded on 24 September, 2018.) István Ötvös, "Államvédelem a kalapszalonn nyomában. Márffy Mantuano Tamás sikertelen szervezési kísérlete." *Kommentár* 7, no. 2 (2012): 71–79.

⁷ On pre-1945 Anglo-Hungarian relations and the Anglophile Hungarian elite, see most recently Tibor Frank, *Britannia vonzásában* (Gondolat Kiadó, 2018).

The Fulfillment of an Unconventional Career in Britain

Judit Márffy-Mantuano, born on 12 July 1903 in Kaposvár, was descended on her father's side from the Márffy family of Vas County (Verseghy) (according to the national census of 1754–1755) and the Mantuano family of Italy (Modena and surroundings), which could be traced back to the twelfth century. The Mantuano family legend traced the family's origins back to a knight who fought in the Crusades, which was depicted by the family coat of arms (an arm holding a black sword piercing through a crown on a red field; a crest: the sword between two black eagle wings). However, on her mother's side (Ilona Maár), her ancestors were mostly members of the lower nobility.⁸ The name and nobility of the Verseghy Márffy family were transferred to Raoul Mantuano in 1902, and from then on, the double family name (Márffy Mantuano) was used. Judit Márffy-Mantuano's father, Raoul Mantuano (who also went by the names Rudolf and Rezső), spoke six languages, served as a diplomat at the Austro-Hungarian Embassy in Rome, and was an economic expert and ministerial advisor. Beyond his political views, which aligned him with István Tisza, the sources reveal little about him. Judit had only one brother, Tamás, born in 1907, whose eventful life⁹ influenced his sister's career in many ways. Judit Márffy-Mantuano lived in Budapest between 1914 and 1926, in relative financial security, although an article in *The Telegraph* commemorating her death in 2003 emphasized that her occasional flashes of revolutionary radicalism were probably prompted by her memories of the time when she had born witness to the revolutions of 1918–1919. Nevertheless, she was a devout Roman Catholic and was outraged by the vociferous atheism and anti-clericalism of the Red Army in 1919. Her career, which seemed to be following the usual path for someone from aristocratic circles, took an unusual turn when she studied economics at the London School of Economics between 1926 and 1929, where she attended lectures held by renowned, mostly left-wing liberal experts of the time (such as Eileen Power, a medievalist and one of the first professional female historians, economist Harold Laski, and sociologist Leonard Hobhouse).¹⁰ During her years in London, she decided to pursue a career in journalism, which her father considered a useless occupation. "Do you know what it means to be a journalist?" he allegedly asked her. "A person who is not allowed to enter a house by the front door, who has a bottle of ink leaking from his pocket, and who is never sober."¹¹

Despite her father's cautionary advice, Judit Márffy-Mantuano decided to pursue a career in journalism, largely influenced by the opportunity to travel abroad

⁸ <https://www.arcanum.hu/hu/online-kiadvanyok/Kempelen-kempelen-belamagyar-nemes-csaladok1/7-kotet-C> (Downloaded on January 22, 2019.)

⁹ More about Tamás Márffy-Mantuano: Ötvös, "Államvédelem a kalapszalón nyomában."

¹⁰ Studying in England was of particular importance in the family, as Judit Márffy-Mantuano's younger brother, Tamás, attended Cambridge University before joining the Hungarian Foreign Service in 1930.

¹¹ "Judith, Countess of Listowel." *The Telegraph*, 22 July 2003. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/1436725/Judith-Countess-of-Listowel.html> (Downloaded on 24 September 2018.)

regularly and her acquaintance with and marriage to William Hare (the fifth Earl of Listowel) during her studies in London.¹² As an aristocrat of English Irish descent, Hare held left-wing (pro-Labour) views, though he belonged to the British political elite. He was a member of the House of Lords from 1932, and between 1941 and 1944, he was the Labour Party leader in the House of Lords. From 1944 to 1945 and then from 1947 to 1948, he served as Minister for India and Burma, and he later served in Clement Attlee's government as Minister of Post and Telecommunications and then Minister of Agriculture and Fisheries. He ended his political career as the last British Governor of Ghana (1957–1960). In Judit Márffy-Mantuano's family, William Hare was sometimes considered a communist,¹³ which of course was an exaggeration, but this did not bother Judit. As a journalist, she benefited from her husband's political connections. Although their marriage lasted only twelve years (the wedding, which was held in Budapest in 1933,¹⁴ was one of the major social events of the year), Judit, who held traditional, conservative principles, continued to use the name Lady (Judith) Listowel and/or Judith Hare until her death, and after 1945, she continued to take advantage of her ex-husband's left-wing, pro-Labour political connections. The extremely energetic Judit Márffy-Mantuano traveled all over Europe between 1926 and 1939. In 1936, she visited the United States, and she even took a six-week tour of the Soviet Union.

In her autobiographical book, published in 1944 in its fourth edition,¹⁵ Judit wrote short chapters in chronological order about her family, childhood, studies, travels, and the interviews she had conducted. In August 1939, in an interview with Italian Foreign Minister Count Galeotto Ciano, she drew the world's attention, albeit in a concealed form, to the dangers of impending German military aggression. In the summer of 1932, she met Adolf Hitler at the Berlin Opera and had a brief conversation with him. Hitler did not make a favorable impression on her. It is therefore understandable that she repeatedly warned her distant relative, Count Pál Teleki, about the National Socialists. She had attended Teleki's university courses in economic geography several times before 1926 at the University of Budapest. The Teleki family connection was established through Judit Márffy-Mantuano's younger brother Tamás, who married member of the Teleki family in 1934 (Margit Sarolta Teleki), whose mother, Eduardina Teleki, belonged to the

¹² William Hare, 5th Earl of Listowel (1906–1997) was an Anglo-Irish Labour politician. He was married to Judit Márffy-Mantuano between 1933 and 1945. They had one daughter, born in 1935. More information about the Earl of Listowel: <https://www.thepeerage.com/p3817.htm#i38165> (Downloaded on 23 January 2019.) More on their daughter, Lady Deirdre Elisabeth Mary Freda Hare: <http://www.thepeerage.com/p3819.htm#i38190> (Downloaded on 23 January 2019.)

¹³ Lajos Z., *Egy rendkívüli utazás*.

¹⁴ Their engagement and upcoming wedding were even mentioned in a short article in the 4 May 1933 issue of the *Prágai Magyar Hírlap* (Hungarian Herald of Prague), which highlighted that the exceptionally educated and strikingly beautiful Judit Márffy-Mantuano had met William Hare at Cambridge University. The article also emphasized that the *Prágai Magyar Hírlap* had previously published several articles by the journalist. https://library.hungaricana.hu/hu/view/PragaiMagyarHirlap_1933_05/?pg=15&layout=s (Download on 23 January 2019.)

¹⁵ Judith Listowel, *This I Have Seen* (Faber and Faber, 1944.)

branch of the family from Kővárvidék and whose father, Domokos Teleki, belonged to the branch from Szék.¹⁶ In May 1940, Judit Márffy-Mantuano conducted a lengthy interview with Prime Minister Pál Teleki, in which she and Teleki emphasized that supporting and following Hitler's foreign policy carried extraordinary risks. Judit Márffy-Mantuano sent a similar warning to Benito Mussolini via Galeazzo Ciano (the Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs). In 1932 in Berlin, the internationally renowned Hungarian journalist interviewed Ernst Franz Sedgewick Hanfstaengl, the press chief of the Nazi party, whom his National Socialist party colleagues called "Putzi."¹⁷ Hanfstaengl's foolish answers to the journalist's questions about Nazi economic policy caused an international scandal. Two years later, now as Lady Listowel, Judit traveled to Germany again with her husband to investigate the newly established concentration camps. She was denied permission and, together with William Hare, was placed on a list of people to be arrested during the planned German invasion of Britain. The Listowels were thus blacklisted, as was Winston Churchill's later literary and press agent Imre Révész (Emery Reves), who fled Berlin in 1933 after he shut down his press agency.¹⁸

Judit Márffy-Mantuano's fierce anti-fascism and anti-Nazism, which, together with her anti-communism, characterized her entire career, were probably fueled by her practical experiences with the Italian fascist and German National Socialist regimes. The last chapter of her first book (*This I Have Seen*), first published in 1944 and now in its fourth edition,¹⁹ discusses at length the German occupation of Hungary. She makes no attempt to hide her strong anti-Nazi and anti-Fascist sentiments. However, even with her excellent aristocratic connections, Judit, who worked as a correspondent for *Magyarság*, *Nemzeti Újság*, and *Pester Lloyd* in London, found it difficult to gain access to the first line of British political and diplomatic elite. She had to pull every string she had, as is well illustrated by how she managed to get an audience with the rarely accessible Winston Churchill in 1935. The incident offers a good illustration of the political, public, and informal networks that operated among the British elite at the time. Mátyás Sárközy offers the following account: "Churchill, who was neglected and struggling with financial problems, was approached by his admirer, film mogul Sándor Korda. In exchange for a substantial downpayment, [Churchill] asked him

¹⁶ <https://www.macse.hu/gudenus/mfat/fam.aspx?id=2571> (Downloaded on 23 January 2019.) I would like to thank Balázs Ablonczy for his help in researching the Márffy-Mantuano-Teleki family connections.

¹⁷ Ernst Franz Sedgewick Hanfstaengl (1887–1975) was an American German businessman. In the 1920s, he was an enthusiastic supporter of the NSDAP and one of the financiers of *Mein Kampf* and the Nazi party newspaper, the *Völkischer Beobachter*. He was the Nazi party's press chief until 1933. He later fell out of favor and fled to Switzerland and then to the United States, where he was actively involved in American research on the Nazi elite. For more information about his life, see: <https://www2.gravestone.com/people/hanfstaengl-ernst-franz-sedgewickputzi/> (Downloaded on 23 January 2019.)

¹⁸ For more information on the career of Imre Révész (Emery Reves), see: Róbert Barta, *Az államférfi és a világpolgár. W. S. Churchill és Emery Reves* (Attraktor Kiadó, 2013.)

¹⁹ Listowel, *This I Have Seen*, 214–241.

to write a film about King George V, who was then celebrating the twenty-fifth anniversary of his accession to the throne. To ensure that the script was of high quality, Korda sent his two best screenwriters, Anthony Asquith and Lajos Bíró, to Churchill's Chartwell estate [...]. Lajos Bíró's wife, Jolán Vészi, was the daughter of József Vészi, editor-in-chief of *Pester Lloyd* (my great-grandfather). On behalf of the newspaper, Judit Márffy-Mantuano found a way to reach Churchill."²⁰ Sárközy and Miklós Lojkó, who published the interview, also emphasize how surprised Judit Márffy-Mantuano was by Churchill's thorough knowledge of Central European history. This was probably thanks to Emery Reves, who kept Churchill constantly informed about Hungary. Through his international press agency (Cooperation Press Service), fifteen articles about Churchill appeared in *Pesti Hírlap* (Pest Herald), *Pester Lloyd*, and *Az Újság* (The News) between July 1937 and July 1938.²¹ However, by the end of the war, Churchill's knowledge of the region had declined significantly. When Stalin asked Churchill about London's intentions towards Hungary during the Potsdam Conference, the British statesman was simply unable to answer. Churchill's lack of preparation in this regard surprised even the members of his own delegation.²² The literary career of Judith Listowel, a journalist who published ten independent volumes,²³ began in 1932 when she translated the work of ethnographer Károly Viski on the folk customs of Hungarian peasants into English.²⁴

Judit's later literary work clearly reflected the development of her career and her wide-ranging interests. Her works depicting family genealogies, backgrounds, and individual life stories (*This I Have Seen* – 1943, *The Golden Tree: The Story of Peter, Tomi and Their Family Typifies the Enduring Spirit of Hungary*, 1958) were highly successful and were published in several editions, as were her handbooks on social life and the management and organization of distinguished households and salons, for instance *Manual of Modern Manners: A Practical Up-To-Date Guide For All Occasions* (1959, reprinted in 1960) and *The Modern Hostess: A Practical Guide to Entertaining with Ease and Economy on All Occasions* (1961). Her deeper interest in society, public life, politics, and history was evident in two of her works: her 1969 book *Dusk on the Danube*, which presented the conditions

²⁰ Sárközy Mátyás, "Vízszintes zuhanás. Naplójegyzetek, 2006–2007." *Kortárs* 51, no. 7–8 (2007): <http://epa.oszk.hu/00300/00381/00117/sarkozi.htm> (Downloaded on 23 January 2019.)

²¹ Barta, *Az államférfi és a világpolgár*, 59.

²² John Lukacs, *A párvialdal* (Európa Könyvkiadó, 1993), 362. Quoted by: András Bán D., "A közép-kelet-európai brit külpolitika és Magyarország 1939–1947," in *Magyarország és a nagyhatalmak a 20. században*, ed. Ignác Romsics (Teleki László Alapítvány, 1995), 146.

²³ *This I Have Seen* (1943), *Crusader in the Secret War* (1952), *The Golden Tree: The Story of Peter, Tomi and Their Family Typifies the Enduring Spirit of Hungary* (1958), *Manual of Modern Manners: A Practical Up-To-Date Guide For All Occasions* (1959, reprint – 1960), *The Modern Hostess: a Practical Guide to Entertaining with Ease and Economy on All Occasions* (1961), *Dusk on the Danube* (1969), *The Making of Tanganyika* (1965), *Idi Amin* (1973), *The Other Livingstone* (1974), *A Hapsburg Tragedy-Crown Prince Rudolf* (1978).

²⁴ Károly Viski, *Hungarian Peasant Customs* (George Vajna & Co., 1932.) (Translated by Judith Márffy-Mantuano Hare Listowel)

of Hungarian urban society in the 1920s in short stories, and her more extensive 1978 monograph on the tragic fate of Rudolf, Crown Prince of the Habsburg Empire (*A Habsburg Tragedy: Crown Prince Rudolf*). The latter work can be regarded in some respects as a precursor to subsequent historical studies²⁵ that applied psycho-historical research methods and perspectives to the suicide of Crown Prince Rudolf. Judit's interest in Africa, which grew particularly strong after 1945, can be explained in part by her husband's diplomatic connections in Africa and in part by the fact that she was now writing books on commission for substantial honoraria. This led to the 1965 publication of her book on the independence of Tanganyika (*The Making of Tanganyika*), in which she expressed general optimism about the future of the African colonies that were gaining independence at the time. This optimistic outlook had already faded by the time her book on Idi Amin²⁶ was published in 1973, as the abuses of power and corruption in African states had by then received widespread international attention. Her work on David Livingstone (*The Other Livingstone*, 1974) demonstrated Judith Listowel's critical sense and reservations about false myths. She argued convincingly that the nineteenth-century Victorian Scottish explorer, who claimed to adhere to Christian missionary principles, had in fact been a hypocrite who had never seen Victoria Falls and had written about it based on other people's accounts. Her book on Jan Kowalewski²⁷ (*Crusader in the Secret War* – 1952) is not only the story of a Polish intelligence officer who led an adventurous life but also a tribute to the anti-Soviet and anti-German Polish émigré communities and a gesture to Kowalewski, who served as editor-in-chief of the periodical *East-Europe and Soviet Russia*, founded by Lady Listowel, until 1955.

²⁵ Here we refer primarily to John T. Salvendy, *Rudolf. Egy lázadó Habsburg lélektani tükörben* (Közgazdasági és Jogi Könyvkiadó, 1988), and Brigitte Hamann, *Rudolftrónörökös* (Európa Kiadó, 2008.)

²⁶ The publication of the book was accompanied by a series of scandalous events. Lady Listowel wrote the book in a month and a half, receiving a substantial honorarium of £300. The Ugandan dictator liked the book so much that he invited the author to a lavish reception in Uganda. However, Lady Listowel's plane was forced to land on the Ugandan Sudanese border, and it took two days to rescue the passengers. The book was later the subject of legal proceedings due to certain statements it contained, resulting in Lady Listowel being fined (the Ugandan government even accused her of gold smuggling).

²⁷ Jan Kowalewski (1892–1965) was a Polish code breaker, military intelligence officer, engineer, and journalist. In 1919, he established the first Polish code breaking office. In 1920, he played a decisive role in the Polish victory over the Soviet Red Army near Warsaw. After the German occupation of Poland, he was active in the Polish resistance movement, first in France and then in Portugal, working closely with British military intelligence. After 1945, he settled in England and was an active member of the anti-communist Polish emigrant community as a journalist. For more information about his life and activities, see Nigel Cawthorne, *The History of Code Breaking* (Rosen Young Adult, 2018), 102–104.

Lobby work and press activities in Hungarian issues

From 1939 to 1941, as a lecturer for the British Ministry of Information, and then from 1942 to 1944 as a civilian employee of the British Army, Lady Listowel came into direct contact with senior British government and military circles and decision-makers. This was not an isolated case. In her 2009 work, Andrea Orzoff emphasizes that “numerous British Foreign Office employees established close ties with Hungarian aristocrats [...] Judit Márffy- Mantuano, a relative of Count Pál Teleki and wife of Lord Listowel, conveyed various messages from Teleki to the British.”²⁸ György Barcza, the Hungarian ambassador in London, who knew Lady Listowel well, described her as “intelligent, but craving attention.”²⁹ This was perhaps an overly simplistic and biased characterization, and according to András D. Bán, Barcza may have been dismissive simply because “Teleki occasionally entrusted his relative with minor tasks, mostly unofficial or semi-official messages, and Barcza only learned about these after the fact, if at all.”³⁰ Similar informal relations are documented in a British Foreign Office archive entry dated 5 September 1942, according to which Sir Robert Campbell, British ambassador to Lisbon, was informed by Baron Béla Radvánszky Jr. about the situation in Hungary in the early autumn of 1942, highlighting Prime Minister Miklós Kállay’s pro-Western policy.³¹ In light of all this, it is not surprising that, using her political connections, Lady Listowel wrote a letter on 30 December 1944 to the British Foreign Office, addressed personally to Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden, asking the British Foreign Office to use its influence to save her friends in Hungary, whom the Arrow Cross Party wanted to bring to trial. With skillful journalistic reasoning, she linked the whole issue to Hungary’s attempt to break from the Axis and the country’s dire situation at the time:

16 Chester Row, S. W.

On the 30th of December 1944.

Dear Mr Eden,

Now that a constitutional Hungarian Government has been formed in the Russian liberated part of Hungary, I want to draw your attention to what is going on in the German occupied part of my native land. The terror introduced by the Szálasi puppet government is so ghastly that even the German military authorities are worried by it. On Dec. 28th I received news that practically all the members of what used to be the Hungarian Foreign Office have been arrested. Four personal friends of mine are committed to court martial-actually, one of them, Jenő Zilahy-Sebess, has already stood his trial and has been condemned to be hanged. You know much better than I do that the Kállay Government was in contact with the Allies and ever since the spring of

²⁸ Orzoff, *Battle for the Castle*, 153.

²⁹ György Barcza, *Diplomataemlékeim. Magyarország volt vatikáni és londoni követének emlékirataiból 1911–1945*, vol. II. (Európa-História, 1994), 265.

³⁰ András Bán D., *Illúziók és csalódások. Nagy-Britannia és Magyarország 1938–1941* (Osiris, 1998), 180.

³¹ TNA FO/371/30962 Central, 1942, Hungary, File No. 81.-with minutes of Carlile Aylmer Macartney.

1943, on suggestions received from Lisbon, organised a full-fledged conspiracy to get Hungary out of the war and over to the United Nations. I need not remind you of the details of this conspiracy, nor of the reasons why it failed. In the Hungarian Foreign Office-apart from the Minister, Jenő Ghyczy-three men were mainly responsible for carrying out the Lisbon instructions: Aladár Szegedy-Maszák, István Bede and Kristóf Kállay (son of the former Hungarian Premier Nicholas Kállay). As soon as the Germans marched into Hungary on the 18th of March 1944, these three young men arrested. During the Sztójay and Lakatos regimes Jenő Zilahy-Sebess tried to carry on the good work and remained in contact with Allied quarters in Lisbon. The facts that 1.) this man was arrested since Admiral Horthy's miscarried armistice demand and was tried first and condemned to be hanged for collaboration with the enemy; moreover 2.) that the other three, held since March but so far not brought to trial, are sent to their puppets have come into possession of evidence which proves not only what had been done under the Kállay regime, but also that the efforts to get Hungary out of the Axis and over to the Allied side were continued by Hungarian patriots after the 19th of March 1944. In view of a strong line H. M. Government is taking over war criminals I want to ask you: is there anything you could do to bring pressure on the Szálasi "government" to spare the lives of my four friends? A Great Power has certain possibilities which are not usually advertised, and I know that people have been saved from death through them. At this tragic moment, when the Hungarian capital is being wantonly destroyed and tens of thousands of Budapest citizens are dying quite unnecessarily, you may feel that I attach unnecessary importance to the lives of four young men. But they are personal friends of mine, and they are the type of Hungarians who would have a great part to play in the new Hungary. Although I know how busy you are I enclose my account of the Kállay conspiracy. Unfortunately, it only brings up the tale until the end of July. In 'Hungarian Record' I only mentioned Mr Keresztes-Fischer by name because he was already dead then-beaten to death by the Gestapo in presence of his wife. As far as the Hungarian Foreign Office was concerned, the execution of the Allied suggestions was entrusted to the four men whose lives are now in the balance. Please help if you can.

Yours very sincerely, Judith Listowel³²

The letter mentioned Jenő Zilahy-Sebess, Aladár Szegedy-Maszák, István Bede, and Kristóf Kállay,³³ all of whom belonged to the close circle of the Anglophile Judit

³² TNA FO/371/48461 Southern, File No. 26. R. 305/26. /21.

³³ Jenő Zilahy-Sebess was a lawyer who served as an official in the Hungarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs from 1936 and as head of the press department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs between 1942 and 1943. Between 1943 and 1944, he was the head of the Hungarian consulate in Brassó. At the end of 1944, he was arrested by the Arrow Cross Party. After the war, he emigrated to Argentina. Aladár Szegedy-Maszák was an economist, an employee of the Hungarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs between 1928 and 1937, secretary of the Hungarian Embassy in Berlin between 1937 and 1942, and deputy head and then head of the political department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs between 1943 and 1944. After the German occupation of Hungary, he was arrested and deported to Dachau. Between 1945 and 1947, he served as Hungarian ambassador to Washington. He then emigrated to the United States. *Memoirs: Aladár Szegedy-Maszák, Az ember ősszel visszanéz*, vol. I-II (Európa-História, 1996.) István Bede was a diplomat and editor who worked for the Hungarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs from 1929 and was head of the press department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs between 1943 and 1944. He was Hungarian

Márffy-Mantuano. There is no evidence of any effective British protest in this matter, but on 15 January 1945, Foreign Minister Anthony Eden politely but firmly rejected British intervention in a short letter:

Foreign Office, S. W. 1.

15th January 1945

Dear Lady Listowel,

Thank you for your letter of the 30th December in which you ask whether it would be possible for His Majesty's Government to intervene on behalf of four member of the Hungarian Foreign Office who have been arrested by the Szálasi Government. I greatly sympathise with your interest in the fate of the Hungarians but I much regret that there is nothing which His Majesty's Government can do on their behalf. Even if it were not physically impossible for us to make any approach to the Szálasi Government, I feel that it would be very difficult for His Majesty's Government to justify intervention on behalf of these four persons only, since there must be many hundreds or even thousands of Hungarian citizens who are in a similar position.

*Yours sincerely, Anthony Eden*³⁴

In the end, everyone mentioned above escaped the Arrow Cross regime, although Aladár Szegedy-Maszák was sent to the Dachau concentration camp (which he also survived). Lady Listowel's tireless activity was demonstrated by her next action. In a letter to the editor published in *The Economist* on 13 January 1945, she openly defended Béla Miklós Dálnoki, Prime Minister of the Provisional Government, against accusations of collaboration with the Germans and the Arrow Cross Party, and she accused the editor of the prestigious and influential British newspaper of misrepresenting the situation in Hungary:

Sir, in your December 30th issue you describe the Provisional Hungarian Government formed in Debrecen as "a queer coalition of the local Darlans and the parties of the Left." Do you refer as "Darlan" to General Béla Miklós, a highly respected Hungarian soldier who dared express anti-German views even at the time of Munich? Or to General Vörös, who escaped from a Nazi prison to go over to the Russians and on Horthy's instructions called on the Hungarian Army to join the Red Army and fight the Germans? Or do you reserve this epithet for Count Géza Teleki, only son of the late Count Paul Teleki, who preferred death to condoning the march of the German Army through Hungary in April 1941, and is regarded as a martyr by Hungarians of all parties? His son, a scientist of note, represents what is best in Hungary's conservative elements.

ambassador to London between 1947 and 1948. He did not return from London, first becoming an active member of the Hungarian emigrant community in England, then editor and head of the editorial office of Radio Free Europe (Radio Liberty) in Munich from 1955 to 1974. Kristóf Kállay was a diplomat and the son of Prime Minister Miklós Kállay, serving as his private secretary between 1942 and 1944. In 1946, he emigrated to Rome and worked as an official for the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and as the Vatican ambassador of the Order of Malta. In 1997, he returned home with his family and established the Kállay Collection in Nyíregyháza.

³⁴ TNA FO/371/48461 Southern, File No. 26. R. 305/26. /21.

The Economist betrays lack of information of the real forces operating inside Hungary when it ignores: (1) the deep-rooted constitutional sense of the Hungarian people, who would never respect a government unless it had legal status. The Miklós Government was appointed by the Presidium of the Provisional National Assembly, temporary repository of Hungary's national sovereignty. Apparently, The Economist is also unaware of (2) the long tradition of communal elections in Hungary. In the Russian liberated parts of these were recently held by secret ballot and were a great success. Characteristically they did not return advocates of wild solutions, but men who represent the real wishes of the Hungarian people. In Hungary, the Soviet Military Authorities have made good Mr Molotov's promise that Russia would not interfere with the internal structure of the countries under her control.

Yours faithfully, Judith Listowel³⁵

The response from the editor of *The Economist* pointed out how subjective Lady Listowel's view of events was and contended that she did not have access to accurate information:

The Economist did refer to General Béla Miklós, the Premier of the Hungarian Provisional Government, as a "local Darlan." Lady Listowel has apparently missed the meaning of "Darlanism" or forgotten the role played by Admiral Darlan. The French prototype, too, was a "highly respected soldier" and went over to the Allies after he had collaborated with the Germans. However, unlike Horthy, he had not been Hitler's full fighting ally. Nor is the argument about the Hungarian elections very convincing. The Debrecen National Assembly's "legal status" is a piece of political fiction, if only because no parliamentary elections has taken place. That the communal elections were held by secret ballot is highly encouraging; but it would be interesting to know their result and the votes which the parties represented in the Assembly received. On these points The Economist admits "lack of information," because no data on the results of the election have so far been published. Lady Listowel's "information of the real forces operating in Hungary" seems to show the same gap.

Editor³⁶

Carlile Aylmer Macartney, then the Foreign Office's leading expert on Hungary, made comments on the matter that were largely identical to those of the editors of *The Economist*. Between 1942 and 1946, he annotated and commented on almost every foreign affairs document relating to Hungary.³⁷

³⁵ TNA FO 371/48461, Southern, 1945, Hungary, File No. 26.-with minutes of Carlile Aylmer Macartney.

³⁶ TNA FO 371/48461, Southern, 1945, Hungary, File No. 26.-with minutes of Carlile Aylmer Macartney.

³⁷ On Carlile Aylmer Macartney's activities at that time, see: Róbert Barta, "Történész a Foreign Office szolgálatában: C. A. Macartney (1895–1978) tevékenysége és írásai Magyarországról," in *Diplomata írók – író diplomaták*, ed. Attila Bárány and Gábor Pusztai (Debreceni Egyetem, 2018), 131–146.; Róbert Barta, "A Historian in the Service of the Foreign Office. C. A. Macartney (1895–1978) and his writings on Hungary," *Acta Neerlandica* 15 (2019) 163–184.

Outline and summary

Between 1944 and 1954, Lady Listowel, who was increasingly active as a writer, was blacklisted in the Soviet bloc for publishing the fiercely anti-Soviet and anti-Communist weekly *East Europe and Soviet Russia*, much as she had been declared an undesirable person in Nazi Germany after 1932. The weekly, which can be considered a continuation of the press review *Soviet Orbit* published for internal use by the Foreign Office in 1944, was not merely a Cold War mouthpiece, but it constantly mocked the Soviet system.³⁸ One issue of the weekly, for instance, which was distributed in 41 countries, published an article entitled *Academy of Nonsense*, according to which a female member of the Soviet Academy of Sciences was convinced that it was possible to live for 150 years if one took a champagne bath every day.³⁹ Lady Listowel's brother, Tamás Márffy-Mantuano, was removed from the Hungarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 1948 for political reasons. He subsequently chose to emigrate and, as a result, he and his sister soon came to the attention of the Hungarian security services. István Ötvös, author of a study on the unsuccessful attempt to recruit Tamás Márffy-Mantuano, points out that in 1953, the Hungarian state security services established and treated as fact that Lady Listowel was not only a central figure in the Hungarian fascist émigré community in London, but also an agent of the British secret service, whose English-language magazine constantly slandered Hungary.⁴⁰ The London branch of the Hungarian State Protection Authority (ÁVH)⁴¹ began monitoring Lady Listowel and the magazine's editorial staff, simultaneously attempting to gather information about Lady Listowel in Hungary. They took a statement from Pál Ignótus, the son of the founder of *Nyugat* (West, a major cultural and literary journal in Hungary in publication between 1908 and 1941), who was sentenced to fifteen years in prison in 1950 on fabricated charges in the trial against Árpád Szakasits and his associates. According to the presumably forced testimony, Judith Listowel had been active in London during the war as a supporter of the Horthy regime and had had connections not only with pro-government conservative circles but also with Labour politicians.⁴² According to Ignótus, Lady Listowel's extensive network of social connections in England made this circle quite diverse. She was in constant contact with one of the editors of the *Daily Herald*, György Barcza, the former ambassador to London, and with the leaders of the American Hungarian National Committee,

³⁸ More on this: John Jenks, *British Propaganda and News Media in the Cold War* (Edinburgh University Press, 2006), 27–61. 108.

³⁹ "Judith, Countess of Listowel." *The Telegraph*, 22 July 2003. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/1436725/Judith-Countess-of-Listowel.html> (Downloaded on September 24, 2018.)

⁴⁰ Állambiztonsági Szolgálatok Történeti Levéltára (hereinafter ÁBTL) 3. 2.4 K-1019, 10–11. Notes, 2 July 1953. Quoted by Ötvös, "Államvédelem a kalapszalonn nyomában".

⁴¹ For more information on Hungarian intelligence operations in England after 1945, see: János Rainer M., "Kémeink az Oxford Streeten. Esettanulmányok a magyar hírszerzés történetéből, 1957–1967," in *1956-os Intézet Évkönyv IX* (1956-os Intézet, 2001), 69–86.

⁴² Pál Ignótus notes in prison, 1950. ÁBTL 3. 2. 4 K-1019. Quoted by Ötvös, "Államvédelem a kalapszalonn nyomában," 47–65.

so she had known Tibor Eckhardt and the aforementioned Aladár Szegedy-Maszák. In addition to a few individuals associated with the social democrat Károly Peyer, Viktor Kruchina, who had served as deputy head of the Military Political Department before his emigration to England, and Viktor Sztankovich, a British intelligence agent in Hungary during the war, also had a place in Lady Listowel's political salon. General Sir Ian Jacob, political supervisor of the BBC's European continental and overseas broadcasts, also belonged to this circle, which somewhat supported Lady Listowel's alleged connections to the British secret service. According to Ignotus, everyone in this circle was clerical to some extent and agreed, when it came to foreign policy, that Great Britain and Germany should be pacified after the war, even if it meant supporting German reconstruction and rearmament on an anti-communist basis. Ignotus's notes provide insight into the connections with the Hungarian embassy in London. Lady Listowel was allegedly also in contact with Tamás Szabó, the embassy secretary, who was considered a confidant of former Prime Minister Ferenc Nagy and who had defected in the summer of 1947 after the outbreak of the Hungarian Brotherhood (Magyar Közösség) affair and Nagy's resignation. Géza Luby, embassy secretary and confidant of Ambassador István Bede, also belonged to Lady Listowel's inner circle, though Bede's relationship with Tamás Szabó was far from cordial. Later, Gábor Pulay, who replaced Géza Luby, also appeared in Lady Listowel's circle, proving that despite the personnel changes at the embassy, Judith Listowel had continuous access to information about the Hungarian diplomatic mission. This made her a suspect in every respect. In addition, Viktor Chornoky, Zoltán Tildy's son-in-law, stated during one of the hearings that he had corresponded with Judith Listowel regarding Zoltán Tildy's departure abroad.⁴³

Judit Listowel's activities in England after 1945 caused problems not only for the Hungarian communist regime but also for Moscow, as the press outlets *Soviet Orbit* and *East Europe and Soviet Russia*, while not decisively, to some extent counteracted and reduced the impact of Soviet propaganda abroad and helped strengthen anti-Soviet sentiment among the Western European and American public and among Eastern European emigrants. For this reason, Judith Listowel's neutralization, or at least her surveillance, was to be achieved by recruiting her brother, who was blackmailed under the pretext of a family reunification request. According to state security documents, information had been gathered on Tamás Márffy, referred to by the code name "Ajtay," since 1952. According to a 1954 state security report, "We have been dealing with this case for two years, as we have the opportunity to make contact with him through his nine-year-old son living in Hungary and his father-in-law, and through him we can obtain important information about the object controlled by his sister. Their goal is to take their child and father-in-

⁴³ Details of the trial against Viktor Chornoky: Szűcs András, *Az akasztófa két oldalán. Chornoky Viktor és Szász Béla*. (Unicus Műhely, 2007), 110. Quoted by Ötvös, "Államvédelem a kalapszalonn nyomában," note 7.

law to London.”⁴⁴ The goal, thus, was to use her brother (by refusing to grant his young son, who was living in Hungary, permission to leave the country) to gain access to Judit Listowel’s political salon and influence the newspaper *Soviet Orbit*. The recruitment of Tamás Márffy ultimately became pointless, because in the fall of 1954, *Soviet Orbit* and *East Europe and Soviet Russia* ceased publication due to distribution difficulties. At the same time, Judit Listowel effectively pressured the Hungarian authorities using her ex-husband’s political connections with the Labour Party. As a result, during his final visit to the Hungarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 1955, the first secretary of the British Embassy in Budapest mentioned the pending case of Tamás Márffy-Mantuano’s son, and Lord Listowel sent a letter to Mátyás Rákosi. This forced the Hungarian counterintelligence service to write an apologetic explanatory report to the Minister of the Interior and Rákosi, and in 1955, the case was finally closed. Tamás Márffy-Mantuano’s son was finally allowed to leave the country with special permission in the spring of 1956.⁴⁵

During the 1956 revolution, Judith Listowel traveled to the Austrian Hungarian border and attempted to cross it to reach Budapest. However, a driver warned her that Soviet soldiers were shooting people indiscriminately, so she returned to Austrian territory. After the revolution was crushed, like C. A. Macartney, she visited the camps of Hungarian refugees in Austria and published a lengthy article based on her interviews in two parts in the American *Saturday Evening Post*. In this article and in later writings, she argued that the West had been too pre-occupied with the Suez Crisis, which had been unfolding at the same time, and therefore had failed to grasp the true message of the Hungarian revolution, namely that “the spirit of the people cannot be broken.”⁴⁶ This explains why she was denied entry to Hungary until 1964 and why she preferred to visit Poland until the late 1980s. Although she visited Hungary several times after the fall of communism and even received some compensation for her family’s nationalized property, she remained an intense supporter of Hungary throughout her life in the United Kingdom. She was an active participant in the events of the *Anglo-Hungarian Society* and the *Oxford-Hungarian Society*, and she regularly attended the commemorations held by the Hungarian Embassy and the Hungarian Cultural Centre in London on 15 March and 23 October. Mátyás Sárközy also mentions this in his diary entries: “Lady Listowel, at the age of ninety-nine, still came to the Hungarian Embassy’s March 15th celebrations four years ago. At the reception, there were only two chairs standing by the wall, one occupied by Győző Határ and

⁴⁴ Jelentés, 1954. március 26. BM II/1. alosztály. ÁBTL 3. 2. 4 K-1019, 74–75. Quoted by Ötvös, 2012. Note 9.

⁴⁵ According to information from *The Telegraph*, in 1956 Judith Listowel persuaded her sister-in-law to write a letter directly to Khrushchev about her son’s case. *The Telegraph*, 22 July 2003. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/1436725/Judith-Countess-of-Listowel.html> (Downloaded on 24 September 2018.)

⁴⁶ Judith Listowel, “Hungary’s Terrible Ordeal.” *Saturday Evening Post*, 6 January 1957. 22–23. 12 January 1957. 26–27.

the other by Judit Márffy. 'Who are you?' the old lady asked Győző in a sharp, shrill voice. 'I am Győző Határ, a writer,' came the reply. 'It's no use telling me. My hearing aid isn't working again,' said the countess, waving her hand dismissively."⁴⁷

Judith Listowel (Judit Márffy-Mantuano) died on 15 July 2003, three days after her one-hundredth birthday, at her home in England.⁴⁸ The life and work of Judit Márffy-Mantuano (Judith Listowel) offer examples of how, in the first half of the twentieth century, individuals emerged from Hungarian aristocratic circles who defied social conventions, chose professions that were despised by many (journalism), engaged in modern sciences (economics, sociology), and considered studying abroad important. The latter was not far from the values of the Hungarian aristocracy, nor was their respect for Catholic tradition, which did not prevent many of them from sympathizing with more radical, left-wing liberal ideas. In the case of Judit Márffy-Mantuano, all this was framed by an unusual career path in many respects, as her marriage to William Hare in the mid-1930s tore her away from the traditional world of the Hungarian aristocracy. Through her extensive travels and her work as a journalist, she not only came into personal contact with famous politicians and public figures of the time but also developed her worldview and way of thinking. She brought her conservatism and deeply held Catholic faith from home, which she found compatible with support for moderate reforms and changes and the modern ideal of a career-building woman. Her opposition to Nazism, fascism, and Bolshevism clearly predestined her to join the pro-Western elite of the Horthy regime before 1945. Through her activities in England, she attempted to represent Hungarian interests that were important to her, especially during the war years, when she probably encountered British civilian and military intelligence and Foreign Office experts, including C. A. Macartney. After 1945, her uncompromising anti-communism and anti-Soviet stance clearly marked her place among like-minded Hungarian emigrants in England. Judith Listowel, who also made a name for herself as a writer, became an integral part of British aristocratic circles, although this did not mean complete assimilation for her. As her obituary in *The Telegraph* emphasized, she remained a fierce Hungarian patriot until the end.⁴⁹ Lady Listowel played an important role, albeit only as a mediator and from behind the scenes, in ensuring that the Anglophile members of the Hungarian political elite before 1945 were able to appear on the British political and foreign policy scene at all.

⁴⁷ Sárközy, "Vízszintes zuhanás."

⁴⁸ Lady Listowel's only daughter, Lady Deirdre Mary Hare, married John Richard Brinsley Norton, 7th Baron of Grantley, in 1955. The marriage produced two sons: Richard William Brinsley Norton, heir to the barony, in 1956, and Francis John Hilary Norton in 1960. https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/83268685/johnrichard_brinsley-norton (Downloaded on 30 January 2019.)

⁴⁹ *The Telegraph*, 22 July 2003. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/1436725/JudithCountess-of-Listowel.html> (Downloaded on 24 September 2018.)

TAMÁS STARK

**HUNGARY'S WAR CASUALTIES.
FORTY YEARS AFTER LAJOS FÜR
PUBLISHED HIS STUDY "MENNYI A SOK SÍRKERESZT?"
("HOW MANY GRAVE CROSSES?")
IN THE JOURNAL ALFÖLD**

As soon as the fighting ended in Hungary at the close of the Second World War, assessments began to be made concerning of the number of Hungarians who had perished in cataclysm. The first postwar issue of *Magyar Statisztikai Szemle* (Hungarian Statistical Review), published in the summer of 1946, contained a statement on this subject.¹ The author, statistician Árpád Snyder, referred to the difficulty of arriving at any precise figures at the beginning of his study: "The damage statistics survey was intended to provide information on the extent of our material losses, but we have not yet received reliable data on our human losses, and it will probably only be possible to obtain accurate information in this regard in the distant future."² Snyder therefore based his calculations on estimates, but as his study shows, there were specific points of reference for the approximations concerning the number of people who had fallen in battle, the losses suffered by the population of the capital, and the victims of the persecution and deportations of the Jews.

Based on the processed casualty lists, by 31 October 1944, the Ministry of Defense already had comprehensive data on the losses suffered. On this basis, Snyder estimated the losses suffered in the Soviet Union at 100,000. He estimated the number of civilian casualties of the siege of Budapest at 8,000 based on data from cemeteries, medical officer reports, and registry offices. Based on the estimated number of survivors of the Holocaust and the number of Jewish people registered in the 1941 census, he put the losses of Jewish lives at 220,000.

Snyder did not cite any sources when determining the number of military casualties, bombing victims, and deaths resulting from the war after 31 October 1944, the number of people who died after the Arrow Cross had assumed control of the government. He estimated that a total of 72,000 people perished as a result of the aforementioned causes between 31 October 1944 and the end of fighting in April

¹ Árpád Snyder, "Becslés Magyarországnak a második világháború következtében elszenvedett emberveszteségeiről," *Magyar Statisztikai Szemle* 24, no. 1–6. (1946): 1–4.

² *Ibid.* 1.

1945. Hungary's war casualties were estimated at 400,000. This figure referred to calculations for the postwar period. Although Snyder wrote of more specific data in the "distant future," these data were never published, and the communist regime even strictly prohibited the erection of war memorials.

When it came to human losses during the war, emphasis was placed mostly on victims who had adopted antifascist stances and also on the soldiers in the Second Hungarian Army, huge numbers of whom had sacrificed by the Horthy regime on the altar of German-Hungarian cooperation. The official politics of memory did not really address the fate of Hungarian Jews either. Works on their persecution and extermination, such as those by Elek Karsai, were published in small numbers by the National Representation of Hungarian Israelites.

The wall of silence was broken in 1984, during what was considered a softer phase of the socialist dictatorship. In the March issue of *Valóság* (Truth), Mihály Korom discussed the postwar years and, in this context, wrote a few paragraphs about the forced population movements and losses associated with the war. He based his calculations on Snyder's study but supplemented the statistician's data somewhat and concluded that the total loss of life came to roughly 450,000 people. He reached the following conclusion: "The total human loss in the country's territory during the war can be estimated at 700,000-750,000; the increase compared to the previous figures is mainly due to the ethnic persecution in the annexed territories and, to a lesser extent, to the military losses originating from there."³

Lajos Für's essay "Mennyi a sok sírkereszt? Adatok a Magyar Apokalipszishez" ("So Many Grave Crosses? Data on the Hungarian Apocalypse") was the most substantial contribution to the general acceptance and public awareness of the topic. Für intended the study, published in the September issue of *Alföld* (The Great Plain), as a response to an article by Hungarian historian György Ránki titled "Hol van a sok sírkereszt?" ("Where are the Many Grave Crosses?"), published in the 1984/4 issue of *Élet és Irodalom* (Life and Literature). Ránki's article focused on the tragic fate of the Second Army, but he also wrote a paragraph about the country's total losses, stating that they amounted to six percent of the country's population. According to Für, Ránki treated the subject in a disrespectful manner, considering the figures he published to be too low. Für's study went against the official canon of the time regarding the country's role in the Second World War, which, in his view, was embodied by Ránki, the deputy director of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences' Institute of History, among others. He sharply criticised the official view at the time, insisting that "we hardly talked about issues related to the fate of the nation. ... It is precisely this 'one-sided' approach that explains why studies and textbooks discuss only the sad and shocking fate of left-wing politicians, Jews, and ethnic minorities who were directly destroyed with the help of the fascists and their Hungarian servants, despite Hungary's great loss of blood. For these reasons, the national aspect of the consequences of the war has been

³ Mihály Korom, "A magyar népi demokrácia első éve," *Valóság* 27, no. 3 (1984): 1-9, 3.

left unmentioned. ... Relevant writings therefore forget or avoid the basic facts of territorial changes with convoluted reasoning, and they trivialize the historic losses which came with defeat, remaining silent about the devastating consequences for national consciousness.”⁴

In his study, Für attempted to quantify the losses in two ways. He took Árpád Snyder's aforementioned analysis as his springboard, or more precisely, Snyder's statement that Hungary's population would have reached 9.5 million by the end of 1945 as a result of natural growth, but in reality, the country's population was probably between 9.1 and 9.3 million. According to Für, the natural growth of the population which could have been expected was higher than Snyder's estimate, and the country's population should have grown to 9.62 million by the end of 1945. Thus, according to his calculations, the population deficit was between 600,000 and 700,000. “If we add the assumed growth due to migration [into the country] to the 600,000-700,000 shortfall, the figures again seem to indicate that the loss of population in the country according to its post Treaty of Trianon borders was around 900,000,” Für concludes.⁵

Für also arrived at estimates concerning the population loss based on the difference between the results of the 1941 and 1949 censuses. Compared to 1941, there were 111,000 fewer people living in Hungary in 1949. This was the first time in the history of censuses that the country's population had declined over time. The editors of the volume containing the demographic results of the 1949 census emphasize the following in their introductory study: “based on the actual natural increase registered between 1941 and 1949, the population should have increased by approximately 330,000. The total population deficit can therefore be estimated at approximately 450,000, and assuming a more favorable natural growth rate than that actually recorded—similar to the rate between the two wars—it even would have reached 500,000 to 600,000.” According to Für, “however, we obtain the total population deficit when we add the absolute population decline of 111,000 to this, meaning that the final result, the total deficit, can be estimated at approximately 630,000–710,000. Considering the migration balance, the human loss is again around 900,000 or 750,000–800,000.”⁶

Based on the total loss of Hungarians living in the territory of Hungary according to the Trianon borders, Für also estimated the total loss of population in the war zone. Since the population of the country's territory was only about 64 per cent of its population following the First and the Second Vienna Awards and the other territorial conquests made by Hungary during the Second World War, Für estimates that the number of people from the wartime territory of Hungary who perished in the war was about 1.4 million.

The strength of Für's study lies not in his calculations, as these are based on uncertain data and estimates. This is particularly true of the data on natural rates

⁴ Lajos Für, “Mennyi a sok sírkereszt? (Adatok a Magyar Apokalipszishez),” *Alföld* 35, no. 9 (1984): 33–52.

⁵ *Ibid.* 43.

⁶ Für, “Mennyi a sok sírkereszt,” 43.

of population growth, which are based on assumptions. Migration balances can also only be calculated based on concrete data and surveys. Für did not have access to such data and did not delve deeply into the subject. The significance of his study lies in the fact that it made research into war casualties a legitimate topic and extended the circle of victims to include everyone who perished, such as those who died in Soviet captivity. In this way, his essay, which is of little scientific value, became an intellectual precursor to the change of regime.

I myself also began to address this topic in the mid-1980s, but unlike Lajos Für, I attempted to determine the number of military and civilian casualties, victims of the Holocaust, and those who died in Soviet captivity separately based on the available data. Drawing on these figures, I calculated the country's total losses. My first summary work, "Magyarország második világháborús embervesztesége" (Hungary's Human Losses During the Second World War), was published by the Hungarian Academy of Sciences' Institute of History in 1989. The book, written 36 years ago, is still relevant today, but based on research conducted since then and new sources that have emerged, we now know significantly more about the losses, especially the numbers of victims of the Soviet camp system.

Though we unquestionably have more sources and more precise figures today than in earlier decades, it nonetheless merits noting that historians will probably never be able to determine the precise number of Hungarian victims of the Second World War and the Holocaust. The inaccuracies stem from the sources, or rather the lack of sources, and the methods used to arrive at estimates.

The available figures on losses are partial data. When determining and delimiting the total losses, these data must be supplemented with reasonable assumptions and estimates. This calculation method produces varying results, all of which are acceptable within certain parameters.

Military Losses

Based on the casualty records compiled by the Ministry of Defence's No.22 Casualty Department, the most comprehensive report on the number of soldiers and forced laborers who were killed, wounded, taken prisoner, or went missing, was published in November 1945. This report was also included in the "peace preparation" material compiled for the Paris peace negotiations.

According to the November 1945 report, the total losses suffered by 31 October 1944 amounted to 256,431 persons, of which 37,490 were killed, 88,296 were wounded, 5,755 were taken prisoner, and 124,890 went missing.⁷ The large number of missing persons is due to the manner in which casualties were recorded. A soldier or laborer could be registered as killed in action if his comrades were able to show his identity tag. In the absence of this, a missing individual was only

⁷ HM Hadtörténelmi Levéltár, Békeelőkészítő anyag (HM Military History Archives, Peace Preparation Material), Box 3, A/II. 31. p. 309.

reported as a fatality if the death had been seen and confirmed by at least two eyewitnesses. During the war, and especially during the chaotic retreat of the Second Army, it was often impossible to collect identity tags, and there were no witnesses available to confirm the deaths. Therefore, the field chaplains and military grave registration officers who recorded the losses listed the names of those absent for "unknown" reasons in the "missing" column of the reports sent to the Casualty Department.

To determine the number of casualties more accurately, it is worth looking at the losses on an annual basis.

In 1941, 885 soldiers from the 85,000-strong Carpathian Group and the rapid response force fighting in its ranks died in battle. 3,359 were wounded or fell ill, and 280 were missing or taken prisoner.

Nearly two-thirds of the soldiers and laborers on the casualty lists served in the Second Army and the occupying forces. According to data received by the Ministry of Defense's Casualty Department, the total losses of soldiers and laborers sent to the eastern theater of war in 1942 and 1943 amounted to 138,848. Of these, 17,848 were killed, 37,781 were wounded, 2,734 were taken prisoner, and 80,235 disappeared.

Those who disappeared were either killed or taken prisoner by the Soviets. According to Soviet sources, approximately 30,000 were taken prisoner as a result of the Red Army's attack in January 1943.⁸ Ninety percent of those taken prisoner died within weeks in the Davidovka or Marsansk camps. Since almost all the missing persons should be considered fatalities, and some of the wounded also died, the losses suffered in 1942 and 1943 can be estimated at around 100,000.

Most of the victims served in the Second Army, which had a total of 240,000 soldiers and laborers.

The Ministry of Defense's casualty department recorded 18,638 dead, 47,741 wounded, 3,012 captured, and 44,341 missing between January and November 1944.⁹ As there are no reliable Soviet data on the number of Hungarian prisoners of war, we are compelled to rely on Snyder's estimates. In his study, he considered 75 percent of those missing to be dead, citing the intensity of the fighting on the eastern front. Based on this assumption, approximately 50,000 people were killed or died in the battles fought in the Carpathian foothills and along the borders. Based on the surviving documents of the Casualty Department, it is not possible to determine the losses of the First, Second Transylvanian, and Third Armies separately.

Based on the above, of the total losses of 256,431 suffered by 31 October 1944, the number of those killed can be estimated at around 150,000.

⁸ "Magyar Hadifoglyok a Szovjetunióban. Dokumentumok, 1941–1953," Editor-in-chief Éva Mária Varga (ROSSZPEN-MKTTK, 2006), 561.

⁹ Honvédelmi Minisztérium, Hadtörténeti Intézet és Múzeum, Hadtörténelmi Levéltár, Békeelőkészítő anyag (Ministry of Defence, Institute and Museum of Military History, Military History Archives, Peace Preparation Material), Box 3, A/II. 31. p. 309.

From late autumn 1944, as the fighting progressed and the army gradually disintegrated, reports from the fighting units arrived only sporadically to the Ministry of Defense's Casualty Department. It was not possible to process and compile the fragmentary data. The available partial data has been studied by Krisztián Ungváry, János Bús, and Péter Szabó. Based on their research, the number of casualties in the last two months of 1944 and in 1945 can be estimated at 25,000 to 50,000. Most Hungarian soldiers fell in the fighting for the capital.

Together with the victims of the final military operations, the number of soldiers and labourers who died in battle and in captivity immediately after the fighting is estimated to be between 175,000 and 200,000.

Civilian casualties during the fighting

During the last full year of the war, 1944, the fates of soldiers and civilians became intertwined during the fighting that took place within the territory of the country and in its airspace. The first civilian casualties occurred during air raids. Among Hungarian cities, Budapest suffered the greatest losses, as it was hit by almost every wave of attacks. The first major Anglo-American bombing raid on 3 April 1944 claimed 1,073 lives. On 12, 13, and 16 April, bombs fell on the capital again. In May, there were only two attacks on the city, but in June and July there were frequent air raid alerts. There was a break in August, followed by eight more attacks on Budapest in September. The increasing intensity of the air war is indicated by the fact that from 2 December onwards, air raid warnings were no longer issued, with only the radio announcing potentially dangerous flights overhead. A minor alert was ordered if fewer than twelve aircraft flew over the city, and people only had to go to shelters in the event of a major alert. Győr, Sopron, Szombathely, and Szeged were also frequent targets.

The Central Statistical Office's June 1945 survey provides detailed information on the losses suffered by the civilian population. The main results of the survey were published in the first issue of the aforementioned *Magyar Statisztikai Szemle* in 1946 under the title "Quick Survey on the Public Interest Conditions in Villages and Towns." According to the aggregate data for the postwar territory of the country, 44,490 people lost their lives as a result of war actions, air raids, and ground fighting.¹⁰ The most serious losses were suffered by the population of Budapest, with 8,568 deaths.¹¹

After Budapest, the most serious losses were in Fejér County, with 3,940 deaths. 2,059 people lost their lives in Veszprém County, and 1,942 civilians died in Komárom County.

¹⁰ "Tájékoztató gyorsfelmérés a községek, városok közérdekű viszonyairól," *Magyar Statisztikai Szemle* 24, no. 1–6. (1946): 9–20, 15.

¹¹ Kálmán Oszoly, "Nagy-Budapest területe és közigazgatási szervezete," *Városi Szemle* 31, no. 1 (1945): 39–80, 54.

However, these official figures do not include the additional losses caused by the extremely difficult living conditions following the siege. The requisitioning of supplies by Soviet troops led to severe food shortages. Due to poor nutrition, epidemics, and other diseases, one and a half times or perhaps even twice as many people died from hunger and disease as from actual fighting. This is well illustrated by the case of Budapest, where, in addition to 8,568 war deaths, 12,000 more people died of disease in the spring of 1945 than in the same period in 1944.

Victims of the Holocaust

Unlike previous wars, the Second World War was not fought solely for military purposes. To create a “racially” homogeneous German empire, Hitler carried out a series of ethnic purges in the Polish territories occupied and annexed by Germany in 1939. The National Socialist regime waged a separate war against Jews in the name of “racial” ideology.

The secondary literature in Hungary usually puts the number of Hungarian victims of the Holocaust at 560,000. This figure was first published by the Statistical Department of the Hungarian Section of the World Jewish Congress in the second issue of its journal *Statisztikai Osztály Közleményei* (Statistical Department Publications) in 1946. The calculation also appeared in the appendix to Jenő Lévai's *Fekete könyv a magyar zsidóság szenvedéseiről* (Black Book on the Suffering of the Hungarian Jewry), published in 1946.¹²

The calculation, attributed to Zsigmond Pál Pach and Siegfried Roth, was based on the 1941 census, which recorded a Jewish population of 825,000. When the country fell under German occupation in March 1944, the Jewish population of Hungary had already suffered devastating losses. These losses had come with the first deportation targeting Jews, which had been in the summer of 1941, as well as the massacre of Jews in Újvidék (or Novi Sad by the Serbian name of the city) in January 1942 and the losses incurred by the forced labor units (Hungarians defined as Jewish by the laws at the time were conscripted into these labor units, which suffered higher casualty rates than the other military units). In total, some 63,000 Jews had perished by March 1944. In the summer of 1944 and during the months of Arrow Cross rule, 618,000 Jews died as a result of the deportations and atrocities committed under the Arrow Cross regime. Since only 121,000 of those deported returned to the territories that currently belong to Hungary and those that belonged to Hungary during the war, 497,000 Jews were murdered in German extermination camps and, to a lesser extent, during the Arrow Cross massacres in Budapest. The total loss of Jewish life was thus 560,000. The result was first published by Zsigmond Pál Pach in the 26 March 1946 issue of *Új Élet* (New Life).

The data sets compiled immediately after the war rely on a shared method of calculation. In each cases, the losses were determined by subtracting the known or

¹² Jenő Lévai, *Fekete könyv a magyar zsidóság szenvedéseiről* (Officina, 1946), 313–316.

estimated number of survivors from the estimated population in 1941 (a fundamentally correct manner). Thus, the losses were calculated as the difference between the initial data and the total number of people in the capital and the rest of Hungary following the cessation of hostilities, plus the number of returnees. However, since the number of returnees in the calculations ranged between 30,000 and 100,000, while the difference between the extreme values of the Jewish population in 1941 was approximately 160,000, the magnitude of the losses depended largely on the initial data, i.e. the presumed size of the population before the Holocaust. Based on all this, it seems that those who compiled the various data sets determined and systematized the specific numbers of victims (i.e., the number of those deported and killed and those murdered by the Arrow Cross regime) based on the final result derived from the difference between the pre-Holocaust and post-Holocaust populations.

The difference between the prewar and postwar population figures does indeed allow us to arrive at estimates concerning the total number of victims, but the results cannot be considered accurate, as the population in 1941 and the number of survivors can only be estimated within a wide range. The Jewish population in Hungary in 1941 numbered 725,000, but the persecutions affected an additional 50,000 to 100,000 people, because the second and third anti-Jewish laws, contrary to Hungarian tradition and statistical practice, defined who was considered Jewish in Hungary on the basis of so-called race rather than religion. In the summer of 1941, some 20,000 Jews considered “foreigners” were deported to Galicia, which at the time was under Hungarian occupation. The vast majority of those deported had been born in Hungary, and many of them had documents proving their Hungarian citizenship. Very few of those who were deported were able to return to Hungary. Most of them fell victim to the mass murders that began in the region in August 1941.

In the summer of 1944, the approximately 450,000 Jews living in areas of the country apart from Budapest were deported to concentration and extermination camps in Germany. Most of the men of working age were sent to the concentration camps. Approximately 30,000 unarmed Jews were sent to the Soviet battlefield with the Second Army. Most of them lost their lives in January 1943 in the battles on the bend in the Don River. In the autumn of 1944, after the Arrow Cross takeover, Arrow Cross leader Ferenc Szálasi agreed to the “loan” of 50,000 Hungarian Jews. However, the number of Jews driven towards the German border in death marches and transported by train cannot be determined with certainty. From the records of the people’s court trials and burial statistics, we can conclude that approximately 15,000 people perished in Budapest under the Arrow Cross regime as a result of mass murders and inhumane living conditions.

Based on censuses and surveys conducted after the war, senior officials at the Central Statistical Office estimated the number of survivors in the country’s postwar territory to be between 220,000 and 260,000 in 1946.¹³ During the same period, var-

¹³ Snyder, “Beclslés,” 2–3; Lajos Hirling, “Magyarország népessége 1869–1949 között,” in *Magyarország történeti demográfiája*, ed. József Kovácsics (Központi Statisztikai Hivatal, 1963), 236.

ious Jewish organizations recorded 44,000 survivors in northern Transylvania (the territory ceded by Romania to Hungary after the Second Vienna Award), 20,000 in Transcarpathia (which fell under Hungarian occupation), 10,000 in Upper Hungary (the territory ceded by Czechoslovakia to Hungary after the First Vienna Award), and 4,000 in Bačka (or Bácska by its Hungarian name, the area which had been part of northern Yugoslavia but which came under Hungarian control after the German army marched unopposed through Hungary to invade Yugoslavia).¹⁴ Taking into account the territory during the war, the number of survivors was between 270,000 and 340,000. Considering the wide range of estimates of the Jewish population in 1941, the only reliable statement that can be made about the losses is that the genocidal war against the Jews claimed approximately 500,000 victims in Hungary.

Roma victims

The Nazis wanted to exterminate only the Jews, but the Roma were also victims of “racial” persecution. In Poland, Yugoslavia, and the occupied Soviet territories, many Roma were executed by firing squads, and a significant number of them were sent to concentration and extermination camps.

There were many supporters of the disenfranchisement, segregation, and deportation of Roma in Hungary. The so-called “solution” to the so-called “Gypsy question” began after the German occupation. In several counties, lists of Roma were compiled, and in many settlements, after the Jews had been forcibly removed, Roma were locked up in the empty ghettos, but no deportations took place. On 24 August 1944, the Ministry of Defense ordered the establishment of Roma labor battalions. The plans were to form between 50 and 60 companies, into which between 10,000 and 12,000 Roma would have been conscripted. The implementation was halted, and the few companies that were formed were assigned to fortification work. The deportations that resumed in the autumn of 1944 also affected the Roma.

In early November, thousands of Roma were taken from several districts in Baranya, Vas, Zala, and Pest counties, most of them to the Fort Csillag in Komárom. Hundreds died there from starvation and abuse. Some of those fit for work were deported to the concentration camps at Dachau and Buchenwald. In December 1944 and early 1945, gendarmes and Arrow Cross members massacred Roma in several towns, including Várpalota, Lajoskomárom, Szolgaegyháza, and Lengyel.

Archival materials relating to the fate of the Roma are incomplete, and often no written records were made of the atrocities and mass murders committed against them. Due to the lack of data, there is no consensus among researchers concerning the number of victims of the persecution. László Karsai estimates the total number of those taken away for forced labor, deported, and killed at somewhere be-

¹⁴ Tamás Stark, *Zsidóság a vészidőszakban és a felszabadulás után, 1939–1955* (MTA Történettudományi Intézete, 1995), 67–74.

tween 5,000 and 8,000.¹⁵ According to János Bársony and Ágnes Daróczi, the number of Roma victims of mass murders in Hungary may be between 1,220 and 1,600. According to their research, 7,000 Hungarian Roma were sent to concentration camps in Germany, of whom between 2,500 and 3,000 were murdered.¹⁶ According to Szabolcs Szita, the number of victims from the Hungarian Roma community is estimated to be between 5,000 and 50,000.¹⁷

The fate of those who fell into Soviet captivity and were deported

The most important Hungarian source of information on prisoners of war and forced laborers is a five-page report titled “Data on the approximate number of prisoners of war,” compiled in September 1946 by the Peace Negotiations Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for the Hungarian delegation participating in the Paris peace negotiations.¹⁸ Based on the loss registers of the Ministry of Defense and the locations of the units that had retreated to Germany, the authors of the study concluded that “the number of those who fell into Russian captivity was approximately 600,000.”

The basic documents on the deportations of civilians can be found in the files of the Prisoner of War Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Over the course of many years of research, data on 24,000 civilians has been collected from 350 boxes of documents. According to a report prepared by People’s Commissar for Internal Affairs Lavrentiy Beria on 2 February 1945, a total of 31,913 people were “mobilized” from Hungary for forced labor in the Soviet Union.¹⁹ These figures, which partly overlap, represent only a fraction of the civilians deported from what is now Hungary. Based on the records of the Prisoner of War Department and the secondary literature, we can conclude that the number of people deported from Budapest may be in the tens of thousands.

The partial data below are available on the number of civilians who were taken prisoner in the territories that were returned or regained between 1938 and 1941. Based on the research of János Kristóf Murádin, the number of Hungarian and German nationals deported from northern Transylvania and Partium (the territories recaptured by Hungary in the wake of the Second Vienna Award) may have

¹⁵ László Karsai, *Cigánykérdés Magyarországon 1919–1945. Út a cigány Holocausthoz* (Cserépfalvi Kiadó, 1992).

¹⁶ János Bársony and Ágnes Daróczi, *Kali Trash, Pharrajimos, Samudaripen. A romák sorsa a Holocaust idején Magyarországon II* (Cigányságkutató Intézet, 2015), 111, 133.

¹⁷ Szabolcs Szita, *Együttélés, üldöztetés, holokaust* (Korona Kiadó, 2001), 109.

¹⁸ Magyar Nemzeti Levéltár, Országos Levéltár, Az államigazgatás felsőbb szervei, Külügyminisztérium, Magyar Békedelegáció 1945–1947 (Hungarian National Archives, National Archives, Higher Bodies of State Administration, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Hungarian Peace Delegation 1945–1947), XIX – J-1-c. 1945-1947-512-1946. 961–965.

¹⁹ V. B. Konaszov and A. V. Terescsuk, “Berija és a ’malenkij robot. Dokumentumok Ausztria, Bulgária, Magyarország, Németország, Románia, Csehszlovákia és Jugoszlávia polgári lakossága 1944-1945-ös internálásának történetéről,” *Történelmi Szemle* 66, no. 3–4 (2004): 394.

been between 25,000 and 35,000.²⁰ Researchers studying the history of deportations from Transcarpathia (which Hungary seized following the German invasion of Czechoslovakia) generally estimate the number of local residents captured and taken to collection camps at 40,000.²¹ Slovakian Hungarian researcher Attila Simon concluded that a total of approximately 3,300 Hungarians were transported from Slovakia to Soviet camps.²²

It should be noted that the number of Hungarians and Germans from Hungary who were taken into Soviet captivity is not the same as the aforementioned figure of 600,000 soldiers and the largely estimated number of civilians, as there is certainly some overlap between the figures. A significant proportion of the prisoners of war counted by the Ministry of Defense left their units and were taken into Soviet captivity in civilian clothing, i.e., as “civilians.”

Soviet data do not provide clarity in the maze of figures. The available sources are reports prepared by the Main Administration for Affairs of Prisoners of War and Internees of the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs of the Soviet Union, which contain the numbers of registered prisoners.

A summary report prepared in January 1949 presenting data on the total prisoner-of-war contingent published the most important data broken down by nationality. A total of 526,064 prisoners were registered as Hungarian nationals.²³ The list of prisoners registered by the Soviets (more than half a million people in total) in principle includes all persons captured between 1941 and 1945 from the territory of Hungary during the war. Since, according to Soviet regulations, able-bodied civilian men rounded up in the occupied territories were also considered prisoners of war, the Soviet data should in principle also include the number of civilians who were deported. However, the data does not reveal how many of the Hungarian men taken from northern Transylvania, Partium, and Transcarpathia were registered as Hungarian prisoners of war or possibly as internees. Although records were also kept, in principle, of prisoners in Hungarian collection camps, accurate registration took place in Soviet camps. The available sources suggest that the Soviet data cited do not include the number of people who died in the collection camps or during transport.

Since 2021, the 681,995 personal files compiled by the Main Administration for Affairs of Prisoners of War and Internees of the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs of the Soviet Union on Hungarian prisoners have been available online on the website of the Hungarian National Archives (<https://adatbazisokonline.hu/gyujtemeny/szovjetunioba-elhurcoltak>). The files contain the first and last names of the persons registered as prisoners, their dates of birth, the place and

²⁰ János Kristóf Murádin, “Erdélyi magyarok a Szovjetunió kényszermunkatáboraiában,” in *Certamen III. Előadások a magyar tudomány napján az Erdélyi Múzeum-Egyesület I. szakosztályában*, ed. Emese Egyed and László Pakó (Erdélyi Múzeum-Egyesület, 2015), 414–415.

²¹ *Kárpátaljai magyar férfiak szovjet lágerekben*, compiled by György Dupka (Intermix Kiadó, 2017), 8.

²² Attila Simon, “Hazatérésük nem kívánatos,” *Rubicon* 27. no. 5–6 (2016): 61–63, 63.

²³ *MHSZD*, no. 94, 373.

time of their capture, their nationality, the reason for and time of their departure from the camp, and, in the case of death, if the person died in the prison camp and the date and cause of death. The processing of this enormous database has begun, and the initial results of the research indicate that the total number of files does not correspond to the number of registered prisoners, as more than one personal file may have been created for each prisoner. At the same time, the card system does not contain the names of many prisoners who, based on contemporary Hungarian sources, we know were deported. Therefore, based on our current knowledge, the database does not provide a sufficiently reliable basis for accurate estimates of the number of Hungarian soldiers and civilians taken into Soviet captivity.

From the data presented, it can be concluded that the total number of Hungarians and Germans in Hungary who were taken prisoner by the Soviets may exceed the estimate of 600,000 given in the aforementioned study “Data on the approximate number of prisoners of war.” This number may reach or even exceed 700,000. Krisztián Ungváry gives similar figures in his book *Magyar honvédség a második világháborúban* (The Hungarian Army in the Second World War).²⁴ Éva Mária Varga, who has written a monograph on the history of Soviet captivity, estimates the number of Hungarian prisoners sent to the Soviet Union at 541,000, drawing largely on Soviet sources.²⁵ Another expert on the subject, Zsolt Bognár, gives a significantly different figure.²⁶ He also bases his estimate on “Data on the approximate number of prisoners of war,” but he believes that the figure of 600,000 given in the study only refers to soldiers. He therefore adds another 200,000 to this figure, because in his opinion, this is how many civilians were taken prisoner by the Soviets during the fighting in Hungary. To this he adds some 250,000 people who, according to his research, were deported from the recaptured and then subsequently lost territories, as well as between 50,000 and 60,000 people who were taken “prisoner of war” as “Germans.” Thus, the number of Hungarian prisoners taken into Soviet captivity slightly exceeds one million. Although the data are uncertain and estimates concerning the number of prisoners can be calculated in many ways, in my assessment, the calculations of Éva Mária Varga and Zsolt Bognár fall outside the broad limits within which the real but unknowable number of prisoners can be realistically estimated.

We do not know exactly how many people were taken into Soviet captivity, nor do we know their fates. We have no accurate data on the number of those released from captivity. We only have reliable Soviet and Hungarian data on the number of those who returned between 1946 and 1949, i.e. during the period of organized

²⁴ Korom, A népi demokrácia első évei,” 3.; Krisztián Ungváry, *Magyar honvédség a második világháborúban* (Osiris Kiadó, 2015), 476. Korom estimated the size of the prisoner population at 700,000, while Ungváry estimated it at 616,000.

²⁵ Varga, *Magyar Hadifoglyok a Szovjetunióban*, 162.

²⁶ Zsolt Bognár, “1 milliónál több vagy kevesebb? A második világháború időszakában szovjet (hadi)fogságba vetett magyar állampolgárok – katonák és civilek – létszáma, összetétele és embervesztesége a magyar és a szovjet források tükrében,” in *GUPVI, GULAG Magyarok a szovjet lágerbirodalomban*, ed. Zsolt Bognár and Andrea Anna Muskovics (Gulág- és Gupvikutatók Nemzetközi Társasága, 2021)

repatriation of prisoners. According to reports from the Main Administration for Affairs of Prisoners of War and Internees and the minutes of the Debrecen Prisoner of War Reception Committee, the number of prisoners repatriated during this period is estimated to lie somewhere between 200,000 and 210,000.²⁷

We have only fragmentary data on the number of prisoners released from captivity in 1945. Since the primary goal of transporting as many civilians and soldiers as possible was to put them to work in the Soviet economy, sick and disabled prisoners were not needed. On 4 June and 13 August 1945, the State Defense Committee issued decrees ordering the release of prisoners who were unable to work and were being held in camps behind the frontlines and in the Soviet Union. Under the two decisions, some 180,000 prisoners were released, of whom approximately 48,000 were transported home from the Soviet Union.²⁸ Soviet documents also mention that, in addition to the aforementioned decisions, 21,805 people were handed over to the Hungarian Ministry of Defense to form volunteer Hungarian divisions, and 10,352 people who had been captured during the Budapest raids were also released. The total number of prisoners released in 1945 was approximately 210,000.

There are no Hungarian sources to corroborate the Soviet data. Due to the disorganization of the Hungarian prisoner of war administration, no comprehensive records were kept of the prisoners who were released and repatriated. Based on local news reports about the releases, reports from officers at the Ministry of Defense dealing with the affairs of Hungarian citizens in captivity, and memoirs, Zsolt Bognár concluded that only 120,000 to 140,000 people could have been released from the collection camps in Hungary.

Based on the higher Soviet figures, the total number of prisoners of war and civilian internees released or repatriated to Hungary between 1945 and 1949 can be estimated at 400,000–420,000 people.²⁹

It should be noted, however, that neither the Hungarian nor the Soviet data include Carpathian Ruthenians who were repatriated to their homeland, and the data only partially include Transylvanian prisoners who were transported to Romania. Those from (northern) Transylvania were transported to Hungary until 1947, together with Hungarians who were Czechoslovak and Yugoslav citizens. The 7,179 people who were registered by the Main Administration for Affairs of Prisoners of War and Internees in March 1947 as Hungarian prisoners of war with Romanian citizenship were presumably sent to Romania.

It is impossible to determine the exact number of victims of Soviet captivity. The list provided by the Vojennije Memoriali Society, which cares for military graves, contains the personal data of 66,281 Hungarians who died in Soviet prisoner-of-war and internment camps, but this is only a fraction of those who died in Soviet captivity. The actual number of deaths is unknown. Based on an estimated 700,000 prisoners, the number of victims can be estimated as lying somewhere be-

²⁷ HM HIM Hadtörténelmi Levéltár (Military History Archives), 1948. eln. III. Information

²⁸ *MHSZD*, No. 94. (pp. 389, 403)

²⁹ Varga, *Magyar Hadifoglyok a Szovjetunióban*, 176–179.

tween 250,000 and 300,000. This includes those who lost their lives in Hungarian collection camps or during transport, as well as those who died "unnoticed" in the Soviet Union (i.e., whose deaths were not registered).

The total loss

Árpád Snyder, who was the first to calculate the losses, wrote about 400,000 victims in his study published in 1946, but this number referred to the postwar territory of the country. Accepting Snyder's findings, Mihály Korom estimated in 1984 that the total loss of life in Hungary during the war was 700,000–750,000. Lajos Für estimated the loss of life at around 1.4 million. In his study "The Balance Sheet of the Apocalypse," published in 1989, Ferenc Szabó A. itemized the losses of soldiers, civilians, and Soviet prisoners of war, as well as the victims of the Holocaust.³⁰ He thus arrived at the conclusion that Hungary's total human losses could be between 986,000 and 1,090,000. In his book *Magyar honvédség a második világháborúban* (The Hungarian Army in the Second World War), published in 2005, Krisztián Ungváry estimated the total human losses at between 930,000 and 950,000.

The calculations of Ferenc Szabó A. and Krisztián Ungváry can be considered well-founded, as they worked with original sources directly related to the losses.

Based on the data and estimates presented in this study, the total number of victims of war, the Holocaust, and Soviet captivity (calculated for the territory during the war, i.e., including the territories annexed by Hungary) can be estimated at between 850,000 and one million. This result is not significantly distorted by the fact that there is necessarily some overlap between the data reported on the number of victims of combat, captivity, and the Holocaust. Considering the population and territory of the country at the time, only Poland, Germany, and Yugoslavia suffered proportionally greater losses. The nature of the war is reflected in the fact that approximately three-quarters of the total human losses were victims of the National Socialist and Communist regimes.

At the beginning of research into war casualties in the late 1980s, researchers, including me, sought to make their calculations as accurate as possible. However, after decades of studying the sources, it can be concluded that it is worth placing the losses within broad limits, because on this subject, approximate figures which allow for some inaccuracy are more credible than figures which are purportedly precise.

³⁰ Ferenc Szabó A., "Az apokalipszis mérlege," *Valóság* 32, no. 7 (1989): 62–77.

1945 IN THE HISTORY OF HUNGARIAN SOCIETY: INTERPRETIVE CANON AND INTERNATIONAL COMPARISON

1945 was one of the most significant turning points in global and Hungarian history in the twentieth century. The end of the Second World War ushered in a new international order. Though it took several years for the two global poles to emerge, the geopolitical and ideological foundations for their confrontation were already in place in 1945.¹ For the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, including Germany, 1945 meant not only a transformation of the balance of power and the institutionalized international order, but also an interruption of their internal social and political development and the beginning of a new social and political era.² The perception of the rupture was strong at the time, and since then, the significance of the break in continuity seemed to intensify.

However, the interpretation of 1945 or the Second World War as a turning point in Hungarian history is hardly a matter of wide-ranging consensus, neither among historians nor among the broader public. Its significance depends mainly on how we evaluate the two periods separated by this year, i.e., the preceding period and the following decades. Assessments of the interwar period or the state socialist era often highlight, if only implicitly, the significance of 1945, just as historical statements about 1945 or the consequences of the Second World War frequently imply views on the preceding and subsequent periods as well. The common basic structure of the narratives interpreting 1945 is therefore (and this seems unavoidable) that they necessarily deal with Hungarian history both before and after this turning point. In other words, only by presenting the situation “before” and “after” can we show the significance of the changes of 1945 in the history of Hungarian society.

¹ Ignác Romsics, “1945 mint korszakhatár,” *Korunk* 26, no. 5 (2015): 3–8.

² According to Ferenc Laczó’s assessment, from the perspective of German social and political development, 1945 appears to be a turning point in historical narratives, when Germany, after its historical development culminating in Nazism, “got back on the right track” in the second half of the twentieth century. Ferenc Laczó, “Egy végletes Bildungsroman fordulópontja? 1945 német és európai perspektívában,” *Múltunk* 28, no. 1 (2016): 4–18. According to Tony Judt, after the war, the inhabitants of the countries west of Germany gradually, albeit not precisely, returned to something resembling their prewar living conditions. Tony Judt, *Postwar. A History of Europe Since 1945* (Random House, 2010), 39.

In an article on the history of interpretations of 1945, Péter Kende identified two contrasting approaches. One of these, which we refer to here as the “people’s democratic” interpretation (Kende did not use this term), originated immediately after the war. According to Kende, the central statement of this interpretation of 1945 was “what even some non-communist democrats considered to be true in the postwar years, namely that the Hungarian social structures that had existed until 1944 needed radical transformation, and that the changes of 1945, even with the painful experience of Soviet brutality, offered some kind of opportunity in this regard.”³ In contrast, Kende presents another narrative that emerged after 1989, which rejects the former approach and instead sees 1945 and, more recently, also 1944 as the moment of the loss of national independence and a revolutionary upheaval in Hungarian society that broke the social order that had been considered natural until then. Peter Kenéz sees a similar polarization of arguments surrounding the changes which took place in 1945, linking historians’ positions directly to political positions, because, in his view, conservatives consider the breakdown of the pre-1944 order of Hungarian society tragic, while liberal and socialist historians see 1945 as the unfolding of a much needed social revolution.⁴

This “popular democratic” approach interprets the radical transformation of Hungarian social structures in 1945 as an opportunity for democratization. Éva Ständeisky, for example, when outlining the social background of contemporary intellectual/political debates on democracy, provides the following summary of the interpretative framework we refer to as “people’s democracy.” “Another piece of luck was that by 1945, the political and social tensions caused by extreme wealth disparities had been ‘resolved’ by the transformation that followed the Second World War. The gradual expropriation of large capital assets by the state had been completed. (Those legally classified as Jews had already been deprived of their property before 1945.) Almost the entire ruling elite was replaced, and land ownership was transformed. Under conditions of relative enforced equality and balance, it was easier to dream of democracy.”⁵ In this text, land redistribution and the expropriation of big capital, and with it the reduction of wealth inequalities, are presented as an opportunity for democracy, and the previous social structures are cast as hindrances to democratic development. Kenéz echoes this argument: “Hungary needed a social revolution, and that meant, above all, the destruction of the great estates together with the social and political system resting on them. The conquest of the country by the Red Army was the source of a great deal of suffering and misery, but at the same time, that army made it possible,

³ Péter Kende, “Hogyan vált 1945 reményből megosztó erővé?” in *A demokrácia reménye. Magyarország 1945*, ed. János Rainer M. and Éva Ständeisky (1956-os Intézet, 2005), 181.

⁴ Peter Kenéz, *Hungary from the Nazis to the Soviets* (CUP, 2009), 289. On political aspects of the debates, see: István Feitl, “Vita a parlamentarizmusról 1944-1949 között.” *Múltunk* 20, no. 2 (2018): 238–258.; Mária Palasik, *Parlamentarizmustól a diktatúráig (1944–1949)* (Országgyűlés Hivatala, 2017).

⁵ Éva Ständeisky, *Demokrácia negyvenötben* (Napvilág Kiadó, 2015) 17.

indeed inevitable, that this much-needed revolution would be carried out immediately and rapidly.”⁶

In this study, I show that the above conception, which posits a causal relationship between revolutionary changes in social structures and democratization, is heir to a long tradition, the sources of which go back to the contemporary interpretations of 1945. However, when examining the history of the formation of this concept, we may be surprised to find authors, namely from the far right, who shared the basic lines of this “people’s democratic” interpretation. I point out, furthermore, that the validity of this interpretative tradition is seriously questioned when compared with other conceptions, and especially when compared with the history of other countries in the region.

The fundamental lines of the canon

None of the contemporary interpretations threw into question the indisputable fact that the events of “social revolution” that took place in 1945 were caused by external forces. In other words, the obvious rupture was not brought about by internal developments in Hungarian history. Mátyás Rákosi, for example, captured this idea in a speech: “The first thought I want to express when I stand before the working people of Budapest is a word of thanks to the Red Army and its great leader, Comrade Stalin. (Long, enthusiastic cheers and applause; the participants in the mass meeting stand up and cheer the Red Army and Marshal Stalin for several minutes.) If, after so much misfortune, the Hungarian people can once again look to the future with confidence, it is primarily thanks to the Red Army.”⁷ The idea that external forces were needed to get Hungarian history moving again had already appeared less than a year earlier, voiced by a figure who represented ideology diametrically opposed to that of Stalin and Rákosi. In a speech held in 22 April 1944, far-right politician and journalist Kálmán Hubay similarly insisted on the importance of foreign influence in shaping Hungary’s present and future: “Yes: we were happy on 19 March [1944; the day when the German occupation of Hungary began] because we knew that the day of Hungarian liberation had come, because we knew that no foreign enemy horde would trample on Hungarian soil. [...] We knew that friends and allies were coming. They were coming with pure faith and the intention of redemption. They were coming to open the gates of life, development, and rebirth to the Hungarian people. [...] Yes: we thank the Führer of the Greater German Reich, we thank Führer and Chancellor Hitler (shouts, rhythmic: Hitler! Hitler! Hitler!).”⁸

⁶ Kenez, *Hungary from the Nazis to the Soviets*, 107.

⁷ Mátyás Rákosi, “Budapest népéhez. 1945. február 25.” in Mátyás Rákosi, *A magyar jövőért* (Szikra, 1947), 338.

⁸ Speech by Kálmán Hubay at the Grand Council of the Hungarian National Socialist Party held on April 2, 1944, published in *Párt és állam. A magyar nemzetiszocialista párt politikája, programja és szervezete*, ed. Kálmán Hubay (Without P. 1944), 13.

Both speeches offered a positive assessment of the impact of external forces from the perspective of Hungary's internal development, but such an interpretation must somehow address the fact that the changes deemed necessary and implemented from the outside did not occur "by themselves," as if these changes had merely been the result of Hungary's internal development. "We would certainly be happier," Hubay insisted, "[and] our uniforms would fit us more proudly [...] and our enthusiasm would be more ardent if the Hungarian people had been able to fight for their own liberation. We, Hungarian National Socialists, have been working desperately for many years to rise from oppression under our own steam."⁹ Hubay was attempting to refute the obvious arguments that arose in response to external influences with a degree of logical gymnastics. "Let the neo-Kurucs not come now," he proclaimed. "[...] let them not grieve and whine, do not fear for Hungarian independence, freedom, and sovereignty, because why didn't you fear for them when they [...] were being undermined from within by the Jews and Freemasons, the feudal lords and clericals, the servants and the betrothed of the golden calf?"¹⁰

Other interpreters of the events of 1945 also had to confront the fact of external influence. According to István Bibó, one of the most important non-communist critical social thinkers in twentieth-century Hungary, the external origin of change threatened to obscure the "meaning" of change within Hungarian history. "In Hungary," Bibó wrote, "the overwhelming majority of the population associates democracy and liberation with the misery caused by losing the war [...]. This is a danger whose seriousness cannot be overstated. Let us be aware that it is a matter of life and death for Hungary that the collapse of the old world remains liberation, or rather becomes liberation [...] that the liberating achievement of the Soviet army retains its significance for Hungarian democratic development [...]."¹¹ Elsewhere, Bibó summarizes the significance of 1945 in the context of a particularly long historical development as follows: "1945 is not liberation because it brought undisturbed joy and happiness to the overwhelming majority of Hungarian society, as it did to more fortunate nations who prepared for this liberation with serious resistance and helped achieve it with serious participation. It is a heavy burden that we did not fight for this liberation ourselves. But it is still liberation, because the social power relations of Hungarian society, which had been frozen since 1514, have now shifted for the first time, and in the direction of greater freedom."¹² The latter statement, which is completely ahistorical (given that Hungarian society underwent enormous changes between 1514 and the twentieth century) forms the basis for the interpretation that 1945 bore witness in Hungary to a genuine opportunity for democracy.

⁹ Ibid 14.

¹⁰ Ibid 12.

¹¹ István Bibó, "A magyar demokrácia válsága," in István Bibó, *Válogatott tanulmányok*. vol. 2 (Magvető, 1986), 19–20.

¹² István Bibó, "A magyar társadalomfejlődés és az 1945. évi változás értelme," in Bibó, *Válogatott tanulmányok*, vol. 2, 502.

Hubay and Rákosi did not belong to the same political parties, of course, and Bibó represented a completely different intellectual level than both of them, but their statements share a common pattern in that they placed the series of events that occurred at the end of the war within the coordinate system of external forces and internal Hungarian historical development, and in their interpretation, the external forces performed a historical task that was long overdue “from within.” Beyond these summarical, directly political assessments, we can also examine more nuanced formulations concerning the historical developments that necessitated the change brought about from outside in 1945.

Communist historian Mód Aladár’s train of thought places the significance of 1945 in a hundred-year perspective: “One hundred years ago, the leading class in social transformation and the struggle for independence was the county landowners and intellectual nobility. The interests of the landowning class prevented the complete liberation of the serfs, and thus the mobilization of the entire Hungarian people in defense of the national cause, and so the struggle for independence in 1848, failed. Apart from a brief interruption in 1918–1919, reactionary forces relying on foreign powers ruled Hungary unchallenged for nearly a century, and it was precisely this fact that made the completion of the 1848 revolution a central issue for the progressive classes and the best of the Hungarian people, as an essential condition for any further national and social progress. [...] Feudalism, however, was replaced by the rule of large landowners in alliance with big capitalists, big banks, and big industry, and thus freedom and national independence required not only the abolition of feudalism, but also the abolition of the reactionary rule of big capital. [The] Hungarian working class, led by the Communist Party [...], returned to 1848. It started from the realization of the goals of Kossuth, Petőfi, and Táncsics, from the modern completion of 1848 [...] and linked the workers’ struggle against reaction in the truest sense with the struggle of the entire nation, the struggle of the entire Hungarian people. Over the past three years, with land reform, the enactment of political freedoms, the creation and defense of a democratic republic, the democratization of government and legislation, political leadership, and finally the nationalization of big banks and big industry, it has not only fulfilled but exceeded the goals of 1848. But this does not mean that our achievements are no longer under threatened. Reactionary, imperialist interests around the world are dreaming of a new world order.”¹³

According to Mód, the turning point that emerged in 1945 was the fulfillment of a historical task that had been pending since 1848. The “reaction” that made social revolution impossible was an ally of foreign, “alien” forces, and therefore, the achievement of national independence became a prerequisite for the victory of social revolution. 1945 and its consequences thus fulfill both tasks at once, even if the composition of the reaction had changed over time, because “big capital” had joined the large landowners in the meantime. Mód reinterprets Hungary’s anti-Habsburg tradition of independence in a manner that links it to the communist

¹³ Aladár Mód, *Pártharcok és a kormány politikája 1848–49-ben* (Szikra, 1949), Introduction.

program and the steps taken to Sovietize Hungarian society (land distribution, nationalization, dispossession, etc.), which thus become national issues and quasi-national achievements.

József Révai, the leading communist ideologue, performed the same operation (on which Mód actually builds) in his studies on the Reform Era, 1848, and populism. Révai interpreted his topics in a similar trajectory of historical development. In the preface to his 1948 volume, in which he strove to integrate the popular movement under communist leadership into national narratives, he openly stated that his historical conceptions served political goals, because “the revival of the historical past was not an end in itself for me, but a political necessity.” He also insisted that the purpose of his writings was “to serve the struggles of the present.”¹⁴ On the other hand, according to his view of history, the reactionary political actions represented by dates distanced the Hungarian people from their 1848 Hungarian identity; “We have strayed very far from that Hungarian identity since 1867, 1914, and especially since 1941.”¹⁵

The statements in the 1949 Mód text regarding the achievement of national independence or the “creation of a democratic republic” and even more so those regarding “freedom rights” almost seem unintentionally ironic from today’s perspective. More importantly, however, the image of historical enemies presented in the list of “feudalism,” “large estates,” “big capital,” and “big capitalists” differs terminologically from Hubay’s list (“Jews and Freemasons,” “feudalists and clericals,” “servants of the golden calf”), but it largely serves to designate the same social groups. Many people, both (would-be) historians and ideologues, presented the trajectory of the history of Hungary from 1848 and 1945 based on the images of enemies identified by Mód, albeit with variations.

Bibó offered an interpretation of the historical development that was finally brought to a close by the revolutionary transformation of 1945 that bore strong affinities with Mód’s interpretation. “The catastrophe,” Bibó wrote, “began with the death of [King] Matthias and the definitive rise to power of the landed aristocracy, escalated with the [defeated György] Dózsa revolution, and was sealed with the disaster at Mohács and the Habsburg monarchy that grew out of it.”¹⁶ Mód also developed a longer-term interpretation of the Hungarian historical trajectory that shows many parallels with Bibó’s statements.¹⁷ Despite their differences (and differing political positions), Bibó and Mód agreed that Hungarian history prior to 1945 represented a cycle that had to be broken in a revolutionary manner.

This latter idea, however, was not found exclusively in the writings of authors who were traditionally considered to be on the left in terms of their political leanings. The same view of society and history also appears in the works of authors considered to be on the extreme right, such as an Arrow Cross ideologue with a winding political career. Right-wing ideologue Dr. Ödön Málnási (who bore the

¹⁴ József Révai, *Marxizmus, népiesség, magyarság* (Szikra, 1948), 3.

¹⁵ Ibid 4.

¹⁶ Bibó, “A magyar társadalomfejlődés és az 1945. évi változás értelme,” 496.

¹⁷ Aladár Mód, *400 év küzdelem* (Szikra, 1945). The work saw seven editions by 1954.

title “Vitéz” as a member of the so-called Order of Vitéz, a Horthy-era honorific awarded for wartime service) offered the following portrait of the Hungarian landed class: “The pseudo-gentry, buried in its view of life of 1867, lost touch with the ethnic Hungarian peasantry, shunned any extension of rights, land reform and social policy [...]. Lacking a perspective on world history and insensitive to the great transformation taking place in Europe, it was unable to play a role in the work of building national development. It became nothing more than the mandarin bureaucracy of the ruling party of the day.”¹⁸ The theme of the stagnation of Hungarian social development before 1945 and the inadequacy of the elites is also fundamental for Bibó and Hungarian novelist and historian László Németh, with only minor variations compared to Málnási, but expressed at a higher intellectual level. For Németh (the most influential essayist of the populist movement) as for Málnási, the 1867 Compromise marked a turning point in the development of the Hungarian elites: “The Habsburg dynasty sublet half of its oppression to the Hungarian pseudo-elite, which (since the Hungarian people remained in opposition) had to involve more and more renegades from the weakest or most indifferent ‘peoples’ of the country: Swabians, Slovaks, and Jews.”¹⁹

This statement by Németh, who cannot be classified as either right-wing or left-wing, about the pseudo-elite strikingly rhymes with Málnási’s concept of the “pseudo-gentry.” However, Németh’s basic criticism of the interwar elite on ethnic and “quality” grounds was shared not only by Málnási, but also, of course, by other “populists.”²⁰ Bibó also agreed with Németh when he wrote in his study on the idea of a distorted Hungarian character. He cites “Kisebbségben” (In the Minority), Németh’s most famous essay. “As László Németh asks,” Bibó writes, “we must find out ‘where the Hungarian lost itself in the Hungarian.’”²¹ Although Bibó methodologically surpasses Németh’s approach to the problem of character and assimilation, he nevertheless considers Németh’s “fundamental perception of crisis to be deeply true and authentic.”²²

The basic themes of pre-Second World War far-right social criticism thus coincide strikingly with the ideas of authors considered “populist” or even communist. “But even the name socialism,” Málnási writes, “makes the leaders of the moment shudder, and they honor any representative of efforts to change the dangerous stagnation of society with veiled or open accusations of communism.” Málnási continued: “Those who advocate secret suffrage, land reform, and capital credit reform are honored with the label ‘communist.’ The nation’s centuries-old, outdated political system and the unsolved social problems that may end up de-

¹⁸ Ödön Málnási, *A magyar nemzet őszinte története* (Cserépfalvi, 1937), 222.

¹⁹ László Németh, “Szekfű Gyula,” in László Németh, *Kisebbségben* (Magyar Élet, 1942), 218.

²⁰ For more on Németh and Bibó’s kind of socialist commitment to social justice, see: János Rainer M., *Újratervelés. Szocializmus Magyarországon a 20. században* (Osiris Kiadó, 2023), 44–55, 58–61.

²¹ István Bibó, “Eltorzult magyar alkat, zsákutcás magyar történelem,” in Bibó, *Válogatott tanulmányok*. vol. 2, 571.

²² Ibid 572. On the similarities between Bibó and Németh’s reflexions, see: Balázs Trencsényi, *A nép lelke. Nemzetkarakterológia viták Kelet-Európában* (Argumentum, 2011), 463.

stroying the nation prompted even the best of the nationalist elements to engage in thorough, systematic organization and prepare for a major social surgical operation.”²³ Although Málnási’s writing skills (in addition to his other activities, he also worked effectively as a political communications expert who helped build the image of Ferenc Szálasi, who was imprisoned in 1938, as a martyr²⁴) cannot be compared to those of Németh, Bibó, or even Mód, his judgment of the nation’s “centuries-old outdated political system” and the need for “social surgery” to solve social problems (and even the considerations that should guide such intervention) follow the pattern one finds in the Németh’s, Bibó’s, and even Mód’s writings.²⁵

One even finds similar texts by leading far-right politicians, not just authors in quasi-intellectual roles such as Málnási. In the writings of Béla Imrédy, a politician and economist who served as Prime Minister of Hungary from 1938 to 1939 and emerged as a leading figure on the far right, one also finds elements that present Hungarian society in the first half of the twentieth century in a manner similar to Málnási, Németh, and even Bibó. “But let us suppose for a moment that the Jewish question did not exist,” Imrédy writes. “[...] Even then, we would still have to face extremely serious problems. We must not forget that Hungarian life still has certain feudal-patriarchal features, and that nowhere else is the horizontal stratification of society as strong and almost insurmountable as it is here.”²⁶ Imrédy’s ideas concerning the political program required to transform Hungarian society were based on these contentions. “If the nation wants to survive,” he said in a speech held in early 1939, “it must be divided proportionally. There is no place within the nation for castes, class divisions, birth privileges, or arrogance [...]. We want to build a new Hungary based on the unity of the people, and we want to pass it on to our descendants.”²⁷ Imrédy, who was serving as Prime Minister when he held this speech (even if he was on the verge of falling from power), was essentially repeating the clichés of the socially critical thinking of the era. At the time of the speech, Péter Veres, president of the National Peasant Party after 1945, expressed similar ideas about the search for social justice, linking socialist goals with a racial perspective. According to his point of departure, true nationalism, a nation based on a race that is not divided by class boundaries, can only exist under socialism: “Due to their class inhibitions, the upper classes fail to see that a true racial community cannot be built on a people beaten and torn apart by wealth disparities,

²³ Málnási, *A magyar nemzet őszinte története*, 232–233.

²⁴ Rudolf Paksa, *Magyar nemzeti-szocialisták. Az 1930-as évek új szélsőjobbaldali mozgalma, pártjai, politikusai, sajtója* (MTA BTK TTI – Osiris, 2013), 127.

²⁵ Málnási’s vision of history even matches the later canonized communist historical narratives in some parts, such as his sharp condemnation of Werbőczy, a famous legal codifier of the sixteenth century. Gergely Romsics, “Történetpolitikai gondolkodók,” in *A magyar jobbaldali hagyomány*, ed. Ignác Romsics (Osiris, 2009), 444–447. On Málnási biography: Gábor Tabajdi and Krisztián Ungváry, *Elhallgatott múlt. A pártállam és a belügy* (1956-os Intézet, 2008) 242–261.

²⁶ Béla Imrédy’s memorandum to the Prime Minister, March 1937, in *Imrédy Béla a vádlottak padján*, ed. Sipos Péter (Osiris, 1999), 445.

²⁷ “Imrédy Béla beszéde a Magyar Élet Mozgalom nagygyűlésén. 1939. január 6.” in *Imrédy Béla a vádlottak padján*, 506.

violence, and ignorance. In our case, this is particularly true, because the most Hungarian tribe, the peasantry, is at the bottom.”²⁸

The approach illustrated here through the texts of authors who espoused ideas that fell on very different places on the political spectrum (and who once actually fought against each other in the world of political action) is still well known today. We call it “popular-democratic” because its starting point is, in a sense, the alleged need for the, assumed revolutionary, liberation of the “popular” strata, historically considered subordinate, from the strata considered not to consist of “the people.” The idea of the revolutionary transformation of society was based, from a normative point of view, on a substantive conception of democracy in all versions of the “people’s democracy” concept, which could not be mistaken for democracy according to formal criteria (such as the enforcement of civil liberties, the rule of law, the functioning of democratic political procedures) but rather was based on the alleged fulfilment of the (alleged) interests of the “liberated people.”

This liberation, by its very nature, could only be achieved by force.²⁹ Although Bibó did not elaborate on the consequences of his own “people’s democratic” approach in terms of the legal system and violence, he did allude to the fact that social and political transformation cannot take place through democratic procedures based on the majority principle, and he also contended that such a transformation could have a violent side. “This change has never been achieved through elections, voting, majority will, or strict adherence to rules,” he wrote. “Elections can only reflect existing power relations, and the prerequisite for the emergence of democracy is the breaking of feudal power and feudal habits.”³⁰ This is, in fact, a formulation of the paradox that democratic development must be preceded by an anti-democratic overture. However, Bibó did not elaborate on this issue. The stance he adopted, however, did lead Bibó to believe that it was necessary to cement the power of parties he considered democratic into law and to establish a political system that would exclude voters he disliked from having any meaningful representation in the political arena.³¹

Ferenc Erdei presented a much more nuanced picture of society in prewar Hungary than Bibó, and he also offered a more rigorously consistent concept of the nature of the revolutionary “people’s democratic” transformation. He derived the need for a revolutionary transformation of the social structure from essentially the same principles as Bibó. However, Erdei clearly drew conclusions about the rule of law and political freedoms from his understanding of Hungarian society and the significance of the events of 1945. In the summer of 1945, at a famous conference on the nature of democracy held at Pázmány Péter University, he made the following statement: “It would be a huge mistake to seek in the popular democracy of our day the meaning and forms of bourgeois democracy as expressed in classi-

²⁸ Péter Veres, *Szocializmus, nacionalizmus* (Mefhosz, 1939), 237.

²⁹ Máté Zombory, “Demokrácia vita a katasztrófa után (1945–1947),” *Replika* 95 (2015), 31–59.

³⁰ Bibó, “A magyar demokrácia válsága,” 50.

³¹ Bibó István, “A koalíció egyensúlya és az önkormányzati választások,” in Bibó, *Válogatott tanulmányok* vol. 2, 297–333.

cal rules. [...] If we were to interpret the free play of forces [...] as it was interpreted [...] in the liberal bourgeois era [...] it would clearly result in the imminent danger of the liberation [...]. Obviously, this kind of political regime would very quickly jeopardize land reform. If we were to interpret freedom of association, speech, and the press as broadly and without restriction as people did one hundred years ago, we would be giving opportunities to the enemies of the people, which would result in the imminent collapse of democracy. [...] The same consequences would arise if we were to enforce the requirements of general humanity, personal freedom, and the complete inviolability and integrity of acquired rights and property, which are laid down in the classic rules of the liberal era. This would make making radical social transformation impossible. [...] All this would obviously be an impossible wish under the circumstances of our time, and it would result in nothing less than the complete collapse of democracy and the cause of the people. [...] The frontlines are clearly drawn: on one side are the people, peasants and workers and the intellectuals who support them, while on the other side are the enemies, the representatives of the rule over the people, who must be fought against. [...] [D]uring the struggle, not only are people's personal rights, acquired rights, and property frequently violated, but so are the rights and laws themselves."³²

What is remarkable about Erdei's precise and honest statement is not only that he notes the "frequent" violations of civil liberties and the legal system itself and the disregard for the principle of "general humanity," but also the way in which he justifies this by contrasting the "people" with the "representatives of the rule over the people." He obviously proceeds from the assumption that, first, a non-legitimate rule was exercised over the "people" and, second, the elimination of this rule requires not only a change in the political system but also a change in the structure of society. All this makes it necessary and justifiable at least to suspend the legal system and the fundamental principles and practices of classical European legal culture, since maintaining them would "make it impossible to radically transform society."

The "people's democratic" interpretation of the social transformation that took place at the end of the war became canonized after 1945 and defined the circle of authors and works to be included in the canon in such a way that it severed the threads that connected the social criticism of the texts of Erdei or Bibó or even Mód with the writings of authors classified as far-right. Yet the similarities between the aforementioned texts and those of the far-right authors are not coincidental or partial. Rather, there is a high degree of overlap in the structure of the schemas they constructed about Hungarian society, and even the political programs derived from these schemas may have overlapped.³³ Although we can hardly find

³² Ferenc Erdei, "Népi demokrácia. Előadás a Pázmány Péter Tudományegyetemen 1945 júniusában," in Ferenc Erdei, *Politikai írások*, ed. Kálmán Kulcsár (Akadémiai Kiadó, 1988), 322–225.

³³ This overlap is also mentioned by János Gyurgyák, when analyzing the work of a popular publicist close to Imrédy: "It is a paradoxical phenomenon of Hungarian historiography that many of Miltay's and the arguments of the Hungarian 'race protectors,' for example, their

any passages in the writings of authors belonging to the strictly defined “people’s democratic” canon that praised the political program of the extreme right, this is not the case in the opposite direction. For example, in 1966, Málnási, who has already been mentioned, wrote a text in exile evaluating Hungarian socialism that, except for a single sentence, could have been delivered at a meeting of the Patriotic People’s Front. “In Hungary,” he wrote, “not a single worker or peasant longs for the days before 1945, because no one wants to travel third class on the train of life again. Everyone accepted the socialist revolution that took place, even if it came from outside.”³⁴ Málnási backs up this statement with a long list of achievements of Hungarian socialism, namely the development of industry, social security, library visits exceeding, in number, those in the Federal Republic of Germany, and ten Hungarian gold medals at the Tokyo Olympics, which placed Hungary sixth in the medal table. He states that “Hungarian workers are attached to their factories as their own, and if history were to raise the idea of reprivatization once again, they would defend them against the tanks of any Western neocolonial power just as they did in 1956.”³⁵ Overall, Málnási—who, according to the introduction to his booklet published in London, spent twelve years in prison under the Horthy and Rákosi regimes for his socialist political convictions—estimates that at home “no one wants to remove socialism, the vital element of Hungarian life.”³⁶ Placing this in the context of the long-term development of Hungarian history, he assesses that by 1966, “on the whole, the Hungarian people, perspiring at home, had made up for the omissions of sinful centuries by way of socialism.”³⁷ According to Málnási, the Hungarian people “only want to modify socialism with what is missing: freedom.” Málnási thus seems to have remained faithful, in the 1960s, to the basic position he had already represented in the 1930s. However, between these two periods, he also wrote his work *Magyar Márttyrok* (Hungarian Martyrs), in which he commemorated numerous war criminals, both minor and major, starting with Péter Hain (a Hungarian police official who played a role in the security apparatus under the Arrow Cross regime and who was executed in 1946 for his role in wartime crimes).³⁸

Precisely because the “people’s democratic” interpretation was not exclusively linked to the Communist Party or even to left-wing political values, it has been able to survive various transformations since 1945. After 1945, the far-right representatives of the “people’s democratic” position were naturally excluded from the canon, whereas after 1989, it continued to exist in new variations, this time

criticism of the Bethlen system, appeared in Marxist historiography and journalism after 1945.” János Gyurgyák, *Magyar fajvédők*. (Osiris, 2012), 182. Looking back, Milotay summed up his journalistic activities from exile as follows: “I pleaded with and rebuked the ruling classes, the powerful lords of feudal estates and monopoly capital, that sacrifices be made in the interests of popular solidarity and a healthy social balance.” Quoted by Gyurgyák, *Magyar fajvédők*, 181.

³⁴ Ödön Málnási, *A hazai magyarság mai követelése* (Harsona, 1966), 11.

³⁵ Ibid 10.

³⁶ Ibid 12.

³⁷ Ibid 13.

³⁸ Ödön Málnási, *Magyar Márttyrok*. (Interhun, 1999).

excluding from the canon authors who, as communists, had once represented this historical interpretation, such as Mód. During the Kádár era, several authors who opposed the political system, such as Péter Kende and Miklós Szabó, also continued to promote this interpretation of 1945. However, Miklós Szabó, who was known for his opposition to the party state, was aware of the original context of the concept he endorsed. He stated categorically (and after the change of regime, this statement constituted a taboo contention and a break with the new canon of political thought) that Révai had been right in his interpretation of the tradition of independence. It is here that Bibó's view of history connects with that of the communist leader, who was otherwise extremely distant from Bibó politically. Szabó emphasized the influence of these two personalities in the formation of his own view of history. "One [influential figure] was Bibó," he wrote, "whom I have already mentioned and whose assessment is now completely correct, and the other was an author whose assessment is now not correct in the slightest, József Révai. Essentially, he is still the most accurate guide to modern Hungarian history. [...] Révai was the first to give the historical tradition of 1848 a serious standard."³⁹

In fact, this has remained the dominant interpretation of 1945 to this day, and its proponents share the view that the establishment of democracy at the end of the war required a radical transformation of the sociological structure of society. However, unlike Erdei, most proponents of this approach did not think through what the violation of fundamental legal principles, which necessarily accompanies any major restructuring of society, means in terms of democracy. It has also been largely forgotten that the conceptual framework used to interpret the 1945 transformation, which formed the discursive network of political action at the time, did not represent a break with the socially critical discourse that had existed before 1945.

The basic tenets of the "people's democratic" concept (anti-elitist populism) can be further illuminated by comparing this concept with a radically different interpretation of 1945. This interpretation of 1945, represented by the émigré László Péter, could be described as "liberal" for lack of a better term, to use Kenez's typology. Contrasting this "liberal" interpretation with the left-wing "people's democratic" interpretation and the former far-right interpretation calling for a "new Hungary of popular unity" makes the common points between these two even more apparent.

Péter does not present and evaluate everything that 1945 brought in relation to the preceding era, as in the reflections quoted so far. Rather, he considers the transformations that came in this year from the perspective of the establishment of the subsequent dictatorship. Péter is primarily concerned with the question of why the Sovietization of Hungary and other countries in the region went so smoothly in the second half of the 1940s. "People's democracies did not fall from the sky onto

³⁹ "Szabó Miklós," in Ervin Csizmadia, *A magyar demokratikus ellenzék. Interjúk.* (T-Twins, 1995), 72–73.

the Elbe region,” he writes. “[T]hey were not imposed on the resistant population by foreign bayonets, but were established everywhere, without exception, with the active (and how active!) participation of tens or even hundreds of thousands of local people.”⁴⁰ In searching for an explanation for this active participation, Péter also turns to the social conditions that existed before the Second World War, but he does not cite wealth inequality or some form of social oppression as the primary cause. He focuses on public law and certain characteristics of the legal system. He seeks the reasons for the rapid and easy Sovietization in these characteristics, or more precisely, in the absence of certain fundamental civic values in the law.

For Péter, bourgeois transformation is not primarily a transformation of social structure, occupational structure, or wealth distribution. As he explained in a study examining Hungarian bourgeois development from 1848 onwards, “we would be painting a completely distorted picture if, influenced by Marxist conditioning, we were to believe that the transformation of the legal system was merely the ‘legal side’ of bourgeois transformation. In fact, this was not a bourgeois transformation, but a civic one, which meant human coexistence regulated by clearly formulated laws that created legal equality—in other words, civic society.”⁴¹ He explicitly extends his criticism beyond strictly Marxist doctrines to all positions that, like Ferenc Erdei’s, are based on the concept of “social progress,” especially if they understand development as a succession of social formations.⁴²

In his view, Hungary and the other countries in the region were easily Sovietized because their legal systems had always been characterized by the discretionary power of the government and had always lacked any real commitment to the rights of citizens as political equals. These legal systems had also lacked detailed discussion of individual rights and clear affirmation of the self-evident nature of these rights. This—and not wealth inequality, which would have made England at least as susceptible to Sovietization as the countries of Central Europe, if not more so—created the opportunity for governments to quickly subjugate society and individuals after 1945. When communist Interior Minister László Rajk banned thousands of associations without any legal basis, he was merely continuing the practice of the previous governments. Looking at the bigger picture, Péter concludes that “liberal democracy did not exist anywhere east of the Elbe before 1945—not even for a short period of time.”⁴³ Instead of liberal democracy, the region was characterized by etatism. Péter recalls the amusing example of English farmers who, when visiting Hungary in 1902, had seen state intervention in agriculture almost as communism.⁴⁴ He concludes that “the path of etatist economic policy led with minor leaps and detours from Ignác Darányi to Ernő Gerő.”⁴⁵

⁴⁰ László Péter, “Miért éppen az Elbánál hasadt szét Európa?” in László Péter, *Az Elbától keletre. Tanulmányok a magyar és kelet-európai történelemről* (Osiris, 1998), 18.

⁴¹ László Péter, “Volt-e magyar társadalom a 19. században,” in Péter, *Az Elbától keletre*, 157.

⁴² Ibid 154.

⁴³ Péter, “Miért éppen az Elbánál,” 24.

⁴⁴ Ibid 23.

⁴⁵ Ibid 24.

According to Péter, 1945 did not represent a turning point. It was a transition between eras that preserved—and even reinforced in its most unfavorable aspects—the characteristics of the previous era. He refers to continuity, for example, when he writes that “agricultural production also began with state assistance in 1945. The ‘forced cultivation,’ the system of compulsory deliveries, and strict regulations against price gougers, along with many other measures, formed a transition between the pre-1945 rural economy and the post-1948 state control system.”⁴⁶ Alongside this characterization of the years between 1945 and 1948, Péter sees the most significant transformation of 1945—the distribution of land—as more of a problem in the development of liberal democracy than an important step toward it. “Instead of the land reform that had been postponed for decades,” he wrote, “in the spring of 1945, local committees in the liberated country distributed land based on a decree hastily issued by a communist minister.”⁴⁷ Péter’s ideas about liberal constitutionalism did not correspond to the fact that such an important issue was not regulated by a carefully elaborated law, but by a “hastily issued decree.” Péter considered land distribution a serious issue from the point of view of legal certainty. He noted that, “[d]uring the land distribution of 1945, however, it was precisely ownership that became uncertain.” In other words, the values of the legal system that had been guaranteed during the Dualist Era and for most of the interwar period were also shaken. As a result of the land distribution, “the new owner of the land received benefits but became an ‘etatized’ peasant. His situation tied him to the Communist Party without giving him any hope of consolidating his ownership of the land.”⁴⁸

If one compares the “people’s democratic” historical canon with László Péter László’s texts, it becomes vividly clear this canon retained a kind of anti-liberal interpretation that ultimately took a revolutionary stance toward pre-Second World War society, which in its anti-liberalism too dated back to the thinking of the war and postwar periods. This “people’s democratic” narrative obscured even the possibility of a liberal interpretation and indeed remained the prevailing understanding to such an extent that its followers later considered this view of history, formulated according to what Péter referred to as “Marxist reflexes,” fundamentally liberal. Reading the texts of Bibó, Erdei, Málnási, Mód, and others from Péter’s perspective, it also becomes apparent that the efforts to establish a “people’s democratic” canon obscured the affinities that the texts belonging to this canon shared with the views of far-right social critics. From Péter’s liberal perspective, these texts all rested on a shared set of fundamental assumptions, despite the different political values traditionally attributed to them.

The “people’s democratic” interpretation of 1945 attempted to legitimize the rule of the new postwar political elites by linking “democracy” with the transformation of Hungarian social structure in spite of the fact that this transformation

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid 21.

⁴⁸ Péter, “Miért éppen az Elbánál,” 32.

took place in a fundamentally anti-liberal way, relying on a pattern that had already been widely used before 1945. The conceptual pairs of “reactionary” versus “democratic” and “bourgeois democracy” versus “people’s democracy” drew a line between positions and social actors that were considered legitimate in the political arena and those that were excluded from it.⁴⁹ Only from the “popular-democratic” perspective that crystallized in the context of these discursive and political struggles does it appear that the establishment of democracy required the utter reshaping of the previous social structure, rather than the transformation of political culture and the restoration and entrenchment of a civil legal order. Democratic political transformation and radical restructuring of the social structure are only necessarily linked if we understand “democracy” to mean social revolution, as Bibó, Erdei, and many of their contemporaries did.

Hungarian transformation of 1945 in comparative perspective

So far, I have examined the basic premises of narratives about 1945, with a particular focus on the dominant narrative according to which the events of this dramatic year created the possibility of democracy *because* the war had broken the previous social structure, which had not been favorable to democracy. In the discussion below, by placing the Hungarian developments in 1945 and afterward in an international comparison, I throw into question the Hungarian interpretations of 1945, first and foremost about the self-evident nature of the conviction that, in connection with 1945, the question of the possibility of democracy is *causally* connected with the changes to the social structure of the country brought about by the war.

In fact, the developments which took place in Hungary in 1945 fit into a broader European context and become explicitly more understandable when compared to the transformation of some neighboring countries in 1945. Most of the societies of continental Europe, except for the neutral countries, have experienced more than one occupation and political regime change, and the various occupations or state policies have often caused more horror and tragedy than the armies. The forced labor in the war economy, the seizing of property belonging to certain groups and the redistribution of these properties among others, the extreme disruption of everyday relationships, and insecurities concerning food, clothing, and housing were common experiences in all European societies. The totalitarian nature of war, especially in countries that had been occupied successively, also led to the disintegration of the state monopoly on violence. A wide variety of groups and organizations and even individuals used violence against others without being directed by or having to yield to the higher authorities. In some European countries, there were civil wars or at least clashes of a civil war nature for longer or shorter

⁴⁹ Zombory, *Demokrácia*.

periods during the war.⁵⁰ Strategies had to be developed at all levels of society under such circumstances in response to unexpected new experiences.⁵¹ After the war, in response to these challenges (and not in a predetermined way according to some law of European development), the institutions of political democracy were established in Western Europe.⁵²

In fact, the democratization of Europe after 1945 cannot be taken for granted. Much of the secondary literature tends to present it as a natural process, as a natural ordering of European countries that emerged as soon as the forces that had hindered it, most notably Nazism, had disappeared. As Martin Conway has pointed out, this is a teleological reading of the emergence of democracy. Democracy emerged after the Second World War as a result of specific forces and circumstances that varied from country to country, and its general emergence in Western Europe was, in fact, unexpected, given what had come before. Overall, it grew gradually out of the crisis left behind by the Second World War, and it was consolidated from the 1950s onwards through conflicts between different political forces, and also through their compromises, constitutional decisions, elections, and, in some places, referendums. An important role in this process was played by the establishment of an international coordination structure for the allocation of US resources as part of the Marshall Plan, which was a precursor scheme to the Treaty of Rome in 1957.⁵³ In the discussion below, I use international comparisons to further a more nuanced understanding of the factors that may have helped democratization in Hungary in the aftermath of the Second World War. I also consider the factors that hindered this process.

It is worth beginning with some discussion of Germany's postwar dual development. It seems highly probable that Saxony in the GDR, a relatively rich and occupationally bourgeois society, was no more prone to Sovietization than poor and agrarian-dominated Schleswig-Holstein, which, as the poorest of the original Länder of the GDR, nevertheless avoided being transformed into a people's democracy. In this case, whether a given area was Sovietized or not depended on the occupying military presence, not on the inherent structural characteristics of societies or on the area's legal culture or history.

The example of a divided Germany clearly shows that whether or not a given country was Sovietized had little to do with its specific social and political culture. Yet numerous other examples reveal the same thing. The fates of the countries that were in the Soviet zone and those that remained just outside it illustrate this point all too vividly. Stefano Bottoni refers to Greece, Finland, and Austria as

⁵⁰ Judt, *Postwar*, 13–40.

⁵¹ Jan T. Gross, "Themes for a Social History of War Experience and Collaboration," in *The politics of Retribution in Europe. The Second World War and its Aftermath*, ed. István Deák et al (Princeton University Press, 2000), 15–36.

⁵² Martin Conway, *Western Europe's Democratic Age, 1945–1968*. (Princeton University Press, 2020).

⁵³ Martin Conway, "Democracies," in *Europe's Postwar Periods – 1989, 1945, 1918*, ed. Martin Conway et al, (Bloomsbury, 2018), 121–136.

the Central Europe that was saved when he looks at the frontiers of Soviet rule. Each is a separate case, but it is clear that Moscow never actually issued an order to Sovietize these countries. The Soviets in Austria, for example, did not seek to Sovietize the country. They sought merely to exploit its economy. They also never sought to separate Austria from the West in the same way as they sought to separate East Germany. They would have enjoyed the support, had they made such efforts, of the Austrian Communist Party, from which the interior minister in the first postwar Austrian government of the people's front hailed. The Austrian situation was seen in Moscow as part of the diplomatic game on the German question.⁵⁴ Looking at the Central European region, but also assessing developments in Hungary, János M. Rainer expressed a view similar to Bottoni's assessment, stating that "the forced transformation of organic Hungarian structures was in any case in some way in line with the intentions of the top Soviet leadership. For where there was no such intention (in Finland, for a time in East Germany), it did not take place, despite the zeal of the local communist leaders."⁵⁵

The developments in Austria shed some light on the Hungarian transformation after 1945, especially if Czechoslovakia is included in the comparison. If we consider the historical backdrop, interwar Czechoslovakia was more in line with the norms of a liberal democracy than Austria. In Austria, the constitutional amendment of 1929 meant a step in an authoritarian direction, and from 1932 onwards, a clear dictatorial system was established. During the transition, most of Austrian society was indifferent to the elimination of political pluralism and traditional parliamentarism.⁵⁶ Even before the Anschluss, the Austrian *Ständestaat* deprived more than 10,000 people of their Austrian citizenship and confiscated their property. The assets of the banned organizations and associations were also confiscated, and these assets, which amounted to very large sums (and included the assets of the banned trade unions) were then handled in a very chaotic manner on the basis of conflicting laws.⁵⁷ Similar processes did not take place in Czechoslovakia. There was no shift in a dictatorial direction before 1938, although we cannot talk about a parliamentary alternation between parties here either, as there was a permanent coalition of parties, and no government failed by losing its parliamentary

⁵⁴ Stefano Bottoni, *A várva várt nyugat. Kelet-Európa története 1944-től napjainkig*, (MTA BTK Történettudományi Intézet, 2014), 71–74.

⁵⁵ János Rainer M., "Magyarország a Szovjetunió árnyékában 1944–1989," in János Rainer M., *Bevezetés a Kádárizmusba*, (56-os Intézet – L'Harmattan, 2011), 20.

⁵⁶ Miroslav Septák, "Parlament und politische Kultur in der Zeit des Überganges der Republik Österreich von der Demokratie zu einem autoritären Regime," in *Hohes Haus' 150 Jahre moderne Parlamentarismus in Österreich, Böhmen, der Tschechoslowakei und der Republik Tschechien im Mitteleuropäischen Kontext*, ed. Franz Adlgasser et al (Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2015), 241–257.

⁵⁷ Ilse Reiter-Zatloukal, "Repressivpolitik und Vermögenskonfiskation 1933–1938," in *Österreich 1933–1938. Interdisziplinäre Annäherungen an das Dollfuß/Schuschnigg-Regime*, ed. Ilse Reiter-Zatloukal et al, (Böhlau, 2012), 61–76.; Christiane Rothlaender, "Die Durchführungspartei des politischen motivierten Vermögensentzug in Wien 1933–1938, in *Ibid* 77–93.

majority. The parties were also intertwined with public administration.⁵⁸ An authoritarian change only occurred at the end of 1938, when an authorization law in the Czech Republic that remained after the Munich Agreement gave the president and government the right to amend the constitution. The government then banned a multitude of organizations and took control of local municipalities.⁵⁹ In parallel, the dictatorial turn was even clearer in Slovakia, as at the end of 1938, the diet in Bratislava was established through “elections” held with a single-party list, and President Jozef Tiso was subsequently given the right to appoint new representatives.⁶⁰ Yet the conditions in Czechoslovakia before 1938 cannot be compared to Austria at the time, where pensions were taken away and thousands of people were interned.⁶¹

In other words, as this comparison of the circumstances and political constellations in Austria and Czechoslovakia in the interwar period reveals, there is no reason to think that Austria was protected from Sovietization by some attachment to the kinds of legal principles that László Péter considered essential for the rise of a democratic state. The Czech Republic would have been far more likely, given its political traditions in the interwar period, to have shown strong resistance to Soviet-style transformation. Yet Czechoslovakia was Sovietized, whereas Austria, ultimately, was not. Yet one might well have supposed the opposite given their history before 1938, i.e., Czech society should have shown stronger resistance to Soviet-style transformation. And yet the further history of the two countries does not show this. From 1938 onwards, Austrian society, as part of the German Reich, was largely involved in the wartime everyday life of the Nazi state, with everything that entailed.⁶² Meanwhile, Czech society was largely spared violence because no one was drafted into armies and there was no widespread resistance or partisan movement. The public administration and companies, which were integrated into the German war economy, worked smoothly throughout the Protectorate, where the standard of living was even higher than the standard of living in the German Reich during the war years.⁶³ The development of the two countries after 1945 was nevertheless different, because Austria turned towards democratic development despite the dual burden of its *Ständestaat* and Nazi past, while the

⁵⁸ Eva Broková, “Die tschechoslowakische Parlamentsdemokratie und der Parlamentarismus in der Zwischenkriegszeit,” in *Hohes Haus*, 201–214.

⁵⁹ David Hubeny, “Die Beseitigung des Parlamentarismus in der Zweiten Republik und das Verbot der Kommunistischen Partei der Tschechoslowakei,” in *Hohes Haus*, 307–318.

⁶⁰ Milan Zemko, “Rise and Peripetia of the Slovak Parliamentarism in the twentieth Century,” in *Hohes Haus*, 383–395.

⁶¹ Pia Schölnberger, “‘Ein Leben ohne Freiheit ist kein Leben’. Das ‘Anhaltelager’ Wöllersdorf 1933–1938,” in *Österreich 1933–1938*, 94–107.

⁶² Thomas R. Grischany, *Der Ostmark treue Alpensöhne. Die Integration Österreicher in die Grossdeutsche Wehrmacht, 1938–1945* (Vienna University Press, 2015); Gerhard Botz, *Nationalsozialismus in Wien* (Mandelbaum, 2008).

⁶³ Deák István, *Európa próbatétele. Együttműködés, ellenállás és megtorlás a második világháború alatt* (Argumentum, 2015), 47–53.

Czech Republic showed the greatest readiness among all Central European countries for Sovietization.

The paths of these two countries in the postwar years also shed new light on the interpretations discussed above of Hungary's history after 1945. One could begin with the processes that took place in the Czech Republic. Here, similarly to the situation in Hungary, the provisional legislature did not consist of delegates who had won national elections. The delegates, rather were chosen by local assemblies, and only on 28 October 1945, i.e., essentially at a time when general elections were being held in Hungary, which was in a great hurry to establish parliamentarism. The latter only took place in Czechoslovakia in May 1946, under not entirely democratic circumstances, because, for instance, non-Slavic citizens were not given the right to vote. The elections were won by the Communist Party, which at the time was not advocating socialist transformation in the strict sense, but only the nationalization of big business, the protection of small enterprises, and generally a national and democratic revolution. In the Czech Republic, they received 43.25 percent of the vote, 34.46 percent in Moravia, and 30.48 percent in Slovakia. This is the largest spontaneous show of support ever received by communist parties through largely freely cast elections in all of Central Europe.⁶⁴ The legislature then, with the cooperation of non-communist parties, adopted some anti-liberal measures that violated freedoms. When the resolution of the government crisis at the end of 1947 took a clearly anti-parliamentary turn, the non-communist parties protested in vain. The Communist Party managed to mobilize millions of citizens for strikes and demonstrations, and the administration carried out clearly illegal government orders without major setbacks. All this happened without any Soviet troops in the country and, as Czechoslovakia emerged from the war on the side of the victors, without any armistice control commission.

Thus, in Czechoslovakia, the interwar social and political system of which is often described as democratic when contrasted with Hungary during the Horthy era, the liberal legal principles that László Péter contended had been absent in Hungary did not form a line of defense against Sovietization. Furthermore, the political and social transformation that began in 1945 cannot be regarded as a democratic turn that abolished some kind of unequal distribution of wealth and an authoritarian political system. In Czechoslovakia between the two World Wars, after the distribution of land in the aftermath of the First World War, there was no large estate system comparable to that in Hungary. Admittedly, there was no genuine way to change the positions of the political forces vying for power (some of whom governed and some of whom were in the opposition), and political life was certainly not free of power manipulation in the service of the stability of coalition governments. Yet nonetheless, the political system in interwar Czechoslovakia was certainly more democratic than the Hungarian political system of the Horthy era,

⁶⁴ Jan Dobes, "Die Legislative unter den Bedingungen der 'Volksdemokratie.'" *Die tschechoslowakische Nationalversammlung 1945-1948*, in *Hohes Haus* 319-337, and Jirí Pernes, "A csehszlovák társadalom és az 1948. februári fordulat," in *Sztálin árnyékában. A szovjet modell exportja Kelet-Közép-Európába (1944-1948)*, ed. Miklós Mitrovits (Ország-ház Könyvkiadó, 2018), 201-218.

which was dominated by the hegemonic governing party. Thus, in Czechoslovakia, the historical turning point brought about by the Second World War did not mean a breakout from a “dead-end” social development, as the “people’s-democratic” interpretation of Hungarian history assumes. Nor did the “land issue” provide the background for the communist party. Yet nonetheless, compared to Hungary and Poland, Czechoslovakia almost spontaneously turned away from its democratic past and became Sovietized, the social acceptance of which at the time cannot be explained by great social inequalities or inherited historical authoritarianism, as the Czech political elites had defined themselves by opposing the latter even since the First World War.

An overview of the developments in Austria provides further insights. The Austrian political system shifted clearly towards authoritarianism from 1929 onwards, and after 1932 it was much more dictatorial than the Hungarian one at the time.⁶⁵ Nevertheless, after 1945, the construction of a democratic institutional system began relatively quickly, building partly on the interests of the people who had been sidelined by the Nazis. For example, an officer of the American occupation authorities described Joseph Reither, one of the founders of the Austrian People’s Party, as “a bullheaded autocrat, bigoted and selfish.”⁶⁶ Nevertheless, politicians such as Reither, who before 1938 had served as the provincial governor of Lower Austria and also president of the Lower Austrian Chamber of Agriculture and the Lower Austrian Farmers’ Association (and in these positions was essentially the unquestioned ruler of the province), became the architects of the democratic political system after 1945, alongside figures such as Leopold Figl and Julius Raab. They turned away from dictatorial solutions and the civil war mentality and showed a clear willingness to compromise with forces outside their own political family. Figl and Raab, Austria’s first two postwar chancellors, were also associated with Christian socialism, Engelbert Dollfuss’s corporative state, or, at one stage in their careers, the Heimwehr. Raab had been a minister in Kurt Schuschnigg’s last government before the Anschluss.⁶⁷ In fact, in Austria—as in Germany—not only representatives of the former corporative state but even Austrian Nazis were sometimes integrated into democratic society. It is well known that five former Nazis were given posts in the government of Bruno Kreisky, a social democrat of Jewish descent.⁶⁸ Such phenomena rightly drew criticism, as they showed that the establishment of democratic institutions

⁶⁵ Emmerich Tálos and Florian Wenninger, *Das Austrofaschistische Österreich 1933–1938*. (Lit Verlag, 2017). Anton Pelnika, *Die gescheiterte Republik. Kultur und Politik in Österreich, 1918–1938*. (Böhlau, 2017).

⁶⁶ Quoted: Ernst Bruckmüller, Ernst Hanisch, Roman Sandgruber, Norbert Weigl, *Geschichte der österreichischen Land- und Forstwirtschaft im 20. Jahrhundert. Politik, Gesellschaft, Wirtschaft*. (Überreuter, 2002), 61.

⁶⁷ James William Miller, *Engelbert Dollfuss and Austrian Agriculture. An Authoritarian Democrat and His Policies*, (University of Minnesota, 1987).

⁶⁸ Cornelius Lehniguth, *Waldheim und die Folgen. Der parteipolitische Umgang mit dem Nationalsozialismus in Österreich*, (Campus Verlag, 2013).

also involved remaining silent about elements (and crimes) of the past. Thus, these institutions were by no means without moral stain.

If we examine the significance of 1945 in Hungarian history in comparison with Austria, Czechoslovakia, or perhaps Italy, it immediately becomes clear that the question that interested László Péter, namely, which societies were Sovietized and which had chances of democratization, was not determined solely by the nature of legal developments or social inequalities. In theory, the Czech Republic had a favorable legal heritage and democratic social traditions, and it lacked the tensions surrounding the “land question,” yet it was Sovietized, while Austria became an established democracy in the 1950s, although liberal parliamentarianism had even less of a tradition there than in Hungary. In any case, Moscow’s intentions and the extent to which the presence of the Red Army made this possible were decisive factors in the Soviet-style transformation. In Czechoslovakia, the absence of the latter factor was probably compensated for by the fact that the Communist Party was able to present itself as the most authentic representative of national interests. Italy, on the other hand, where the communist labor movement in the north existed alongside a large estate system and a landless agrarian proletariat (similar to the situation in Hungary), was not Sovietized despite its many internal social tensions and the strong presence of the communist party.

The profound political transformation in Italy, Austria, West Germany, and later Spain took place after the Second World War without any violent changes to the social structure. Although limited land reform was implemented in southern Italy in 1946, based on legislation and with compensation for landowners, no fundamental social transformation took place. The change of constitution (which meant the transition from a monarchy to a republic) was decided by referendum in 1946, and this change became a legitimate and accepted decision despite the relatively small difference between the votes on either side.⁶⁹ In Italy, the threads of continuity between the prewar and postwar periods are obvious in social stratification, institutions, and elites.⁷⁰ This was also true on a personal level, if only because, despite the lynchings at the end of the war, there was no systematic prosecution for war crimes. In some occupied countries, the prosecutions were much more serious and widespread than in Italy. In the Netherlands, which had a population similar to that of Hungary at the time, 150,000 people were arrested, and 60,000 convictions were handed down. Similar proportions were typical in Belgium, Denmark, and Norway, where four percent of the population was prosecuted. These figures match and even exceed the extent of the prosecution rate in Hungary. However, unlike in Central European countries, including Hungary, prosecutions in these countries did not involve ethnic-based collective stigmatization and were not linked to the political transformation of the social structure.⁷¹

⁶⁹ Tibor Szabó, *Olaszország politikatörténete 1861–2011*. (Belvedere Meridionale, 2012), 94–95., 108–109.

⁷⁰ Adrian Lyttelton, “Epilogue,” in *Liberal and Fascist Italy, 1900–1945*, ed. Adrian Lyttelton (Oxford University Press, 2002), 250–251.

⁷¹ Deák, *Európa próbatétele*, 202.

Beyond the comparison focusing on the countries discussed above, Burgenland, which can be considered the intersection of Austria and Hungary, offers an interesting case study for discussion of the relationship between the social structure characteristic of Hungary in the first half of the twentieth century and democracy. This region was already part of the Austrian political system in the interwar period, but its social structure remained unchanged, as, unlike in the victorious successor states, no land reform took place here after the First World War. Among the Austrian provinces, this region had the highest proportion of smallholders and agricultural workers living in the shadow of large estates in the interwar period. The provincial election results were characterized by the outstanding performance of the left wing before 1934. Burgenland was essentially the only Austrian province where the Social Democrats were able to build up significant influence in rural areas. On the one hand, this makes it likely that in a different political system, with free competition between parties, left-wing political forces would have had a chance in elections in Hungary during the Horthy era on the eastern side of the Trianon border between Hungary and Austria, i.e. in Western Transdanubia too. On the other hand, it also shows that a political institutional system having a certain degree of autonomy from society can also be transformed without any change in the social structure of society. Much as was the case after the First World War, society did not change much after 1945, either in Austria as a whole or in Burgenland, where the “Hungarian” large estate system remained. To this day, the Esterházy family foundation manages approximately 60,000 acres in the northern half of Burgenland, and in addition to manor houses, it also owns Fraknó fortress, and abbeys have forest estates in Austria. But all this does not prevent the Austrian provinces and the country as a whole from functioning within a democratic political framework. If, as some people have suggested, Austrian democracy does face challenges, this is not a consequence of the traditional property structure.

These comparisons and the example of Burgenland provide several lessons regarding narratives about Hungarian history around 1945. Hungarian social development and the history of Hungarian political ideas and institutions do not appear to be particularly problematic in international comparison in terms of the existence of the prerequisites for democracy. Hungary, one could plausibly claim, was very much like the other states of the region from this perspective.⁷² This is true both for the period between the two World Wars and for the post-Second World War history of willingness to accept or resist Sovietization, since, among the countries in the region, Poland was the only one in which there was social opposition to the new regime on a scale similar to that in Hungary. However, in these comparisons, it is not self-evident that the democratization of the political system would have required a profound transformation of the structure of Hungarian society, since this did not happen in Austria or Italy (nor, for that matter, in the western

⁷² Erwin Oberländer, “Die Presidialdiktaturen in Ostmitteleuropa – ‘gelenkte Demokratie’?” in *Autoritäre Regime in Ostmittel- und Südosteuropa 1919–1944*, ed. Erwin Oberländer et al (Schoeningh, 2004), 3–17.

part of Germany) in 1945 or immediately thereafter. The above comparison raises the question of whether the move towards democratic development necessarily required the forced social transformation that began in Hungary in 1945.

Under the conditions of European societies for most of the twentieth century, political systems proved rapidly adaptable, both in the direction of democratization and dictatorship, depending on the international balance of power. Even France did not automatically prove resistant to authoritarian transformation when it became possible for international reasons.⁷³ Democratization or Sovietization after 1945 was not “chosen” by Italian, Austrian, or Hungarian societies in the examples mentioned, nor did it result from some structural or mental predisposition, or even from the mass collective behavior of individuals, as an inevitable necessity.⁷⁴ The possible exception in the region is Czech society, which, while not choosing Sovietization, showed considerable affinity for it despite the general assumption of its bourgeois and democratic character. At both the collective and individual levels, in everyday attitudes and political ideas, societies simply adapted to the dictatorial or democratic political power relations that were determined by international power relations. This adaptation, of course, often had long-term, serious consequences that can be felt to this day.

⁷³ Robert O. Paxton, *Vichy France. Old Guard and New Order*. (Alfred A. Knopf, 1972).

⁷⁴ Zsombor Bódy, “Parlamentarizmus a parlament falain kívül. Észrevételek a magyar parlamentarizmus társadalmi beágyazottságával kapcsolatban a XX. század első felében,” *Politikatudományi Szemle* 23, no. 2 (2014) 33–58.

ON THE TRAIL OF A SERIES OF POLITICAL MURDERS IN HUNGARY 1945

Hungary joined the Second World War on the side of the Axis powers. Nonetheless, in March 1944, it was invaded by its own ally, Germany, and thus remained a battlefield from the fall of 1944 until the spring of 1945, with German troops stationed on the western side of the country (essentially, of the Danube River) and Soviet troops stationed on the eastern side. On 2 December 1944, in accordance with international agreements, representatives of the underground democratic parties in the Soviet-occupied territory of Hungary formed the Hungarian National Independent Front (Magyar Nemzeti Függetlenségi Front, or MNFF), uniting the Independent Smallholders, Agrarian Workers and Civic Party (Független Kisgazda-, Földmunkás és Polgári Párt, or FKGP), the Hungarian Communist Party (Magyar Kommunista Párt, MKP), the National Peasant Party (Nemzeti Parasztpárt, NPP), the Civic Democratic Party (Polgári Demokrata Párt, PDP), the Social Democratic Party (Szociáldemokrata Párt, SZDP), and various trade unions in the area.

In December 1944, as a symbol of the rejection of the previous political system, the Hungarian National Independent Front established the Provisional National Assembly (Ideiglenes Nemzetgyűlés, or INGY) and the Provisional National Government (Ideiglenes Nemzeti Kormány, or INK) in the city of Debrecen in eastern Hungary. This coalitional cooperation produced some notable results, including an anti-fascist, democratic country development program (the mutually accepted foundation of their agenda), a declaration of war against Germany, and an armistice with the Allied powers. However, the ongoing war and the damaged infrastructure prevented the government from fulfilling its role as a legitimate and effective centralized power in the first months of its governance.¹ During the winter of 1944–1945 and early spring of 1945, before the government managed to relocate to Budapest in April, it lacked even the most basic means of communication to conduct local politics. It also had little to no control over abuses of power by the local authorities. According to István Bibó, head of the Administrative Department at the Ministry of the Interior of the Provisional National Government, this was “a classical era of police kings.”² Perhaps the most well-known of these instance was the “Republic of

¹ See Mária Palasik, *Chess Game for Democracy: Hungary between East and West* (McGill-Queen's UP, 2011), 8–47.

² Tibor Huszár, *Bibó István: Beszélgetések, politikai-életrajzi dokumentumok* (Kolonel, 1989), 54.

Vésztő” proclaimed at the end of 1944 and beginning of 1945, where some 11,000 residents of the settlement in Békés County, most of whom were destitute laborers, established a proletarian dictatorship led by communist Imre Rábai, son of a directorate member of the Hungarian Soviet Republic in 1919. This new government was eager to reinvigorate life in the area and began by organizing the public provision of goods, engaging in agricultural activities, and distributing all available resources among the local population, including the grain set aside as Soviet spoils of war. Under Rábai’s leadership, a communist group operated as a “state within a state” in the settlement, completely ignoring the decrees of the provisional government and obstructing coalitional public administration until mid-February 1945, when the government took steps to overthrow Rábai.³

The situation in the “Republic of Vésztő” was similar to the situation in the village Dévaványa, which at the time belonged to Jász-Nagykun-Szolnok County (since, 1950 it belongs to Békés County). Bibó discussed this case in detail saying, “if I remember correctly, another small police state had formed there led by a local resident by the name of Dékány, and it was jokingly called the Republic of Dévaványa, though it was no laughing matter, as Dékány incarcerated his enemies by the twenties and thirties under the most appalling conditions. This was slowly turning into a huge scandal, because there was a veritable flight of Dévaványa refugees to Debrecen, but Debrecen [read: the Provisional National Government – M.P.] had no power over Dévaványa. So Endre Szebenyi⁴ wrote a letter to Dékány commending Dékány’s reputation as an excellent chief of police in Dévaványa and inviting him to Debrecen for an exchange of experience and ideas. [...] Dékány liked the letter, and so he had his enemies loaded into wagons with their hands tied with wire and entered Debrecen leading this caravan, where Szebenyi greeted him not at the Ministry of the Interior but at the gates of the building housing the ‘whole-of-government,’ where he immediately arrested Dékány [who, for the record, considered himself a communist – M.P.] and then held a speech to the people who had gathered reassuring them that all those who abuse power and commit crimes in the name of people’s democracy will meet the same end.”⁵

The Provisional National Government may have been able to handle the cases of Vésztő and Dévaványa, but in most cases, it was only informed of legal violations arising from local power struggles long after these crimes had been committed. Thus, it could hardly be held accountable for these crimes. It can, however, be held liable for the ways in which parties and political leaders of the coalition handled the crimes arising from the abuse of local power once these cases had become public.

³ Gyula Gazdag, *A bankett* (Objektív Stúdió, 1979). Public screening was banned until 1982. Károly Csala, “A ‘nyakig szegények’ köztársasága. A bankett,” *Filmvilág*, no. 2. (1982): 18–19.

⁴ Endre Szebenyi (1912–1950) was a member of the communist party and a legal expert of the Ministry of the Interior in charge of supervising the police at that time.

⁵ Tibor Huszár, *Bibó István*, 54.; Gábor Tolnay, “A ‘Dévaványai Köztársaság’,” *Századok* 136, no. 5. (2002): 1161–1209.; Ferenc Z. Nagy – who himself was a prisoner of Imre Dékány – also discusses the Dévaványa case in detail in his autobiography *Ahogy én láttam* (Gondolat Kiadó, 1967), 180–191.

Among cases of abuse of local power in the winter of 1944–45 and early spring of 1945, the case that sparked the most debate and response was the Gyömrő murders committed in the settlement of Gyömrő and the surrounding villages (eight settlements in total), which lie approximately 25 kilometers from Budapest. These settlements formed an administrative unit or district, with Gyömrő as the center.⁶ Between the beginning of February and the end of April 1945, settlement leaders from the Horthy era, including several notaries, chief notaries, priests, office clerks, landowners, a district judge, a restaurant owner, a steward, and a postmaster, were deported from Gyömrő and the surrounding villages. These “interned” individuals were humiliated, tortured to death, and, most cases, buried in graves that they had been forced to dig themselves.⁷

A contemporary report of the Gyömrő murders related the case follows: “It would be difficult to provide a quick summary of the horrific and gruesome events that have taken place not only in Gyömrő but also in the entire Gyömrő district. Several people have been murdered in every village of the district—Mende, Ecser, Maglód, Tápiósüly, Tápiósáp, Péteri, and Úri—or deported to the district center of Gyömrő. Murdered there, some by gunfire, others by being beaten or tortured to death. Following the advance of the glorious Red Army liberating us from the Germans, self-government was restored to the Hungarian people in Gyömrő and throughout the whole district. Although there had been cases of abuse of power, there were very few villages and towns in which terrorist bands could form to act as vigilantes over the—mostly innocent—people they sought to dispose of. However, in the Gyömrő district, people by the name of Balczer, Bacher, Gattyán, Jedlicska, Sinkovics, Majszil, Fürtös, Hancsák, Jenei, and several others seized power and became the absolute authority over life and death. Eighteen people formed the general staff of the Gyömrő district in charge of the institution of Hungarian democratic life. These eighteen people ordered the deportation and execution of people or they killed them in cold blood.”⁸

By the end of 1945, nineteen victims of the Gyömrő murders had been identified.⁹ Among the victims was Count József Révay, a liberal democrat and an openly anti-fascist philosopher and university professor who had merely been visiting the ar-

⁶ These settlements – Ecser, Gyömrő, Maglód, Mende, Péteri, Tápiósáp, Tápiósüly, and Úri.

⁷ The Archives of Political History and Trade Unions [Politikátörténeti és Szakszervezeti Levéltár, henceforth: PIL] 274. f. 11/52. No date or signature.

⁸ Ibidem. No date or signature.

⁹ Steward Károly Aczél, chief notary András Bajnóczy, district judge dr. János Bellus, landowner Count János Ferenc Coronini (Italian citizen), farmer József Czövek, evangelical priest Gyula Csaba, chief notary István Diószeghy, district office clerk József Eper, office clerk Sándor Juhász, curate Pál Mikla, chief notary István Moóri, chief notary Béla Nádas, office clerk Károly Pálfi, chief notary Lajos Pinyei Reichardt, philosopher, private university tutor and landowner Count József Révay, landowner József Schleisz-Bognár, restaurant owner Gyula Soponyai, postmaster János Straub, tax notary Béla Vilmos Zambelli. PIL 274. f. 11/52. Mende-village notary Lajos Ulicsnyi and steward István Rubács are currently also counted as victims, but we have no information regarding their disappearance.

ea.¹⁰ According to Smallholders' Party journalist and parliamentary representative Dezső Futó, Révay was only involved in the Gyömrő events inasmuch as "Révay... had 5–600 acres of land that he leased to Gyömrő residents, I believe. Révay lived with his mother on Magyar Street [in Budapest] in extremely poor circumstances, as they had nothing to eat and were in danger of starving to death. It was at this time that Mátyás Rákosi¹¹ had come to Pest, and the Count visited him to tell him of his misfortunes. Révay was not rightwing. On the contrary, everybody knew him to be leftwing, and so Mátyás Rákosi gave him a document to the effect of asking the police and the general staff of the village to support Count József Révay."¹²

The state of affairs outlined above was possible due to the fact that the Second World War had largely dismantled the previous government, putting it out of commission despite the occupying Red Army's orders that "local authorities and organs of the local governments operating before the arrival of the Red Army are to remain unchanged." Even the provisional government issued a decree at the beginning of January 1945 reinstating the prewar administration. Local law enforcement had also fallen apart, and the spontaneously forming so-called "popular police" (népi rendőrség) mostly consisted of people wearing cheap civilian clothing, various armbands and in some places, and Lenin caps and carrying shotguns hung from their shoulders with string once they had obtained their license to bear arms from the occupying Soviet authority.

The events that had transpired in Gyömrő and the surrounding area were suppressed on the one hand by official non-disclosure and, on the other, by a long period of fearful silence among the survivors that only began to lift after the regime change of 1989–1990. Nonetheless, even as late as 2008–2009, there were still villages involved where former witnesses were too afraid to expose the secrets behind these tragic events. In the discussion below, I use archival sources and personal accounts to provide a summary of the events in the Gyömrő district in 1944–1945, followed by consideration of the ways in which the political authorities at the time approached the investigation of these murders.¹³

On 2 November 1944, the steadily approaching Second World War frontline prompted the local Gyömrő government to issue an evacuation order. All residents had to leave the settlement within one hour to escape to Vác through Isaszeg. However, these instructions were followed only by a small portion of the population. Most of the officials and leaders and employees of the local government had

¹⁰ Ferenc Nagy, *Küzdelem a vasfüggöny mögött* (Európa–História, 1990), vol. 1: 153, 433.

¹¹ General Secretary of the Hungarian Communist Party Mátyás Rákosi arrived in Debrecen from the Soviet Union on 30 January 1945 and traveled to Budapest by 25 February to hold a speech at a general assembly. He became the Communist leader of Hungary with the help of Soviet Union from 1947 to 1956.

¹² Péter Borenich, *Bosszú Gyömrőn*, Documentary play by Péter Borenich aired in Kossuth Rádió on 16 and 23 February 1992. 10 hours, 5 minutes. The letter is also mentioned in archival sources. PIL 274. f. 11/52.

¹³ See Mária Palasik, *Félelembe zárt múlt. Politikai gyilkosságok Gyömrőn és környékén 1945-ben* (Napvilág Kiadó, 2010) and Mária Palasik, "Polityicseskije ubijsztva v Vengriji vesznoj 1945 goda," *Jevropa, Mezsdunarodnij almanac*, 2013. (Tyumeny Juniversityét, 2013), 20–33.

already fled, except rural dean and curate József Prause.¹⁴ By dawn of 15 November, the Soviet army had entered and occupied the settlement.

According to József Prause's report to the Bishop of Vác, "on 6 December, the derelict settlement formed a workers' and peasant's council,"¹⁵ an event also confirmed by the minutes of the first session of the meeting of Hungarian Communist Party leaders of the Gyömrő district on 1 March 1945. The minutes also inform us that the workers' and peasants' council had 12 members, and all other workers' and peasants' councils formed in the rest of the district were established under the control of the workers' and peasants' council. (The workers' and peasants' council was often called the "directorate" in Gyömrő.)

Apart from the minutes mentioned above, we also find information on the general state of affairs in Gyömrő in a letter written on 23 December 1944 by one Miklós Steinmetz to Mátyás Rákosi. Steinmetz, a truce-bearer who would die in the siege of Budapest a few days later, arrived in Gyömrő in December as a political officer of the 317th Rifle Division. He was shocked to find that "the leaders of the village fled with the Hungarian troops and the 'public administration,' if one even exists, is in the hands of 'communists'. These people are not even members of the party: they used to be members of the Directorate or soldiers in the Hungarian Red Army in 1919.¹⁶ I find their operation too 'leftwing'; for example, there is a sickle and hammer flag on the village hall, and their posters say 'fight for a communist society', etc."¹⁷

In his letter to Rákosi, Steinmetz expressed his discontent that the 49th Guard preceding his division in Gyömrő approved the operation of the workers' and peasants' council by way of a stamped certificate and reported that the "1919" communists in Gyömrő sought to establish a local wing of the Hungarian Communist Party. Steinmetz himself had stopped them until a representative of Rákosi could come, but Steinmetz also added that "[t]hey need a lot of help, as all villages do, but I do not know how to assist them; therefore, I consider it necessary to be instructed on this matter."¹⁸

The act of former members and soldiers of the Directorate of 1919 organizing themselves to form popular or national committees, councils of five or seven, or "directorate" committees as the frontlines approached or went beyond a given area was not a unique occurrence. Such measures stemmed from the fact that there remained in the villages people who had been active in the Hungarian Soviet Republic in 1919, and according to accounts, this was also the case in Gyömrő, where assistant locksmith Jakab Krupka, leader of the Gyömrő directorate in 1919, assumed leadership of the settlement once again in December 1944. We have no definitive list of the others who took part in these bodies, but subsequent meet-

¹⁴ Vác Episcopal Archives [Püspöki Levéltár], *Acta Parochianum*, Gyömrő, 212/1945.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*.

¹⁶ A reference to the 133 days of the Hungarian Republic of Soviets, which began on 21 March 1919.

¹⁷ PIL 728. f. 1.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*. Steinmetz's letter only reached Mátyás Rákosi after Steinmetz's death. It was found in the inner pocket of his jacket after the truce-bearer's tragic death a few days later.

ing sessions and accounts allow an accurate reconstruction of the Gyömrő directorate membership. Three members were brothers by the name of Tibor, József, and Rezső Schwarzstein.¹⁹ They were former Budapest residents who owned a family villa in Gyömrő. Tibor Schwarzstein in particular had good connections with the Soviet military leaders stationed at Gyömrő. The rest of the workers' and peasants' council consisted of their acquaintances, including local lumber trader Károly Eiser,²⁰ who became acting secretary of the local communist party officially established on 14 February,²¹ upholsterer Imre Deutsch,²² assistant wheel-smith István Balczer, house-painter Károly Bacher, blacksmith Ferenc Majszin,²³ and electrician László Fürtös.²⁴ Another person strongly connected to them and believed by many to have been the intellectual leader of the group was Károly Eiser's brother-in-law, Zoltán Kántor. Kántor, however, lived in Budapest, not Gyömrő.

According to Pál Sulyán's account, "[t]he village was shocked in earnest when Tibor Schwarzstein stood out on the steps of the village hall in a red armband and proclaimed the proletarian dictatorship of Gyömrő."²⁵ The proceedings of the local assembly, organized by the workers' and peasants' council of Gyömrő in this short *ex lex* period, were preserved in minutes dated 6 January 1945, and according to the minutes, the assembly was gathered in the main hall of a school in Maglód in order to elect the local workers' and peasants' council of the village.²⁶ Ferenc Kiss, who would be appointed secretary of the local communist party a few weeks later, called the assembly to order and then called upon "comrade" Tibor Schwarzstein to speak, who recounted in his introduction how he had emigrated to Russia, spent one year at a Russian university, and returned to Gyömrő with the Red Army. The minutes report his speech [in a mixture of direct and indirect speech – M.P.] as follows: "Dear Comrades! The time has come for us to overcome all obstacles and restore peace in our nation. He claims that there are many Hungarians studying at Russian universities who will soon return to Hungary to aid the rebuilding process with their knowledge and experience. He proposes district directorates where all settlements delegate one member each and all settlements will form councils of seven to act as temporary local governments." Schwarzstein proceeded to announce the names of the candidates, and the people elected those he recommended as members of the local council of seven. Schwarzstein then said that "Hungary shall be a member state of Russia. They will treat us as enemies until Germany falls, since there are still some Hungarian troops fighting against the Russians in this country... therefore they can only accept us as a member state once Germany has been occupied..."

¹⁹ Later, the family changed its name to Sásdi.

²⁰ Trade license issued back in 1922. Hungarian National Archives, Pest County Archives [Magyar Nemzeti Levéltár Pest Megyei Levéltára, henceforth: MNL PML] V. 1047-A/b; 180/1945.

²¹ PIL Pest County Collection 45. f. 10.

²² He changed his name to Deáki.

²³ Trade license issued in 1930. MNL PML V. 1047-A/b; 180/1945.

²⁴ Trade license issued in 1922. MNL PML V. 1047-A/b; 180/1945.

²⁵ Péter Borenich, *Bosszú Gyömrőn*, 16 February 16 1992.

²⁶ The document is referenced from PIL Pest County Collection 45. f. 12.

The conflict in Gyömrő escalated when the directorate established by former 1919 Directorate members and soldiers was opposed by a decree of the Provisional National Government to establish a national committee (*nemzeti bizottság*) in order to reorganize local bodies of public administration in all settlements.²⁷ The leader of the forming national committee opposing the directorate in Gyömrő was farmer János Czövek, and his committee intended to reestablish the previous public administration in accordance with the new government decree. The members of the directorate were shocked by the committee's display of national flag armbands and accused the organizers of conspiracy against the proletarian dictatorship²⁸ (a term discouraged by contemporary official communist party propaganda).

The conflict described above was exacerbated by the fact that most of the directorate leadership mentioned earlier by Miklós Steinmetz had not only joined the new "democratic police" but had also established the local wing of the Hungarian Communist Party. When these people were informed of the forming local national committee and the possible reestablishment of the previous administration, they did everything in their power to prevent it, including a resolution that leaders in the settlements who remained in office under the Arrow Cross regime of Ferenc Szálasi and continued to work were to be discharged at once and their pensions revoked.²⁹ They also spread rumors that a reactionary group was forming in Gyömrő to seize power, and these allegations proved enough to enlist Soviet help and arrest several people in January and February.³⁰ On 7 March 1945, János Czövek, whom they believed to be the leader of the forming national committee, was tricked into leaving his house at night and shot in the neck in his own backyard.³¹ He was assumed to be the first victim of the serial murders. It was later discovered, however, that he was in fact the third victim, as one notary had gone missing in February from Maglód and another in early March from Tápiósáp.

Several weeks of terror swept over the district after the murder of János Czövek, and the Gyömrő murders continued until the end of April 1945. Almost all the victims belonged to the "low professional class" of the Gyömrő district and were only known in their immediate circles and by local residents of their villages. Most of them were in their 30s and 40s, came from industrial and rural backgrounds, and after graduating from high school, had acquired their government jobs by applying to and gaining the approval of the local representative body. Most of them were too young to have held the kinds of positions under the Hungarian Soviet Republic in 1919 that would have provoked retribution, and none of them had been involved

²⁷ Decree 14/1945. M. E. *Magyar Közlöny*, 1945/1. (January 4, 1945) "We call upon... the already established and to be established settlement, district and municipal national committees to reorganize all local government bodies as temporary representative bodies, urban representative bodies, and municipal committees."

²⁸ PIL 274. f. 11/52. Draft reply of the Ministry of the Interior, 1946.

²⁹ MNL PML XVII. 161. Documents of the National Committee of Tápiósüly.

³⁰ PIL 274. f. 11/52.

³¹ Péter Borenich, *Bosszú Gyömrőn*, 23 February 1992.

in rightwing movements, though they had pledged to the Arrow Cross government. If they had made any enemies during their time in office, they presumably did not consider themselves guilty of wrongdoing, since they remained in office instead of fleeing to the West, like Ferenc Szálasi and many others did.

The Provisional National Government sought to reestablish legitimate accountability mechanisms as early as January 1945 by certifying public servants and establishing public prosecution and people's courts, but whether its decrees reached Gyömrő is uncertain. *Délmagyarország* (Southern Hungary) became a national daily newspaper to be distributed in the liberated territories, frequently publishing government provisions, along with the capital's daily newspaper *Szabadság* (Liberty) and *Magyar Közlöny* (Hungarian Bulletin), which went into publication in February 1945. *Szabadság* was probably available in Gyömrő due to the city's proximity to the capital. However, this does not excuse the perpetrators, since many former notaries, priests, landowners, counts, etc. all over the country had fortunately been spared the Gyömrő method of reckoning and revenge.

The leaders of the Gyömrő directorate authorized themselves to "restore order" in the district. For example, when they received word that the democratic parties had allowed chief notary István Moóri to remain in office in Tápiósüly despite the resolution of the Gyömrő directorate, Jakab Krupka went to the village himself to settle the matter. According to the account of Erzsébet Moóri, daughter of István Moóri, Krupka "set upon József Bugyi, secretary of the Communist Party, and threatened to have him arrested. He immediately discharged him from the Communist Party and stated that my father [István Moóri] was to be discharged from office. This was on 13 April, and they came for him on 18 April. By the afternoon of the nineteenth, he had been murdered."³²

Most of the victims were arrested on the basis of false allegations of "fascist affairs detected in the settlement." They were then escorted to Gyömrő, where they were detained for a few days and then made to sign a release statement after interrogation. However, instead of being released, the victims were brutally murdered. Evangelical priest Gyula Csaba had "his eyes gouged out, his tongue torn out, his genitals cut off, and then he was crucified and told to 'go to your God.'"³³ Károly Aczél was brutally tortured and his penis was amputated before his execution.³⁴ The curate from Ecser also had his eyes gouged out and was forced to dig his own grave before he was murdered. Exhumation revealed that the grave was too small, and the legs of the victim were chewed off by dogs.³⁵ The later exhumation revealed that some had been buried alive, and relatives of several victims had to identify the bod-

³² MNL PMLXVII. 161. Documents of the National Committee of Tápiósüly. Account of Erzsébet Moóri as reported to me.

³³ Péter Borenich, *Bosszú Gyömrőn*, 16 February 1992. Testament of Jolán Csaba.

³⁴ Contemporary note written by mortician János Metzl. Department of Investigation Supervision of the Public Prosecutor's Office [Legfőbb Ügyészség Nyfl.] 12.097/1990.

³⁵ Péter Borenich, *Bosszú Gyömrőn*, 16 February 1992. Testament of Nagybányai Nagy Zoltánné, niece of the victim.

ies by their undergarments or teeth, because the victims' heads had been mutilated beyond recognition by gunshots.³⁶

When investigating the Gyömrő murders, it has been suggested that Jakab Krupka and the members of the Gyömrő directorate might have realized that, should the old government institutions be legally reinstated and life return to normal, their era would be over, and they would lose the positions they had acquired in those few months. They might even be held accountable for their acts as leaders. They might face acts of retribution similar to what had come in the wake of the Hungarian Soviet Republic in 1919. Thus, they may well have planned the murders to ensure their stay in power until, according to Krupka, "such a large-scale political change" would be over.

The cause of the Gyömrő murders should not be simplified to the—mistaken—conclusions of the directorate established by former 1919 Directorate members just because some of the leaders were communists of that era, nor should it be explained simply as a consequence of hatred of the upper class, since most of the perpetrators were engaged in respectable trade, with barely an agrarian proletarian or smallholder among them, all of which suggests that this case was much more complex. Local police bodies had been marauding, killing, and terrorizing people in the settlements of the district from the outset, but we have no adequate explanation as to what united these ragtag officers. One possible explanation would be the authority, power, and influence that they enjoyed simply by virtue of the fact that they were armed. Another might be revenge, not necessarily against certain individuals but against the resident intellectual classes of the Horthy era, or even retribution, since there were several Jewish labor service members among the police. Although each settlement had different law enforcement units (police, militia, village officers), these bodies all employed identical methods, as if they were operating under some latent central authority. The successful execution of their robberies and murders required consideration and coordinated planning. Thus, their crimes could not have been spur of the moment individual acts.

It is also worth noting, as a detail that was typical of the murderous abuses of power that took place in Hungary in final months and immediate aftermath of the war, that the Gyömrő murders were not committed to set an example. The perpetrators were careful to hide their built, remaining silent about their crimes for most of their lives, as if they had sworn an oath not to speak of the murders to anyone, and whoever broke this oath would meet the same fate as their victims. They must have done a good job keeping their secrets, since none of the perpetrators ever divulged more than a few hints at local pubs, perhaps even in fear of one another, which is the only plausible explanation as to why, even today, the bodies of half of their victims have not been found. Theirs was a cruel ring indeed.

The perpetrators of the Gyömrő murders may have been motivated in part by the murders committed by their ranks. The question is simple: did knowledge of

³⁶ Department of Investigation Supervision of the Public Prosecutor's Office, 12.097/1990. Witness interrogation minutes, statement of J. F., 12 December 1990.

these murders encourage them to commit others, or did fear prove the true motive? In their case, they had joined a *sui juris* group at a time when the group's power and influence seemed greater than that of any office or lawful authority. Their membership elevated them to a higher position and gave them the right to bear weapons, but it was a collective hive mindset that turned naturally latent aggression into cruelty and terrorism. As to their methods of torture, they had the recent past to guide them. Some had encountered these kinds of techniques in the prisons of the counterrevolutionary period. The majority simply drew on what they had seen simply because of the horrors of the war, the deportation of Jews, and the acts of cruelty committed by the Arrow Cross against fugitives and members of the labor service battalions (most of whom were Jewish). In other words, they had an extensive repertoire to choose from.³⁷

Contemporaries investigating the Gyömrő murders suggested that the perpetrators may well have been motivated by the desire to seek retribution for the 1944 deportation of the Jewish residents of Tápióvölgye villages. According to Pál Sulyán, "[i]t is possible that the contemporary local government had been excessive in fulfilling their duties during the Jewish deportation, but only one or two of the victims were involved, and extreme rightwing movements like the Arrow Cross were never strongly supported in these parts. It is interesting to note that those who had been involved in these movements mostly escaped unscathed, and most of the victims were people who had had absolutely nothing to do with politics."³⁸

For the most part, the residents of the villages involved in the Gyömrő murders only dared to speak in hushed whispers of what they merely suspected, namely, that people were first disappearing and then being tortured and murdered. At night, one could hear the screams of the tortured victims coming from the basement of the Chief Servant Judge's Office (Főszolgabírói Hivatal) in Gyömrő, and village residents spoke in whispers of people disappearing from their circles, and they noted the people with whom these victims had last been seen. There were even cases in which they noticed that the clothes of a victim who had vanished were being worn by somebody else.

The victims had little to no connection to one another. It therefore took some weeks before friends and relatives of those who had vanished (been murdered) began to realize that other people in the community had also lost loved ones. They then formed a group to take collective action and find out what had happened to these people. The events in Gyömrő were ultimately exposed to the public at the end of April 1945, when a group of mourning women asked to see Smallholders' Party representative Dezső Futó after having been granted an audience with Prime Minister Béla Miklós Dálnoki and the Minister of the Interior Ferenc Erdei as well.

The Provisional National Assembly had had only two short parliamentary sessions, and the institution of interpellation had not yet been reinstated. Therefore, on 18 May 1945, representative Dezső Futó issued a memorandum of objection to

³⁷ Mária Palasik, *Félelembe zárt múlt*, 117–126.

³⁸ Péter Borenich, *Bosszú Gyömrőn*, 23 February 1992.

Prime Minister Béla Miklós Dálnoki. The first part of the memorandum criticized the police's abuse of power, and the rest of the document was a report of the Gyömrő murders, requesting a full investigation of the case. Futó also mentioned that he would have written several articles about the case for the daily newspaper *Kis Újság* (Small News) had the "Russian censorship operating under the armistice agreement" allowed them to be published.³⁹

The Gyömrő case surfaced during the parliamentary session of 27 June 1945,⁴⁰ and Prime Minister Béla Miklós Dálnoki instructed Minister of the Interior Ferenc Erdei to file a report on the Gyömrő situation within two days. After the murders had been exposed to the public, communist Chief of the Budapest Political Police Services Gábor Péter went to Gyömrő and concluded that the events were a simple case of serial murders.⁴¹ Twelve people were arrested at the police station in Gyömrő and taken to Budapest. They were soon released, however. The justification given was that they were "desperate," "self-aware proletarians."⁴² Murder investigations began on 24 September 1945,⁴³ resulting in the discovery and exhumation of most of the victims⁴⁴ and the arrest and detention of the district chief notary and chief judge on 28 September. These individuals were released within a few days, however, and the investigation was closed.

At the beginning of November, Prime Minister Béla Miklós Dálnoki instructed the Minister of the Interior and the Minister of Justice to file a report on the Gyömrő case.⁴⁵ Following 10 November, Social Democrat Minister of Justice István Ries sent these documents to the Office of the District Attorney of Pest County to conduct the procedure, and Zoltán Pfeiffer, newly appointed Smallholders' Party State Secretary of the Ministry of Justice did everything in his power to see the investigation through. Kálmán Zolnay, communist head of the Attorney General's Criminal Justice Division of the Ministry of Justice, reported this in his letter to one of the Communist leader,

³⁹ Dezső Futó, *Önéletírás, világlátás* (Országos Eckhardt Tibor Alapítvány, 1995), 98–112. A reference to the fact that, under the armistice agreement signed with the Allies in Moscow on 20 January 1945, Hungary was under the control of the Allied Control Commission with Soviet leadership, which also controlled the press.

⁴⁰ MNL OL XIX-A-83-a.

⁴¹ *Register of the National Assembly* [Nemzetgyűlés Naplója, henceforth: *NN*], (Athenaeum, 1946), Sessions 1–30. columns 640–642.

⁴² PIL 284. f. 13. Ferenc Erdei's report to the Syndicate of the National Peasants' Party at the session of 3 July 1945.

⁴³ PIL 274. f. 11/52.

⁴⁴ Ibidem.

⁴⁵ This was one of the last acts of Miklós Béla Dálnoki as Prime Minister due to changes sweeping Hungary in the fall of 1945. On 4 November 1945, Hungarian National Assembly elections resulted in a new coalition government, which was inaugurated on 15 November and led by Zoltán Tildy, party leader of the Independent Smallholders, Agrarian Workers and Civic Party. Communist Imre Nagy became the new Minister of the Interior. István Ries remained Minister of Justice but was joined by a very capable Smallholders' Party state secretary by the name of Zoltán Pfeiffer. Smallholders' Party politician Ferenc Nagy was elected chairman of the National Assembly, officially becoming the first state dignitary.

Mihály Farkas.⁴⁶ “I hereby inform you,” Zolnay wrote, “that Smallholders’ Party State Secretary of the Ministry of Interior Zoltán Pfeiffer has contacted the head of the District Attorney’s Office of Pest County regarding the case of the murders committed by our comrades employed in the service of the local police in the Gyömrő district, and he has instructed him to conduct an investigation without consulting me.”⁴⁷ According to Zolnay, Pfeiffer’s goal is to “have all of our comrades arrested and the case presented to the public in a court hearing so that the reactionary groups may have cause to say that these are the sort of methods communists use and the Communist Party has been obstructing this case since February.” He then continues by saying, “I have heard countless opinions like that on this case, and yet for over six months comrade Kálmán Kovács⁴⁸ and I have done everything in our power to delay the criminal trial, but it appears that we can delay it no longer. If this case is presented in court in the manner described above, the moral damage suffered by our Party will be immeasurable; therefore I have repeatedly appealed to comrades Szebenyi, Gábor Péter, and Lajos Fehér to have these policemen transferred to another part of the country and, should the Office of the District Attorney issue a warrant for their arrest, to make arrangements through the police so that they may not find the men in question.”⁴⁹

State Secretary Pfeiffer’s initiative was successful, and the exhumation of the Gyömrő victims continued. Pest County Court medical experts Dr. Lóránt Tamáska and Dr. János Metzl had to unearth the bodies themselves, assisted only by the examining judge and the court notary, since the people of Gyömrő were too afraid of the perpetrators at large to dare offer their services under such circumstances.⁵⁰

The investigation launched by Pfeiffer led to the arrest of 21 persons in the Gyömrő district on 15 December 1945. However, the arrest warrant actually named 48 individuals, which suggests that the communists’ plan to cover up the murderers had been successful and the other perpetrators were given refuge in time.⁵¹ Those arrested included the district chief notary, the municipal judge, several policemen, police officers, and party secretaries of the Hungarian Communist Party.⁵² One of them was Zoltán Ernő Horváth, who had succeeded Jakab Krupka in the summer of 1945 as chief notary of Gyömrő. Upon his release, he wrote a report to the Hungarian Communist Party in which he complained that “the escorting police per-

⁴⁶ Head of the Organization, Cadre, Mass-organization, Economic and Information Department of the Central Directorate of the Hungarian Communist Party in charge of supervising the army and the police from December 1945.

⁴⁷ Department of Investigation Supervision of the Public Prosecutor’s Office, 12097/1990. and PIL 274. f. 11/52. The letter is dated 7 December 1945.

⁴⁸ Dr. Kálmán Kovács (1913–1991): politician, law historian and university professor. At the time he was state secretary of the Ministry of the Justice and National Assembly representative of the Hungarian Communist Party.

⁴⁹ PIL 274. f. 11/52. 7 December 1945. Lajos Fehér was Gábor Péter’s deputy at Budapest Political Police Services.

⁵⁰ PIL 274. f. 11/52.

⁵¹ Ibidem.

⁵² Ibidem. Note dated January 15, 1946.

sons treated us in the most anti-democratic way. They reprimanded the communist persons involved in the former illegal state of affairs in the most objectionable way. [...] They told us several times that were we to move in the car, they would blow us to pieces. They handed us over to the detention inspectorate at the detention center of the Pest County Attorney's Office. [...] They merely called me the Gyömrő murderer at first, but later they questioned me about priests hidden in toilets."⁵³

As these events unfolded, Dezső Futó wrote a letter to the new Prime Minister Zoltán Tildy on 28 December 1945 in which he proposed that, should the investigation be delayed by the Ministries any further, he would have no choice but to present the case in parliament in an interpellation.⁵⁴

Dezső Futó's suspicions were confirmed when the people arrested on charges of involvement in the Gyömrő murders were held at the detention center of the Pest County Attorney's Office for 18 days and then, with the exception of one person who admitted his involvement in the murders,⁵⁵ the rest (who had denied involvement) were released by order of the Ministry of the Interior. Their documents were not released to the public, and Minister of Justice István Ries issued Decree 534/1946. I. M. VI. regarding future course of action to the effect that, "[i]n this case, no arrests or results of investigation may be implemented until further orders from the Minister of Justice."⁵⁶

Dezső Futó issued an interpellation to the National Assembly in February 1946 regarding the failure to hold anyone accountable for the Gyömrő murders. Futó presented the investigation procedure and its deficiencies in detail and he appealed to the Minister of the Interior to conduct an objective investigation.⁵⁷

On 16 May 1946, a draft reply was formulated in response to Futó's interpellation, the draft itself signed by Imre Nagy but presented under Minister of the Interior László Rajk. The draft reply condemns Futó, stating that "presenting the Gyömrő case, as the interpellation had done, does not serve the successful and lawful investigation of the case and will only result in turning the national and international public against the Hungarian People's Democracy."⁵⁸ The Minister's draft reply clearly defends the perpetrators and does not condemn any of them in the slightest, whoever they may be, and although the Minister of the Interior promises a full new investigation in the draft, no investigation was conducted, much as the reply to the interpellation was never presented in parliament.

In Gyömrő, the situation remained unchanged. In fact, the wife of B. I., one of the suspects in the murders, wrote a letter to Prime Minister Ferenc Nagy⁵⁹ on 4 August

⁵³ Ibidem.

⁵⁴ Letter written by Dezső Futó. Private property of Péter Borenich and used with his permission.

⁵⁵ Historical Archives of the Hungarian State Security [Állambiztonsági Szolgálatok Történeti Levéltára] 3. 1. 9. V-150000/33. Ferenc Gér was released in December 1946.

⁵⁶ Decree quoted by Dezső Futó in his interpellation in Parliament. *NN*, Sessions 1-30. column 642.

⁵⁷ *NN*, Sessions 1-30. columns 640-642.

⁵⁸ MNL OL XIX-A- A-1-j. 21-22. Another communist party member, László Rajk succeeded Imre Nagy as Minister of the Interior on 20 March 1946.

⁵⁹ Zoltán Tildy was elected President of the Republic on 1 February 1946. Ferenc Nagy was elected Prime Minister.

1946 requesting that her husband and the other suspects be arrested to stop them from terrorizing the local population. She noted that they had been arrested twice but were released on both occasions.⁶⁰

In 1945–1946, the case of the Gyömrő murders was examined by three succeeding Ministers of the Interior, three Prime Ministers, two Ministers of Justice, and the National Assembly. Despite media censorship, accounts of the murders sparked a nationwide response and could no longer be concealed, in spite of the hopes and efforts of the Communist Party. The radicalism of (and crimes committed by) the Gyömrő police had probably greatly inconvenienced the senior leadership of the Communist Party, but instead of attempting to clear the suspects of all charges of abuse of authority in court, they had chosen to protect even those who were at least partly responsible for the attacks. The attempt to conceal the Gyömrő case from the general public and obstruct all efforts to hold the perpetrators accountable had undoubtedly done more harm than good to the party's reputation and left subsequent generations with the conclusion that party interests cannot protect one from being accountable for their crimes.

For the perpetrators, the Gyömrő case was officially closed with an amnesty issued on 1 February 1948: "Those who, until 1 August 1946 inclusive, committed illegal acts and thus were legally sentenced, and also those against whom investigations would be launched or continued for having committed illegal acts under the influence of the outrage caused by the anti-popular and war activities of the former political system or in the belief that they were serving the cause of democratic change, are hereby granted amnesty."⁶¹

At the request of the victims' relatives, the Office of Prosecutor General conducted a fact-finding investigation in 1990–1991. It determined that criminal proceedings could not be initiated in the same case against those who had received presidential pardons in 1948.⁶²

The political rehabilitation of the victims finally took place only decades later, after the change of regime in the parliamentary session of 31 March 1992.⁶³

⁶⁰ MNL OL XIX-A-1-e, 2. d.

⁶¹ *1948. év hatályos jogszabályai* (Grill Károly Könyvkiadó Vállalata, 1949), 942–951. Declaration of amnesty by the President of the Republic of Hungary issued on 31 January 1948. Proclaimed on 1 February 1948.

⁶² About the investigation of the Office of Prosecutor General see Mária Palasik, "Politikaigylőkosságok 1945-ben – értelmezési lehetőségek," in *1944/1945 – Társadalom a háborúban. Folytonosság és változás Magyarországon*, ed. Zsombor Bódy and Sándor Horváth (MTA Bölcsészettudományi Kutatóközpont, 2015), 171–191.

⁶³ *Register of the Hungary National Assembly* [Országgyűlési Napló] Minutes of the nineteenth day of the 1992 spring session of the National Assembly. 31 March 1992, 1243–1246. https://library.hungaricana.hu/hu/view/ON1990_1990-1994_010/?pg=1242&layout=s&query=gy%C3%B6mr%C5%91

EXTRAORDINARY CIRCUMSTANCES, EVERYDAY CRIMES: BUDAPEST 1944–1947*

The siege of Budapest towards the close of the Second World War and the years which came in the wake of the siege can be considered one of the most critical periods in the modern history of the Hungarian capital and perhaps the entire country, when public safety, or more precisely the lack thereof, was a central social issue. From this perspective, the military operations taking place in Budapest and the aftermath of the war cannot be clearly separated from each other, since the former was shaped by the complete collapse of law enforcement and public safety, while the latter was determined by efforts to restore public order. Although it would be difficult to define both the beginning and the end of the period in question precisely, from the perspective of the discussion below, the timespan between the beginning of the siege of the capital, i.e., November 1944,¹ and roughly the end of 1947 can be considered a single phase, forming an arc from the collapse of public security to its gradual restoration. We could also phrase this idea as follows: the Second World War, both in Budapest and in Hungary, did not end with the conclusion of hostilities and the advent of peace, since the consequences of the war, including supply and housing problems and famine, still largely determined the everyday lives of city dwellers in 1946 and even 1947.

This is an extremely interesting period from the perspective of both urban and criminal history, and it is a period that has been relatively little researched to date. Prewar structures were still partially observable in both law enforcement and crime, but at the same time, the war and the changed political and economic environment gave rise to new, previously unseen elements.

Public safety as a central issue seems to be extremely important not only to historians attempting to interpret the era retrospectively. Contemporaries themselves, whether in the press, the government, the city, or law enforcement agencies, also saw the situation in this light. The issue of public order received special attention in the minutes of both the Provisional National Assembly and the Budapest National Committee, as well as in other official documents. Soviet military operations were still in full swing in the country when Béla Miklós Dálnoki,

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¹ See Krisztián Ungváry, *Budapest ostroma* (Corvina, 2013), 11–67.

Prime Minister of the Provisional National Government, highlighted the restoration of property and personal security as the third most important task, alongside the ceasefire and the establishment of the national army.²

Efforts to restore public safety in Budapest began during the siege in areas that were gradually being freed by the Soviet Red Army. One interesting source on this subject is the semi-official report by Károly Némethy, the temporarily appointed head of the Buda administration, on the situation after the siege of Buda and the reorganization of the administration in 1945.³ In Némethy's report, we find the following about public safety:

Resolving public safety issues was an extremely important task. In this regard, our authorities found themselves in a very difficult situation because they were powerless in the absence of adequate law enforcement, especially since arming the police was out of the question at the time. In many cases, the Russian district commands intervened very forcefully and often earned the gratitude of the population. Looting by the mob did not reach the same extent as on the Pest side. Nevertheless, public safety improved only gradually and slowly.⁴

Just how slow the pace of improvement was even after the siege (if one can speak of improvement during this period), is evidenced by the minutes of the meeting of the Administrative Committee of the capital on 18 September 1945. At the meeting, committee member Vince Nagy added the following comment to the chief of police's August report:

Dear Administrative Committee! Mayor Vas's proposal [to extend martial law to include perpetrators of murder – R.P.], which we have accepted, proves beyond doubt that none of us is satisfied with public safety in Budapest. Looking at the chief of police's report, I must highlight two figures. According to the report, the number of crimes committed against life and physical integrity—not misdemeanors, but felonies—was 419 in one month. This means that 14 murders or attempted murders occur every day. The number of robberies was 319 in one month, which is more than ten cases per day.⁵

In the discussion below, in the absence of more detailed research on crime history during this period, I offer a general overview of the public safety situation in the Hungarian capital during the period outlined above. My analysis is based on two

² Minutes of the meeting of the Provisional National Government on 23 December 1944, in *Dálnoki Miklós Béla kormányának (Ideiglenes Nemzeti Kormány) Minisztertanácsi jegyzőkönyvei 1944. december 23.–1945. november 15.* A kötet, ed. László Szűcs (Magyar Országos Levéltár, 1997), 86.

³ Budapest Főváros Levéltára (Budapest City Archives, hereinafter referred to as BFL) IV.1420.j. The report, dated April 22, 1945, is published on the website of the project entitled *Women Raped in War*, initiated by the City of Budapest in 2020: [HU_BFL_IV_1420_j.pdf](#) (last download: 29 August 2025)

⁴ BFL IV.1420.j, 11–12.

⁵ *Fővárosi Közlöny*, 25 September 1945. 636.

main groups of sources: first, press reports and commentaries on public safety, and second, police statistics contained in the monthly and semi-annual reports submitted by the Budapest Chief of Police to the capital's Administrative Committee, which can be supplemented in part by other statistical data published from time to time in the press of the period.

In recent decades, international research on the history of crime has examined the impact of wars on crime from a variety of perspectives.⁶ Although social historical research in Hungary has dealt relatively little with the correlations between wartime conditions and crime trends and has tended to focus on politically motivated crimes and war crimes, thanks to contemporary analysts, we have more detailed information about the impact of the First World War on public safety. Several criminal statisticians and criminologists have addressed the issue, but the most detailed treatise on the subject was written by Ervin Pálosi and published in 1927 by the Budapest Statistical Office.⁷ With regard to the period following the Second World War, however, no similar research is available, presumably due to the political changes in the wake of the war and the communist takeover of the country. Indeed, no publications providing basic data on crime trends were produced during this period. Although articles dealing with this issue appeared in the press during the war, these articles cannot be considered thorough analyses. They are, rather, discussion papers raising the issue for public debate.⁸ Nevertheless, while the circumstances were very different, since in 1918 the capital did not become a battlefield, whereas by the end of the Second World War, Budapest had become the scene of one of the most destructive sieges in modern history, it is nonetheless worth comparing, at least in broad terms, how the two wars affected crime in the capital in 1918 and 1944–1945, despite the lack of detailed sources related to latter period. In the discussion below, I present this comparison.

Criminal activities committed during the siege and the period before public order was completely restored can essentially be examined along five main lines. The first, and one of the most important from our perspective, is the trends in violent crime. Partly related to this issue (but definitely to be treated separately from crimes under public law) are politically motivated violence and war crimes. I do not deal with these kinds of crimes here. I focus, rather, on forms of crime that have

⁶ For a summary of international secondary literature on this topic, see Clive Emsley, "Future Themes and Research Agendas on Crime and Police in Wartime," *Crime, History & Societies* 21, no. 2 (2017): 77–86.

⁷ Ervin Pálosi, *Budapest kriminalitása és moralitása az 1909–1925. években* (Budapest: Székesfőváros Statisztikai Hivatala, 1927).

⁸ The best example of this is Esti Ujság's autumn 1944 summary of crime committed during the war. "A háborús társadalom képe a bűnözési statisztika tükrében," *Esti Ujság*, 4 October 1944. 5–6. The contrast is particularly striking when compared to an article published before the German occupation, in January 1944, which summarizes court statistics for the year 1941. The article, published in *Pesti Hírlap* by lawyer and university professor Dr. György Auer, essentially notes an improvement in criminal statistics and even considers the moral state of Budapest to be no worse than that of the rest of the country, while also noting that the majority of crimes were being committed by adults. *Pesti Hírlap*, 19 January 1944. 3.

tended to define everyday criminality in times of peace. Similarly, it would exceed the scope of this study to examine in greater detail the third defining feature of the period, namely economic crimes, which became widespread primarily due to supply difficulties caused by the war. Within the trends of crime, a new phenomenon was an increase of crimes committed by juveniles,⁹ and finally, due to the siege and the large number of soldiers stationed in the city after it, the issue of prostitution also came to the fore. I deal with the former only briefly and with the latter in more detail later in this discussion.

Public safety after the siege of Budapest

First, it is worth briefly summarizing the picture that emerges from the contemporary press about the state of public safety in the Hungarian capital. The city infrastructure had been almost completely destroyed during the fighting, the streets were full of rubble, residential buildings had become uninhabitable, and there was a lack of public lighting and public services. These factors all contributed to the breakdown of public order. This was exacerbated by the complete disintegration of the authorities responsible for public order and the total abolition of border controls, which, according to press reports, resulted in thousands of foreign nationals residing illegally in the city, often profiting from smuggling.

In light of this, it comes as no surprise that many firearms remained in private hands after the war, resulting in daily armed clashes and shootings. It was not uncommon for weapons to be used against the police.

At the same time, immediately after the siege ended, the various political forces launched intense political propaganda campaigns, each of which focused on public safety issues, regardless of party affiliation. American films, or more precisely their negative impact on society, were the primary target of this propaganda and its mouthpieces, the party newspapers. Discussion of the negative effects of crime films and pulp fiction was not new, of course, as this subject had already been part of the discourse on crime at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth century.¹⁰ It had not been as intense, however, and it had not been part of direct political propaganda. At the same time, between 1945 and 1947 numerous articles appeared in

⁹ The problem had already emerged during the war: the aforementioned article in *Esti Ujság*, for example, emphasized the higher rate of crime among young people. "A háborús társadalom képe a bűnüzési statisztika tükrében," *Esti Ujság*, 4 October 1944, 5–6. See also: "Elkallódó magyar lelkek nyomában..." *Friss Ujság*, 5 April 1944. 4.; Dr. Pál Pados, "Utban a jobb élet felé," *Pesti Hírlap*, 21 September 1944. 4. Of particular interest to us is an article published in the daily newspaper *Uj Nemzedék* (New Generation) in 1944 titled "*Budapest élete ma sokkal kedvezőbb, mint az első világháborúban volt*" (Life in Budapest today is much better than it was during the First World War), which draws on a study by statistician Alajos Kovács. Despite its somewhat misleading title, the article also notes signs of crisis, including an increase in crime. "Budapest élete ma sokkal kedvezőbb, mint az első világháborúban volt," *Uj Nemzedék*, 4 May 1944. 7.

¹⁰ See Roland Perényi, *A bűn nyomában. A budapesti bűnözés társadalomtörténete 1896–1914* (L'Harmattan, 2012), 221–223.

various publications (surprisingly, not only as part of the communist propaganda campaign) about the wave of crime sweeping the United States (and, less frequently, Great Britain and Western Europe as a whole). These articles emphasized the alleged moral inferiority of the capitalist-imperialist social system.

Another major focus of public safety concerns was the increase in the numbers of female offenders. The press was keen to emphasize that women were becoming criminals at a much higher rate than earlier and, they added, were also involved in a surprisingly high proportion of violent crimes. The issue had already been on the agenda during the war. As early as 1944, the political daily newspaper *Nemzeti Ujság* (National Newspaper) had drawn attention to the fact that, as the author of the article put it, the rise in crime among women was a “symptom of war.”¹¹ According to an article published in the 20 June 1947 issue of *Népszava* (People’s Voice) on summary proceedings announced in October 1945 to improve public safety and speed up judicial proceedings, 28 percent of the criminals were women.¹² This information alone does not necessarily prove that the proportion of female criminals actually increased significantly, as women have always been underrepresented in terms of lawbreaking compared to their proportion within the population as a whole. If we try to compare this data with earlier periods, we can rely on the research done by Nikoletta Sipos, who provides statistics on crimes committed by women during the Horthy era. Sipos’ research shows that while there was relatively high fluctuation in the proportion of female offenders in the 1920s and 1930s, this proportion remained mostly below 20 percent, and only after the First World War did it approach the proportion reported in *Népszava*. In the 1920s, the highest rates of crimes committed by women were 24.2 percent in 1920 and 24.4 percent in 1925.¹³ Compared to this, the proportion of female perpetrators after 1945 cannot be considered exceptionally high, but at the same time it seems to support the assumption that both World Wars had the same effect on the gender ratio of offenders. Furthermore, if we examine the high crime rate among women from the perspective of the war years, we see a slow downward trend. Although no relevant data are available for the Second World War, it can be assumed that, due to similar trends in the gender ratio of the population (with men being sent to the front), we would see processes identical to those observed during the First World War. During the years of the First World War, the proportion of female offenders was well above one-third, significantly higher than the abovementioned figure.¹⁴

From press reports, we can also draw conclusions about the spatial patterns of crime. First, contemporary newspaper reports clearly show that crime was linked to specific urban spaces and concentrated in certain areas. Second, there was some continuity with earlier periods. Some of the same urban spaces remained as critical in terms of crime as they had been before the war and even at the turn

¹¹ “A nők bűnözésének meglepő számadatai,” *Nemzeti Ujság*, 22 March 1944. 5.

¹² “A bűnhullám csökkenését reméli a statáriális bíróság,” *Népszava*, 20 June 1947. 2.

¹³ Nikoletta Sipos, “Nagyvárosi női bűnözés Budapesten az 1930-as években,” *Múltunk* 69, no. 3 (2024): 215–235.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 222.

of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Such areas included certain parts of Józsefváros (the VIIIth district of the city), Teleki Square, and some suburbs.¹⁵ At slum settlements originally built as temporary military barrack hospitals during the First World War, the situation became even more dire than it had been before the war. This is evidenced by a six-hour police raid organized on 20 February 1946 at the Mária Valéria settlement, in which 300 police officers, 400 detectives, and 50 Soviet soldiers took part. During the raid, law enforcement completely surrounded the settlement and went from house to house, arresting a total of 71 people, including several burglars and murderers who had escaped from the Markó Street prison during the siege or in the chaotic period that followed.¹⁶ Police mostly tried to improve public safety in the city through raids involving large numbers of officers, mostly supported by the Soviet army, and the so-called “R(aid)-group” established within the police force in early 1946 also primarily attempted to address the situation using this method.

Another frequently discussed topic in the postwar press which also posed a major threat to public order was prostitution and the spread of sexually transmitted diseases associated with it. According to the 7 December 1945 issue of the democratic daily newspaper *Szabadság* [Freedom], “from the moral security standpoint, the situation in the capital is catastrophic—50,000 clandestine prostitutes are infecting the population.” But the spread of prostitution was not only a topic in the news. The chief of police also spoke of tens of thousands of clandestine prostitutes (meaning prostitutes not under the control of the police) in Budapest in his report, emphasizing that the spread of prostitution was mainly due to women who had come to the capital from other parts of the country in search of some source of income seeking an opportunity.

Those were the main issues of public safety in the capital that dominated the press discourse. The tone and style of press coverage were very similar to the tone and style of articles in the prewar press on the issue of crime. However, the fact that the relationship between the press and the police, and thus public communication about crime as a social problem, would soon change significantly in parallel with changes in the political system is foreshadowed to a certain extent by the critical remarks made by the police concerning primarily the print media. A good example of this criticism is János Soproni’s article “Murder and the Press,” published in 1947 in *Magyar Rendőr* (Hungarian Policeman), a police journal containing numerous propaganda pieces when it was relaunched two years after the war.¹⁷ Soproni did not dispute that crime had increased as a result of the war, but he considered

¹⁵ On 6 October 1945, the police attempted to eliminate the underworld presence on Teleki Square. During the raid, which involved 1,800 police officers (almost the entire police force at the time), 200 people were arrested. Ferenc Szilvási, *Rendőrlaktanya a Mosonyiban (1886–1986)* (BM Könyvkiadó, 1986), 60.

¹⁶ “Hatórás razzia volt ma hajnalban vetkőztető banditák, gyilkosok, betörők és tolvajok után,” *Világosság*, 20 February 1946. 2. Similar large-scale raids were carried out later in other slums as well. See, for example, “Hatalmas éjszakai razzia a Mária Valéria- és az Augusztá-telepen,” *Kis Újság*, 9 May 1946.

¹⁷ János Soproni, “A gyilkosságok és a sajtó,” *Magyar Rendőr*, 1947. no. 3. 6.

the way in which this development was presented by the press important from the perspective of “building democracy and developing morality.” He believed that the main problem was that the press largely dealt with more serious crimes, “as it did ten or twenty years ago.”¹⁸ Soproni found this worrying, because the emphasis on sensational elements and the (in his assessment) “misguided reporting” distorted reality and, at the same time, “appeal to the lesser instincts of the public, thereby coming into conflict with the interests of society.”¹⁹ In his opinion, this could encourage many readers to commit crimes, much as crime films and detective novels allegedly encouraged people to commit crimes. Soproni therefore urges the press to provide objective reporting and to educate its readership.

An „epoch-defining” offence: stripping

In the modern history of crime, there are few types of offences that occur in a concentrated manner in terms of both time and space. The so-called “stripping” was a type of crime that was particularly common in the few years under discussion here, and it was also particularly common in the Budapest area. Although the sources contain a few references to similar cases in Debrecen after the Second World War and some Budapest cases after the First World War, these were exceptions. Stripping, simply, was a special type of offence in the modern history of crime in Hungary. It was a specific type of property crime that could be classified as robbery, as it was not simply a case of street theft, because the method of committing the crime was usually accompanied by physical violence, even when the victim did not resist. The main feature of this type of crime is that the perpetrators strip the victims of their clothes and other valuables, such as watches or jewelry.

The modus operandi of strippings is perhaps most authentically summarized by Andor Fóti, a former member of the aforementioned R-group of the police, which was set up after the siege to restore public order. Fóti, who wrote several books about his memories of the police after the end of his career, describes strippings as follows: “The robbers usually caught their victims in front of ruined residential buildings. Their area of operation was half the distance between street corners. They tended to “work” in places with limited visibility and opportunities to escape. They usually worked where they had limited visibility and possible escape routes. They rarely attacked more than two people. They usually attacked in groups of four, and these attacks took one or two minutes.”²⁰ Fóti’s article, published twenty years later in a series of the illustrated weekly magazine *Lobogó* (Flag), which presented Fóti’s police memories in a somewhat embellished form, includes a description of a specific case in which members of the R-group successfully set a trap for a gang of criminals committing strippings.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Andor Fóti, “A sokbillentyűs telefon 3,” *Lobogó*, 2 March 1966. 4–5.

This description clearly shows that stripping was an offence the circumstances of which were determined by the conditions following the siege: residential buildings in ruins, debris in the streets, lack of public lighting, etc.

The prevalence of strippings after the war is illustrated by the fact that in the first part of 1946 there were more than 40 such cases per month in the capital.²¹ The situation had not improved significantly by the end of the year, at least according to the minutes of the meeting of the capital city's Legislative Committee held on 27 November, in which committee member Sándor Aradi addressed an interpellation to the mayor, calling on the city leader and the chief of police to take further measures to curb the spread of strippings.²²

Strippings are also discussed in an article written by police Lieutenant Colonel Dr. János Zilahy in the aforementioned journal *Magyar Rendőr*. In the article *Rablások* (Robberies), Zilahy makes the following statement: "We are currently living in an era of strippings."²³ He also explains the reason for this: "The perpetrator inevitably gains unlawful possession of the stolen goods, which he can sell easily, anytime, anywhere, for a large sum of money. He does not need to resort to the help of a professional dealer."²⁴ Zilahy sees only one possible solution to prevent strippings: constant surveillance and prevention. In his opinion, the best tools for this were "a well-functioning R-group and vigilant security guards."²⁵ While Zilahy was optimistic about the solvability of the problem, he indirectly criticized the press: "No one is doing anyone any favors by exaggerating this problem or presenting it in a humorous manner."²⁶

The spread of gangsterism

Several sources on the state of the capital after the siege mention that, in addition to the old, "seasoned" professional criminals, new groups of mostly younger criminals had emerged, organized into gangs which were not afraid to use weapons against the police.

The main characteristics of the new postwar underworld were also summarized by police major István Bálint in the *Magyar Rendőr* column *Bűnügyi lélektan*

²¹ *Fővárosi Közlöny*, 27 April 1946. 570.

²² Minutes of the regular meeting of the Budapest Capital City Council held on 27 November 1946. Interpellation by committee member Sándor Aradi. *Fővárosi Közlöny*, 21 December 1946. 1381–1382.

²³ Lajos Zilahy: "Rablások," *Magyar Rendőr*, 1947. no. 1. 7–8.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid. The reference to humor is no coincidence, as several jokes and caricatures appeared during this period in connection with the strippings. A good example of this is the caricature published in the satirical magazine *Ludas Matyi*, in which a man wrapped in a sheet is waiting at a tram stop. The dialogue accompanying the caricature reads as follows: "What happened to you, Mr. Jegenye?" "I'm waiting for tram No. 6 and I don't want to arrive at the Kossuth Bridge without my clothes." See "A cautious man," *Ludas Matyi*, 10 February 1946. 6.

(Criminal Psychology). It is worth quoting at length from the essay “A bűnözők alvilága” (The Underworld of Criminals), because Bálint aptly described the changes that had taken in the world of professional crime after the war.²⁷ The war’s “power to disrupt everything and shake things up from the ground up,” he wrote, “also loosened social structures,” and this naturally influenced the composition of the criminal society. It “expanded the society of social outcasts with new elements and brought about fundamental change among criminals,” and it also brought them closer from the periphery of the city. “[It] brought them from the periphery of Angyalföld and Ferencváros,” Bálint wrote, “into the heart of the city, but the inhabitants of the new underworld do not sneak around in the twilight, hiding behind the walls of houses, nor do they hide their secrets in the secluded corners of abandoned lots, but rather they frequent the Grand Boulevard, Nagymező Street, and its surroundings, the bars and coffee houses of the city center.”²⁸ In addition to greater visibility and a more intense presence, gangsterism was also allegedly a symptom of Americanism, the negative influence of detective films, and the pursuit of an ideal of an easy, carefree life. According to Bálint, war was clearly the primary cause of all this:

The loosening of moral and economic laws in the postwar period provided a favorable opportunity for the development of this new type of gangster. The economic turmoil of inflationary times meant a period of easy money and easy opportunities, and those who had become accustomed to the easy life and easy money found it difficult to give it up. If they could not create a way to live the easy life for themselves within the limits of the law, they tried to create it by committing acts that went beyond the limits of the law. These new types of gangsters were involved in everything from breaking and entering to textile smuggling and other activities, and with the power of their ill-gotten gains, they created a new kind of life for themselves, becoming the so-called ‘emperors’ of nightlife, whose subjects consisted of loose women and various types of people who made up the slag of American and European cities.²⁹

Due to the public supply shortages, which persisted for a long time after the siege, smaller and larger organized criminal groups committing primarily economic crimes gathered mainly in the city’s luxury entertainment venues. Examples of such venues were the Shanghai nightclub and “dancing bar” on Móricz Zsigmond Square, which was the regular haunt of Dezső Sántha, known as “Angelo.” Sántha was one of the most famous representatives of this new type of gangster in Budapest. Alongside István Mészáros, who became notorious as Hekus Dönci, Sántha was the most notorious criminal of this period.³⁰

²⁷ István Bálint, “A bűnözők alvilága,” *Magyar Rendőr*, 1 December 1947. 12.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Bálint concludes his article with an optimistic prediction, stating that there is no doubt “which side will emerge victorious from this struggle, and there is no doubt that order will be restored: the democratic social order of the Hungarian people.” *Ibid.*

³⁰ For a short summary of the case see Péter Dulai, “Szókitett hajjal akasztották fel,” *Amerikai Magyar Népszava – Szabadság*, July–December 2017. 21.

Public safety in the capital, reflected in the figures

First, it is worth considering how crimes against persons and property developed in the period following the siege based on data from available police reports. However, before analyzing the figures, it is important to note that police data coverage after 1945 essentially extended to the area of Greater Budapest, which was only established administratively in 1950. At its meeting on 2 March 1945, the Budapest National Committee passed a resolution (No. XVII/.1945) authorizing chief of police László Sólyom, to bring under the jurisdiction of the Budapest police all settlements in the Pest area that had “turned to him in order to maintain public safety.” Then, on 25 September, decree Nr. 8490/1945. ME, titled *On the Organization of the Budapest Headquarters of the Hungarian State Police and the Regulation of Certain Issues Concerning the State Police*, precisely defined the suburban zone attached to the capital city for police purposes: “Greater Budapest includes the territory of the capital city, as well as the towns of Budafok, Kispest, Pestszenterzsébet, Pestszentlőrinc, Rákospalota, and Újpest, and finally the villages of Albertfalva, Békásmegyer, Budatétény, Csepel, Mátyásföld, Nagytétény, Pesthidegkut, Pestszentimre, Pestújhely, Rákoscsaba, Rákoshegy, Rákoskeresztúr, Rákosliget, Rákosszentmihály, Sashalom, and Soroksár.”³¹ Thus, the extension of the jurisdiction of the Budapest city police essentially completed a process that had begun in the last decade of the nineteenth century, which involved the gradual expansion of police control to the suburban zone prior to the creation of Greater Budapest.³² Although the measure seems logical and necessary, as police control of the areas surrounding the city was also necessary to prevent economic and other crimes, it made the work of the police force, which was already understaffed, undergoing reorganization, and forced to work with inadequate equipment and supplies, even more difficult.

For these reasons, among others, it is worth treating the statistical data presented here with caution, because due to the organizational disarray of the law enforcement forces, staff shortages, and the political influence that emerged almost immediately after the end of the war, the reports may not necessarily reflect the actual state of public safety.³³ Thus, for this period, the statement that crime statistics reflect perceptions of crime rather than the reality of criminal activities is even more valid.³⁴ The data shown here are certainly a suitable source, however, for consideration of how the authorities themselves pictured the public security situation in Budapest between 1945 and 1947, at least.

If we first look at the two main types of offences, crimes against persons and crimes against property, and compare the trends in relation to each other, we see

³¹ “Az ideiglenes nemzeti kormány 1945. évi 8.490. M. E. számú rendelete” in *Magyarországi rendeletek tára, 1945. I–VI. füzet* (Belügyminisztérium, 1946), 737.

³² See Perényi, *A bűn nyomában*, 183–196.

³³ On the postwar reorganization of the police, see Gábor Tarján G., “Az első lépések. Adalékok a budapesti rendőrség 1945. évi működéséhez,” *Belügyi Szemle* 64, no. 5 (2016): 20–39.

³⁴ See Perényi, *A bűn nyomában*, 101–103.

that while the number of crimes against persons (i.e., crimes involving physical violence) appeared to decline by 1946, while the number of crimes against property first increased and then stabilized in the second half of 1946.

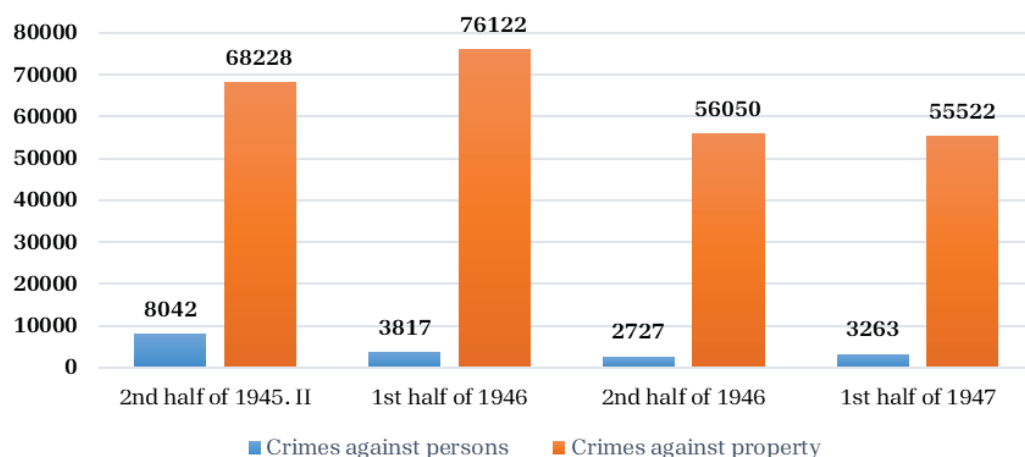


Table 1: Police statistics on crimes against persons and property, 1945–1947

Of course, these figures alone do not tell us very much, so it is worth comparing them with statistics from another period of crisis, the years following the First World War and the subsequent revolutions of 1918–1919, to see how well-founded the authorities' concerns were. If we compare the figures for the period immediately following the siege, i.e., the second half of 1945, with the averages for the period between 1920 and 1924, the gravity of the situation becomes clear.³⁵ Crimes committed against individuals in 1945 were more than twice the average for the years following the First World War, within the space of six months. Although the number of crimes against property was not higher than in the 1920s (which reveals the severity of the economic situation after the First World War), it was still almost one and a half times higher than before the war. And even in the first peacetime year 1946, the public security situation did not improve significantly. The number of violent crimes decreased (6,544 cases), but the number of property crimes remained essentially unchanged (132,172 cases). Thus, compared to the period following the First World War, the situation was worse in both categories in the period after Second World War.

³⁵ For more on the public security situation following the First World War, see also Róbert Kerepeszki, "Deviance in Budapest before and after the 'Great War.' Major tendencies and general features", in *Trianon 1920–2020. Some aspects of the Hungarian peace treaty of 1920*, eds. Róbert Barta, Róbert Kerepeszki and Krzysztof Kania (University of Debrecen, 2021), 87–99.

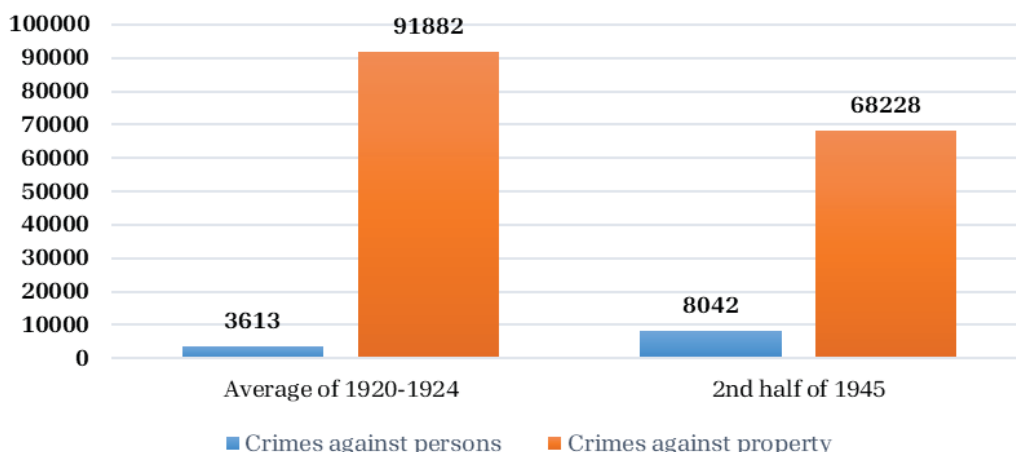


Table 2: Crimes against persons and property in the second half of 1945, compared to the average for the years 1920–1924

Although the available sources do not allow for more in-depth analysis and the data must be treated with considerable caution, it can nevertheless be stated with relative certainty that the prolonged state of war, the destruction caused by the siege, and the state of the law enforcement agencies' staffing and equipment had a serious impact on the development of crime in Hungary, particularly violent crime. This remains true even when relating crime statistics to population changes, since while Budapest had a population of 930,000 at the time of the first census after the First World War in 1920,³⁶ by the period following the siege, according to the 1941 census, the population of approximately 1,200,000 had fallen to around 1 million as a result of the war, according to contemporary estimates.³⁷ The change in population size cannot therefore be considered a significant influencing factor, so we can conclude that, compared to the First World War and the revolutionary period that followed, the conditions after the siege during Second World War, the events of the war, the politically motivated street violence, the daily, direct experience of this violence by the city's inhabitants, and the supply difficulties experienced during and after the siege for months on end all contributed to the indicators of both main types of crime in Budapest (crimes against property and crimes against persons), reflecting these extraordinary circumstances. In his April 1946 report, the chief of police also sought to explain the increase in violent crime primarily as a consequence of the war:

³⁶ *Az 1920. évi népszámlálás előzetes eredményei* (Budapest Székesfőváros Statisztikai Hivatala, 1921), 1.

³⁷ *Budapest Székesfőváros Statisztikai Havi Füzetek*, 1 October 1945.

There were 17 investigations into murders, nine of which were committed by the perpetrator in public places. Although this is still a regrettably high number, when compared to the serious economic situation, the decline in morale caused by the war, and the monthly murder rates in other European cities, it is no worse than those and cannot be attributed any special significance from a public safety perspective. The monthly rate of 17 murders exceeds the peacetime rate in Budapest by 100 percent. This 100 percent increase is explained, however regrettable it may be, by the loosening of moral standards caused by the war and by poverty.³⁸

We can therefore see that the difference between the period that came in the wake of the First World War and the period following the second was particularly marked in the area of crimes committed against individuals, i.e., crimes involving physical violence. If we want to examine the data on crimes committed against the person in more detail, we find information on the relationship between homicides and murders in the reports of the chief of police. However, before moving on to the statistics, it is important to note that it is not easy to draw a clear distinction between murder and manslaughter. The difference between murder and manslaughter is defined in criminal law by intent. The Hungarian criminal code adopted in 1878, which was still in force in the era in question, defines murder as follows: “Anyone who kills another person with premeditation commits murder and shall be punished by death.”³⁹ In contrast, the law provides a more complex interpretation of murder and its penalties. While the punishment for murder, if not premeditated (thus, second-degree murder), was 10 to 15 years in prison, the punishment for murder committed against relatives, spouses, or multiple people was life imprisonment. The criminal code further details the category of manslaughter, stipulating that murder committed in the heat of the moment and carried out immediately is punishable by 10 years’ imprisonment, and if the heat of the moment was caused by violence directed by the person killed at the perpetrator or his relatives, then it is punishable by up to 5 years’ imprisonment.⁴⁰ It is thus clear that the distinction between first-degree and second-degree murder is complex and even at times arbitrary, left to the discretion of those involved in the administration of justice (police, prosecutors, defense attorneys, judges), which may be especially true at a time when both law enforcement and the justice system need are in a state of disarray.⁴¹ Therefore, when analyzing data on these two types of crimes, the observation that statistics reflect less the reality of crime and more the functioning of the authorities and their perceptions of public safety is perhaps even more valid.

³⁸ *Fővárosi Közlöny*, 23 May 1946, 640.

³⁹ Law V of 1878, Chapter XVIII., 278.§

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* 280–281.§

⁴¹ Historians analyzing longer-term trends in the social history of crime tend to treat the two most serious types of crime (first-degree and second-degree murder) as one and the same, due to their varying definitions across different periods and countries.

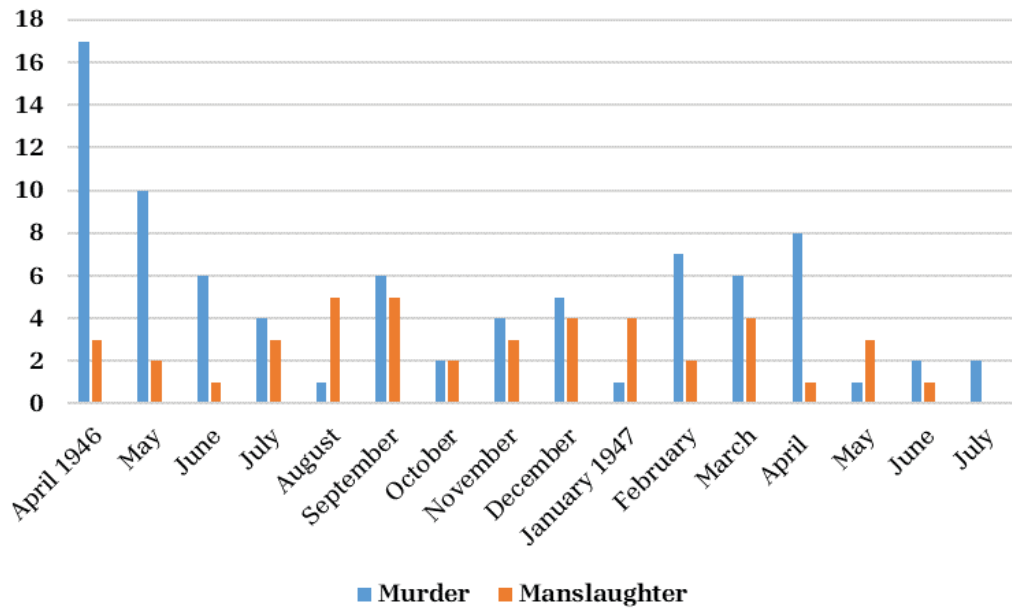


Table 3: Number of murders and homicide per month, 1946–1947

If we look at the data published in the chief of police's monthly report, we see that, in addition to the fluctuations in crimes involving homicide and their high number compared to "peacetime," there is a high proportion of premeditated murders compared to second-degree murders. The latter is particularly interesting, because, in the period between the two World Wars, the number of second-degree murders committed in Budapest in a year was five to eight times higher than the number of first-degree murders. In stark contrast, between April 1946 and the same month of the following year, 69 first-degree murders and 38 second-degree murders were recorded by the authorities.

How should we interpret this anomaly? Does the spread of violence, especially premeditated acts of violence, reflect the fact that law enforcement agencies were deliberately classifying the majority of perpetrators as having committed crimes that were more serious in order to improve public safety through the supposed deterrent effect of harsher penalties? Could it be that the authorities acted in a politically motivated manner in order to emphasize that even tougher measures were needed to eliminate the remnants of the previous social and political system? Was the sudden increase in the number of premeditated murders simply a symptom of the devastating psychological effects of war? Based on the current state of research, there is no clear answer to this question, but it is likely that, to varying degrees, these factors all contributed to the phenomenon. In any case, the period following the end of the war was clearly characterized by a complete collapse of the social and moral barriers that would have better prevented the taking of human life. This is also supported by data relating to the period following the First World War. If we can believe the statistical data provided by Ervin Pálosi (which are presumably also significantly distorted by

the fact that reporting was suspended during the Hungarian Soviet Republic), then a similar situation can be observed in 1919. In the year of the Soviet Republic and the White Terror, 121 premeditated murders were recorded, in addition to 106 second-degree murders.⁴² In comparison, in 1920, authorities uncovered 60 premeditated murders and 195 second-degree murders, and a year later, they uncovered 40 second-degree murders and “only” 10 premeditated murders. If we add to this the fact that in 1938, the last year of peace before the outbreak of the Second World War, the combined number of murders and homicides was 75 (and a third category, infanticide, was included in this figure), we see that serious crimes against persons were on the decline, a trend that was interrupted by the outbreak of the Second World War and the siege of the city.

The two World Wars, thus, were immediately followed by similar circumstances (economic and supply problems, problems of daily subsistence, political chaos, the disorganized state of law enforcement agencies, and in both cases the presence of an occupying army), and these circumstances had a demonstrable effect on everyday crime.

Dealing with the press, we have already mentioned that one of the main motifs in the descriptions of the public security situation following the end of the siege was the spread of prostitution, which allegedly was “like an epidemic.” But what do the chief of police reports reveal in this regard?

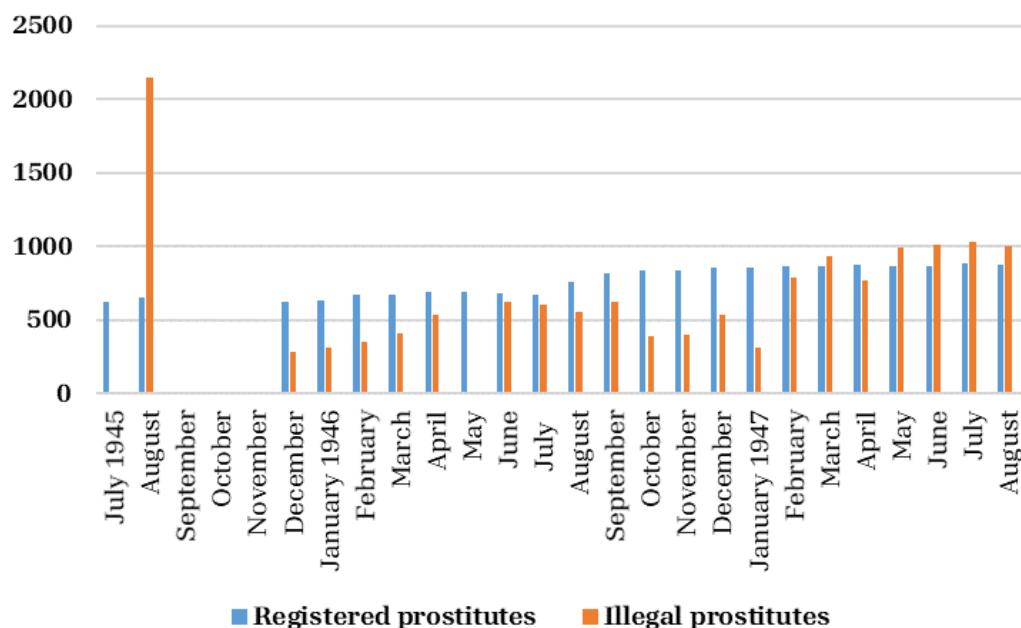


Table 4: Monthly report on registered prostitutes and illegal prostitutes who fell under arrest (1945–1947)

⁴² Pálosi, *Budapest kriminalitása*, 32.

At first glance, these incomplete reports do not necessarily support the above characterization, although the graph clearly shows that there were shortcomings in data collection and reporting, particularly in 1945, which means that the data may be significantly distorted. The only year in this period for which complete data is available is 1946, when police took action in a total of 5,330 cases of secret solicitation. This does not necessarily support the estimate of tens of thousands of prostitutes working illegally in Budapest, despite the undetected cases that are not included in the statistics (and there were probably quite a few of these, perhaps even more than in previous decades), since a woman working as a prostitute without a license was likely to come to the attention of the police on multiple occasions. At the same time, the number of prostitutes monitored by the police gradually rose from around 600 to over 800. But still, what should we make of these figures? Was prostitution really such a big problem in postwar Budapest? To answer this question, it is worth referring back to data from previous periods. While at the turn of the century the number of registered prostitutes rose slowly but surely from around 500 to over 2,000 in the years leading up to the First World War, a slow decline can be observed after the war. Between 1920 and 1922, for example, the average number of prostitutes under police control was 1,922, and the average number of women arrested by the police for illegal prostitution between 1920 and 1924 was 1,415 per year.⁴³ It is worth adding to the latter data that the number of women subjected to police measures due to illegal prostitution clearly increased during the First World War (from an average of 250 in the prewar years to 1,863 between 1914 and 1918).⁴⁴

It is therefore clear that the period of war and its aftermath (in the case of Budapest, the period preceding consolidation after the siege) did indeed bear witness to an increase in prostitution, primarily illegal prostitution. Although contemporary experts could only rely on estimates regarding the actual extent of illegal prostitution, the number of illegal prostitutes who came to the attention of the police suggests that, while regulated prostitution also increased to a lesser extent, illegal prostitution did indeed increase significantly, thus explaining the moral panic with which the press reacted to the phenomenon. The “boom” in prostitution during and after the war can be clearly explained by increased demand: the return of the male population from the front and the large number of soldiers stationed in the city explain the spread of such services. Unregulated prostitution was a major concern for the authorities, primarily because of the spread of sexually transmitted diseases, which posed a serious public health risk at a time when the health care system, severely damaged during the war, had to cope with the burden of an increase in venereal diseases.

Overall, as shown by the data presented above, in the modern history of the Hungarian capital, which began with its unification in 1873, it was the three years between 1944 and the end of 1947 when public safety in the city reached a histor-

⁴³ Ibid. 88.

⁴⁴ Ibid. 89.

ic low. However, if we seek a more nuanced picture of the impact of the war and the subsequent reconstruction process on crime trends in Budapest, further research and comparative studies would be necessary, both in relation to the capital and the rest of the country and in comparison with other large cities.

RÓBERT KEREPESZKI

BLURRED BOUNDARIES: BLACK MARKET, THEFT, AND POLICING IN BUDAPEST, 1945*

Introduction

Approaching the issue from various perspectives, the secondary literature gives profound insights into how wartime and immediate postwar periods influence and shape the dynamics of crime and law enforcement practices.¹ Budapest's prevailing social and public security conditions at the turn of 1944–1945 provide a striking example of how the war, the modern urban siege, and the ensuing general turmoil became major structural factors in crime and policing. In the Hungarian capital, the joint effect of these events led to a social and public security crisis, fundamentally altering social relations, including many characteristics of metropolitan criminality, which is the primary subject of this study.

During the period under study, criminal activity took a diverse array of forms. Given the wide range of possible civilian crimes, as well as the political and war crimes typical of the period, a more comprehensive and in-depth study would certainly yield interesting findings. However, this study of criminality does not aim to be exhaustive. It focuses, rather, on criminal acts committed against private property. This brief overview also highlights, moreover, the significance of newly formed criminal groups and their main activities during the period in question.

Pursuing this objective, the discussion first considers how wartime urban crime can be understood through the lens of social functioning and individual survival strategies. Although it is not the focus of the present analysis, one soon sees that the crimes discussed here and the activities of individual gangs may overlap with and cannot always be separated from other categories of crime that have been extensively discussed in the secondary literature. The study will argue that some crimes, such as black-market activities and theft, became “nor-

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¹ Clive Emsley, “Crime and Policing in Wartime,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Crime and Criminal Justice*, eds. Paul Knepper and Anja Johansen (Oxford University Press, 2016), 519–536.; Rosemary Gartner and Liam Kennedy, “War and Postwar Violence,” *Crime and Justice* 47 (2018): 1–67.

mal” due to exceptional circumstances. In contrast, other crimes, like looting and those committed by organized gangs, became an increasingly persistent threat to the population. To arrive at a more nuanced understanding of this complex issue, we first examine the difficulties concerning the available materials, the possible interpretative frameworks, and relevant sources.

Considering the complexity of the subject, the *Alltagsgeschichte* (“history of everyday life”) paradigm developed by German historians to describe everyday life in Germany after the Second World War is perhaps the most suitable for this analysis.² Using these methodological principles, I present below some distinctive but characteristic patterns of everyday crime along three periods that are difficult to distinguish socially: before, during, and after the siege of the capital. As already indicated, the examples of crime forms presented, including the black market, various kinds of theft, and postwar gang activity, are not intended to be exhaustive. Instead, they are selected to illustrate the predominant types of crime that distinctly reflect that period’s public security issues and social experiences.

I examine first the development and functioning of the black market, which had evolved over several decades and reached its full scale during and immediately after the siege of Budapest. Rather than treating it solely as a criminal network, I highlight its role as a multi-actor system embedded in everyday survival strategies. The subsequent section focuses on various forms of theft, interpreting them within the context of the “public security vacuum” that emerged during the siege, where survival was a central but not exclusive motivating factor. The final section turns to the challenges faced by law enforcement during the last phase of the war and the early period of postwar consolidation, with particular attention devoted to the emergence of criminal groups and the difficulties encountered by the newly formed police force in restoring control over urban spaces and rebuilding public trust.

One of the main aims of the study is to provide an interpretation of the socio-historical patterns and conceptual frameworks of crime in the Hungarian capital against the backdrop of the final phase of the Second World War and the few months immediately following it. At the same time, in this context, the study also sheds light on some hitherto underappreciated aspects of the survival strategies used by the civilian population, as well as on the continuities and discontinuities in social relations between peacetime and wartime.

² Alf Lüdtke, “Introduction: What Is the History of Everyday Life and Who Are Its Practitioners?,” in *The History of Everyday Life. Reconstructing Historical Experiences and Ways of Life*, ed. Alf Lüdtke (Princeton University Press, 1995), 3–40; Paul Steege, Andrew Stuart Bergerson, Maureen Healy and Pamela E. Swett, “The History of Everyday Life: A Second Chapter,” *The Journal of Modern History* 80, no. 2 (2008): 358–378.

Interpretative framework, concepts, sources

Some thoughts in the introduction to this discussion suggest that any attempt to deal with such topics must grapple with various theoretical and methodological challenges. The first among these is the dilemma of setting an appropriate time-frame. Namely, when did wartime days begin and end for the people of Budapest? Whether we should take the actual entry of Hungary into the war (June 1941), the German occupation (March 1944), the country's transformation into a theater of war (September 1944), or the beginning of the siege (November 1944) as the starting point is a question that is as much a matter of reflection as the question of how long this state of emergency lasted. The latter aspect is important because essential public services (especially policing, a particularly relevant topic here) were either lacking or functioning poorly for months following the siege of Budapest. Moreover, the institutional infrastructure necessary for "normal" everyday life was also in disarray. Furthermore, the siege of Budapest cannot be understood as a well-defined, one-off event. It was, rather, a gradually evolving process, the starting and ending points of which might have been different for the inhabitants of the city at the time, depending on the conditions under which they lived.³ These few aspects show that we are dealing with a subject that cannot be confined to a rigid time frame, as the periods before, during, and after the war cannot be sharply separated.⁴

A similar theoretical difficulty arises concerning the concept of everyday delinquency in wartime, especially if we want to interpret it not only from a criminological but also from a sociohistorical perspective. However, the methodological approach I have chosen here mitigates this difficulty, since *Alltagsgeschichte* focuses on life experiences, everyday practices, and the social contexts in which individuals lived. This method places particular emphasis on individual experiences, patterns of socialization, goals, ambitions, challenges, and feelings. Moreover, it focuses on the study of routine activities and community interactions. Although the notion of everyday life is formed by the contexture or interweaving of regular activities and experiences (i.e., lived everyday realities), it is not a static phenomenon but a complex one that is also characterized by routine and change, as well as by the joint effects of the social and cultural context.⁵

During wartime, the social world in which the individual lives becomes uncertain, chaotic and dangerous, disrupting familiar and routine activities. New tasks may replace usual activities that help individuals cope with their changed circumstances. In this context, ordinariness is no longer understood as stability and consistency. It becomes, rather, a set of practices allowing for the "routinization" of uncertainty. People adapt to experiences that compel them to take new measures, often facing new moral dilemmas. As a result, behaviors that may break legal

³ Krisztián Ungváry, *Battle for Budapest. One Hundred Days in the Second World War*. (I.B. Tauris, 2016), 7–12.

⁴ Gartner and Kennedy, "War and Postwar Violence," 5–7.

⁵ Lüdtke, "Introduction," 5–7.

norms can sometimes be seen as necessary for individual survival and can even be interpreted as new social requirements. Adaptation to the altered circumstances of everyday life in wartime can consequently lead to the development of new social rules and informal patterns of behavior that can gradually become normalized, i.e., they may acquire an everyday character. This alteration often conceals latent processes generating significant external and internal conflicts, similar to those observed during the transition from war to a more stable state of peace.

It is thus not easy to grasp the everyday nature or ordinariness of social practices and morays that emerge as methods of adaptation in a time of war. At the same time, it is equally challenging to arrive at a clear definition of “everyday crime” for the same period. However, it may be reasonable to ask whether it makes sense to talk about ordinary crime under such extraordinary circumstances. During wartime, the related rules cannot (necessarily) prevail, because, for example, the law enforcement authorities and judicial institutions that are essential to ensure their effectiveness are not functioning. Furthermore, these bodies and institutions are often radically altered following a regime change in the wake of military conflict, as happened in Hungary in the second half of the 1940s.⁶

In addition, interpretations of order and general norms become ambiguous or pliable, for example, because some acts (such as food theft) can be interpreted as crimes that violate legal norms but also as a legitimate part of a survival strategy. The simultaneous presence of several authorities and other bodies further complicates the matter, as such actors often act in opposition to one another, making the correct interpretation of the concepts more uncertain. This was particularly the case during the siege of Budapest in 1944–1945 and the months that followed, when remnants of the “old” Hungarian police, anti-German forces, various German-allied Arrow Cross units, and Nazi and Soviet military authorities patrolled the capital separately.⁷ This is vividly reflected in an entry in the diary of a Budapest police officer in early January 1945:

Now there is no police, no law, no security of life, and no security of property! Now everyone is fair game, and anyone can be murdered with impunity by the so-called law enforcement officers.⁸

It is clear from the discussion above that the dysfunction or radical transformation of institutional policing in wartime also contributed significantly to the destabilization of legal norms. While the exceptional legal measures introduced during the military conflict, such as curfew, internment, and the procedures of military

⁶ Tamás Kovács, “Police Officers at a Crossroads: Life-Stories of Hungarian Police Officers after the German Occupation of Hungary,” *Istoriva* 42, no. 1 (2024): 135–140.

⁷ Ákos Bartha, “Terrorists and freedom fighters: Arrow Cross Party Militias, »Ragged Guard« and »KISKA« Auxiliary Forces in Hungary (1938–1945),” *Studia Historica Brunensia* 69, no. 2 (2022): 67–89.

⁸ *Elfeledett történelem. Fábián Gáspár rendőrtiszt ostromnaplója, Budapest 1944–1945*, eds. Balázs Mihályi and Mihály Rohánszky (Erdélyi Szalon, 2025), 72. (Gáspár Fábián’s diary entry from 7 January 1945.)

courts in civilian cases, may suggest tighter institutional control, many factors might have had precisely the opposite effect. For example, the aforementioned curfew during the siege was accompanied by restrictions on street lighting at night. An obvious reason for this measure was to make it more difficult for enemy planes to bomb the capital. The darkness also provided excellent conditions for certain crimes, however, such as burglary. The factors influencing this situation may blur the lines between “order” or “lawfulness” and “disorder” or “lawlessness,” along with understandings of everyday crime.⁹

However, these uncertainties do not make efforts to classify certain wartime “everyday crimes” meaningless or irrelevant. Through this approach, we do not aim at creating new categories of offences, but merely to reinterpret some old or conventional categories in the context at the time. Conventional criminal acts are transformed and multiplied and become increasingly “conspicuous” during wartime as a direct consequence of the emerging new perpetrators, both individuals and groups. As a consequence, some of the reinterpreted forms of crime are almost integrated into the set of normal activities of everyday life. On the other hand, it is worth emphasizing that the theory of everyday crime becomes relative in wartime. This means both that certain crimes (such as theft) that had been of lower priority in peacetime might become more significant and also that social disorganization, the increasing inadequacy of law enforcement, and a general lack of security make the population much more vulnerable, which for many people is perceived as a perpetuation or consolidation of instability and a dominant factor of everyday life. The study of everyday wartime crimes requires a sociohistorical approach, which does not aim at normative judgments but seeks rather to explore the kinds of acts committed in these extraordinary times (most often as parts of survival strategies), acts which would probably not have been committed in peacetime under, when legal norms offered more protection.¹⁰

These phenomena often left only sparse and sometimes distorted traces in the historical sources. Therefore, to get the best possible approximation of the actual situation, we have to rely on different types of sources, which may offer different, sometimes even contradictory perspectives, both separately and complementing each other. One group of sources consists of so-called ego documents,¹¹ mainly diaries and letters written by civilians during the siege. Many of these sources offer valuable insights from a “bottom-up” perspective. Despite this, most of them must be handled cautiously. These narratives, of course, are shaped by and reflective of potential biases, as well as the tendency to exaggerate or downplay actions taken or experienced. They are also shaped by events which take place during the time

⁹ Gartner and Kennedy, “War and Postwar Violence,” 28–30.

¹⁰ On the issue of everyday crime in times of war, see also Clive Emsley, “Future Themes and Research Agendas on Crime and Police in Wartime,” *Crime, History & Societies* 21, no. 2 (2017): 78–82.

¹¹ On the concept of ego documents, see Arianne Baggerman and Rudolf Dekker, “Jacques Presser, Egodocuments and the Personal Turn in Historiography,” *European Journal of Life Writing* 7 (2018): 90–110.

elapsed between a given event and the author's account of the event, as well as hindsight reasoning. Also, care should be taken when using archival documents originating from the police and/or other authorities. While in most cases, these highlight the challenges that law enforcement authorities are obliged to face, some often reflect ideological or formalized perspectives, particularly because of the influence of the occupying powers and the new postwar political order.

At first glance, crime statistics may appear accurate and reliable. Their usefulness, however, is limited. Data collection disruptions, deliberate or accidental distortions, and the selectivity of recorded crimes raise questions about the reliability of the data due to methodological inconsistencies.¹² In support of this, it is worth noticing that while a growing amount of district-related data was registered monthly following the siege of the Hungarian capital, much of this information might be misleading for various reasons. One of the causes of this is that the content of the Chief Commissioner of Police's report changed. Until August 1945, the account informed the Budapest General Assembly about the number of criminal investigations completed by the police every month. From this date on, however, the report focused on the number of investigations initiated upon denunciations filed monthly.¹³ The latter account hardly provided a more accurate overview of the actual crime situation and the expected criminal trends in Budapest. This was mainly because many crimes were not reported to the police when they occurred but only when they were noticed. This fact was highlighted in the contemporary press. For example, many people who returned to the capital weeks or months after the siege only then discovered that their homes had been looted,¹⁴ so their reports at that time distorted the picture of crime in that period (e.g. months). Furthermore, in April 1946, the Chief Commissioner of Police of Budapest himself stated that certain persons, especially the victims of crimes committed by fences and other swindlers, had so far been unwilling or afraid to report the perpetrators "partly for reasons of public safety or for certain psychological reasons." However, as the public began to believe that the police had become more active and effective, more and more victims appeared with complaints and charges dating back to earlier periods.¹⁵ This situation in particular distorted crime statistics, because victims reported their grievances during a period when confidence in the police was improving. Although the population took this increased confidence as a key factor influencing public safety and crime trends, it turned out to be misleading regarding the actual criminal conditions.¹⁶

Finally, the contemporary press is an obvious source, not only as a source of information but also as a means of shaping (and studying) the collective image of

¹² On methodological problems in crime statistics, see Paul Knepper, *Writing History of Crime* (Bloomsbury, 2016), 31–57.

¹³ *Fővárosi Közlöny*, 25 August 1945. 528; *Fővárosi Közlöny*, 25 September 1945. 634.

¹⁴ *Szabad Magyarország*, 2 September 1945. 4.

¹⁵ *Fővárosi Közlöny*, 27 April 1946. 570.

¹⁶ International comparative studies confirm this. See Gartner and Kennedy, "War and Postwar Violence," 8.

public security. At the same time, changes in political power and different interests, the presence of foreign occupying forces, censorship, and editorial practices tailored to the tastes of the reading public might have significantly impacted the credibility of information from various press organs.¹⁷ This is all well reflected in the contemporary newspapers, as the prewar adjectives and metaphors used to describe crimes and their perpetrators are increasingly associated with the ideological overtones of the postwar world.

The black market in Budapest

The gradual loosening of legal norms under wartime conditions found expression in the rise in crime, particularly in crimes against private property. One must take the relevant wartime conditions into account, which included the rationing system, a shortage of goods, and the decline in the purchasing power of real wages. These factors imposed ever heavier burdens on the population and made it increasingly difficult to maintain previous living standards. More and more people were gradually forced to cross the boundaries of legality to survive. This process is first recognizable through the functioning of the black market.¹⁸

Black market techniques that develop under wartime conditions became increasingly sophisticated due to the centrally controlled economy, the arbitrary nature of the rationing system, and the shortage of goods. The black market had always been driven by a special “free trade” logic. Prices were determined by the intensity of supply and demand, totally independent of official price controls. The black market is not a typical Hungarian phenomenon. Its operation had a decisive impact on the daily lives of people in the occupied states (e.g. France), areas directly affected by the fighting (see Italy), and even on the countries that were in the war but did not suffer occupation (e.g., Great Britain). In fact, the black market became such a familiar part of everyday life that it continued to pose serious challenges for most countries involved in the war well into the postwar period, whether they ended up on the winning side or the losing side.¹⁹

In Budapest, the extensive operation of the black market was not a new experience for the population, given that a similar phenomenon had already existed in

¹⁷ On the postwar Hungarian press, see Róbert Takács, “A nyomtatott sajtó a koalíciós időszakban (1944–1948),” in *A sajtószabadság története Magyarországon 1914–1989*, ed. Vince Paál (Wolters Kluwer, 2015), 256–353.

¹⁸ Edward Smithies, *Crime in Wartime. A Social History of Crime in the Second World War* (George Allen & Unwin, 1982), 58–77, 201–203.

¹⁹ On black-market activities in other countries during and after the Second World War, see Mark Roodhouse, *Black Market Britain 1939–1955* (Oxford University Press, 2013); Malte Zierenberg, *Berlin’s Black Market 1939–1950* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2015); Stefanos Geroulanos, “An Army of Shadows: Black Markets, Adaptation, and Social Transparency in Postwar France,” *The Journal of Modern History* 88, no. 1 (2016): 60–95; Kenneth Mouré, *Marché Noir. The Economy of Survival in Second World War France* (Cambridge University Press, 2023).

the Hungarian capital during the First World War.²⁰ However, several factors impede a more nuanced historical understanding of the black markets in Budapest and other cities. One of the reasons for this lies in the multifaceted, hidden, and informal nature of the black market. In most cases, black market activities remained largely concealed, as this market existed alongside unregulated and unlawful activities. These activities included profiteering, fraud, stockpiling, smuggling, tie-up sale, foreign currency crimes, counterfeiting, adulteration of foodstuffs, unlicensed trade, and chain trade. These were not the practices of individuals acting on their own. Rather, they were carried out mainly within well-organized networks formed by various occasional or professional actors in the black market. In these clandestine networks, producers of the products offered for sale, intermediaries, and final sellers all found a stable place for themselves. Consequently, informal regulation, reputation, trust in personal social networks, and the constant management of the risk of being caught were all part of the specific operating mechanisms of the black market, as were the buyers themselves, who generated, maintained, and fed this illicit flow of goods through their consumption needs.

Most contemporary diaries, memoirs, newspaper articles, and official reports acknowledged the existence of the black market as a separate entity in a normative and general way but rarely shed light on its actual social and economic causes and/or spatial dynamics. In addition, many accounts suggested, overtly or implicitly, that some of the authorities supported the existence of the black market and even participated directly or tacitly in its maintenance, either for survival or for personal enrichment. This kind of “institutionalized concealment” was already evident in Budapest during the First World War,²¹ and examples from other countries show that the police and other public services often played a tolerant, even supportive role in the operation of the informal and clandestine economy.²²

In the years of the Second World War in Hungary, restrictions imposed during wartime economic management, including price regulation and the introduction of a new rationing system, significantly impeded the capacity of wage earners and the economically disadvantaged to meet their basic needs. Concurrently, the wealthier social groups were able to access most goods through the black market, which was experiencing robust growth. This situation gave rise to heightened tensions between social classes, and by 1942, the authorities themselves acknowledged their inability to regulate the black market effectively, which had permeated virtually every sector of the economy. This was despite the fact that the Hungarian government had repeatedly increased the penalties for black-market activities. Furthermore, during the siege of Budapest, various military authorities imposed

²⁰ Laura Umbrai, *Az éhes Budapest. A lakosság élelmezése a fővárosban az első világháború alatt* (Budapest Főváros Levéltára, 2024), 55–58.

²¹ Zsombor Bódy, “Élelmiszer-ellátás piac és kötött gazdálkodás között a háború és az összeomlás idején,” in *Háborúból békébe: a magyar társadalom 1918 után*, ed. Zsombor Bódy (MTA Bölcsészettudományi Kutatóközpont Történettudományi Intézet, 2018), 164–166.

²² Norman Lewis, *Naples '44. A World War II Diary of Occupied Italy* (Carroll & Graf Publishers, 1978), 109–110.

capital punishment by hanging for certain black-market activities.²³ Following the conclusion of the Second World War, those found to be perpetrators of such abuses remained subject to capital punishment.

In addition to the implementation of stringent legislation, law enforcement agencies sought to combat the black market by conducting regular raids²⁴ at railway stations, major markets (such as those on Garay Square and Teleki Square), and entertainment venues. However, in reality, black market trade was often not linked to these urban areas. Numerous sources reveal that efforts were made to circumvent official controls with the assistance of various front organizations, commercial establishments, and offices. Even in 1946, the situation in Hungary remained critical (exacerbated by lower-than-expected crop yields) to the extent that, in winter, the population was able to address one third of its needs by making purchases on the black market.²⁵

‘Public security vacuum’ and the thefts

By the second half of 1944, wartime mobilization and the Soviet Red Army’s encirclement of Budapest created increasingly severe living conditions for the population. The state infrastructure providing public utilities (gas, electricity, and water) gradually became inoperable. By the turn of 1944–1945, the siege had created such a chaotic situation that the capital’s population had become increasingly vulnerable to improvised and informal solutions for survival. This structural crisis, which affected all aspects of metropolitan life, created a public security vacuum in which there was almost no institutional guarantee of protection. A key aspect of this process was the gradual cessation of police surveillance in the fundamental social spaces of the city, that is, on the streets and squares,²⁶ where the local Budapest police patrols were replaced by German, Soviet, and Hungarian soldiers, as well as by violent Arrow Cross terror squads. As a result, where written and unwritten social norms had once prevailed, the absence of law enforcement control created zones of anarchic abandonment, hopelessness, arbitrary looting, and occasional violence.²⁷

²³ *Elfeledett történelem*. 72. (Gáspár Fábán’s diary entry from 7 January 1945.)

²⁴ On the Hungarian police raids at the time, see János Molnár, “Razziák a fővárosban. A Gazdasági Rendőrség tevékenysége 1945–1948 között,” *Múltunk* 55, no. 4 (2010): 46–64; Ildikó Cserényi-Zsitnyáni, *A politizált gazdasági rendőrség. A Gazdaságrendészeti Osztály, 1945–1948* (Nemzeti Emlékezet Bizottsága, 2015), 55–71.

²⁵ Péter Gunst, “Mezőgazdaság és élelmezés Magyarországon a II. világháború folyamán,” *Agrártörténeti Szemle* 24, no. 3–4 (1982): 369–378; Gyula Erdmann, *Begyűjtés, beszolgáltatás Magyarországon 1945–1956* (Békés Megyei Levéltár, 1992), 47–48.

²⁶ For more on the importance of police surveillance of streets in general, see Roland Perényi, “Urban Places, Criminal Spaces: Police and Crime in Fin de Siècle Budapest,” *Hungarian Historical Review* 1, no. 1–2 (2012): 134–165.

²⁷ Ungváry, *Battle for Budapest*, 216–236.

The collapse of law and order, together with the cessation of police control in public spaces, meant not only the collapse of formal law and order institutions but also the transformation of informal norms of social coexistence. One spectacular sign of this was that some members of the population lost so much trust in traditional law enforcement agencies that they took the protection of their immediate surroundings into their own hands. “To avoid unpleasant burglaries, the male members of the house keep watch from 9 p.m. to 7 a.m.,” a young Budapest girl wrote in her diary in January 1945, reflecting how certain residents’ communities were trying to regain some control of their surroundings and restore some measure of law and order through self-organization.²⁸ This show of self-defense can be understood as a simultaneous social response to the loss of a legitimate state presence and the imminent direct threat of a state of complete disorder in which crime would become more common.

At the time, the blockaded and besieged city of Budapest became an uncontrolled area for plunder, where the boundaries between public and private property had become blurred and where, for many soldiers, civilians, and destitute people, stealing other people’s property was a way to survive. Several sources reveal that various forms of theft became relatively normal parts of everyday life, and that society’s moral perception of the perpetrators had also changed. The need to survive simply overrode moral inhibitions and fears of being caught in the act. On 25 January 1945, a boy in Budapest wrote the following in his diary: “I have put the principle of ‘stealing food is not a crime’ into practice. If I see a jar of jam anywhere, even in a stranger’s house, I take out my spoon and eat it until someone enters the room.”²⁹

As previously noted, moral assessments of peacetime crimes committed as a way to survive during the siege during this period changed. One finds clear examples of this change in the explanations given by perpetrators of their crimes. This change is also captured in the diary of another boy from Budapest, written at the end of January 1945:

My tour took me past a stationer’s shop window shattered by an explosion. [...] Among pencils and other office supplies, I saw a thick notebook. I decided to take it for myself. I planned to write my poems in it. I didn’t consider it theft because nobody owned it anymore under the war conditions. That’s what I thought.³⁰

Among the kinds of theft during the period, one form common in Budapest deserves mention. It is difficult to understand today and indeed may have been hard for people at the time to understand. During the siege of Budapest, people made so-called “air-raid bags,” into which they packed their most essential belongings. These bags were always easy to carry in case one had to take refuge at an air-raid

²⁸ Eszter Juhász, “Ostromnapló,” in *Naplók az óvóhelyről. Budapest ostroma civil szemmel*, eds. Barbara Bank, Balázs Mihályi and Gábor Tóth (Nemzeti Emlékezet Bizottsága, 2021), 401.

²⁹ Miklós Marót, “Naplótöredék,” in *Naplók az óvóhelyről*, 241.

³⁰ János Tolnai, “Naplórészletek,” in *Naplók az óvóhelyről*, 149–150.

shelter. Some thieves specialized in seeking places in air-raid shelters where no one knew them. Then, after a bombing raid, they would take advantage of the confusion to steal other people's air-raid bags, hoping to get valuable loot.³¹ During the turbulent months following the siege, car theft became a prominent profession of sorts in the "theft-industry," mainly due to the lack of police registration and control. In his memoirs, the Soviet city commander of Budapest recalled that the perpetrators of car thefts had become so bold in the second half of 1945 that even the vehicles of officers of the Allied Control Commission were not safe from them.³² The two phenomena vividly illustrate how theft had become a way of life for members of some social strata, and not only a means of survival for those in need.

Consequently, theft cannot be considered a single, simple, discrete category, because there is a substantial difference between theft committed as part of a survival strategy and theft committed simply as a means of gaining wealth. The war-time circumstances and the immediate postwar world created new opportunities for people to steal the belongings of others, and it also made it more tempting to do so, since moral and thus psychological limitations had been loosened. As a consequence of the siege, apartments remained without doors and windows, which might have made them seem abandoned. Consequently, many might have thought that what was left inside was unowned and, therefore, could be taken as booty. Offences against property became so widespread and commonplace that theft was often not considered a serious criminal act. This opinion was strengthened by the frequent experiences of the civilian population, who clearly saw that soldiers from the various belligerents, whether they were defenders, attackers, or occupiers, and even members of the local law enforcement agencies were often involved in theft and looting. This observation indirectly normalized theft and also tacitly emboldened people to steal other people's belongings. Furthermore, there were other moral justifications offered for stealing the property of others. If the stolen goods came from the enemy's stocks, for instance, the theft could even be seen as serving a "higher" purpose.³³

Finally, theft can also be interpreted as a psychological response to the traumatic experiences of war. It offered a kind of compensation that may have partly alleviated the experience of material and human loss, as well as the hardships of long-term deprivation and the constant fear of death and vulnerability during the siege. However, it is important to stress that these motives were only seldom clearly separated from one another in the practice. There were often several motives behind an act of theft. Survival, moral insecurity, the breakdown of community norms, psychological traumas, and the feebleness of law enforcement often

³¹ Csilla Markója and István Bardoly, "'Kegyeltenebb, mint bármelyik országban.' Wilde Margit és Ferenc Wilde Jánosnak írt párhuzamos levélnaplói 1944-ből," *Enigma* 23 (2016): 118.

³² Ivan Tyerentyevics Zamercev, *Emlékek, arcok, Budapest... Egy szovjet városparancsnok visszaemlékezései* (Zrinyi, 1969), 63–64.

³³ *Elfeledett történelem*. 114–115, 136–137, 174–176, 227. (Gáspár Fábíán's diary entries from 29 January, 8 February, 26 February and 30 March 1945.)

appeared simultaneously and reinforced one another. In more than one case, theft became a permanent way of life, especially for those whose survival had depended on robbery or trading on the black market during the war and whose survival strategy had not been made obsolete or unnecessary by the gradual restoration of state order and something resembling normal life after the battles had ended.³⁴

Gangs of Budapest

Even long after the siege, the persistent public security vacuum fostered the emergence of different criminal communities, which structurally opened a new chapter in the history of crime in the capital. In this period, many violent and often randomly organized gangs threatened the people of Budapest. These groups did not require sophisticated methods. Instead of a long-term operation, their only aim plunder and steal as quickly as possible, often by using brutal methods and means. One of their most typical methods was the so-called “undressing,” meaning, essentially, mugging but also stripping the victims of (and stealing) their clothing. The Hungarian word used in the discourse of the time was “vetkőztetés,” which emphatically refers to this act of stripping the victim of his or her clothes. One observer offered the following description of this crime: “It was not advisable to go out in the evening because the so-called ‘undressers’ were there. They would attack you, rip your clothes and shoes off, and take them. If you tried to defend yourself, they hit you on the head.”³⁵

In August 1945 alone, 319 robberies (an average of more than ten cases a day) were reported in Budapest, many of which were these kinds of muggings, and the number of cases that went unnoticed by the authorities is incalculable.³⁶ The prevalence of this method is well illustrated by the fact that a gang of muggers (“undressers”) which operated in the neighborhoods around the railway stations and was arrested in January 1946 admitted that they had robbed 36 victims in this manner, in addition to having committed other crimes.³⁷

These examples indicate that the practices of the gangs operating in Budapest after the siege differed from those of organized criminal groups in peacetime.³⁸

³⁴ Keith Lowe, *Savage Continent. Europe in the Aftermath of World War II* (St. Martin's Press, 2012), 44–47.

³⁵ “Rille Teréz későbbi visszaemlékezése,” in *Naplók az óvóhelyről*, 272.

³⁶ *Fővárosi Közlöny*, 25 September 1945. 634.

³⁷ *Magyar Nemzet*, 4 January 1946. 3.

³⁸ The literature on the activities of various criminal organizations points out that the operation of such communities depends on three key factors in addition to their social environment: structure, cohesion, and coordination. In other words, if the bonds between the members of a criminal group (unity, discipline, mutual trust, etc.) are strong (which is particularly important given the inherently illegal nature of their activities) and if there is a common purpose and a focused division of labor, as well as efficient and well-organized cooperation, the group may be viable in the longer term, or more precisely, more likely to avoid detection by law enforcement agencies. In the classical sense, the gangs typically operated with a less formal structure than

In 1945–46, unemployed civilians, demobilized soldiers, deserters, and frequently former criminals released or escaped from jails during the war, who hardly knew one another or were even complete strangers to one another, formed such gangs or spontaneously joined smaller or larger criminal groups. These criminal communities, which were quite mixed in terms of their social composition, were characterized not only by the use of violence in their crimes but also by their lack of organizational structure. Even at the time of their formation, they did not set up internal rules or a formal hierarchy, and they did not define long-term goals. Their primary goal was not to survive or to fit into the world of urban crime but to obtain immediate and preferably maximum material gain. It was easier for them to use violence than it would have been in times of peace, given the vast amount of weapons, ammunition, and other military equipment left behind in the city after the siege, which was easily accessible to the newly formed gangs. Compared with peacetime underworld criminal groups, these ad hoc gangs had a far more threatening toolset at their disposal. They had weapons, often complemented by Soviet or Romanian military uniforms and police armbands, and this gave them a striking advantage over the newly formed law enforcement agencies and the civilian population, an advantage that both accelerated and reflected the collapse of the informal peacetime criminal “rules” as well.³⁹

The organization of criminal gangs was also facilitated by the fact that law enforcement agencies were severely weakened, having lost much of their former prestige and control over public spaces during the war. In 1945 and even in the following year, atrocities were committed regularly against the police, and according to some sources, it was not uncommon for police officers to be involved in exchanges of gunfire in six to eight places in one night.⁴⁰ During the wartime period, several physical and social spaces emerged in the Hungarian capital that became particularly favorable to the reemergence of crime. The streets remained without public lighting at night. Districts that been partly deserted and destroyed

other organized criminal groups with hierarchical, almost ritualistic rules, such as the Italian mafia. Their internal regulation system was looser and less sophisticated. They had less control over their members, but group cohesion may also lead to long-lasting cooperation between them over time. These gangs did not shrink from making their operations public. They therefore predominantly appeared and committed their crimes in public places, nightclubs, railway stations, and marketplaces, and they let their presence be known to the widest layers of society. A multitude of historical examples show that the emergence and proliferation of such gangs are most often bound to periods when the state’s policing capacity has been weakened, regardless of whether this was a consequence of war, political transition, or economic instability. Scott H. Decker and David C. Pyrooz, “Gangs. Another Form of Organized Crime?,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Organized Crime*, ed. Letizia Paoli (Oxford University Press, 2014), 270–278, 283; Catherine Denys, “Geography of Crime. Urban and Rural Environments,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Crime and Criminal Justice*, eds. Paul Knepper and Anja Johansen (Oxford University Press, 2016), 96–101.

³⁹ Budapest Főváros Levéltára (Budapest City Archives, hereinafter referred to as BFL) XV.9, 28. Rezső Huszti, “A fővárosi közbiztonság alakulása 1945–1975. között,” 10; BFL VI.12.a.1. 203/1945. Report by Police Chief László Sólyom for May 1945, 9 June 1945.

⁴⁰ BFL XV.9, 28. Rezső Huszti, “A fővárosi közbiztonság alakulása 1945–1975. között,” 10.

by bombing provided targets for looting. Public utility sites that had fallen out of use, such as empty waterworks, power stations, and public sewer tunnels, offered hiding places. The neighborhoods around passenger and freight railway stations also became chaotic areas rife with crime, mainly because of attacks on freight trains and the activities of smugglers, as well as bustling black trade in market halls. The rapid reopening of nightclubs and other places of entertainment posed a particular threat to public safety. In a climate of social disintegration, these became hybrid sites. They served as places of collective oblivion, trauma processing, identity search, and informal networking. Such entertainment blocks were particularly concentrated in places where disturbances of social mobility, bustling traffic at transport hubs, and weak state control were combined (e.g., around major railway stations). The partially urbanized natural areas of the capital also contributed to the deterioration of public safety in their peculiar way. Among them, the large parks that were particularly difficult to police, such as Népliget and Városliget, along with other public green areas, were of outstanding significance. Most of these places had provided temporary shelter for marginalized people trying to hide from the authorities. In many cases, the hidden places served as excellent stages for specific crimes. From the point of view of public order and moral regulation, the riverside was a similarly dangerous zone, where abandoned shipwrecks and quayside buildings could function as “bases” for various criminal groups or as hiding places for stolen goods.⁴¹

Journalists covering crime regularly reported on the capture of some gangs. One of the most famous of these was the case of the so-called Márfi (in other sources Márfy) Gang, the members of which were arrested after a long gun battle at the end of December 1945. The group of twelve members, two of whom were women, was equipped with two submachine guns, five revolvers, four hand-grenades, a police armband, and Russian military uniforms. The members of the gang confessed to two murders, three attempted murders, thirteen robberies, and eighteen burglaries. It is surprising to say the least that they started their activity only in November 1945, just one month before their capture.⁴² The example of the Márfi gang, however, not only demonstrates the new aspects of postwar armed violence. It also points to another phenomenon that is at least equally disturbing: among the gang members, there were five juvenile offenders. This was by no means an isolated case, and sources dating back to before the siege period highlight the problems affecting teenagers, which prompted many of them to enter the world of crime.

⁴¹ Ibid. 21.

⁴² *Magyar Nemzet*, 30 December 1945. 1.

Conclusion

The importance of the period analyzed in this study goes far beyond the individual crimes and criminal groups that emerged in the wartime context and after the siege of Budapest. The collapse of public security, the violent appropriation of urban space, and the temporary absence of state order and control were defining social experiences and fundamentally reshaped the framework and attitudes of the public discourse on crime. In the months following the war, there was also an increasing ideological shift as certain crimes came no longer to be interpreted purely in criminological terms but also in political ones. In the public discourse, the boundaries between wartime crimes, political crimes, and everyday crimes gradually blurred, and this became a basis for new ways of exercising power later on.⁴³

The aim of this study was twofold: first, to explore the patterns of crime in Budapest during and after the war using new sources and case studies and, second, to examine crime as a sociohistorical indicator. The examples highlighted, such as the functioning of the black market, the normalization of theft, the emergence of violent gangs, and the challenges of reorganizing the police, demonstrate that the forms and dynamics of crime are linked not only to political systems but also to deeper social processes, adaptive constraints, and specific social-spatial contexts. Additionally, numerous international parallels in the literature illustrate that the erosion of social norms, the blurring of the lines between formal and informal order, and the intertwining of crime and survival were not unique to Budapest in the postwar moment. Instead, these trends represent a social phenomenon which appears in various locations during historical crises. By studying the example of the Hungarian capital, we thus contribute to a more nuanced understanding of everyday life in times of war and sociohistorical reinterpretations of the concepts of crime and order.

⁴³ *Szabad Szó*, 4 January 1946. 1. Unsurprisingly, there was a similarly politicized, ideological interpretation of everyday crime in postwar Germany. See Richard Bessel, "Policing in East Germany in the Wake of the Second World War," *Crime, History & Societies* 7, no. 2 (2003): 8.

AFTERWORD: AN INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

ANSSI HALMESVIRTA

FINLAND AND THE POLITICS OF WAR AND PEACE IN 1944

On the 23 December 1943, Albert Speer, Adolf Hitler's favorite architect and mastermind of the Nazi war economy, was in a plane over Finland. In the 1920s, Speer had dreamt of taking a canoe tour with his wife on the lakes in the region (as so many Germans do nowadays), but now he was heading to the nickel mines near Petsamo. The Nazi war industry desperately needed ore, and since the early summer of 1941, the German Alpen Jaeger divisions had been stationed in Lapland to secure production at the mines and to prepare an attack to blow up one of the lifelines of the Russians, the Murmansk railway line to Leningrad. On his arrival in Petsamo, which lies on the coast of the Arctic Sea, Speer ordered all stored ore be immediately transported to Germany.

When, in the summer of 1940, Hitler pressured Finland to join or at least accompany his attack against the Soviet Union, which he was planning to launch in the summer of 1941, he did so mainly for strategic reasons which soon became clear to the Finns. After some negotiations, Finland was ready to join, but only in order to regain the territories lost in the Winter War and secure a strong defense line in Eastern Karelia against the Red Army. During the war, it was emphasized to the Germans and the world that the Finns were waging their own, separate war for this specific reason. It would have been quite impossible and utterly senseless, however, for Finland to have attacked the Soviet Union on its own, and at the time, many responsible people in Finland believed that Germany, which had already shown its power and military effectiveness in the West, could defeat the Soviet Union.

Ultimately, however, Finland did not have to make an unprovoked declaration of war against the Soviet Union, because Soviet planes bombed Finnish cities (including Helsinki) before the Finnish army even made a move. The plausibility of the Finnish separate war argument was put to the test. Hitler presumably expected Mannerheim to command his armies to join the siege of Leningrad, though no document has been found in which Hitler actually made this demand. Whatever the

case, Mannerheim defied Hitler's expectations.¹ He personal reasons for doing so. Mannerheim did not particularly like Germans, and he regarded Hitler as an arrogant, bombastic, hysteric but dangerous windbag. This was the impression he got when Hitler made a surprise visit to the celebration of Mannerheim's seventy-fifth birthday in June 1942. The more decisive reason, however, for Mannerheim's reluctance to join the German war effort was that he was well aware of the possible consequences. If the Soviet Union were to win the war, Finland would pay a very high price for the attack.

Officially, Finland remained Germany's co-belligerent,² or *kanssasotija*, until the very end, i.e., August 1944. It was not an Axis ally, although in 1941 it signed the Anti-Comintern Pact. Nevertheless, the two countries shared a common enemy, and the offensive had been prepared jointly. In this special way, Finland ended up cornered, albeit not as tightly as, for instance, Hungary. Hungarian historian Sándor Szakály has asked, with regards to the case of Hungary, whether the country had any other choice than to join the German war effort (in Szakály's words, "volt-e alternatíva," or "was there any other alternative?"). In the case of Finland, one probably would arrive at a similar answer: the country had only a few bad options, and the Finns had to find the best from among these bad options. As another historian has put it, Finland had to choose between plague and cholera. However, one must remember both sides of the critical solution. On the one hand, Germany offered Finland an opportunity, and Finland seized it. On the other, the Finns had little choice. Hitler's general plan was to destroy Bolshevism and transform the Soviet Union into a material resource to maintain German power, the *Festung* or "fortress" in Europe. This included taking control of the Baltic Sea and Lapland so that the Swedish iron ore and Finnish nickel ore could flow smoothly to Germany. All this, in turn, required the destruction of Leningrad, and Hitler needed Finland's help to accomplish this and also to secure the northeast flank of his northern armies in general. In a way, Finland complied with the request when its army reached the 1939 border in the Karelian Isthmus, c. 20 km from Leningrad, but it never advanced any closer. This show of restraint (which was also a show of defiance) may well have been a decisive factor in Germany's failure to take Leningrad. It certainly underscored to Stalin that the Finns were not merely Hitler's puppets, and Finland was not simply an instrument of Hitler's will.

Nonetheless, Finland was the most important "brother in arms" for Germany in its war against the Soviet Union. When the war tides turned against Germany in the winter of 1942–1943, the Finnish government contended that ultimately its participation in the war was about defending Finnish national interests, and it began to explore possibilities for a separate peace. The year 1944, regarded by many Finnish historians as the most dramatic in the nation's history, would reveal

¹ Contrary to a common view, Hitler never directly asked Finland to join the siege, and, consequently, Mannerheim did not have to give a negative answer.

² The term appears in: Osmo Jussila, Seppo Hentilä & Jukka Nevakivi, *From Grand Duchy to a Modern State. A Political History of Finland since 1809*. Transl. David & Eva-Kaisa Arter (Hurst & Company, 1995), 198.

how Finland ultimately secured this peace. Hitler clearly was not willing to let the Finns simply withdraw from the war, and there were secret plans to have the Åland Islands occupied were they to attempt to do so. In the end, however, nothing came of these designs. The Nazis simply had far more serious problems on the continent at the time.

The turn of the year 1943–1944 was the proverbial calm before the storm, although Finland had already been dragged into the international war of nerves. In the early days of 1944, a leak from the United States revealed that the Soviets were not demanding an unconditional surrender from the Finns. In response to this leak, the Finnish Government sent a letter to Moscow proposing the borders of 1939 as the starting point of negotiations. Moscow rejected the proposal out of hand and underlined that it would only accept the 1940 borders (see the Maps in the Appendix) as the baseline for further talks, but it indicated that there was still room for negotiation. When the Finns stuck to their original proposal, the dialogue broke down. The Finns were unaware of the decisions that had been reached by the “big three” in Tehran.

Why did the Finnish Government reject the Soviet proposal? First, the military situation on the Eastern front was still quite stable. The Finnish armies in Eastern Karelia were still in good fighting condition, and they were also well positioned, far beyond the 1939 borders. Under these circumstances, the parliament was not yet prepared to make any concessions to the Soviets. First, the Finnish leaders imagined, somewhat optimistically, that Eastern Karelia would be a trump card in the final negotiations and the 1939 borders could be restored. Second, the Finns assumed that the Red Army was compelled to use the vast majority of its forces against the Germans. Third, the Wehrmacht was still so strong in the Baltic and Lapland that the Finnish Government feared that Hitler might take revenge on the Finns if they were to resume negotiations with the Soviets. Fourth, Finland still badly needed arms, grain, and groceries from Germany and its allies. The Finnish Government thus played a duplicitous game which, under the circumstances at the time, was perhaps the only means of safeguarding Finland’s security interests, at least for the time being. Finnish Prime Minister Edwin Linkomies, who visited Hungary in January 1943 as the head of the Finnish Parliament and agreed with Horthy that Germany would ultimately lose the war, put it in a nutshell: “Peace must be struck at the moment when the Germans can no longer prevent its achievement and on such conditions which the great majority of the Finns can accept.”³

The latter aim was difficult to achieve, even if almost everyone was weary of the war and many had come to understand, in the winter of 1944, that Finland would probably have to accept hard peace conditions. But the “waiting game” had started, and it had to be played to the bitter end. As Linkomies surmised, for

³ Henrik Meinander, *Suomi 1944* (Bookwell, 2012), 23. Note: the translations of the quotations from Finnish to English in the text are mine (AH).

Finland, the peace conditions were going to be bitter in the end, but not too bitter to swallow.

The agreements reached at the Tehran summit held at the turn of November and December 1943 by Stalin, Roosevelt, and Churchill shaped the war in Europe until the Autumn of 1944. The fate of Finland was dealt with as a side matter. What is perhaps most noteworthy about this process was simply that the Allies agreed not to demand an unconditional surrender from the Finns, in strong contrast with the policy adopted with regards to the other vassals of Nazi Germany. Stalin's view carried the most weight in the discussion of this question, as Roosevelt and Churchill were preoccupied with issues which, for their respective countries, were more pressing. Stalin's view of Finland was basically distrustful. Although the Finnish government had underlined in the 1930s that it wanted to stay out of the impending conflicts between the great powers, Stalin had remained consistently convinced that the Germans would invade Finland, as they had done in 1918, and might use it as a stepping-stone for an attack against Leningrad. As a precautionary measure, he had commanded the Red Army to conquer Finland in November 1939, and he had taken preparatory steps for a second round of fighting. Stalin was highly suspicious of the Finns, and not without cause, although he did not bear any special grudge against them (he understood why the Finnish army did not join the siege of Leningrad). Nevertheless, in the spring of 1944, he made it clear that he regarded the Finns as exceptionally thick-headed and that, in his assessment, the Red Army would have to hammer some sense into their heads again. He never bought the Finnish view of a "separate war," but he realized the benefits that a separate peace might have for the Soviet Union if reached before Germany's ultimate defeat.

When Finland's fate was discussed in Tehran, Stalin showed unexpected magnanimity towards the Finns. Referring to the courage and tenaciousness of the Finnish soldiers, he said he was ready to give Finland a chance to remain independent, and he laid out his preliminary peace conditions: the 1940 borders, 300 million dollars in reparations (according to the value of the currency in 1938), immediate severance of all relations with Germany, the expulsion of all Germans from the territory of Finland, and a return to peace as quickly as possible. Stalin's concessionary stance was based on the idea that peace would guarantee a tighter grip on Finland than war. It was evident to him that Finland could not be governed by an occupying force. At most, it could be ruled by a puppet regime or some other kind of influence, and indeed this is precisely what happened after the war from the perspective of security policies. Roosevelt attempted to persuade Stalin to make further concessions, but to no avail, and Churchill regarded Finland as part of the Soviet sphere of influence and thus a matter for the Soviet Union to decide. Finland thus had to content itself with preserving its independence, an objective which, in late 1943, was far from certain, particularly given that the Germans learned about Stalin's conditions and blackmailed Finland to remain aligned with them as long as possible.

The timing of Finland's withdrawal from the war was largely dictated by the ability of the German Northern Army Group maintain its position in Estonia and

sustain the siege of Leningrad. Both Hitler and Stalin were perfectly aware of this. Between mid-January and early March 1944, the Red Army broke into the German positions and drove the German forces to the eastern borders of the Baltics. Helsinki was also heavily bombed, and preparations were launched for an onslaught in the Karelian Isthmus. Unexpectedly, the Germans were able to hold on to their positions in the Baltics until September, which delayed Finland's readiness to withdraw from the war. The Soviet peace conditions, which were about the same as those laid down in Tehran, were made known to Finland via Stockholm on 1 March, but after six weeks of diplomatic exchanges, tentative soundings, and internal deliberations, the Finnish Government rejected these conditions in mid-April. The decisive moment came when the Finnish delegation, led by J.K. Paasikivi, met Vyacheslav Molotov in Moscow. The Soviet terms were stiffened with a demand for the cession of Petsamo and an increase in war reparations to 600 million dollars. Although Paasikivi would have accepted the conditions, the Government and Parliament did not. Finland still needed German arms and groceries, and the Red Army was concentrating its efforts against the Germans in the south. Some misguided souls even hoped that when the Allied invasion of France was launched, the American and British troops would be pushed back to the beaches, and the final German attack on the Soviet Union could start. Other, more apprehensive figures argued that if Finland were to capitulate, the Germans would invade and form a puppet government, as had just happened in Hungary. As noted above, the Finns did not know that Hitler's plans included only the occupation of the Aland Islands.

At this juncture, one point more must be added which influenced the decision of the Finnish Government. Many politicians and highly ranked civil servants and intelligentsia in state service in Finland came from the conservative Coalition Party and the Centre (Agrarians). They were ideologically "old school" legalists and had believed that ultimately justice would triumph. They had gradually come to realize, however, that they had been naive. They now feared that "devilish" Russia was merely playing a delaying game with the peace conditions and would ultimately destroy Finnish democracy. Their sense of patriotism, which was also buttressed the fascist propaganda of the Patriotic People's Movement, won the day. Even skeptical statesmen like Linkomies could not change the tone of the public discourse. On 9 March, he held a memorial speech at the funeral of former President Pehr Evind Svinhufvud, who had been deported to Siberia during the period of Russification in the early 1900s. Linkomies praised the steadfast stance Svinhufvud had taken against the Russians, and he emphasized his courage and determination in resisting Russia through law and principle. Privately, Svinhufvud had sided with the philosopher Johan Vilhelm Snellman, who almost one hundred years earlier had warned his compatriots to be cautious in their dealings with the Russians. "Only wild people fight to the last man," he had warned. Finnish politician Urho Kekkonen, who at the time wrote under the pseudonym Pekka Peitsi (and in the 1950s served as Prime Minister), modernized the warning: the unyield-

ing policy of the government might lead to “a heroic suicide.”⁴ The government tried to persuade Mannerheim to take the office of President. It was thought that he was the only person who could have persuaded the Finnish people to accept the peace terms offered by Moscow, and he also would have been acceptable to the Soviets. He refused the offer, however. At the same time, the Social Democrats and the Swedish Party pressured the government to continue peace soundings. They were egged on by the official pleas of the King of Sweden Gustav V and President Roosevelt. It is thus hardly a surprise that Linkomies’s titled his war memoirs *Vaikea aika*, or “A Difficult Time”—something of an understatement. Public discussion of the peace treaty was curtailed in the spring of 1944 by the censors, and the prevailing mood can be described as one of wishful thinking, suspicion, and attempts to weigh the various dangers. There was some basis for “wishful thinking” (meaning the hope that Finland could make peace with the Soviet Union without provoking a harsh German reaction). General Colonel Jodl, who was one of Hitler’s closest aides, had hinted to the Finnish Minister of Defense Rudolf Walden that if Finland were to make peace with the Soviets, German divisions would be transferred to other fronts from Finland. In reality, however, this was not Hitler’s plan.

I will not go into detail, in the discussion here, concerning the general situation in Finland, but a few facts related to the conduct of the war merit mention. In the spring of 1944, the front changed very little. It was mostly trench warfare, punctuated by daily clashes with the enemy. On the Karelian Isthmus, tension persisted until June, when the Red Army launched a major offensive, which lasted for approximately one month. Although the principal battles were relatively brief, the sense of constant threat endured, so much so that the Defense Forces kept over half a million men in active service until late Autumn 1944. In other words, 14 percent of the population (which numbered 3.8 million) was enlisted, which meant 68 percent of the men between the ages of 20 and 40. In addition, some 60,000 women worked in military health care, maintenance, and administration. 40 percent of them were so-called Lottas (voluntary paramilitary organization). As a percentage of the entire manpower engaged in the Second World War, the Finnish soldiers numbered very few, but no other country involved in the conflict had recruited such a large part of its population behind the war effort.

The war was utterly exhausting from the perspective of the Finnish economy. The state had to take care of the functioning of the country on a large scale. A large share of the workforce was sent to the front, limiting the labor available for the production of goods and services, and industry was concentrated on producing war materials. Armament production increased in 1941–1944 by one-fifth, and in 1944, 23 percent of production was reserved for war needs. This more than doubled the share of the state budget devoted to war needs (in comparison to 1940), and indeed by 1944, 74 percent of the state budget went to funding the war effort.

⁴ Meinander, *Suomi 1944*, 94.

The production of war materials was, of course, more expensive than the production of peacetime consumer products.

In terms of foreign trade, Finland's exchanges with Western countries declined sharply, and the country became heavily dependent on Germany and its allies. For instance, groceries, fertilizers, and grain were imported from Hungary, and Romania provided fuel. Already in 1941, half of Finland's foreign trade was with Germany, and this share increased to 75 percent over the next three years. As a matter of fact, Germany subsidized Finnish participation in the war by sending arms and ammunition to Finland. The import of grain (rye), meat, and butter from Germany and Denmark doubled in comparison to prewar years. Without these food items, there would have been famine in Finland.

Germany utilized Finland's dire predicament to its advantage. In April 1944, Hitler stopped the flow of arms and grain to Finland until the Finns were willing to make some show of their political will to continue as "a brother in arms." For instance, on 4 June, when Mannerheim celebrated his seventy-seventh birthday, he pondered a message he had received from Hitler, according to which Germany would not send any more arms to Finland because Finland had continued its efforts to reach a separate peace with the Soviets. Mannerheim had asked for more arms because the Headquarters Intelligence Department had received information from the Kannas front to the effect that the Soviet Union was preparing a massive attack. Three days after the Allies landed in Normandy, the Red Army launched this attack. The consequences for Finland proved fateful.

A huge army consisting of 26 infantry divisions, 20 panzer brigades, and over 1,000 planes (altogether 600,000 men and women) was under the command of General Govorov, who had broken the siege of Leningrad. The aim of the campaign launched by this army was to conquer southeast Finland and compel the Finns to surrender unconditionally. The Finnish army consisted of six divisions and two brigades, and they had only weak air and artillery support. On the morning of 6 June, the Russian Karelian attack started with massive shelling on the Finnish positions, which were only 20 kilometers from Leningrad. Shelling continued the following morning, and the Finns were forced to flee in panic (fifty deserters were given death sentences in a war tribunal and executed by firing squad, and 18,000 were hospitalized because of war psychosis, shellshock, or some other mental disorder). Within ten days, the Red Army had reached Viborg. It was quite clear that the Finnish army needed heavy arms, especially antitank defenses and air support to stop the Red Army. On 12 June, Mannerheim made an appeal to Hitler, who realized that Finland was in deep trouble, and a week later, the desired arms deliveries arrived from Germany: 9,000 Panzerfausts, 5,000 Panzerschrecks, and 30 heavy assault guns. Two German air squadrons with 80 Messerschmitt and 30 Focke-wulf fighters were immediately sent into action, and one heavy assault gun brigade and one reserve division were engaged in defense. Thanks to this well-timed German contribution, the Red Army advance was ultimately brought to a halt to the west of Viborg.

Why was the Finnish army so unprepared for the Russian onslaught? There was one main reason for this: the Headquarters had not made clear plans for an organized retreat, although it should have understood that the positions could not be held against such a massive attack. In hindsight, it was soon understood that the best strategy would have been a flexible withdrawal and heavy antitank defense. However, with the German forces and divisions brought from Eastern Karelia, and thanks to favorable natural conditions (the complicated river and lake systems in Karelia), the Russian attack was finally brought to a halt on 12 July. The Russian attack in Eastern Karelia was also soon repelled. The antitank defenses were particularly effective against Russian heavy tanks, which needed open terrain to push ahead and support the infantry. Concentrated artillery shelling and improved air defenses kept Russian infantry and its vehicles at bay. Today, some historians (blessed with hindsight, as historians always are) refer to this successful defense as a “fend off-victory,” although in the eyes of the Finns at the time, the result seemed somber and ominous, especially if weighed against the peace conditions. And in July 1944 no one in Finland knew that the worst was now over. Many regarded the Germans as saviors, and there were over 200,000 Germans still in the country. 12,000 Finnish soldiers had been killed, and the Karelian Isthmus was lost (so much for retrospective glorifications of the campaign as a “victory”). Perhaps the only “victory” lay in the that Finland was the only country involved in the war that made concerted efforts to repatriate the bodies its fallen soldiers (some 93,000 people) for proper burials in their home parish graveyard (Professor Róbert Barta from Debrecen University saw the gravestones in Keuruu, Central Finland). That Finland was the only Eastern European country that was not occupied was not so much a result of the successful defense campaign. It was a consequence, rather, of the logic of Russian strategy.

It is worth mentioning that without President Ryti’s personal affirmation to Hitler that Finland would not make a separate peace before negotiating with him, the German’s would not have sent help. It was important both to stabilize the situation on the front and to signal to Stalin that the Finns would not surrender unconditionally. The bluff, however, lay in the fact that this personal affirmation was binding only for Ryti, as he had acted against the governmental statutes and without consulting parliament. The next President (Mannerheim) and, consequently, Finland thus bore no responsibility for this affirmation and could simply withdraw it. This could open the way to negotiations with the Soviets. The bluff was well-timed. On 12 July, Stalin discontinued the attack and leaked to Ambassador Alexandra Kollontai in Stockholm that the Soviets would no longer demand an unconditional surrender. Stalin found himself pressed to hurry his armies to Berlin rather than to make them try to breakthrough in Finland (Red Army tanks could not reach Germany through Finland, as Finland does not border Germany). Moscow now sought to make peace according to the following conditions: a new government had to be formed, Ryti and Minister of Defense Tanner had to be replaced by peace-minded figures, and Finns had to notify Moscow that they wanted peace, too. Moscow aimed for a ceasefire, and the Finns could

breathe a sigh of relief. They no longer had to fear losing their independence and submitting to intervention in the country's internal affairs.

The crucial question now was simply who was going to replace Ryti. Considering the difficult situation, there was only one candidate who was acceptable to both the Soviet Union and Finland itself: Mannerheim. When Mannerheim was informed on 25 July by Kollontai that Moscow was ready to negotiate, he acceded. He was also informed that there had been a bomb attack against Hitler and that the German armies had suffered terrible losses in Belorussia. The Germans had also started to pull out their forces from Finland to transfer them to other southern fronts. This information obviously helped Mannerheim in his decision. On 1 August, Ryti, who, during the Continuation War, had ensured that the "brothers-in-arms" relation worked for the Finns without allowing the Germans to gain a strong foothold in Finland, resigned. A practical accommodation had been reached, and Mannerheim was now free to act. He chose Antti Hackzell, the late Ambassador in Moscow, to serve as Prime Minister and the experienced diplomat Carl Enckell to serve as Foreign Minister.

During his career as a General in the Tsarist army and then as Commander of the White army which crushed the Reds in 1918, Mannerheim had hated Bolshevism, and he had hoped that the Germans would first wipe this scourge from the earth and then that the Allies would do the same to the Nazis. Since this scenario, which to Mannerheim had been reminiscent of events in the First World War, had not come about, he did not have any qualms about cutting the German connection as quickly as possible and without too great a cost for the Finns. He waited until he got a note from Stockholm according to which Moscow feared that the Finns were perhaps not serious about the idea of peace, and he let his aide inform Kollontai that they were. On 25 August, the new Government sent a letter to Berlin indicating that Mannerheim did not consider Ryti's affirmation binding. The Germans were furious but could do nothing. The Soviets reacted and duly sent the conditions for interim peace negotiations. Finland should break relations with Germany, and all German troops should leave Finland within two weeks. If the Germans were to refuse, they should be disarmed and imprisoned. When Finland had made these conditions public, its representatives would be invited to Moscow to negotiate a ceasefire or a ceasefire and a peace. After a few days of hesitation (it seemed and later proved to be impossible to remove German troops from Finland within two weeks, particularly from Lapland), the Government announced via Stockholm to Moscow that it had accepted these conditions (on 2 September). When Moscow announced that a ceasefire would come into force on 4 September, Mannerheim issued orders for all fighting on the front to cease. When the complete ceasefire was reached on 5 September, practical preparations for peace negotiations had already begun. The negotiations would be held in Moscow. The Finnish delegation consisted of Prime Minister Hackzell (who became seriously ill just two hours before the first meeting and was replaced by Foreign Minister Carl Enckell), Defense Minister Walden, General Oscar Enckell, and Councilor Nykopp, all of whom were fluent in Russian. General Erik Heinrichs, who could assess what the

Soviet terms would entail in light of Finland's defensive capabilities, provided military expertise for the Finnish side.

The delegation arrived in Moscow on 7 September. One of its members noted something remarkable in his diary, namely that Finland seemed to be the only country in Eastern Europe that would not be devastated and occupied. The ceasefire between the Soviet Union and Finland had taken effect by the time the terrible, final phase of the World War began. If we compare what Finland was offered to withdraw from the war with the Armistice Agreement reached between Romania and the Soviet Union (signed on 12 September 1944), the Romanians' decision had more far-reaching consequences. The Red Army was permitted, according to the terms of the Armistice, to march freely through Romania. One might be prompted to think, by this lacuna between the practical reality and the official justification, of *Emberszag* (Stench of Man), the memoirs of Hungarian writer Ernő Szép. Szép wrote about his experiences in a labor camp somewhere near the capital. Officially, he was forced to dig trenches to stop the Russian panzers. Practically, however, the work merely served as a means of tormenting elderly Jews to exhaustion and death.

In early Autumn, it became clear that Stalin's idea was to create a buffer zone in Eastern Europe. The Baltic countries would soon suffer the early phases of the establishment of this buffer zone. On the very day when the Red Army launched its great campaign on the Narva front in Estonia, the Finnish delegation was ready to negotiate with Molotov in Moscow. However, it had to wait one week for the Russians and the British to agree on what they would demand from Finland. They agreed to offer the so-called interim peace, meaning that the final peace conditions would be settled in a pan-European peace conference when the war was over.

Seen from the Finnish perspective, the peace conditions were harsh. The 1940 borders were restored, Petsamo was ceded to the Soviet Union, the Germans had to be immediately disarmed, all German and Hungarian citizens were to be arrested and interned, the Finnish army had to be demobilized within two and a half months, and war reparations were set at 300 million dollars. The hardest condition for the Finns to accept, however, was the lease of Porkkala peninsula, which lies some 30 kilometers to the west of Helsinki, as a naval base for the Soviets. Finally, the fulfillment of the treaty conditions would be controlled by a Control Commission of the Allied powers. Foreign Minister Enckell proposed Hanko instead of Porkkala to Molotov, but Molotov was adamant: "You either sign or go home. If you go home, we come and pull this through without mercy and come to Helsinki." Concerning the reparations, the Finns wanted to show calculations proving that Finland simply did not have the economic resources to pay them. Molotov retorted: "If your experts can prove that one war year is cheaper to you than one year of peace with the reparations payments, we can read the document, otherwise, we won't even have a look at it." Without further ado, the treaty was signed on 19 September. The representatives of Finland all signed it, but only

Andrei Ždanov signed it on the Allied side, because the Allies considered it a temporary and primarily military agreement. The Finns thought otherwise.

When the conditions were announced on the radio in Finland, for the most part, the Finnish people were as dumbfounded as the representatives in parliament, who had to concede that such a harsh treaty was ultimately unsurprising and unavoidable. Although people were downcast, there was no time for depression. The terms of the treaty placed emphasis on fast action, beginning with the evacuation of the Karelians (some 470,000 people), the people of Lapland (to Sweden, from where they could return in November 1944), and Porkkala. The expulsion of the Germans was only possible through military measures, which became something of a “third war,” which dragged on into 1945 and which ultimately even involved the (admittedly somewhat halfhearted) assistance of the Russians.

Some of the Finnish leaders who had been responsible for the war suffered from mental disorders, and they either resigned or had short recovery periods. One of them was Mannerheim’s Chief of Staff, the aforementioned Erik Heinrichs, who wrote an important memorandum to his superior which can be described as the first draft of Finnish postwar security policy. Its main point went against all previous policies. It emphasized that, after having suffered two wars, Finland should henceforth avoid open conflict with its neighbor to the east, because policies should be based on strategic considerations. Thus, it was essential to convince the Soviet leadership that Finland was capable of defending its southern and western coasts so that the country could be regarded as neutral. This would match the Soviet plan to create a buffer zone which would stretch from the Balkans to Murmansk. Based on this memorandum, Heinrichs wrote a second draft in the spring of 1945 which contained ideas about a common defense strategy for the Gulf of Finland for Finland and the Soviet Union. This, for its part, ultimately became the preliminary text for the Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance, which was signed in 1948 (known in the English secondary literature as the YYA Treaty after its Finnish name, “Ystävyys-, yhteistyö- ja avunantosopimus”). This treaty stabilized the security policy and foreign policy relations of the two countries for quite a long time, albeit on conditions largely drafted by the Soviets.

The interim peace treaty forced the Finns to make a radical ideological shift which meant extensive neutralization of their political vocabulary. Official speech and speech in public had to abandon anything which hinted at hostility to bolshevism or hatred towards the “archenemy Russian.” This meant abandoning the so-called “hatred-of-the-Ruskie” (*ryssäviha*) propaganda disseminated since the early 1920s by the Academic Karelia Society and other openly anti-Soviet organizations, for instance, the so-called kinship societies. According to articles 20 and 21 of the peace treaty, all political prisoners, communists, and some pacifists had to be released, and the pro-Hitler and fascist-minded political, military, and paramilitary organizations (for instance, the Civil Guards and Lottas, which had been the main supporters of the war effort) had to be abolished. All pro-German newspaper coverage disappeared soon because of official censorship and sen-

sible self-censorship, and the Soviets had practical control of the Allied Control Commission (ACC).

The moot question in late Autumn of 1944 was the extent to which the Soviet Union would utilize the ACC to interfere in Finnish internal affairs. The arrival of Andrei Zhdanov, who served as head of the ACC in Finland from 1944 to 1947, seemed foreboding to many Finnish leaders, but—somewhat unexpectedly—the 280 Russian ACC personnel behaved rather correctly, in comparison, for instance, to their colleagues in Hungary, as István Vida has shown. For their part, the Finns were cautious with their tone, as one can sense, for instance, in the statement made by Mannerheim when he met Zhdanov for the first time. “I am very sorry,” Mannerheim said, “that Finland and the Soviet Union drifted into a war. However, there is in the defeat of Finland a good side: now the countries can solve their conflicts by peaceful means.”⁵

The ACC had the authority to report if there were omissions or negligence in fulfilling the conditions of the peace treaty, but it did not have the power to interfere in the work of Finnish civil authorities or the military. Zhdanov ordered his staff to stay within the limits of their official functions (he knew that the Finns had referred to the Russians as barbarians), and Stalin had advised him that the situation in Finland had to be stabilized quickly and without complications so that the country could start producing and delivering the reparations products to the Soviet Union. And that is what Finland did. Some bold historians have compared Zhdanov with Tsar Alexander the First, but to my mind, this comparison is more far-fetched than bold, since Alexander was quite popular in Finland for his leniency and liberal measures in establishing Finland’s autonomy in 1809.

The Lapland war waged against the Germans was not a war at all in the beginning because the Finns and Germans had already agreed in 1943 that the German army, which consisted of more than 200,000 men, would retreat from northern Finland and Lapland according to a timetable agreed upon by the “brothers in arms,” with the Finns following them at a safe distance. If this plan had worked, the Germans would have withdrawn from Finland more swiftly than they ultimately did once hostilities were intensified under pressure from the ACC. The Germans, however, were completely unable to comply with the agreement because they had been ordered to take their heavy armaments and stock with them to Norway, and in Autumn 1944 they still had groceries and fuel for half a year, as well as enough ammunition for over a year. When they eventually departed from Petsamo, they left 200,000 bottles of champagne behind, which the Russians were then able to consume. They also left behind many pregnant Finnish women, whose children recently tried to find their fathers in Germany. Only a scarce few of these fathers were still alive, and many were not entirely willing to meet their wartime progeny.

For Zhdanov, the expulsion of Germans was a primary and intriguing issue, and when he surmised that some kind of secret game was being played in Lapland between the Finns and the Germans, he traveled to Mikkeli, Mannerheim’s head-

⁵ J.E.O. Screen, *Mannerheim* (Helsinki, 2001), 121.

quarters, to demand direct action from him and more troops to the North.⁶ Mannerheim sent 60,000 men and commanded Lieutenant-General Hj. Siilasvuo to expel the Germans from the country despite the covert agreement. He also asked Zhdanov for Red Army's help, and Russian troops chased the Germans on the Murmansk front but were either not able or not willing to engage them in battle. As the Germans retreated, they applied the scorched earth tactic in order to slow the Finns down. This took a heavy toll on infrastructure and housing, for instance in Rovaniemi, the capital of Lapland. When the Finnish troops reached Rovaniemi, they saw huge explosions and a town in flames. The Germans had been ravaging the small town for nine days, and before they left, they set fire to the wooden houses, and the fire spread to the railway station. There was a train carrying ammunition and explosives, which exploded for hours on end, killing people and setting houses aflame. As one reporter wrote afterward, there was little left of Rovaniemi apart from a "bare heap of coal, ash, and sand."⁷ Due to the systematic destruction of the towns and villages, the Germans are still sometimes referred to in Finland as the "Lapland-burners," and a Finn may strike a match in front of a German as a provocative reminder of this chapter in Finnish-German history. The Germans also blew up the mining buildings in Petsamo before they retreated. The last troops marched over the border into Norway on 21 November.

Although the Germans mined the roads, blew up the main bridges, cut telephone lines, and set houses in Lapland on fire, the Finnish army passed its final test. This was facilitated in part by the simple fact that the Germans themselves were eager to leave the country and be ready to fight in Germany. Both armies suffered a loss of c. 1,000 men, and 1,300 German soldiers were interned and handed over to the Soviets. With this, the third and last war came to an end for Finland. Germany and Finland never reached a peace agreement. Neither party had ever declared war. Nazi Germany collapsed in 1945, and Germany was then divided into two different states belonging to two different spheres of influence until 1990, so the issue was simply never addressed. Finland tried in vain to gain some compensation from West Germany for the devastation of Lapland.

The final balance sheet of the three wars showed a long compromise between Finland and the Soviet Union. The Finns realized that they would have to take the Russian concerns about the security of Leningrad (now Saint Petersburg) into account in their foreign policy. The Kremlin realized that it would cost a great deal to force its geopolitical expansionist goals onto the Finns. Both sides benefited from this lesson for a long time.

The end of the Lapland war did not mean an end to problems between Finland and Germany, however. While the Finnish authorities were struggling to resettle hundreds of thousands of evacuees from Karelia and elsewhere and the Finnish economy was suffering from a serious lack of a workforce, Zhdanov pressured

⁶ To say that the Germans left Lapland "voluntarily" greatly simplifies what happened in the Lapland War. Cf. Mária Ormos, *Magyarország a két világháború korában (1914–1945)* (Csokonai Kiadó, 1998), 266.

⁷ Meinander, *Suomi 1944*, 325.

the Finnish Government to develop contacts with Finnish communists, who in the meantime had been released the prisons. Zhdanov was also keeping an eye on the process of the internment of Germans living in Finland. His involvement in this process offers a good example of how the cooperation between the Finnish government and ACC worked. The second article of the peace treaty dictated that the Finnish government was obliged to isolate all remaining German soldiers and civilians who were citizens of Germany or Hungary. Of the c. 1,000 Germans who had been living in Finland in 1943, 300 had left the country in early September 1944, as had half of the 40 Hungarians. Thus, the only Germans and Hungarians who remained were people who, for personal reasons, wanted to be interned or were trying to find some way out of the quandary. In December, the number of those interned was roughly 470. These people were dispersed into six different camps. The ACC hoped to find Nazis and other politically suspicious persons among the Germans and the Hungarians, whom it could interrogate and punish and also prevent from hiding their belongings. Among the interned were 70 children, who were undernourished and left without schooling. The Finnish state police in the meantime, now manned by communists, took care to ensure that the interned were not treated well. After a long screening process, 15 of those interned were found to be fascists. They were held in prison until the summer of 1947, when they were expelled to Germany. The rest of the interned were freed in October 1946. The items belonging to the Germans were confiscated and transported over the Eastern border. The sources reveal little about the fates of the Hungarians. Some of them were unofficially allowed to flee to Sweden, and some of them remained in Finland because the situation in their homeland was hardly promising. One would have expected to find information about them in the archives of the Finnish Security Police, but I have found little mention of them in the surviving documents.

In Finnish historiography, late 1944 is described with the terms “new direction” and “time of danger.” “New direction” meant an upsurge of the far left. Now that they were free to enter public life and politics, far-left figures could express their long-suppressed anger against the Finnish war policies. They demanded thorough investigations, purges, and punishments of the politicians and civil servants who were responsible for or guilty of the war. Their hard core included some 30 to 40 leading communists and radical socialists who had been imprisoned in the 1930s for political reasons and for various crimes against the state. They were led by a troika of Hertta Kuusinen, Yrjö Leino, and Ville Pessi. Many of them had suffered inhumane, even sadistic treatment in prison. Hundreds had been isolated, and in the autumn of 1944, they numbered 342, but not all political prisoners were registered. Their discharge was dictated by the interim peace treaty, which also repealed the so-called communist laws of 1930.

Freed political prisoners gathered at the Workers Union House in Helsinki in early October. They were overjoyed about the peace treaty and the success of the Red Army in Central Europe. Some speakers also proclaimed that the yoke of capitalism was about to be broken and hinted at their intention of replacing it with Soviet-style socialism. However, the main goal was to form a kind of peo-

ple's front by inviting Social Democrats to join a future party that could unite the left. The party, it was predicted, would win the upcoming elections. This prediction proved right, but the success (in the 1945 elections the left gained 99 of the 200 seats in the Parliament) was not quite enough to change the regime completely, a fearful image which loomed large in the minds of the political right in postwar years (hence the expression "time of danger").

The next step was to establish a Finland-Soviet Union Society. The communists wanted to control it, but they invited bourgeois-minded people to join in order to buttress the credibility of the Society. A third of the seats in the Council were set aside for these bourgeois-minded figures, and as incredible as it may seem, Paasikivi, the most prominent figure in the efforts to stop the rise of communist influence in Finland, was elected the honorary member, and he gave the opening speech on 15 October. The next day, the Communist Party was founded, and two weeks later, the "people's front" party, the Finnish People's Democratic League (Suomen Kansan Demokraattinen Liitto, or SKDL) appeared on the political map, too. Zhdanov evidently gave rearguard support to the radical reform plans that these "people's front" parties were about to draft.

The "new direction" also came to mean a cultural-political about-turn away from the 1920s-1930s mainstream Christian-nationalist-Finn-ideology, which was intertwined with deep anti-bolshevism. Paasikivi's close friend, Yrjö Ruutu, who was an advocate of Soviet-friendly cultural and security policies, was nominated to the post of Director General of the Educational Board. He wanted to root out anti-Soviet language in all public fora, and in the middle of October a systematic campaign was launched by officials and the Finland-Soviet Society to purge anti-Soviet movies and literature. The blacklist was composed mainly of history books, military books, translations of Nazi propaganda, and new German literature in general. At the top of the list was, of course, Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, several editions of which had been printed in Swedish and Finnish translation during the war. The list also included Jalmari Jaakkola's *The Eastern Question*, which was translated with another title into Hungarian, too. Jaakkola's book presented a vision of Greater Finland, i.e. more *Lebensraum* for Finns and their close kinship peoples in the Eastern Karelia. Mika Waltari's action-packed communist-spy novels were also blacklisted.

This was followed by an extensive censorship process. Works of literature which the Soviet Union might regard as hostile in its content and tone were identified in libraries, and the librarians were left to decide which of these books should be destroyed or stored away. One can imagine how high-handed this process was, since, for instance, many libraries selected J. L. Runeberg's *Vänrikki Stoolin tarinat* (Ensign Ståhl's Tales), a cycle of narrative poems written in the middle of the nineteenth century in Swedish (the literary language in Finland at the time), as a work that should be censored. The cycle, which is a story of the Finnish War of 1808–1809, was later rehabilitated, so to say, as a harmless romanticized historical narrative. Because the censorship process did not extend to private libraries, the blacklisted books were still quite easy to come by. It is thus hardly clear that the

measures actually changed the reading habits or opinions of the older generations which had lived in “White Finland.” Members of the younger generation were the main target of reeducation campaign. In December, a program was launched to expunge school textbooks of any “erroneous information about the conditions in foreign countries.” Practically, this meant that sentences that were hostile to the Soviets were to be blacked out or covered up somehow. For example, the sentence “Bolsheviks promised independence to Eastern Karelia but went back on their word,” which was found in a history book titled *History of Fatherland* published in 1944, had to be covered up. For the sake of consistency, schoolbook poems and texts that dealt with Karelia, war, and everything concerning Soviet-Finnish relations were also to be covered up. Teachers told the pupils what to “forget,” and they covered up the “dangerous” texts with sticky paper. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the students actually learned precisely these passages from their textbooks very well.

The long arm of the censors reached the world of movies as well, and 46 movies (mostly of German origin) were banned. All German war documentaries and propaganda films were blacklisted, but from some 60 German and Hungarian films only the sections in which Nazis or German/Hungarian warfare was shown had to be cut. The ACC spotted this “oversight,” and in December, the Government prohibited all German films. Instead, Soviet movies were played in the theaters, and they started to attract audiences. *Stalingrad* was shown in November, followed by *German POWs in Moscow* and *The Katyn Forest Tragedy* in December. In the same vein, the Finnish news agency started to air educational radio talks on Soviet literature, sports, and history. These talks emphasized the vigor and will for peace of the Soviets and the benevolent socialist personality, a construct that differed strikingly from the actual socialist personalities that the Finns had encountered after the arrival of Soviet forces in the country.

It would be difficult to say how epochal, or annoying contemporaries considered all these regulations. The switch from propaganda in support of one ideology to propaganda in support of another hardly caused any serious problems. I know from the history of my home village that many people had grown quite indifferent to political agitation during the war. The new propaganda might even have been soothing to people who were not extreme leftists, but who had been critical of the German presence in Finland and thus belonged to the so-called “peace opposition.” It must have been very unsettling, however, to people on the extreme right and to the so-called “genuine Finns” (*aitosuomalainen*), who despised the Russians. Some of them withdrew from the public sphere. Some hoped that the Soviet grip on Finland would loosen as time passed, especially if the national spirit of defense could be preserved and internal conflicts avoided. They placed their trust in the Finnish people’s capacity to remain united, which in political terms amounted to a tacit alliance between the bourgeois parties and the Social Democrats at both the national and the local levels. Many of them had hoped that Germany would crush the Soviet Union, but it hardly would have been wise to admit this after the armistice. Such an admission merely would have underscored the extent to which

anti-Bolshevism had put Finland and Germany in the same camp. They regarded the years between 1944 and 1948 as “years of danger.” This danger, which was the risk of the Sovietization of Finland (financed but not concretely orchestrated from Moscow), was vigorously opposed by them and the new Paasikivi Government. The government majority consisted of the legalist conservatives and democrats, who struggled to keep communists out of key police and ministerial positions. By 1948, they had largely managed to purge the State Policy and Ministry of Interior of any major communist influence.

The Lapland war was almost over in November, and the Finnish army’s demobilization process ended on 5 December. Paasikivi’s Independence Day speech on 6 December reflected the urge to change political thinking in Finland. As a realist in politics (Paasikivi had studied Machiavelli and Meinecke), he summed up the situation in the following words: “We are now at the bottom of the valley where the events have led us. The way up is difficult and demands determined action, and every step forward should lead us to wider views. The beginning of wisdom is to recognize the facts.”⁸ The last sentence is borrowed from Thomas Carlyle, the British historian of cataclysmic changes. To Paasikivi, for a long time, the basic dictum in Finnish foreign policy would be the following: the success of Finland depends on how well relations with the Soviet Union are managed. Law and justice did not suffice to protect small nations like Finland. Diplomacy had to be based on considerations of how to survive in a world regulated by great powers which might have a vested interest in protecting territories close by and sinister ambitions to expand. The geopolitical fact that Leningrad was so close to Finland had to be respected. The bitter lesson of the 1920s and 1930s had been that there are always realities behind diplomacy. Although Finland, like Hungary, now enjoys the protection of NATO, the lesson still holds.

All key persons who were involved in envisioning a “new, peaceful Finland” hurried to congratulate Paasikivi on his remarkably straightforward if also audacious speech. Zhdanov was the first of these people, and ever faithful to his arrogant style, he made the following cutting comment: “The gloomy picture you painted of Finland at the bottom of a valley would have been better suited for the time before September.”⁹

What can we historians say about this? Is it surprising that a Soviet figure again wanted to have the last word, and without any touch of politeness? The Soviet Union was the winner whatever the case, and to say that Finland was the runner-up was petty consolation to anybody in Finland. Christmas time in 1944 was sad, gloomy, and simple in Finland. On 28 December, many Finns heard news reports that Hungary had declared war on Germany.

⁸ Meinander, *Suomi 1944*, 373.

⁹ Meinander, *Suomi 1944*, 374.

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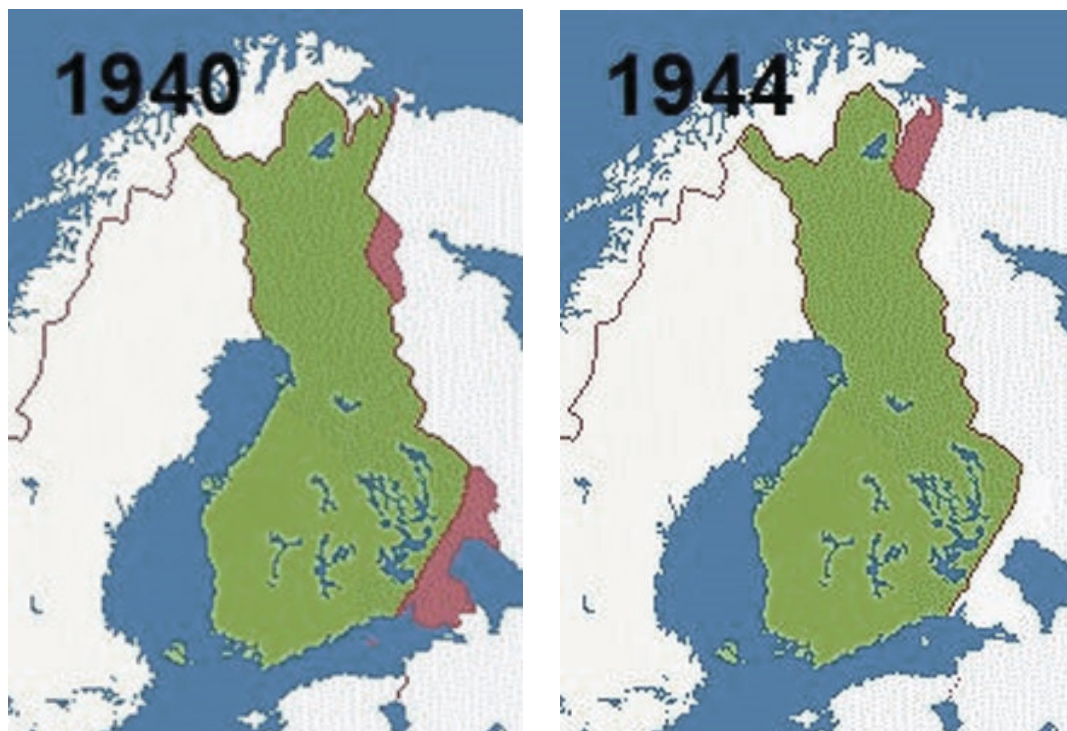
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Appendix: Maps



(Source: Anssi Halmesvirta)