

Magyars and Serbs: the 'Southlands'

1941–1945

The 1941 occupation of the Southlands and the 1942 round up

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On 10 April 1941, four days after Germany attacked Yugoslavia and the day Croatia seceded from the state, Lt Col. Nenad Krnjajić commander of the 14th Garrison Regiment stationed in the Palić area in the Vojvodina region of Serbia, noted in his regimental journal: "Windy and cloudy; sleet. It is peaceful on our sector of the line. Minor Hungarian troop movements in the border area. On the radio the news is bad everywhere... The Germans broke through at Bela Crkva and are pushing forward... Lt Col. Ružić, commander of 13th Garrison Regiment, informed me that Lt Col. Ivovnur [a Croat – E.S.], his second-in-command, has deserted."¹

The next day, on the orders of Miklós Horthy, the Regent of Hungary, units of the Hungarian Third Army and the Mobile Corps crossed the Hungarian-Yugoslav border. The main military objective, besides re-annexing the Bačka (Bácska) region to Hungary, was to secure the rear of the German troops, advancing in the direction of Belgrade. That was done without any major engagement with the Yugoslav army, and within three days they had recaptured the Danube-Tisza interfluvium, the Bács and the southern Baranja 'Triangle', thereby closing the era of Hungarian territorial gains. The last sentence of Lt Col. Krnjajić's journal entry for 13 April runs: "As the best solution, I have ordered the destruction of all war material and am dispersing the unit."²

In an autobiographically inspired novel by Attila Balázs, a writer from Vojvodina, István Szilágyi, Hungarian army soldier recalls the reoccupation of Bačka in the following terms:

They waited until every single one had closed ranks on the top of the hill, from which a far prospect opened onto the Bácska. Onto that blessed chunk of land so saturated with tears, which had now become Hungary once again... there was no order but everyone prayed. Here, too, there were some who blubbed.³

¹ Cited by A. Kasaš, "Jedno svedoanstvo o Apriliskom ratu u Bakoju 1941," *Godine Zbornik atice srpske za istoriju* 49 (1994), 172–173.

² *Ibid.*, 177.

³ A. Balázs, *Kinek észak, kinek dél vagy a világ kicsiben*. [To Some the North, To Some the South, or the World in Miniature] Budapest 2008, 383–384.

Hungary reacquired 11,601 sq. km. (or 55 %) – though other statistics put it at 11,475 sq. km. – of the 20,551 sq. km., with a population of 1,145,000 (1.3 million by other counts) that had been part of Hungary (not counting Croatia-Slavonia) and had been ceded to the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes by the 1920 Treaty of Trianon. Of the inhabitants 26.3% were ethnic Magyars, 17.2% ethnic Germans, 21.2% Serbs, 19.2% Croats, 7% Slovenes, 3.5% Slovaks, 1.3% Ruthenes, and 1.3% were Jews. The Banat, despite earlier promises by Hitler's Germany, was left under German occupation and later tacked onto occupied Serbia for administrative purposes.

The marching in of the Royal Hungarian Army was celebrated by the Magyars of the Délvidék – the 'Southlands' – as marking an end to "Serb oppression" and national liberation from "23 years of slavery." Second-class citizens of a minority, they were once again the members of the constitutive nation. Their grievances led them to expect compensation, social standing, indeed privileges. Solemn masses were said where thanks were given for the re-annexation; the national flag was ceremoniously dedicated with girls festively arraigned in national costume.

The celebration by the central Hungarian authorities took place a good three months later, on 27 July 1941, in Subotica (Szabadka). Horthy and his wife, accompanied by high-ranking personalities, including Prime Minister László Bárdossy and the Minister for Internal Affairs, Ferenc Keresztes-Fischer, arrived by train. They were met at the station by György Sánta, the former President of the Hungarian Party of Yugoslavia, to be driven "amid scenes of indescribable jubilation" to the main square, now once more bearing the name of Saint Stephen, King of Hungary, where the re-annexation was praised by the Prime Minister as a just and everlasting deed. After a ritual involving the breaking of a loaf of "Bácska bread" Horthy decorated officers and soldiers who had distinguished themselves in the Yugoslav campaign.

What was experienced by Magyars as an intoxicating national liberation was burdened by "Chetnik gunfire", armed clashes with Serb nationalists, most of them members of local Chetnik organisations. Major casualties included many innocent civilians, the vast majority of them Serbs. "Protection against Serb Secret Organisations", confidential material produced by the Hungarian General Staff for officers of the Royal Hungarian Army provides a reliable account of Chetnik organisations "allotted to divisions and organized as proper, military units. Members receive military and special training and are supplied with appropriate weapons." Their task in peacetime was keeping national minorities under observation, counter-espionage and state security, in wartime, on the other hand, their duties were destruction and sabotage in hostile territory, murders, the spreading of rumors, disrupting the battle order of enemy troops, subversion by systematic propaganda in enemy-occupied territories, and finally guerrilla fighting.⁴

Maj.-Gen. Pál Peterdy, commander of the Kaposvár 10th Infantry Brigade entering Sombor (Zombor) on 13 April, in his daily report described one incident as follows: firing lasted the whole night but "in the darkness it was not possible to pin it down with certainty. Everybody suspected the larger housing blocks wher-

⁴ Hadtörténelmi Levéltár ('War History Archive' = HL): "Records of the Kaposvár 10th Infantry Brigade, 1941-42/I.b". The word Chetnik derives from the Serb *četa* 'troop'.

eas most of the firing came from inconspicuous small houses." Some officers reckoned to have located the Chetniks in the attic of the Gymnasium, others in the Sokol House, but by morning they were given news that the shooting came from the 'Serb steeple' that is from the direction of the Orthodox Church. Five shells were fired at it: "All five bull's eyes and the sniping ceased."⁵

The events at the Serb hamlet of Sirig (Szörgepuszta) NW of Temerin, just north of Novi Sad (Újvidék) led to one of the many partisan actions against Magyars in the autumn of 1944. The Hungarian home guards of Temerin herded the Serbs out to the village fields at the time of the welcome of the Hungarian army. Immediately before that however there had been a minor clash between withdrawing Yugoslav forces and the Hungarian vanguard. Although the Serb settlers waived white flags, under circumstances that have remained unclarified to the present day, the Hungarian units suddenly surrounded them killing, some estimate 111, others 470 (the lives of 150 Serbs locked in a fire station at Temerin were, at the same time, saved by a Magyar solicitor and a physician, who vouched for their not being Chetniks). In connection with the Chetniks' willingness to resort to sniping regardless of circumstances or the consequences, one incident debated down to the present day happened in the village of Gospodjinci (Boldogasszonyfalva). The daughter of the local Serb priest standing among a crowd enthusiastically welcoming the Hungarian troops stepped over to one of the officers, a captain, and drawing a gun (or a grenade according to other sources) concealed in her bouquet killed him.

Military history records only a single armed clash involving regular troops of the Hungarian and Yugoslav armies, at Bački Petrovac (Petrôc), which resulted in 65 dead and 212 wounded. According to data which are accepted nowadays, the number of Hungarians killed in regular army conflicts was 7 officers and 119 other ranks, 22 officers and 239 other ranks being wounded. Hungarian statistics put the number of civilian victims of reprisals for "Chetnik shootings" and what was referred to as "pacification" of the area at 1,242 and 1,122 – predominantly Serbs – lost their lives in "irregular warfare". The number of summary executions, 313, for taking part in armed actions against the Hungarian military, brings the total of civilian deaths to 2,870, though Yugoslav estimates compiled immediately after the war put the number of civilian fatalities in the first days of the occupation at 3,506.⁶

⁵ HL: "Records of the Kaposvár 10th Infantry Brigade, 1941-42/I.b". The Sokol ('Falcon') was a flamboyantly nationalistic gymnastic and physical fitness movement started in 1862 by Miroslav Tyrš primarily for middle-class students but over time increasingly for the working class, in the Bohemian (i.e. Czech) region of what was soon to become the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The Slav nationalist aspect led to the first Sokol club being established in what was then still the Hungarian city of Novi Sad (Újvidék). Nowadays, Sokol clubs again have a strong presence primarily in the Czech Republic but also in Serbia

⁶ I have no access to data for Yugoslav army casualties, only the total of those taken prisoner of war, Hungarian military sources state that in April 1941, 150 Yugoslav officers and 2,000 men were captured. After a time those Serbs who were not natives of Old Serbia were released. The remainder – 70 officers and 1,200 other ranks – were handed over to the Germans [MOL (Hungarian National Archive) XIX-J-1a-IV-107.II. 30 October 1945.]. The number of Yugoslav Royal Army POWs of Danube Banovina, who had been captured by the Germans or Italians and were released due to the ac-

As soon as the territory was regained and during the subsequent military rule reliable local Magyars were co-opted into five- and ten-man committees to examine the national loyalties of the population (not just the Serbs) during the 20-odd years that the region had been part of the Yugoslav Kingdom as the Danube Banovina. Local Hungarians would go round towns and villages, often from house to house, and point out to soldiers where reliable people and where 'suspect' elements lived. On 14 April, Lt.-Gen. Elemér Gorondy-Novák, commander of the Hungarian 3rd Army, ordered "the pacification of territories under guerrilla threat." This commenced with the deportation and internment of Yugoslav post-Trianon settlers and anyone considered "suspect" in regard to national loyalty. Around 12,000 people, the bulk of them volunteer (*dobrovoljac*) settlers and their family members already interned in camps, were initially expelled over the border into German-occupied Serbia, but as this met with the displeasure of the German government, who sent them back to the Serb-Hungarian border, negotiations were initiated concerning their official transfer. Indeed, the notion of resettling the entire Serb population of the Southlands in Serbia and of the Croats in Croatia was mooted. As the talks floundered the settlers considered unreliable were for the most part taken from local internment camps to camps in the interior of Hungary (Sárvár). Some of those who appealed individually were released in the summer of 1941 or detailed to work, but the majority remained in internment until the end of the war.

From what is known today, around 50,000 Southern Slavs and their families – including public servants, teachers, lawyers, or any others who could be considered as linked in one way or another to the Kingdom of Yugoslavia – most of whom had settled in the region after 1918 – fled after the territory was re-annexed by Hungary. The number of Hungarians, Szeklers from the Bukovina, Csángós from Moldavia, and members of the Magyar minorities in Croatia, Bosnia or Serbia, all those who resettled in the Southlands in state-sponsored schemes is estimated at 25,000–30,000, and it is next to impossible to guess the scale of additional spontaneous population movements.

The reintegration of the Southlands in Hungary was accompanied from the start by heightened ethnic antagonisms, further aggravated by Hungary's entrance in the war on 27 June 1941 and her participation in the German invasion of the Soviet Union.⁷ Increasingly potent armed movements which threatened Hungary's integrity emerged along the southern marches directly in contact with Serbia. Royalist Chetniks were implacably anti-Communist, and their struggle against Communist Yugoslav partisans eventually culminated in civil war. But despite the socio-political hostility, both paramilitary organizations – the one under Draža Mihailović, the other under Josip Broz Tito – had as a primary goal the restoration of dismembered Yugoslavia to its pre-1941 state and therefore represented a permanent threat to Hungary.

Amid all these difficulties, by January 1942 Hungary had achieved significant progress in respect to consolidating the legal, cultural, administrative, economic

tivities of a POW selection committee in Vienna came to 9,521 by the end of May 1942, of which 4,282 were Magyar, 1,682 Slovene, 1,195 Serb, and 689 Bunjevac, i.e. southern Slavs mainly from the Bačka region.

⁷ Great Britain delayed a declaration of war on Hungary until 7 December 1941.

and political reintegration of the Southlands.⁸ Successive Hungarian governments regarded it as a prime task to stress the local continuity of Hungarian statehood and made every effort to do away with the nationalistic and crudely anti-Magyar institutional framework that had been created by the Yugoslav state since 1918, replacing them with appropriate Hungarian institutions.

From the outset it was made plain that a sharp line would be drawn between "the indigenous Serb population", that is, Serbs living there prior to 31 October 1918, and Serbs who had moved to or been settled in the area since that date. Lt.-Gen. Béla Novákovits, head of the military administration for the Hungarian 3rd Army, starting out from the premise that "part of the indigenous Serb population has the inclination to become loyal citizens of the Magyar homeland," instructed the local heads of the military administration to promote that process "in an appropriate manner." He forbade arrests of Serbs "in the absence of well-founded suspicion of wrongdoing," numerous instances of which had occurred from the very start. In his order he emphasized that "even if certain measures are unavoidable in a particular case, they should be carried out with the greatest tact and always in such a manner as to make it patent that the measure is not directed against the aggregate of the ethnic Serb indigenous population, but only the particular individual affected by it". He urged local commanders to promote manifestations of loyalty towards the Hungarian state on the part of indigenous Serbs "with due understanding and tactful conduct."⁹

Barely had that consolidation process been embarked on than it was sundered by an incitement to revolt in the name of the approaching proletarian revolution by the Provincial Committee of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia. That Party, at the back of an ever-growing number of subversive exploits, was tightly bound to the Soviet Union, a country with a social structure not only vigorously rejected by Hungary but at war with her. The first act of sabotage took place on 19 July at Stári Bečej (Óbecse) where the harvested grain was set of fire. By October there were over 30 similar incidents, accompanied by armed clashes with the Hungarian gendarmerie as well as the army. Perpetrators were in all cases tried in a military court-martial and summarily executed, and firm steps were taken to disband Communist organizations. On 1 October, however, the central police station in Subotica was tipped off that "more widespread incendiarism, explosions and Communist unrest" was to be expected, with weapons and explosives being supplied by revolutionaries in Croatia. In essence it was under the influence of that tip-off that General Ferenc Szombathelyi, after 6 September the Hungarian Chief of the General Staff, advised Prime Minister Bárdossy that martial law be declared in the Southlands to suppress hostile conspiracies and acts of sabotage aimed at the Hungarian gendarmerie or army. As cases of that nature, he emphasized, overstepped the bounds of acts of disaffection, he proposed that such cases be dealt with solely by the Chief of General Staff, or in other words that the right to exercise jurisdiction be removed from other commanding officers:

⁸ For further information see the articles on "Délvidék 1941-1944 I.II." (Southlands 1941-1944) in *Limes*, Nos. 2 & 3 (2009).

⁹ MOL K-63. *A Külügyminisztérium politikai iratai* [Political Documents of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs], 1941-47-4,90.

Subversion has recently increased vigorously in Bačka and is supported with armed support from Croatia. It is a Communist organization operating on a pan-Slav basis and its military aspects (acts of disaffection and sabotage aimed at weakening the army's striking power) occur in much greater number and in a more dangerous form than Communist conspiracies heretofore.¹⁰

In the course of anti-Communist investigations carried out that autumn, according to Szombathelyi, 2,367 persons were arrested and tried by a summary court with Captain Vilmos Dominich as Judge Advocate and the "flying court", so called because it was always locally convened in ever-different towns, sentences also being carried out on the spot. Between 1 October and 1 December 1941 around 600 cases were charged; 342 arrested persons were tried by General Staff Court Martial of whom 116 were adjudged guilty of a charge of disaffection; 79 were condemned to death by hanging and 64 actually executed, the sentences of the others being commuted by Szombathelyi. In all cases sentences included the sequence of execution, with the other condemned men being obliged to watch the earlier executions. Less serious cases were passed on to five-man special panels of law courts in the cities of Szeged and Pécs.

It may be noted at this point that the Chetniks also strove to build up their organization in the Bačka, but those attempts were ripped in the bud and thus they failed to commit any acts of sabotage. The sole attempt drawing mainly on 97 former Yugoslav army officers was wound up in the autumn of 1943. Two of their leaders were condemned to death by the court martial, but neither sentence was carried out.¹¹

Nonetheless, by late October 1941 it was clear that for all the severe sentences handed down by General Staff Courts Martial, this failed to stop the partisans, who were continuously being reinforced from across the border. At the end of December 1941 the gendarme post at Žabalj (Zsablya) was reliably informed that "suspicious elements infiltrated" from the Banat into Bačka. A few days later several suspected partisans were arrested in Zabalj, then in early January 1942, at a nearby farmstead, gendarmes were involved in a gun battle with armed men who were hiding there. Seven Hungarians were wounded and ten partisans were killed. This marked the start of army reinforcements in the Šajkaška, ("boatman country"). To be more specific, on Szombathelyi's orders on 6 January there commenced "a systematic combing through and mopping up" of the area, a round-up aimed at eliminating "Communist and Chetnik agitation." The Germans also embarked on a series of raids in a hunt for partisans, and it is now known that the two actions were co-ordinated by the Hungarian and German authorities. The raids were extended to Novi Sad, with Szombathelyi from the outset entrusting the unified command of the Hungarian military and gendarme units to Lt.-Gen. Ferenc Feketehalmy-Czeydner.

¹⁰ MOL K-28. *A Miniszterelnökség kisebbségi osztályának iratai* [Documents of the Prime Ministerial Office's Department for Minorities], 1941-R-22,498.

¹¹ See E. A. Sajti in "Délvidék 1941-1944," 228-238.

In the course of secret Hungarian negotiations with the British in 1943, and of contact with Chetnik leader Draža Mihailović (he was acquitted in Serbia a good few years ago of all responsibility for war crimes and rehabilitated), the Hungarian representative Károly Schrekker sent a voluminous memorandum to the British ambassador in Ankara in April 1943 including an account of the raid:

In Novi Sad, Serb partisans on the pretext of a revolutionary uprising by "Chetniks" (an uprising did indeed break out and had to be put down), the local commanding officers gave an order for the mass killing of Serbs and Jews and gave permission for brazen looting. Telephone cables to Budapest were deliberately cut to ensure that counter-orders could not be transmitted, and it took 48 hours for Budapest to learn what had happened. Orders for atrocities to cease promptly were then sent off by aeroplane, but by the time these arrived hundreds of victims had died – a massacre for which there is no parallel in Hungarian history. The affair provoked horror in Budapest, but the government was weak-kneed in punishing those responsible because the German legation and generals declared their solidarity with the transgressors.¹²

It was alleged in the indictment of Feketehalmy-Czeydner and associates in the autumn of 1943 that the round-up claimed 3,309 victims. The statistics assembled by the command of the Hungarian 5th Army suggest that a total of 3,340 individuals disappeared, among them 2,550 Serbs, 743 Jews, 11 ethnic Hungarians, 13 Russians, 7 Germans, 2 Croats, 1 Slovak, and 13 Ruthenes (they included 792 women and 147 children); in Novi Sad specifically, there was a total of 1,246 victims, the majority of them Jewish.

The "raid" did a great deal of harm to Hungary's international reputation. It was not just the Yugoslav government in exile which reacted furiously. General Walter Kuntze, deputy commander of the German 12th Army reported to the army high command (*Oberkommando der Wehrmacht*) as early as 5 January that the armed clash with the Šajkaška partisan detachment had been "blown out of proportion" in Budapest, and that the disproportionate counteraction was meant to prepare the ground for Hungarian troops to enter the Banat.¹³ The true foreign-political message of the action that was addressed to the Germans was not, however, a preparation for entry into the Banat as Kuntze supposed. Much more to the point was the temporal coincidence with a visit paid in January 1942 by Jochim von Ribbentrop, the Reich Minister for Foreign Affairs, and Field Marshal Wilhelm Keitel, Chief of the High Command of the Armed Forces. It is known that von Ribbentrop arrived in Budapest on 6 January in order to demand the wholehearted engagement of the entire Hungarian army at the eastern front, whereas Keitel arrived on 20 January for discussions concerning the details. By then plans for clearing Novi

¹² *Magyar-brit titkos tárgyalások 1943-ben*, [Secret Talks between Hungary and Great-Britain in 1943], ed. and with intro. essay by Gy. Juhász. Budapest 1978, doc. 21/c., 121-122.

¹³ *Zbornik dokumenata i podataka o narodnooslobodilačkom ratu naroda Jugoslavije*. Dokumenti Nemačkog Rajha 1941. T. XII.Knj.1. Belgrade 1973. Doc. No. 2, p. 13.

Sad were ready. It was not just a matter of that temporal coincidence alone, however. That is supported by a 10 January letter that Regent Horthy wrote to Hitler as well as by the complete official record of a court martial which commenced on 14 December 1943.¹⁴ According to the record Ferenc Fóty, a liaison officer sent by the Department of Counter-Intelligence (VKF 2) to Novi Sad alleged that in respect of von Ribbentrop and Keitel's visit to Budapest he was given the order that it was "in the nation's interest" to be able to supply proof that partisan activity was being directed from the Banat, and that Hungary's action had been part of the German mopping-up operation of the Banat partisans. At the talks with Ribbentrop, Prime Minister Bárdossy did indeed ask, with reference to the situation in the Balkans, for moderation in the German requests. Horthy in his 10 January letter to Hitler, likewise with reference to partisan activity that flowed over from the Banat onto Hungarian territory, asked Hitler to be permitted to withdraw the Hungarian armored corps from the eastern front and/or a reduction in the number of Hungarian units to be sent to the eastern front. Hungary managed to secure that latter reduction by dint of permitting the Waffen SS to recruit in Hungary. With particular reference to the extension ("overdimensioning" was the then-current jargon) of the raid in Novi Sad, it should be mentioned that from the start of 1942 German military circles had been vigorously pressing the Hungarians to intensify the struggle against Tito, culminating in the German request in 1943 relating to the Hungarian occupation forces in the Balkans.¹⁵

In the autumn of 1943, with a view to seeking a more favorable assessment of Hungary after the war, Horthy, the then premier Miklós Kállay, and Colonel General Ferenc Szombathelyi were prepared to call the guilty to account (Horthy's decision can be dated 11 October 1943) something that no other government in German-dominated wartime Europe was prepared to do. The history of the trial which went ahead, or to be more accurate the escape of the accused officers, is one of the better known aspects of the round-up, so let it be noted that even before the trial had got under way the Hungarian government had made a start on estimating the damage done to Serb families, primarily those in Novi Sad (Jews were not included). The Government allocated two million *pengő*¹⁶ to the committee charged with distributing compensation with the instruction that support be paid out primarily to families that had been left without an income earner and to promptly pay for minor, readily assessable material damage. By doing so, it was argued, "the political, social and moral effect of taking this step should become immediately appar-

¹⁴ E. A. Sajti and G. Markó: "Ismeretlen dokumentum az 1942. januári délvidéki razia résztvevőinek peréről. 1943. december 14–1944. január 14:" [Unknown Document about the Trial of Participants in the Southlands Action of January 1942: 14 December 1943–14 January 1944] *Hadtörténelmi Közlemények* 32:2 (1985), 426–456. *Horthy Miklós titkos iratai* [Nicholas Horthy's Secret Writings], ed. with notes and tables by M. Szinai and L. Szűcs, Budapest 1962, Doc. No. 62, 313–318.

¹⁵ For a fairly recent article on this issue, see G. Kovács, "Szombathelyi Ferenc és a 'Balkáni megszálló hadosztályok ügye' 1943-ban," [Ferenc Szombathelyi and 'the Divisions Occupying the Balkans' in 1943.] *Századok* 139 (2005), 1371–1425.

¹⁶ At then-prevailing exchange rates, 1 pound sterling was worth 27.8 pengő, 1 US dollar 5.7 pengő, and 1 German mark 1.4 pengő.

ent."¹⁷ The committee put the material damage at 9,327,930 pengő and the income support due to death of the family head at 452,040 pengő. Of the two million pengő that had been allocated the committee had actually paid out 717,410 pengő by the time Germany occupied Hungary on 15 October 1944, at which point the newly appointed Sztójay government prohibited any further disbursements.¹⁸ The Kállay administration returned to the relaxation of the "iron-handed" policy, restoring an even-handed minority policy in education, use of the mother tongue, the functioning of certain clubs, wider scope for culture, etc. benefiting Serbs.

The raid left indelible marks in the twentieth-century history of both Hungary and Yugoslavia (Serbia); for a while, indeed, it strained to the utmost relations between Magyar and Serb inhabitants in what is now the Vojvodina. József Sombor-Schweinitzer, Deputy Chief Commissioner of Police in Hungary, whom the minister for internal affairs dispatched to Bačka immediately after the raid with the objective of "restoring [in Serbs] the shattered trust they had placed in civic loyalty," wrote wryly towards the end of the visit: "there is barely a Serb who could be declared willing to serve the Hungarian interest."¹⁹

Hungary's status as vanquished and Yugoslavia's as victor at the end of WWII meant that any favorable effect that may have been made by the conciliatory steps Hungary had taken was reduced, or rather, completely nullified. But it was not just the unfavorable denouement of the war for Hungary and its foreign policy implications which neutralized the appeasement offered to the Serbs by Kállay's government. A segment of the civilian population including the intelligentsia led by Milan Popović, who sat as their representative in the Hungarian parliament and, in his own words, distanced himself from "the apostles of hatred and impatience" – i.e. the Yugoslav resistance movements – and would have been willing to re-assimilate as a national minority within the framework of a Hungarian state, were political featherweights both at home and abroad. Their policy of seeking a *modus vivendi* with Budapest was regarded by both wings of the Yugoslav resistance as a betrayal. (In Yugoslavia, after the war, Popović and the entire editorial board of the only Serbian-language daily newspaper in the Southlands were tried as war criminals, sentenced to death and executed.)

By the autumn of 1944 Europe's future was not being settled in Berlin, but in London, Moscow and Washington. The Southlands were not governed any more from Budapest but again from Belgrade. Its Serbs had become proud citizens of a victorious Yugoslavia that now enjoyed an international respect such as it had never previously had; its Magyars again ended as an exposed ethnic minority, losing all the advantages and privileges when being integrated in the motherland. They also had to bear the burden of the 1941 to late 1944 period. During the months when the end of the war was already in sight, the victors knew no mercy.

¹⁷ MOL K-28. [PM Office, Department for Minorities], 1941-R-27,709.

¹⁸ E. A. Sajti, *Impériumváltások, revízió, kisebbség. Magyarok a Délvidéken 1918–1947*. [Changes of Empire, Revision, Minority: Hungarians in the Southlands 1918–1947]. Budapest 2004, 305–306.

¹⁹ Sajti, *Impériumváltások*, 292.

The autumn of 1944: Retake and retribution

By the spring of 1944, the partisans had liberated a sizeable part of Serbia, and by late July–early August their vanguard had reached pockets in the Southlands where local sympathizers joined them. On 6 September, the Red Army crossed the Romanian–Serb frontier at Kladovo and, joined by partisan units, made a start in repossessing the Banat, laying the groundwork for a breakthrough toward Bačka and Baranja and thus freeing the way for the Red Army to push on towards Budapest and Vienna.

Towards the end of September the evacuation of the Hungarian civil administration from the Southlands began, and on 4 October the district command of the Szeged 5th Honvéd division ordered the evacuation of the territory south of the Ferenc Canal. The Szekler of Bukovina also set out, and, on October 7, the organized evacuation by German troops of the ethnic Germans of Bačka and Baranja started.

No armed clashes occurred in the re-annexed southern areas between the retreating units of the Hungarian Army and the Yugoslav Popular Liberation Army or Red Army regulars. The Magyar inhabitants in no way resisted the incoming partisans nor did they do anything to hinder their advance.

The decree establishing Yugoslav military rule in the Banat, Bačka and Baranja was signed by Tito on 17 October, the day after he arrived in Vrsac in the Banat. This lasted until the end of January 1945. Tito justified this measure referring to “the extraordinary circumstances under which these areas existed at the time of the occupation” (i.e. at the time when they were re-annexed by Hungary). The aim of military administration, the decree continues, “is to remove as speedily and fully as possible any misfortune the occupiers and foreign elements who settled in the region caused to our people as well as the full mobilization of the economy in the interest of the successful prosecution of the war of popular liberation.”²⁰ Major-General Ivan Rukavina, the head of the military administration, openly spoke of its nationalist and punitive functions. In his view the introduction of a military administration was necessary in order “to safeguard the nation’s future and the South Slav character of the region. In the *Slobodna Vojvodina* newspaper of the United Vojvodina Popular Liberation Front, a member of the Vojvodina Territorial Committee of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia is even more to the point:

We may have routed the German and Hungarian conquering hordes and have driven them westwards, but the poisonous weeds that they have scattered have not yet been eradicated (...) the tens and hundreds of thousands of foreign elements – who were settled on territories where our ancestors cleared the forests and drained the marshes to create the conditions necessary for a civilized life – are still sniping from the dark on our fighters and on Russian soldiers, and doing everything they can to prevent the normalization of conditions, getting ready for the time when, in this, for us, difficult situation they can once again stab us in the back.²¹

²⁰ J. B. Tito, *Sabrana djela*. [Collected Works] Vol. 24. Belgrade 1984, 96–97.

²¹ *Slobodna Vojvodina*, 28 October 1944.

The repressive measures covered Hungarians, Serbs, Croats, indeed each and every ethnic or social group in multi-ethnic Yugoslavia classified as "enemies of the people" or "war criminals" by those in power. The ethnic German minority was collectively declared to be guilty, and although the Hungarians were not officially labelled as such, in the autumn of 1944 they were treated in much the same way and were reckoned unreliable for many years to come. They were not admitted to membership by the newly formed local Popular Liberation Committees and in many places even the public use of Hungarian was prohibited. Exploiting (or rather exceeding) opportunities created by the Hungarian ceasefire, there were mass expulsions across the border of Hungarians as well as Germans who had settled in the region after 1941. The Serb inhabitants of three villages – Čurug (Csurug) Žabalj (Zsablya) and Možorin (Mozsor) – referring to the role played by local Magyars in round-ups, specially requested that the entire ethnic Hungarian population be expelled, and on that basis they had them interned and legally barred for good from their own homes. According to Hungarian statistics at least 65,000 were expelled from the Southlands or forced to leave their homes, which is almost double the number of those who fled from the region in 1918 at the end of WW1. Executions and torture on a mass scale, indiscriminate and, at first, usually without due legal process, using methods reminiscent of the Middle Ages, were employed by partisans as soon as they entered the Southlands at the beginning of October 1944, and retribution proceeded in several waves until the end of that year. It remains impossible to the present day to give even an approximate estimate of the numbers involved. Various publications, both in Hungary and abroad, basing themselves on the number of victims who can be identified by name, have put the total at 5,000–6,000, but other estimates have ranged from 20,000 to 60,000. Lesser repressive measures continued even after mass executions of Magyars abated, and efforts were made to keep them, in the parlance of the times, within the bounds of "revolutionary legality".

The first reports about the cruelties inflicted on the region by partisans reached Hungary even before the country's collapse and the end of the war. They were sent by the already disintegrating but still functioning Hungarian civil administration to the Department for Minorities of the Prime Minister's Office in the short period that General Géza Lakatos held that office (29 August–16 October). Those from the Medjumure gendarmerie and National Assembly Member Iván Nagy arrived on 31 August. The latter forwarded a letter dated 7 August by a woman called Rózsi Lajkó, a resident of Čakovec

(Csáktornya). She had written to a brother in Doroslovo (Dorozsló) to describe the circumstances under which their father had died. According to her harrowing tale, partisans had occupied the village on the night of 22 July 1944. They assembled 68 people, driving them out to the village outskirts where there was a marshy area. The older ones, including their father, were gunned down. To quote from the letter, written in mangled, misspelt Hungarian:

... and they were made to sing and they were beaten, prodded, shot in the head and left in the underbrush still tied up even though still alive to drown there... there were no more dead, only those old men,

but we do not know why that had to be done. Dear Brother, we have been orphaned, Father is no more, our hearts are in mourning.²²

József Grósz, the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Kalocsa and Bács wrote a longer memo on behalf of the episcopate at the end of April 1945 to draw the attention of Foreign Minister János Gyöngyösi to the expulsions and executions, protesting against them and requesting the government to take vigorous action:

The ethnic Hungarians of the Southlands were sorely troubled at the end of last year, when, as far as I have been able to ascertain from credible reports available albeit the border is closed, thousands and tens of thousands of Hungarians were carried off by Yugoslav partisans to places unknown. According to reports that are barely possible to check the number of Hungarians killed by the Yugoslavs amounts to many thousands. (...) Adding to that, in recent days the Yugoslav authorities have been expelling in their thousands from certain areas Hungarians who moved to the Southlands after 1941 and so are not Yugoslav citizens, as well as those who fled from their homes anticipating the arrival of the Russian army but returned later. I am well aware that under the terms of the armistice the Hungarian government is responsible for transporting back to Hungary all non-Yugoslavs citizens, but I protest, and I am impelled to ask for vigorous action on your part, against the way in which these expulsions are actually taking place (...) Those being expelled were assembled more or less simultaneously parish by parish, without any warning, being allowed barely enough time to gather the most essential clothing and, on average, 500 pengő, in ready cash. The homes of the expellees and all the furniture and fittings within them were placed under lock and key, sealed by the Yugoslav authorities, but in many places an immediate start was made on carrying away furniture and fittings.²³

According to minutes recorded on 2 August 1945 at the border station of Nagyszéksós: a partisan detachment of around 150 men aimed submachine guns at the patrol and placed machine guns and heavy machine guns at both ends of the bridge. With guns behind their backs, 157 Swabians [i.e. ethnic Germans] were then driven by partisans onto Hungarian territory.

When the captain commanding the Hungarian border patrol, in keeping with orders, asked for them to be taken back, the Serb company commander replied, if need be, he would resort to arms to prevent the Swabians being sent back over; he was not going to take orders from a Russian, because Russians were nobodies. Tito was the only one to give orders to him, and if need be he would chase the Russians back to the line of the River Tisza. [...] if there was much more gassing then they would be in Röske within half an hour and in Szeged

²² MOL K-28. [PM Office, Department for Minorities], 1941-R-25,965.

²³ Archive of Kalocsa Archdiocese (KFL) I.1.a. Generalia de Archidioecesis. 9145. 476.

within two hours (with a bit of fighting) and the Danube-Tisza line would be the frontier.²⁴

On 17 July 1946 Archbishop József Mindszenty of Esztergom, the Prince-Primate of Hungary, forwarded to Foreign Minister Gyöngyösi anonymous reports titled "Hungarian Fate in the Southlands" and "The True Situation of Hungarians in Yugoslavia" that had been given to him personally by a deputation from the Southlands. These made special reference to the executions of Hungarians at Bezdan, the deportation of Hungarians from Čurug and Žabalj, and the tragic death of Antal Reök, the Lord Lieutenant of Subotica:

Dr. Antal Reök, Lord Lieutenant of Szabadka [(Subotica), was lured over, and a few weeks later he was thrown down from a balcony at the Ban's Palace in Újvidék (Novi Sad). Dr József Bogner, a newspaper editor, was executed after prolonged torture; the parish priest of Torontáloroszi [Rusko Selo] was beaten to death in a cellar by Tito's Gestapo; Abbot István Virág, the 84-year-old parish priest of Horgos (Horgoš) dropped dead when he was about to be executed. Lajos Varga, the parish priest of Moholy [Mohol] was dragged for miles behind a cart until he died and his corpse was then mutilated; Rev. István Köves of Mozsor [Mošorin] was carried off to Újvidék from Hungarian territory.

The case of Hungarians executed on charges of sabotage in the mine at Vrdnik was reported as well as the notorious slave market at the Novi Sad internment camp:

At half past four at dawn, men and women from the camp are separately marched off; at half past five they line up in front of prospective employers who take their pick and take them off. There are some employers who are only on the look-out for women and girls; they are usually from one military unit or another. The number of those who have syphilis is a dreadfully high. Towards the end of April at daybreak, at 3:30am, a soldier came to the camp and made for the women's dormitory and chose a girl, saying that "he only needed her for a couple of hours," and true to his word she dragged herself back at 6 a.m. half dead. Ordained priests are used to clean out lavatories or to cure raw horse and cattle hides and pig skins for months on end. They are not allowed to say mass, or administer sacraments to the sick (this being reactionary), not even to go out onto the street.²⁵

By now a huge body sources and recollections gathered by local historians provide unequivocal evidence that the mopping-up operations conducted throughout Yugoslavia were planned centrally by the highest military and political circles and also directed from there. The goal of the cruel, indiscriminate retribution in the last phase of the war was the annihilation of every possible and presumed

²⁴ MOL KÜM XIX-J-1-k-Jug.-16/f-32.338/pol.-1945. Box 22.

²⁵ MOL KÜM XIX-J-1-a-IV-109-1981/Bé.-1946. Box 55.

enemy. No political opponent was to remain in a position of power, and the new, as yet weak state bodies had to be consolidated by arousing fear (in this context, the Serbian historians expressly mention a "forest" psychosis from which the new power elite suffered).

Units of the Department for the Protection of the People (*Odeljenje za zaštitu naroda*, OZNA) throughout the entire territory of Yugoslavia received orders personally from Aleksandar Ranković, the minister for internal affairs and head of OZNA, to undertake a purge and to liquidate and carry out mass executions. Political and class enemies, POWs and civilians, collaborators, Ustashi, Chetniks, Germans and Magyars and a long list of other groups were mentioned, which, in practical terms meant that anyone of any ethnic or social origin could be labelled an enemy of the people apart from partisans. In a telegram to the leaders of OZNA in Croatia dated 15 May 1945 Ranković made his position clear. He was dissatisfied with the activities of the internal-affairs organs in Zagreb, he wrote, and relieved their commander of his post for "unsatisfactory work" as during the 10 days which had elapsed since the liberation of the city, contrary to his orders, "altogether just 200 bandits" had been executed".²⁶

OZNA was formed on the Soviet model by Tito's order on 13 May 1944, as "the sword of the Revolution," to detect and deal with enemies at home and abroad. At first it comprised four sections: 1) intelligence, 2) counter-intelligence, 3) army security, and 4) a technical/statistics department. In August 1944, however, a notorious OZNA corps was created, expressly for the liquidation of "enemies of the people", the seven divisions and numerous brigades of which operated throughout Yugoslavia. The activities of these execution brigades in areas with mixed ethnic populations such as the Vojvodina were supported by the local Slavs; indeed, in many instances they played an active role in the settling of accounts. Initially these executions went ahead without any formal procedure, on the basis of suggestions by informants, membership lists of the Hungarian Arrow Cross Party left behind by the Hungarian authorities, membership of Béla Imrédy's similarly right- extremist Party of Hungarian Renewal, holding public office during the period of re-annexation by Hungary, having been a Levente²⁷ instructor and often priests and teachers as well as having enthusiastically welcomed the Hungarians in 1941 was enough for inclusion in the list of "war criminals".

There are hundreds of sources published in Croatia, Slovenia and Serbia which show that often enough courts martial dispensing summary justice were only set up *post facto*, on orders from the central government, to produce sentences to indicate that those executed had been war criminals and the like. Laws and decrees at the time made it possible for an individual to be declared a war criminal or enemy of the people on the basis of a simple denunciation, and the need to produce any evidence and argue the case could simply be ignored. This was particularly true

²⁶ Z. Dizdar, V. Geiger, M. Pojić, M. Rupi, eds. *Partizanska i komunistička represija i zločini u Hrvatskoj 1944–1946*. [Partisan and Communist Reprisals and Crimes in Croatia] Dokumenti, Vol. 1, doc. 28, 113. Slavonski Brod 2005.

²⁷ With archaic associations with knight-errantry, the Levente was an organization membership of which was obligatory for boys between 12 and 21 years to receive regular physical training and army-type drill, including the basics of weapon handling.

in late 1944 and early 1945.²⁸ That is also supported by the findings of ongoing research in the Vojvodina Archive at Novi Sad within the framework of a joint Hungarian-Serb committee established in 2010 to look for data concerning reprisals against Magyars and Serbs during WW2. That Archive holds around 284 boxes of informants' reports sent to the Vojvodina Commission of Investigation into the Occupation and their War Crimes (the War Crimes Committee as it is called more informally). Charges were concocted and criminal proceedings started on the basis of reports such as those held there.²⁹ Following a public appeal to report war crimes by the War Crimes Committee a countrywide total of 938, 828 informants' reports were received by its local and central agencies on which basis 66,420 persons, including 899 ethnic Hungarians, were classified as war criminals, not including "enemies of the people," a less serious category.

Ongoing research initiated by the Hungarian-Serbian Historians' Joint Committee is expected to shed light on such so far unanswered questions as to how many of those informants' reports originated in Vojvodina, and a breakdown by town and village. Another issue to be clarified concerns the list of war criminals. It should be established who among them was sentenced to death, a prison term or confiscation of property. The list moreover contains the names of many well-known and less well-known Hungarian politicians who were not charged or sentenced. To mention just a few: Regent Horthy figures in the list but the Yugoslavs did not request his extradition nor did they charge him. Equally, one might mention Iván Nagy, an ethnic Hungarian politician in the Southlands who between 1941 and 1944 was a member of parliament, and who fled to South America, or alternatively there is László Baky, Undersecretary in the Ministry of the Interior under Sztójay, who was sentenced to death by a Hungarian court and executed (His name occurs twice over in the list (as Baky and Baki), both times with the same case reference number and occupation and war crime charges). The only reason for bringing this up is that this source has often been misinterpreted and it is falsely claimed that 899 Hungarians were executed for war crimes. The list is merely of those against whom an allegation of war crimes was confirmed but it gives no guidance on what court proceeding may have ensued, what the judgement of the court was, or even whether or not an execution took place.

The horrors of the retribution were meant demonstrate the victorious final end of war and civil war in 1944. By arousing fear, terror and collective amnesia, every trace of the re-annexation was meant to be erased from the memories of ethnic Hungarians in the Vojvodina so as to strengthen the initially extremely weak loyalties which bound them to a state so alien to them with its radically new social ideology and structure. Nor should it be forgotten that Hungary, being on the losing side, was made to sit in the defendant's dock, and the great powers reformulated the disharmony which had existed between ethnic and state bounda-

²⁸ See Dizdar et al., Vol. 1, doc. 14, p. 91.

²⁹ Zs. Mezei, "Rendszerváltás a Vajdaságban 1944/45-ben a Vajdasági Levéltár fond-jainak tükrében" [Change of Régime in Vojvodina in 1944-45 in the Light of Finds at the Vojvodina Archive], in K. Biernacki and I. Fodor, eds. *Impériumváltás a Vajdaságban (1944) – Promena imperije u Vojvodini 1944 godine* [Change of Rule in Vojvodina in 1944] Szeged-Senta 2010, 119-148.

ries since 1918. In 1945 some three million members of the Hungarian nation once again found themselves outside Hungary's borders. Yugoslavia was able triumphantly to take its seat at the side of the victorious Allies and so to reunify a country which had been dismembered in 1941. There was no power in the world which could have compelled Yugoslavia to face up to the atrocities committed against innocent civilians. As a result, to the best of my knowledge, in Serbia not one person has been sentenced for the part they played in reprisals against ethnic Hungarians. The dissolution of the Yugoslav state created the conditions for the new states emerging out of its ruins to recreate their identity allowing people to become acquainted with this particular chapter of their Yugoslav (national) Communist past and to mourn, at last, not only its Serb victims but also ethnic Hungarians and Germans.