

The change of rule and reprisals against the Hungarians in Yugoslavia 1944–1946

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The Lakatos government in Hungary was considering the idea of forming a Serb defence force to help Hungary to retain Bačka (Bácska) and sent an emissary to the headquarters of Mihailović to discuss the matter.¹ Meanwhile, however, the Yugoslav partisans entered the Banate (Bánát) at the beginning of October, along with the Soviet army. Units of the Eighth Vojvodina Brigade transferred there from Srim (Szerémség) entered Bela Crkva (Fehértemplom) on 1 October and reached Vršac (Versec) on the following day. On 16 October, the partisan high command moved there, including Tito. He had just reached an agreement with Stalin in Moscow, covering joint military operations of the Yugoslav and Soviet armies on Yugoslav soil. Under that agreement, Tito had received a requested tank division, an undertaking from the Soviets to quit the territory of Yugoslavia after the military operations, and permission for Yugoslav authorities to exercise

¹ Lajos Bolla, the Hungarian consul general in Belgrade, wrote in his report on 3 October 1944, "An emissary of ours (a military man) tried recently to reach Mihailović's headquarters. This happened just at the time when Tito's bands had made a successful strike on Mihailović's headquarters in the Ravna Gora mountains. Our emissary told me that as a result of the attack, he failed to reach his desired destination and had to make a 35-km night-time journey through the pathless mountains, partly on foot. Furthermore, he found himself in an extremely dangerous situation in a village near Gornji Milanovac, when Mihailović's men began to act in a threatening way towards him, so that only after strong representations by him and the Mihailović officer accompanying him could he continue his journey. He also told me that on the way, seven communist prisoners had their throats cut before his eyes." Finally, the consul general recommended that under the circumstances, they should not insist upon making direct contact with Mihailović and his men. Magyar Országos Levéltár (National Archives of Hungary, henceforth: MOL). K-63. Küm. pol. 1944-16-119.

the functions of public administration during the Soviet stay.² From Vršac, Tito directed the liberation of the capital, Belgrade, as commander in chief. This extremely important operation included the introduction of military rule in the Banate and in Bačka and Baranja (Baranya), i.e. in all territories recovered from Hungary except the Međimurje (Muraköz) and the Mura Country. Tito justified this by “the extraordinary circumstances under which these territories lived during the occupation, and the need to remove as fast and fully as possible all misfortune caused to our people by the occupiers and the aliens settled here, while full mobilization of the economy for as successful a continuation as possible to the war of people’s liberation requires initially that all power be in the hands of the army.”³ Colonel General Ivan Rukovina was put in charge of the military administration. He stated plainly in a proclamation on 22 October that military rule was needed “to preserve the national future and the South Slav nature of these territories.” He went on to say that the Slav population had an obligation to “help in the introduction of measures necessary from the point of view of the national future,”⁴ and warned of the toughest sanctions against acts of sabotage. Rukovina was directly subordinate to Tito. The only other place where military rule was introduced after the partisans took over was Kosovo, where there had been an armed uprising.

Nikola Petrović, a member of the Provincial Committee of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia (KPJ), reflected the view of many South Slavs when he called it a “historic decision” to introduce military rule. Writing in *Slobodna Vojvodina*, the organ of the Vojvodina People’s Liberation Unity Front, Petrović went on to say, “We have broken up, or rather, pushed westwards the conquering German and Hungarian hordes, but we have not yet rooted out the poisonous weeds they scattered... The aliens, in their tens and hundreds of thousands, who settled territories where our forefathers cleared forests and drained marshes, creating the conditions for civilized life, still shoot from the darkness at our heroes and at Russian soldiers, and do everything to prevent normalization of the situation, preparing, in this difficult situation for us, for the right moment to stick a knife in our backs again... The people sense the need for this decisive measure and the need for energetic measures to safeguard the Yugoslav nature of the Banate, Bačka and Baranja.”⁵

So there were several motives behind the introduction of military rule. Here, as in Kosovo, the positions of the new authorities were very weak, so that the readiness for action provided by military rule helped to eliminate even the minimal possibility of restoring the Hungarian administration. Of course, there was no chance of this in any case. Budapest, it will be seen later, did not even raise the question of a border adjustment on ethnic grounds in the South Country. It was important for Tito’s regime to prevent this, lest these territories become a focus

² E. A. Sajti, “Tito,” in P. Polonyi, E. A. Sajti, *Mao–Tito*. Budapest 2000, 267.

³ J. B. Tito, *Sabrana dela*. Vol. 24. Belgrade 1984, 96–97.

⁴ *Muzej Vojvodine arhivska zbirka* (henceforth: MV AZ). PK KPJ za Vojvodinu. No. 18815.

⁵ *Slobodna Vojvodina* (reprint edition), 28 October 1944.

for supporters of the emigré government in London or for royalists, on the pretext of the Tito-Šubašić agreement concluded under pressure from the Allies, notably Britain.⁶

The Yugoslav military administration placed the organizations of people's power under strict military control. In some villages inhabited by Hungarians, Germans or Romanians, minority members were expressly forbidden to set up people's committees, whereas in general, there was pressure to establish rapidly a Slav-led police force (or People's Guard, as it was called at the time). Minority members were also forbidden to travel, move about in any way, or even use their language. Germans and Hungarians set to do forced labour in Stari Bečej (Óbecse) had to wear a white armband, so that they could be checked more easily.

Although the ideological framework was different, the Yugoslav military administration was brought in for very much the same reasons as the Hungarian one introduced in 1941. The purpose was to remove any doubts about where the territory belonged, on national (South Slav national) grounds, and to take indisputable control of every branch of authority and administration. Tito issued a decree harnessing the largely undamaged economic potential of the territory to the war effort. However, the new possessors of power made that criterion subordinate to ethnic policy, by interning and deporting members of the German and Hungarian communities, so that seasonal labour had to be brought from places as distant as Macedonia.

The military administration was divided into two regions, the Banate and Bačka-Baranja, each subdivided under district and local commands. The Banate and Bačka were each divided into four military districts, while Baranja formed a single district. The seats of the districts were Petrovaradin (Pétervárad), Velika Kikinda (Nagykikinda), Pančevo (Pancsova) and Vršac in the Banate, and Novi Sad (Újvidék), Subotica (Szabadka), Sombor (Zombor) and Stari Bečej in Bačka. There were seven departments in the executive branch and the judiciary. Administrative, legal, statistical and personal matters, for instance, belonged to the General Department, while the Military Administration Department covered mobilization, labour service and labour camps. There were separate departments for legal and judicial work, the economy, transport, health, and public education.⁷ There were doubts from the outset about the loyalty of the German and Hungarian minorities to the new state. Yugoslavia, like several other countries in Europe, openly declared the collective responsibility of the Germans for the events of the war, while the Hungarians were categorized in a subtler way. ("Not all Hungari-

⁶ R. Končar, *Vojna uprava za Banat, Bačku i Baranju 1944/1945. Zbornik radova sa naučnog skupa Narodna vlast u Vojvodini 1941–1945*. Novi Sad 1986, 738.

⁷ On the military administration, see Končar, op. cit.; R. Cvejić, "Uloga KPJ u organizovanju i radu Vojne uprave za Banat, Bačku i Baranju," *Istraživanja* 1 (1971), 245–255; A. Kasaš, "Ekonomske mere Vojne uprave za Banat, Bačku i Baranju 1944/1945," *Zbornik za istoriju Matice srpske series* 27 (1983), 173–183; N. Lazić, *Baranja 1941–1945*. Slavonski Brod 1979, 252–259; E. A. Sajti, *Délvidék 1941–1944* [South Country, 1941–1944] Budapest 1987, 243–248.

ans are responsible for the crimes of Szálasi and Horthy.”) However, the line of “paying back everything” in revenge and collective responsibility was the dominant one in the early months.

The internment of the Germans and confiscation of all their property was officially ordered on 18 October 1944. Forty internment camps were established in Vojvodina, into which the data known today suggest that 140,000 Germans were crowded. These were almost exclusively women, children and old people. (It has been seen already that the men were conscripted into or volunteered for the SS and some of the population had left the country with the German troops.) Two days later, on 20 October 1944, the internment of Hungarians began. It is almost impossible to establish how many Hungarians were interned, as the literature available does not even give approximate figures. Knowledge of their fate as individuals, however, has grown substantially since the 1990s, mainly through reminiscences. Humiliated and exploited, they were put to work mainly in agriculture and timber production. This was done although they had not had any hand in the atrocities against the Serbs. For those that had were executed, or in the case of the Hungarian inhabitants of Čurug (Csurog) and Mošorin (Mozsor) in the Šajkaš (Sajkás) district, collectively expelled at the request of the local Slavs, because so many of them had assisted in the 1942 raid. The order to intern and relocate the Čurug Hungarians⁸ came from the Vojvodina committee investigating war crimes on 23 January 1945 – after Rukovina’s order on 1 December for the release of Hungarian internees deemed to be innocent. The reason given was that the whole adult Hungarian population of Čurug had taken part “directly or indirectly” in the bloody events of 1942. As the document put it, the relocation was necessary “to ensure the normal course of life in the village and punish justly those who had taken part in the assaults during the occupation.” The statement on the subject in *Slobodna Vojvodina* on 26 January 1945 emphasized that the deportees were Hungarians, but the move was not aimed at all Hungarians. It was a punishment for those who had “committed crimes by their evil-doings.” A similar fate befell the 550 Hungarian inhabitants of Mošorin and in fact almost all the Hungarians in the Šajkaš district along the River Tisza. Most of them were taken

⁸ For recent work on the reprisals, see M. Matuska, *A megtorlás napjai*. [Days of Reprisal] Novi Sad 1991; *Miért? Zakaj?* Lendavski zvezki/Lendvai füzetek series, no. 16. eds. S. Kulčar et al. Lendava 1998; L. Forró, *Jelöletlen tömegsírok Magyarkanizsán, Martonoson és Adorjánon* [Unmarked Graves at Kanjiža, Martonoš and Adorjan] Szeged 1995; S. Mészáros, *Holttá nyilvánítva*. [Declared Dead] Novi Sad 1991; T. Cseres, *Vérbosszú a Bácskában*. [Vendetta in Bačka] Budapest 1991; B. Teleki, *Becse történetéből*. [From the History of Beče] Beče] 1995; E. A. Sajti, “Magyarok a Vajdaságban 1944 őszén” [Hungarians in Vojvodina in Autumn 1944] in *Nemzettudat, jugoszlávizmus, magyarság*. Szeged 1991, 123–131; Zs. Cirkl, *Bácskai golgota*. [Bačka Golgotha] Totovo Selo 1998; I. Papp, *Ez a mi kálváriánk*. [This is our Calvary] Novi Sad 1999; J. Szloboda, *Zentán történt 44-ben*. [It Happened in Senta in ‘44] Novi Sad 1997; J. Teleki, *Visszatekintés a múltba*. [Looking Back into the Past] Novi Sad 1996; Earlier, similar writings could appear only in the United States or Europe. See E. Homonnay, *Atrocities Committed by Tito’s Communist Partisans in Occupied Southern Hungary*. Cleveland Oh. 1957.

to the internment camps at Bački Jarak (Járek), Gajdobra (Szépliget) and Mladonovo (Dunabökény). The ghastliest situation developed at Bački Jarak, where various infectious diseases and poor provisions led to a very high mortality rate. At least 3,000 German internees died there, including about 400 children. The adult Hungarians of Čurug and Žabalj (Zsablya) were marched to Bački Jarak, while the children and women were taken by train and lorry. In the spring of 1945, there were 3632 Hungarians at Bački Jarak, which gained notoriety as the death camp and was closed in June 1945.⁹ At the same time, the first Slav settlers arrived in the village, which had once been almost entirely German in population.

The most tragic events after the change of rule in the South Country were the indiscriminate executions, mass murders and "still colder days."¹⁰ Instead of being followed by official investigations, these became shrouded in a silence imposed by the political authorities. The historiography of the question is interesting in itself, not least as a typical example of how authority can mask its crimes in euphemisms. Here let us try to reconstruct one aspect of this—the sources and attributions on which the published estimates of the number of victims have been based and how much researchers have managed to discover so far. However, there are some remarks to make beforehand. The resistance and civil war that preceded the Tito system and provided its legitimacy brought with it a psychology of terror and counter-terror not alien to the revenge culture that is socially acceptable in the Balkans. The new authorities, and Tito himself, toyed with the principle of "the worse the better", in terms of strengthening the partisan movement. Many of his writings in this period show that he saw acts of terror against the Serbs, wherever they occurred, as events that played into the partisans' hands and could be used to further the communist movement. The new elite had a feeling, not to be underrated, that they had "suffered" to gain power. They and all those who had suffered for the new system were the only ones who had a right to exact revenge and receive compensation for their sacrifices. The concept of collaborators, traitors and fascists was not a legal one, but a political one, which could be extended indefinitely and had received moral and political reinforcement internationally from the trials of war criminals conducted by the Allies.

In foreign-policy terms, there were no factors forcing the system to investigate itself and face facts that had been at work on Hungary after January 1942. There were desires for domestic political consolidation, but these were sufficient only to

⁹ S. Mészáros, "A járeki haláltábor" [Bački Jarak Death Camp] in B. Csorba, ed., *S nem törődtek veled, a holnap mit örül*. [And They Paid No Heed to What the Tomorrow Brings] *Források a Délvidék történetéhez* 3, Budapest 1999, 204.

¹⁰ The expression "cold days" entered the vocabulary of the Hungarian public and historians from the title of a gruelling novel by Tibor Cseres. The "cold days" covered the mass murders and razzias by the Hungarian soldiery and gendarmerie in January 1942, when Serbs and Jews were shot and fell into the icy waters of the Danube. The "still colder days" refer to the way the partisans shot more Hungarians dead in revenge than the Hungarians had killed during the razzias.

ensure that the crimes committed against the Hungarians were classed as minor political "mistakes" that could be overruled and remedied, and were simply a "political error" on the part of a young, new system.

The author considers that in terms of politics and power, the new system, for rational reasons, should not have allowed official and popular revenge to be taken on such a scale. It was done nonetheless, although efforts were made to ensure that the reprisals did not become a destabilizing influence. Tito himself treated the reprisals issue according to strictly political criteria. They were directed not at a specific nation or national group, but against all who were collaborators according to the philosophy of the victors and of whom it was thought that they might endanger the socio-political structure of the new system. Between the "good" and the "bad" was drawn an ideological, political dividing line, and everyone who had not "taken to the woods" with the partisans was called to account.

That at most provided a cover for the ethnic forces behind the call to account, without changing them. Tito, in the autumn and winter of 1944-1945, handled in a masterly fashion the reprisals and the "fraternity and unity" that were seen as the foundation stone of the system. For instance, when the British followed the valid agreement by handing over to the Yugoslav army the *domobran* (Croatian enlisted men) who had surrendered at Bleiburg, as well as the *Ustaša* and other Croatian refugees, the regime proceeded to execute tens of thousands of prisoners of war and civilians. According to the official order signed by Tito, they were to be handled as prisoners of war, but he sent a messenger ordering that they should be executed just the same. Similar retribution was exacted near Kočevski Rog on Slovenian enlisted soldiers and fleeing civilians, and that is not to mention what was done in Kosovo.

The military administration carried a penal function. Before Tito arrived in Vrsec, he ordered Peko Dapčević, commander of the First Army, to send him a "reliable" brigade "to clear the town of its Swabian [local German] population."¹¹

The reprisals were largely carried out by state-security units of the People's Defence Department or OZNA (*Odeljenje za zaštitu naroda*),¹² but regular partisan units also took part. In many cases, the local population simply settled scores with its enemies. The reprisals were therefore carried out mainly by the new organizations of power and military force, but paradoxically, it was the rudimentary, rootless condition of these that led to the uncontrolled escalation in the scale of their actions. It is now known that Tito also had knowledge of the executions in the South Country, while the internments and deportations were ordered by the military administrative bodies themselves. The OZNA received authority for its cleansing operations from the commander in chief. According to the recollec-

¹¹ Sajti, "Tito", 272-274; M. Dželbdžić, ed., *Tito u Vršacu*. Vršac 1984, XIX.

¹² OZNA was formed in September 1943 as part of the High Command. Its aim originally was to build up an intelligence-gathering service to identify and punish spies and fifth columnists. Headed by Aleksandar Ranković, it was the forerunner of the State Security Directorate (UDB).

tions, the punishment of the people of Čurug and Žabalj was authorized by Tito himself when a delegation applied to him. However, Tito feared there would be international outrage at the scale of the reprisals and called before him the leaders of the Provincial Committee of the KPJ, Žarko Atanasković, its secretary, and Isa Jovanović, its organizing secretary. According to the recollections of the latter, Stari ("Old One", the name used for Tito in tightly knit, high-ranking political circles) was angry because he was afraid of international complications and claimed they had known nothing about the reprisals. In self-justification, Jovanović added, "These were done by individual commanders, mainly local people, often at the instigation of activists. The military administration had no knowledge of these excesses either."¹³ A state commission was set up in May 1945 to investigate the "injustices" committed in Vojvodina. However, the records of the commission's work have never been found, if it ever began to operate at all.

For many years, historians were obliged to rely on word-of-mouth estimates, until the collection of reminiscences and archival research began in present-day Yugoslavia. The latter have been confined so far almost entirely to the archive materials in Vojvodina and in Hungary. The materials in the Belgrade archives remain largely unknown, while exploration of the military archives has only just begun. Furthermore, it has to be realized that for a system of administration working by "partisan" methods, without any antecedents, the least of its concerns is to record its own atrocities in writing. So it is not certain that the records in the military archives will bring us any nearer to accurate figures for the victims. The author takes the view that local historical research is likely to come nearest to the truth. So far it has been possible to find in historical writings and journalism figures that show discrepancies of several hundred per cent. Some put the number of victims at 5,000 and others at 40,000.

The tribunal on war crimes (*Komisija za utvrđivanje ratnih zločina okupatora i njihovih pomagača*) sentenced altogether 899 Vojvodina Hungarians to death for war crimes. Present knowledge suggests that about 5,000 people of Hungarian ethnicity were convicted of war crimes in judicial trials according to the laws of the time, but most of them were sentenced to forced labour or prison.¹⁴ The OZNA kept a special list of those executed in many places. The sentences were passed without a formal trial, based on "announcement" or perhaps on a list of Arrow-Cross party members that had been found, or because someone had actually or presumably taken part in a raid. Many people were executed for having been members of the Hungarian Party of Renewal, or because they had held office during the years of Hungarian rule. In some cases, it was even enough to have been an elementary-school teacher who taught national awareness to his or her pupils, served as a Levente youth-movement leader, and so on. Surviving OZNA

¹³ I. Jovanović, *U službi revolucije*. Novi Sad 1987, 198–199.

¹⁴ The number of Hungarians executed as war criminals appears, on the basis of research by Sándor Mészáros, in Matuska, 373; A. Kasaš, *Mađari u Vojvodini 1941–1946*. [Hungarians in Vojvodina] Novi Sad 1996, 203. gives a figure of 5,000 for the number of Hungarians prosecuted for war crimes.

lists prove that mass executions took place mainly between late October and November 1944.

The main sources explored so far by historians in Yugoslavia are a list compiled by the Vojvodina OZNA entitled "Register of Executed War Criminals 1944/45" and notes of the names of those executed kept by some local people's committees. These show plainly that 5,000 Hungarians in Bačka and the Banate were executed in October and November 1944. Those executed in Baranja, the Međumurje and Mura district are not included in the total. Nor are those executed after sentencing by the Yugoslavian people's courts. The figure of 5,000 covers only those executed whose names can be reconstructed from the two types of list mentioned and only those executed by the OZNA. Yugoslav Hungarian historical, and still more, journalistic accounts of the reprisals often cite a conversation between the historian Sándor Mészáros, who died a few years ago, and Svetozar Kostić Čapo, head of the Vojvodina provincial OZNA at the time of the executions. He thought that the OZNA forces had executed 20,000 Hungarians.¹⁵

The first reports of the atrocities by the partisans occupying the South Country reached Budapest almost immediately, at the end of August 1944, while the Lakatos government was still in power. The information came from the already disintegrating gendarmerie in the South Country, or more precisely the Međumurje, and from Iván Nagy, a member of Parliament.

Nagy passed on to the Prime Minister's Office a moving letter dated 7 August 1944 from Rózsi Lajkó of Čakovec (Csáktornya, in the Mura district), in which she told her brother in the Bačka village of Doroslovo (Doroszló) of their father's death. The partisans, on 23 July 1944, had rounded up 68 people, of whom six were Serbs, nine Dalmatians and the rest Hungarians. "Ten of these they tied together in front of the community and announced that they were taking them before the military law, and the rest of the youngsters would be [sent] under arms into battle." Since some of the men they sought were not at home, they threatened the women, including the writer of the letter, saying that if the young men are not at home next time, they will take the women out for execution. The men collected were driven out to the edge of the village, to a marshy area, and there "they had to sing and they beat and stabbed them, shot them dead and pushed them tied together into the bushes, and those that were still alive choked like that... There were no other dead except these older men, but we don't know why it had to be done like that. Dear brother, we are orphans now, our good father is no more, there is mourning in our hearts..."¹⁶

The Central Investigation Command of the gendarmerie reported on the same events on 19 August. According to this account, a partisan detachment of 50 men had burst into Čakovec, rounded up 53 prosperous Hungarians and taken away

¹⁵ These sources were unearthed by the Novi Sad historian Aleksandar Kasaš, who also published the victims' names. Kasaš, 160–178.

¹⁶ MOL. K-28. *ME Kisebbségi osztály*. [Prime Minister's Office, Minorities Department] 1944-R-25965. The letter was written in a strong dialect and with spelling mistakes.

their horses and agricultural implements. Their relatives had found the bodies of 37 victims in a wood a few kilometres from the village.¹⁷

The provisional Hungarian government in Debrecen certainly knew about the atrocities a few weeks after its formation. Its earliest known report on the subject, compiled in Debrecen on 16 January 1945, deals with the Petőfi Brigade formed by the partisans. These source materials of 1945–46 also contain *estimates* of the number of victims, which have found their way into the public mind in Hungary through various channels. The anonymous author of the January 16 report had escaped into Hungary from Bačka. According to his report, “The fate of the Hungarians in the first weeks of the occupation was forced labour (men born 1883–1929 and plenty of women as well), large-scale slaughter in more serious cases (see the ensuing report), and possibly financial (robbery) and moral ruin (violation of Hungarian women).”¹⁸ By the end of July, the Foreign Ministry had also received a list of Catholic priests killed or imprisoned by the partisans. It contained the names of 22 persons, of whom 13 were known for certain to have been murdered, including Bálint Dupp, the parish priest of Čurug, István Virág, titular abbot of Horgoš (Horgos), the parish priests Dénes Szabó of Totovo Selo (Tótfalu), Lajos Varga of Mol (Mohol), Ferenc Petrányi of Stari Bečej, Ferenc Plank of Stari Sivac (Ószivác), István Köves of Mošorin, Antal Berger of Tavankút (Tavankút) and Dr Ferenc Takács of Bačko Petrovo Selo (Péterréve), as well as Father Krizosztom Köröztös, Franciscan prior of Novi Sad, and another, unnamed Franciscan friar.¹⁹ These names are also likely to have reached the government through Prince-Primate József Mindszenty, as did the account of the atrocities compiled by Hungarian refugees from the South Country, which Mindszenty passed to Foreign Minister János Gyöngyösi on 17 July 1946.²⁰ (One of the authors had escaped from the Novi Sad internment camp.) Historians record how Mindszenty condemned resettlement of the Hungarian community in Slovakia, in a dramatically worded pastoral letter on 15 October 1945, but with the Hungarians in Yugoslavia, he thought it enough to pass on news to the government. The report put the number of victims at 50,000–60,000. Special mention was made of the Jarak camp, where the authors said that 80 people a day were dying. They also counted 16 priests of Kalocsa diocese among the victims. A report prepared by the Foreign Ministry on 16 October 1945 for the peace preparations put the number of dead at 40,000, while another memorandum, made for Prime Minister Fe-

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ MOL. *A nemzeti kormány miniszterelnökségének iratai* [Documents of the Prime Minister's Office of the national government]. 1944/1945–1949. XIX-A-1-j-XXIII-112–1945. 21.d. Unfortunately, the supplementary report mentioned was not found.

¹⁹ MOL. *Külgügyminisztérium Békeelőkészítő osztály iratai* [Documents of the Foreign Ministry Peace Preparations Committee] XIX-J-1-a-IV-109-40178/Bé-1945. 55.d. Later research established that the unknown Franciscan was called Kristóf Kovács. Péter Weiner, parish priest of Bačka Palanka (Palánka), died in internment camp and Endre Varga, parish priest of Toba (Tóba), during interrogation. M. Matuska, “Vajdaság mártír papjai,” [Martyr Priests of Vojvodina] in Csorba, *S nem törődtek vele*, 219–21.

²⁰ MOL. XIX-J-1-a-IV-109-1981/Bé-1946. 55.d.

renc Nagy on October 20, 1946, gave a figure of 30,000–35,000. József Horváth, a lawyer from Bačka who fled to Szeged, wrote in a letter to Gyöngyösi of some 30,000 victims. A member of the Peace Preparations Department at the Prime Minister's Office, in a document at the end of November 1945, stated that there were "apparently" 20,000 Hungarian victims. The Minorities Department at the Prime Minister's Office, in one of the peace preparations materials made in the autumn of 1949 about Yugoslavia, contains this formula: "According to unverifiable reports, the number of Hungarians executed in Vojvodina was about 40,000. The closure of the Yugoslav border and the insurmountable obstacles to travel to Yugoslavia make it impossible to gain an insight into this question."²¹

So the estimates that reached the Hungarian government from various sources ranged from 60,000 down to 20,000. The figure that became most established in Hungary was the 40,000 mentioned by Tibor Cseres, based on data from two Catholic priests, Márton Szűcs and József Kovács. It seems likely, therefore, that Mindszenty and Cseres drew on the same sources.

Dezső Sulyok, formerly a Smallholders Party member of Parliament, did not give a figure in the memoirs he wrote from exile, but he had hard words for the slaughter perpetrated by the "revenge brigades". József Grósz, archbishop of Kalocsa, who received accounts from priests in his diocese who had fled, wrote in his diary of revenge and the large number of victims. The writer Gyula Illyés recorded in his diary on 27 May 1945 that 30,000 Hungarians had been murdered in the South Country, while on 5 June he mentioned a figure of 40,000.²²

These estimates made immediately after the executions have not been quoted out of any conviction that they bring the figures any closer to the truth. The important point here is that the Hungarian government knew of the mass retribution from the outset, even if the figures reaching them were not accurate. Despite that, there is no sign that the government raised the question of the mass executions anywhere – not with the Allied Control Commission, not separately in Moscow, nor at the Paris peace negotiations, let alone in Belgrade.

The only informal protest of which the author knows was made by Mátyás Rákosi, leader of the Hungarian Communist Party, on a secret visit to Vojvodina in January 1945, when he met Vojvodina provincial leaders and apparently even Tito himself. Rákosi, who was actually born in the Bačka village of Ada, met the secretary of the KPJ Provincial Committee, Jovan Veselinov Žarkov. Veselinov recalled the meeting in his memoirs, although he no longer remembered the exact

²¹ *Ibid.* IV-104-jugoszláv-40.171/Bé-1945. 54.d.; IV-109-495/Bé-1946. 55.d; IV-110-40862/Bé-1945. 55.d; MOL. *Miniszterelnökség Kisebbségi és nemzetiségi osztályának iratai* [Documents of the Prime Minister's Office Minorities and National Groups Department], 1945-8. XIX-A-1-n-"Z"3045/1946. 6.d.

²² Cseres, 242-247. For critiques of these calculations, see E. A. Sajti, "Döbbenet és hitelesség," [Dismay and Credibility] *Magyar Napló*, Vol. III, No. 12, 4 October 1991, 36-38; D. Sulyok, *A magyar tragédia*. [Hungarian Tragedy] Part 1, Private edition, 1945, 156-157; J. Török, ed., *Grósz érsek naplója 1944-1946* [Diary of Archbishop Grósz, 1944-1946] Budapest n.d., 56; Gy. Illyés, *Naplójegyzetek 1929-1945*. [Diary Notes, 1929-1945] Budapest 1986, 364, 366.

date. Rákosi, apparently, had told him he approved of what the Yugoslav communists had done "with Horthy's men and the war criminals", for they had done the same with all traitors, but he requested that the mass executions and deportations be suspended.²³

Careful study of the sources reveals how the reprisals lost significance at government level—in the Minorities Department of the Prime Minister's Office and especially in the Foreign Ministry. Eventually, official documents managed to turn the massacres by the partisans into something that had never happened. The process ended in 1946 with an image of Yugoslavia as a country that was resolving the nationality question in an exemplary way. This image was shattered not by evidence of the national and minority problems there, but by the Stalin-Tito split and the clash with the Soviet Union. One fruitful subject to investigate would be why the subject of the reprisals against the Hungarians never emerged in 1948–54, the tensest period in relations between Yugoslavia and the Soviet bloc.

The Minorities Department had been among the most important at the Prime Minister's Office before 1945, but then it began to decline, despite the fact that it had the extra task of contributing to the peace preparations.²⁴ It has been seen in earlier how the Minorities Department held the reins in the affairs of the Hungarians beyond the country's borders. That also meant that the department could shape the policy of successive Hungarian governments based on a broad range of information. During the coalition period after 1945, the minorities issue became a theatre of party political struggles and demarcation disputes, especially between the communist-influenced Interior Ministry and the Prime Minister's Office. As the question of Hungarians abroad lost significance at government level, so the Minorities Department diminished in importance and produced ever more mundane preparatory and analytical materials. Ödön Pásint, the head of the department, commented bitterly on the reductions in the department after the Paris Peace Treaty had been concluded, in a memorandum to Prime Minister Ferenc Nagy in July 1946. The best specialist officers in the department had been lost and the staff reductions left it unable to do its job. Meanwhile "the situation of the Hungarian community in neighbouring countries has changed greatly for the worse, on the one hand. On the other, the complete absence of minority legal protection at present, and its possible introduction into the peace treaties, set very weighty and urgent tasks, whose neglect or inadequate performance could have the gravest and perhaps irreparable effects on the lives and livelihoods of over three million Hungarians."²⁵

²³ Ž. J. Veselinov, *Az autonóm Vajdaság születése*. [The Making of Autonomous Vojvodina] Novi Sad 1984, 74.

²⁴ According to statistics compiled in June 1946 by Ödön Pásint, head of department, seven of the 14 executive officers, including the South Slav officer, György Borsay-Bauer, were black-listed, i.e. dismissed as politically unreliable. MOL. XIX-A-1-n-"Z"2748-1946. 5.d.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

The Minorities Department's hitherto central sphere of competence connected with the prime minister was broken up among several ministries. Almost every ministry set up its own minorities department, and eventually, in 1947, the department at the Prime Minister's Office was abolished.

When Hungary signed the armistice in Moscow on 20 January 1945 and the Hungarian state formally began its post-1945 history, the country and its neighbours were placed in the Soviet sphere of influence. That placed heavy constraints on the country's sovereignty, not of course for the first time in its history. However, the disjunction of its ethnic and linguistic borders from its political ones remained as it had been since Trianon. The armistice already prescribed that Hungary had to withdraw its forces to its pre-1938 borders and all Hungarian laws and decrees ceased to apply to the territories reannexed between 1938 and 1941. However, a quite different complexion was put on the failure to obtain a revision of the country's borders than the one current before the war. The Smallholders' Party hoped that the linguistic and political borders would be brought closer to each other and that this would be augmented by autonomy for islands of Hungarians further from the border. The communists and the social democrats rejected any form of linguistically or ethnically based territorial revision and attributed no significance either to minority protection based on collective rights. They viewed the problem of the Hungarian community as a question of democracy (or people's democracy), assuming a kind of automatic adjustment. (They amended this stance in the case of Transylvania.) The political parties became involved in serious debates during the peace preparations, mainly about the Hungarian-Slovak border, but they agreed from the outset that it was superfluous and senseless to put forward any territorial claims on Yugoslavia. Agreement was reached at a meeting of the parties on 6 March, 1946, held in the Minorities Department of the Prime Minister's Office, which as mentioned before, was taking part in compiling the materials for the peace preparations. It had been agreed earlier that the question of the Hungarians of Yugoslavia could be taken off the agenda, as their situation was developing in a "fortunate" way. This was all the more the case because "the Hungarian mission in Belgrade, envisaged at the Potsdam Conference, will bring the two countries close together, so that we will be bound by the most cordial relations in terms of nationality policy as well."²⁶ Government work concerning the situation of the South-Country Hungarians altered direction accordingly. A lengthy study entitled "The Development and Events in the Yugoslav-Hungarian Relationship since the Autumn of 1944" was completed on 28 December 1944 by the Minorities Department at the Prime Minister's Office. The study explained, "The forces of the Yugoslav army liberated Bačka in the autumn of 1944 and the majority of the Hungarians had moved out along with the retreating Hungarian troops. Those who had spend years in the mountains and forests returned to Bačka. These people judged the Hungarians by a different yardstick and saw the events of 1941 as excesses committed by the old Hungarian army. Thus very few people were called to account for them.

²⁶ MOL. XIX-A-1-j-"Z"252-1945. 3.d.

"As people's rule became settled in Yugoslavia, the Hungarian community received representation in central power proportionate to its size. The Hungarian schools opened and the Hungarians found themselves in a more favourable situation than they had dared to imagine."²⁷ The study took it as the standard, general view among the Bačka Hungarians that "if the Chetniks instead of the partisans had happened to prevail, no sign of the Hungarian community would have survived in Bačka today."²⁸

If no word was said about the executions, Foreign Minister János Gyöngyösi at least raised the question of ending the internments when he met Colonel Obrad Cicmil, head of the Yugoslav mission at the Allied Control Commission. Cicmil called on Gyöngyösi in his office on 17 September 1945 to enquire about the Hungarian position on the Yugoslav territorial claims against Italy. Gyöngyösi avoided giving a direct reply, whereupon Cicmil informed him that the Yugoslavs would be prepared to make Hungary the biggest concessions on port use and transit traffic. He added that "the Yugoslav government, for its part, is prepared to support Hungary at the peace negotiations and in the preparation of the peace, and apart from that, on any question that does not conflict with Yugoslavia's interests." Gyöngyösi requested that the Yugoslavs release not only Hungarian prisoners of war, but also the civilian Hungarian internees who are not war criminals." Cicmil gave a promise on this, without thinking it worth mentioning to the Hungarian foreign minister that reviews of the cases of internees had commenced several months earlier.²⁹

Among the few protests over the retribution against the Hungarians concerned the case of 42 Szekler settlers who had been taken prisoner by the Yugoslavs, and whom historians until recently thought had simply been shot. György Bodor, on behalf of the Central Cooperative of Völgység Settlers (*Völgységi Telepek Központi Szövetkezete*) appealed to the prime minister on 7 December 1945 to intervene with the Yugoslav allied mission, on behalf of the 42 men from Veternik (Hadikliget), who had been caught while fleeing from Bačka. According to the documents, they were not allowed to go to Hungary even in September 1946. Six of them had died in the meantime in the internment camp at the Bor copper mine.³⁰

Marshal Tito issued a decree on 27 January 1945 instructing the military administration in Vojvodina to hand over to civilian people's committees by 15 February. The explanation given was that the military administration had fulfilled its task and thereafter "would only obstruct the revolutionary changes in such a sensitive multiethnic territory as Vojvodina."

²⁷ MOL. XIX-A-1-n-"Z"79-1945. 3.d.

²⁸ MOL. XIX-J-1-a-IV-108-71/Bé-1946.

²⁹ MOL. XIX-J-1-j-Jug-29/h-5.pol.-1945. 38.d.

³⁰ MOL. XIX-A-1-n-"Z"1011-1945; A-j-XXIII-10817-1946. 2.d. Cseres, 235-236 followed the reminiscences of a Hadikliget Székely, Gábor Albert, in stating that the 42 men had been executed in Subotica. This was taken over by Kasaš, 175.

The matter was put more clearly in *Slobodna Vojvodina*, the one daily paper appearing in Vojvodina at the time. The military administration, it explained, had "basically resolved the German question in Vojvodina, while the Hungarian anti-fascists have accepted that their place is in the people's liberation movement headed by Comrade Tito."³¹

So the main condition for acceptance set by the new authorities was not loyalty to the state, but ideological and political identification with the system, although the aim of the two was the same. Either way, every regime, in a period when the national question was handled largely as a border issue, sought guarantees that the minorities would not tend to gravitate outwards, towards the mother country. That was the case in Vojvodina as well, especially in wartime Europe, in a country that had just regained its statehood after being forced to its knees not long before.

Initially, up to the end of the war, Tito offered only one way to prove loyalty to the state: volunteering for the partisan brigade named after Sándor Petőfi, the Hungarian poet. During the decades after 1945, the history of the brigade became a cardinal point in the process of legitimizing the Vojvodina Hungarian community within the Yugoslav system, which meant that its history was falsified. The actual course of events is more prosaic, but no less instructive. The brigade was formed along with Albanian, Italian, German and Czechoslovak units in August 1943 after a political decision, as a way of fleshing out the pan-Yugoslav character of the partisan movement. The Petőfi Brigade was founded in the small village of Slavonski Drenovac in the Slavonian mountains of Croatia, its members being transferred from various other partisan units fighting in the district at the time. It had a strength of about 80, of whom some 60 were Hungarians. Ferenc Kis was appointed commander and Károly Gerő political commissar. The language of command was Hungarian and the partisans wore next to the Red Star badge in their caps a strip of cloth in the Hungarian national colours of red, white and green. According to a report by Ferenc Marosy, the Hungarian minister in Zagreb, a Hungarian flag was obtained from the Hungarian Public Education Association in Croatia during a raid, as the unit did not possess one.³² The brigade was supposed to become a focus for South-Country Hungarians joining to the partisan side, and even for anti-fascist and anti-German forces in Hungary, but it did not meet expectations in this respect. István Varga, a Hungarian communist and veteran of the Spanish Civil War, proposed at Bačka Topola (Bácztopolya) at the beginning of November 1944, during the period of the great reprisals, that volunteer Hungarian partisan units should also be formed in Bačka.³³ The recruiting was relatively successful mainly among the poorer Hungarian peasants in

³¹ *Slobodna Vojvodina*, 1 February 1945.

³² MOL. K-28. ME Kisebbségi o. 1943-R-30933.

³³ On the history of the Petőfi Brigade, see F. Baki, L. Vebel, *Petőfi brigád*. [Petőfi Brigade] Novi Sad 1983; K. Brindza, *Nemirna ravnica*. Stara Moravica 1968; I. Törköly, *Akikért nem szólt a harang. Vajdasági magyar frontharcosok vallomása*. [For Whom the Bell Did Not Toll. Confessions of Vojvodina Hungarian Frontline Fighters] Szabadka 2001.

Bácstopolya and Stara Moravica (Ómoravica), although the district party organization put effort into ensuring that "class-conscious" individuals enrolled in the brigade. This armed unit was also preferred by several hundred Hungarians called up for labour service. On the whole, the Hungarian units were poorly equipped, although that was not specific to them. So the Sándor Petőfi Partisan Brigade consisted of a few volunteers and otherwise of Hungarians who practically speaking had been enlisted. They also crossed the border into Hungary (in the Danube-Tisza region and in Pécs and district, for instance) to perform propaganda tasks. They saw action in the clashes along the River Drava (Dráva), mainly from February 1945 onwards. Their fighting morale was low and desertions occurred. Their greatest test came in heavy combat near Bolman (Bolmány), where more than 30,000 Yugoslav soldiers lost their lives in several months of fighting against the German-Hungarian and Croatian armies, including many members of the Petőfi Brigade. Fierce German resistance was met during the battle for Bolman, where the Petőfi Brigade, now with a strength of about 1,200, suffered 50 dead and 190 wounded in a single day on 6 March.

A report was made about the Petőfi Brigade to the provisional Hungarian government in Debrecen on 16 January 1945. Its author was probably a man who had fled from Bačka having previously held a public position there. About the ostensibly voluntary nature of the brigade, he had this to say: "They either enlist "voluntarily" or are handled as fascist suspects and sent to do the forced labour obligatory for the South-Country Hungarian community." The brigade commander, speaking at Sombor to the author of the report, during the early stages of organization, said that in a week and a half in command, he had managed to solve somehow the question of quarters and provisioning. "So far we have not received any other equipment than footwear. The four or five weapons available were obtained from Russians for spirits, etc." Interestingly, the author of the report told the provisional government that although he realized the borders would follow the 1938 frontiers, he recommended somehow basing such a South-Country Hungarian unit "on a footing of purely and exclusively Hungarian popular action", to demonstrate how Hungarian people there had put up armed resistance to fascism. That, he went on, would prevent Tito's people using the local Hungarians for their own purposes.³⁴ This idea was no more apposite than the earlier plan of recruiting a Serb defence force among the Bačka Serbs.

The grounds for bringing war criminals to justice was provided by an agreement between the great powers. Proceedings would take place in the country where the crimes had been committed. Hungary was obliged to hand over its war criminals by Point 14 of its armistice agreement. Yugoslavia applied for extradition mainly in the cases of those responsible for the Novi Sad and Šajkaš raids, but there was also a list of several Hungarian politicians that originally included Horthy and Bárdossy. The Yugoslavs chased up the extradition proceedings on several occasions, complaining that the Hungarian government was slow to hand people over. For instance, Captain Lazar Brankov, holding talks mainly on school

³⁴ MOL. XIX-A-1-j-XXIII-112-1945. 21.d.

matters with the Minorities Department of the Prime Minister's Office on 25 October 1945, plainly reproached the Hungarian government for "taking a very bureaucratic position" on the extradition question.³⁵

It is not widely known that the Hungarian government, when formulating its own peace objectives, considered holding a retrial of those responsible for the Novi Sad raid, or working up the trial materials from 1943–44 for foreign propaganda purposes and publishing them as a book. The idea of a retrial was apparently raised by *Szabad Nép*, the communist daily paper, early in July 1945, as a way of "showing the whole world that [the forces of] democracy in Hungary do not identify themselves with the Novi Sad affair." The retrial would also show, according to the paper, that it was the affair of the Germans, not the Hungarians. After the idea had been raised in the newspaper, it was also discussed by the Minorities Department, which supported it, arguing that it would be "better for Hungary to come up" with the whole affair, which would "certainly be one of the most discussed propaganda questions" at the peace conference.³⁶ An opinion was also requested from István Ries, the Social Democratic justice minister, who sent a reply on 16 August 1945. He supported the idea of publishing a popular account of the military trial and indicated that he would soon select someone for the task. Ries wrote to the prime minister, "I think it is in Hungary's interest to make the trial material ... known to the world public and show that retribution for the massacres in Novi Sad and district and restoration of the country's good name before world opinion was an aim also of the last administration, and only the mounting German political influence and the exigencies after 19 March 1944 prevented the criminals from receiving their deserved punishment." However, Ries thought that a retrial could not be considered because of Hungary's extradition obligations under the armistice. For it might give the impression in Yugoslavia "that Hungary wanted to withdraw the criminals from the jurisdiction of the Yugoslav people's court, which was competent according to the place of commitment of the crimes."³⁷ With that, the idea was dropped from the agenda.

In May 1945, members of the Yugoslav interior security organization OZNA, with the help of the Soviet army, rounded up 36 Serbs and Croats taking refuge in Budapest and took them straight to Belgrade, along with members of the Nedić party arrested in Vienna. They included journalists, former employees of the Croatian legation, traders and others.

However, OZNA agents had already appeared in ruined Budapest at the beginning of March 1945, intent on arresting a list of Hungarian war criminals, with the help of the Soviet mission to the Allied Control Commission. They discovered, for instance, that Iván Nagy, the former head of the Hungarian mission in Zagreb and member of the Hungarian Parliament, who had finished his political career in the propaganda department of the Arrow-Cross government, was in hiding around Lake Balaton. Gyula Kramer, former president of the South-

³⁵ MOL. XIX-A-1-n-"Z"813/biz-1945. 2.d.

³⁶ MOL. XIX-A-1-j-XXIII/b-5011-1945. 31.d.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

Country Hungarian Public Education Association, was arrested in Budapest, and Elemér Korányi, a Catholic priest and former member of Parliament, in Esztergom. Leó Deák, for instance, gave himself up to the Soviet military authorities in Budapest on 11 March. The OZNA also caught in Budapest Milan L. Popović, the former member of Parliament, Gyula Zombory, the Novi Sad chief of police, the gendarme Lieutenant Colonel Géza Báthory, József Könyöky, the Novi Sad police counsellor, and others. Colonel General Ferenc Feketehalmly-Czeydner, József Grassy and Márton Zöldi, for instance, arrived at the Andrássy Avenue jail in Budapest after being handed to the Soviets by the Americans. Following an application by the Yugoslav mission to the Allied Control Commission, the latter officially requested their extradition from Prime Minister Ferenc Nagy, on the grounds that they had already been declared war criminals in Yugoslavia. Although they had already been sentenced to death in Hungary, they were then extradited to Yugoslavia and put on trial again. With Ferenc Szombathelyi, the former chief of staff, a life sentence of penal servitude from the Hungarian people's court was followed by extradition to the authorities in Yugoslavia, in August 1946 under still unexplained circumstances, not long after he had begun to serve his sentence.³⁸

The first big war-crimes trial of Hungarian politicians, police and civilian officials started in Novi Sad on 20 October 1945. The main accused were Leó Deák, the former lord lieutenant, Milan L. Popović, Gyula Kramer, Géza Báthory, Gyula Zombory, József Tallián, József Könyöki and Péter Knézi. They were all sentenced to death by the military court of the Third Army, apart from Knézi, who was prosecuted because he had been an administrator appointed over Serb companies. The sentences were carried out in Žabalj and Novi Sad.

The deciding factors in all the war-crimes trials were the confessions of the accused and the testimony of the witnesses. Popović, for instance, was interrogated for nine days, as was Deák for a similar period. None of them admitted to the main charge of taking an active part in the raid and reprisals, which were the war crimes, so that the cases had to rest on the testimony of the witnesses.

The trial of Ferenc Szombathelyi and accomplices, which began on 22 October 1946, raised considerable interest in Yugoslavia. The sentences were delivered on 30 October or according to other sources, on 31. The accused alongside Szombathelyi were Lieutenant General Ferenc Feketehalmly-Czeydner, Major General József Grassy, Gendarme Lieutenant General Lajos Gál, Gendarme Captain Márton Zöldi, Ernő Bajsai, deputy lord lieutenant of Bačka, Miklós Nagy, former mayor of Novi Sad, Ferenc Bajor, city commander of Novi Sad, and Pál Perepatics, former merchant and intelligence officer. Their trial was also used for political purposes before the parliamentary elections in the Serbian Republic.³⁹ According to the charges, Szombathelyi was sentenced to death because he was responsible,

³⁸ *Ibid.* XXIII/b-3227-1946. 73.d; *Szombathelyi Ferenc visszaemlékezése 1945*. [Recollections by Ferenc Szombathelyi, 1945] Introduced and annotated by P. Gosztanyi, Budapest 1990, 15.

³⁹ MOL. Mikrofilm 12405/4; *Slobodna Vojvodina*, 24-31 October 1946; Kasaš, 207.

as commander in chief of the Hungarian army allied with the Germans, for the murders and robberies committed by the advancing Hungarian army, and for the many death sentences by the chief of staff's so-called flying court, which had been designed to strangle the people's liberation movement and instrumental in organizing the raids. Szombathelyi in particular was accused, in the case of the judgements by the summary chief of staff's courts, of "not exercising" his prerogatives of mercy, for instance in not reprieving Svetozar Marković Toza, the Vojvodina communist leader. An ethnic Hungarian, Károly Gyetvai, was appointed as the prosecutor in the trial, for political reasons. According to the Vojvodina press, "a storm of applause broke out" among the audience in court when the death sentences were pronounced, along with cries of "Long live the people's court, long live justice, death to war criminals" etc.⁴⁰ Feketehalmy-Czeydner, Grassy and Zöldi were sentenced to be hanged in public and the others to be shot by firing squad in public and have their whole estates confiscated. Feketehalmy-Czeydner's sentence was carried out on November 4 in Žabalj and those of the others on the same day in Novi Sad.

⁴⁰ *Slobodna Vojvodina*. 5 November 1946. It is still not known how many death and other sentences the Yugoslav people's courts passed.