
THE SPECIAL ROLE OF THE ARMED FORCES ON MIKLÓS HORTHY'S PATH TO POWER

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ABSTRACT: *Central and Eastern Europe underwent a deep-rooted transformation in the years following World War I. The German Empire became a republic, Tsarist Russia sank into a bloody civil war, while the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy and the Ottoman Empire became fragmented. It was obvious throughout the region that political extremism combined with violence moved into the forefront. This study focuses on the events unfolding in Hungary at that time. It examines the extent to which the National Army and the so-called officers' detachments contributed to the rise of Admiral Miklós Horthy during the Civil War. Their activities were also intertwined with the period of the White Terror that followed the short-lived Soviet Republic, or with the election of Horthy as Governor of Hungary. However, amid consolidating conditions, Horthy, who had just been elected Governor, also became increasingly embarrassed by the excesses committed by military personnel.*

KEYWORDS: World War I, Hungarian Soviet Republic, political violence, extreme right movements

Background

In order to understand how and under what circumstances Miklós Horthy¹ rose to power and how the National Army and the officers' detachments were formed, we have to go back in time to the autumn of 1918, to the date when Prime Minister István Tisza²

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¹ Miklós Horthy is often regarded as one of the most controversial figures in Hungarian history, and his life, rise to power, political career, and downfall have been examined by numerous authors. From the perspective of this study's topic, he wrote an overview of Horthy's role: Ignác Romsics, *Honmentők – honvesztők* (Budapest: Helikon, 2021), 107–175 and Dávid Turbucz, *Horthy Miklós* (Budapest: Napvilág, 2014), 66–92.

² Count István Imre Lajos Pál Tisza de Borosjenő et Szeged (Pest, 22 April 1861–Budapest, 31 October 1918). István Tisza, a man with an enlightened conservative worldview, served as Prime Minister of Hungary on two occasions (1903–1905, 1913–1917), and his primary goal was to preserve the Kingdom of Hungary.

delivered his famous and often-quoted speech in Parliament on 17 October 1918: “I don’t want to play any trickery with words. I acknowledge what Count Mihály Károlyi³ said yesterday, that we have lost this war. We have lost it, but not in the sense that we would not be able to endure our defence even further heroically; and that we would not be able to make the final victory very expensive for the enemy, but we did indeed lose it in the sense that, owing to the shift in the balance of forces, we can no longer hope of winning the war, and that, as a result, we must seek peace on terms that our enemies accept under such conditions.”⁴

The incumbent Hungarian Prime Minister stated all this at a time when no Entente troops were yet stationed in the territory of the Kingdom of Hungary. Even the K. und K. formations were fighting outside the territory of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. What is more, after the conclusion of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk (3 March 1918), the Eastern Front essentially ceased to exist. Also, in Tsarist Russia, a bloody civil war was already underway. However, these could have been visible and, in some cases, even well-positioned achievements for the leadership of the Monarchy.

However, the “mood” of the population was completely different.⁵ The worsening economic situation, marked by runaway inflation and impoverishment, negatively affected a considerable section of society.⁶ At the same time, K. u. K. armed forces fighting on various fronts suffered heavy losses. By the end of the war, hundreds of thousands of Hungarian soldiers and K. und K. soldiers from Hungary were taken as prisoners of war. Similarly, many Entente and Russian soldiers were incarcerated in the Austro-Hungarian prisoners of war (POW) camps. It was also a fact that by the autumn of 1918, the number of deserted soldiers amounted to tens of thousands, many of whom were hiding in large cities, such as Budapest. According to estimates, 40,000 (!) deserters were hiding in Hungary. In other words, by 1917–18, Hungarian society had been completely exhausted financially and psychologically.⁷

If we also take into consideration the fact that the Kingdom of Hungary failed to find a solution to the social problems that had existed for a long time and which almost stretched apart the country even before the war, it is easy to understand that the survival of the Monarchy had become an essentially insurmountable task by the autumn of 1918. Although the remarks by Prime Minister Tisza, already quoted above, also mentioned the need to further extend the right to vote and to modify the management of the estate system in Hungary, by October 1918, it was no longer enough to talk about them merely...⁸ Perhaps it was even more problematic that the ethnic

³ Count Mihály Ádám György Miklós Károlyi de Nagykároly (Budapest, 4 March 1875–Vence (France) 9 March 1955). He was a leading Hungarian politician in 1918–1919, after which he was forced into exile. However, he returned to Hungary after 1945 and served as the Hungarian Ambassador to France from 1947 to 1949. He resigned from his post in 1949 and lived in France until his death.

⁴ *Képviselőházi Napló*, 1918. október 17-ei ülés, 292.

⁵ Pál Hatos, *Az elátkozott köztársaság – Az 1918-as összeomlás és forradalom története* (Budapest: Jaffa, 2018), 19–22.

⁶ János Botos, “A fizetőeszköz inflációja az első világháború alatt és után 1914–1924”, *Múltunk*, no. 3, (2015), 70–138.

⁷ János Suba, “Védhírszerzőszolgálat kiépítése 1918-ban”, *Rendvédelem-történeti Füzetek*, no. 21, (2010), 140.

⁸ See: Lajos Varga, *Kormányok, pártok és a választójog Magyarországon 1916–1918* (Budapest: Napvilág Kiadó, 2004).

nationalities and the idea of reaching a compromise with them were alien to the mentality of Hungarian political leaders.

The situation was further aggravated by the fact that, in the spring of 1918, or at the latest in the summer of 1918, the ruling circles of the Entente made the decision. There was no longer any need for the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. It can be duly assumed that a considerable section of the ruling elite in Hungary was unaware of this position. According to the decision, the territory of the Monarchy had to be divided among the peoples living there, in accordance with their right to self-determination. Thus, the outcome of the seemingly confusing political sequence of events at the end of October 1918 was clear: the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy ceased to exist.⁹ With the request for, and the signature in Padua (3 November, 1918) of, the armistice agreement on the Italian front, the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy not only ended the war, but also acknowledged its de facto military defeat.¹⁰

In addition to the formation of the Hungarian National Council (23–24 October 1918), chaired by Count Mihály Károlyi, the news of the end of the war and the de facto withdrawal of Austria from the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy finally determined the fate of the former entity. One result was that the Kingdom of Hungary regained its de jure independence, which naturally sparked euphoria. Still, perhaps many people did not appreciate what this actually meant in that particular political and military situation. At the same time, it should have been a warning sign that while on 31 October 1918, Count Mihály Károlyi was appointed Prime Minister, a detachment of (deserted) soldiers assassinated Count István Tisza at his own residence, who by this time had already emerged as the embodiment of all evil in the eyes of the vast majority of society. It was also equally ominous that soldiers returning home from the fronts, often in a disorderly manner, began looting and engaging in robberies in larger cities on their way, typically targeting the shops of the Jewish citizens of the given settlements.¹¹

The already complex and at the same time quite fluid situation in Hungary was further complicated by King Charles IV's¹² letter from Eckartsau (13 November, 1918), in which he wrote: "Therefore, I withdraw from any participation in the conduct of state affairs and recognise from the outset the decision by which Hungary determines the future form of its government."¹³

⁹ The establishment of National Councils, as well as the proclamation of Czechoslovakia and the German-Austrian Republic, were significant events in the history of the region.

¹⁰ Mária Ormos, *Padovai Trianonig, 1918–1920* (Budapest: Kossuth Kiadó, 1984), 15–40.

¹¹ T. Kovács, *op. cit.*

¹² Karl Franz Josef Ludwig Hubert Georg Otto Maria Habsburg (Persenbeug (Austria), 17 August 1887–Funchal (Portugal), 1 April 1922). He ascended to the throne on 21 November 1916. His attempts to establish contact with the Entente powers were in vain. In 1921, he made two unsuccessful attempts to return to the Hungarian throne. After his second attempt, Charles was exiled to the Portuguese island of Madeira, where he soon contracted Spanish flu and died in 1922. The deeply religious Charles was beatified by the Catholic Church in 2004.

¹³ Hungarian National Archive. Hungarian Section, Archives of Government Bodies from the Civic Period – Official Archives of the President – Office of the Cabinet of the Governor – Semi-official Documents of the Governor (K 589)-I-A-1. (Magyar Nemzeti Levéltár Országos Levéltára Polgári Kori Kormányhatósági Levéltárak – Államfői Hivatali Levéltár – Kormányzói Kabinetiroda – A Kormányzó felhivatalos iratai (K 589) – I-A – 1)

At the end of 1918 and at the beginning of 1919, the governments led by Count Károlyi (31 October 1918–11 January 1919), and then by Dénes Berinkey¹⁴ (11 January 1919–20/21 March 1919) were unable to cope with the challenges they faced. The personal integrity of ministers in the successive governments was not unproblematic either, just recall the example of Minister of War Béla Linder.¹⁵

In the field of domestic politics, the government was unable to halt the influence of the Communist movement, which was increasingly violent in its efforts to seize power, or at least against the representatives of legal power. Their influence was strongly asserted through the soldiers' councils formed not only in the armed forces but also in the police. The government did not know what to do with the completely pointless strikes during the winter of 1918–1919 either. Although the government took tough action against the Communists after a demonstration organised on 22 February 1919, which ended in shooting, the perpetrators were arrested and detained in the Metropolitan Collective Prison, this proved to be a belated action by the government to suppress them. Similarly, the government was also unable to deal with the far-right anti-Semitic organisations recruited from far-right military officers who were already openly organising at the end of 1918.¹⁶

However, the biggest failure and disappointment of the successive Hungarian governments of the period was not their inability to control domestic political events. The Hungarian governments of the time were unable to achieve any notable successes in foreign policy. The new Hungarian leadership, that is, Count Mihály Károlyi and his team, received its first slap in the face in Belgrade during the armistice negotiations in November 1918.¹⁷ Although General Franchet d'Esperey, who spoke on behalf of the Entente, negotiated from the position of the winning side, the Hungarian delegation still managed to secure minor concessions compared to the original draft presented to them.¹⁸ However, a few days later, it turned out that the government in Paris had not given Franchet d'Esperey a mandate to agree. Consequently, Paris considered the outcome of the Belgrade negotiations null and void. Moreover, President Clemenceau even considered it a violation of French interests, stating that the French government recognised Count Mihály Károlyi's government. At that time, there was no decision on this issue in Paris. Thus, French politics, willingly or unwillingly, also interfered in Hungarian domestic politics.¹⁹

¹⁴ Berinkey Dénes (Csúz, 17 October 1871–Budapest, 25 June 1944). In Berinkey's life, his political involvement in 1918–1919 was merely a "detour," as he never again took on a political role after 21 March 1919; instead, he worked as a lawyer and a teacher.

¹⁵ Although Linder only held the ministerial position between 31 October and 9 November 1918, he is considered one of the worst Ministers of War in Hungarian history. Following his brief ministerial term, he was Military Attaché in Vienna during the Soviet Republic. He met his wife of Serbian origin there. He was the Mayor of Pécs from 23 September 1920, then the leader of the Baranya-Baja Serbo-Hungarian Republic (Srpsko-mađarska Republika Baranja-Baja) between 14 and 21 August 1921. After the fall of this administrative entity, Linder and his family left Hungary and finally settled in Belgrade.

¹⁶ M. Kozma, *op. cit.*, 367.

¹⁷ Bogdan Krizman, "The Belgrade Armistice of 13 November 1918", *The Slavonic and East European Review*, vol. XLVIII, no. 110, (1970), 67–72.

¹⁸ Mihály Károlyi, *Hit illúziók nélkül* (Budapest: Magvető Könyvkiadó, 1977), 139–142.

¹⁹ B. Krizman *op. cit.*, 69–75.

In the autumn of 1918, Czech(Slovak), Romanian and Serbian troops essentially occupied Hungary as long as they saw a legal basis for it in accordance with various international treaties or based on their own claims that they considered justified.²⁰ We must also be aware that they met with little resistance, and in several places the local population welcomed them as liberators and restorers of public order.²¹ Thus, when, in March 1919, French Lieutenant Colonel Fernand Vix, on behalf of the Entente, handed over his fourth note to the Hungarian government, which ordered the evacuation of new territories, he also created a domestic political situation that finally brought the dissatisfied voices “on all sides” into a unified position. The incumbent Berinkey government fell, and the Communists de facto took power (de jure, the Social Democrats and Communists united) and proclaimed the Soviet Republic.²² At the same time, other right-wing political forces and groups also felt that the time had come to act and organise. Pro forma, of course, against the Communists.

One of these groups was the Vienna-based Anti-Bolshevik Committee (ABC), founded on 12 April 1919. It is usually associated with the name of Count István Bethlen.²³ However, the group was diverse, and after an unsuccessful military action following a successful money-making “operation” – the so-called “Bruck coup” – its activity decreased. In addition, the internal conflicts within the group also intensified. The Austrian Government, on the other hand, increasingly regarded the ABC, consisting mainly of Hungarian aristocrats, as a suspicious and hostile group.²⁴ As a result, the organisation’s significance soon evaporated, and by May 1919 it was no longer a factor the Entente’s strategists considered.

Also, forces loyal to King Charles IV were organising in Feldbach, Austria. Former officers of the K. und K., who gathered mainly under the leadership of Colonel Antal Lehár²⁵, were also able to rely on the support of certain aristocratic and ecclesiastical circles still loyal to the Habsburgs. It is important to emphasise that Lehár had thousands of trained military personnel at his disposal.²⁶ Lehár was also in contact with the ABC in Vienna. This organisation, led by Colonel Lehár, was interesting in two respects. First, the Habsburg Restoration lacked any significant social basis in Austria, and, second, the young Republic of Austria did not want to hear of the return of the Habsburg family. Secondly, for several reasons, Austria considered Hungary as

²⁰ Vladan Gavrilovic, “The Serbian Vojvodina: Idea and Borders until 1918”, *ISTRAŽIVANJA, Journal of Historical Researches*, no. 34, (2023), 112–120.

²¹ B. Krizman *op. cit.*, 76–80.

²² See: P. Pastor, *Revolutions and Interventions in Hungary and Its Neighbor States 1918–1919* (Boulder: Social Science Monographs, 1988) and Pál Hatos, *Rosszfiúk világforradalma: Az 1919-es magyarországi Tanácsköztársaság története* (Budapest: Jaffa, 2021).

²³ Count István Bethlen (Gernyeszeg, 8 October 1874–Moscow, 5 October 1946) was a Hungarian nobleman and statesman who served as prime minister from 1921 to 1931. He played a key role in Hungary’s economic and political consolidation following World War I. A staunch supporter of Miklós Horthy throughout, he was arrested by Soviet authorities in 1944 and died in Soviet captivity in Moscow.

²⁴ Ignác Romsics, *Bethlen István: Politikai életrajz* (Budapest: Magyarságkutató Intézet, 1991), 83–89.

²⁵ Antal Freiherr von Lehár (born Antal Lehár; 21 February 1876–12 November 1962) After the war and the failed coup attempts, he lived in Munich and later in Vienna. He was not directly involved in politics; however, following the *Anschluss* in 1938, the Gestapo placed him under surveillance and even subjected him to house arrest.

²⁶ M. Kozma, *op. cit.*, 380–382.

an opponent, and in the case of the town of Sopron, even a rival. In other words, it was not in Austria's interest to stabilise the political conditions in Hungary.²⁷

The third centre opposing the Soviet Republic, the importance of which increased only by the summer of 1919, is linked to the name of Count Gyula Károlyi.²⁸ This "other" Count Károlyi first tried to form a government in Arad (5 May 1919), but without much success. The Romanian troops occupying the city interned them.²⁹ In the end, Károlyi and his government were "saved" by the French forces and transferred to Szeged³⁰, which was under French occupation. In the summer of 1919, the "counter-governments of Szeged," established here, finally served as a real political counterweight to the government of the Soviet Republic based in Budapest, the Revolutionary Governing Council. It is, however, undeniable that the real power and strength of the governments of Szeged were very limited. They could exist and function in Szeged by French favour. The first government in Szeged was formed on 31 May 1919, and lasted for only a week. Besides Károlyi, there were twelve ministers in the government, including Miklós Horthy, who held the post of Minister of Defence. He also held this ministerial position in the second Károlyi government in Szeged (6 June–12 July 1919). Although at the beginning there was hardly any army...

The Creation of the National Army

The formation of the National Army (NA) in the summer of 1919 was a decisive event of the period, and especially for Miklós Horthy's political ambitions. Horthy started his career as one of Emperor Franz Joseph's aides-de-camp in Vienna. Later, Emperor and King Charles IV surprisingly appointed him to the position of Commandant of the K. u. K. fleet in 1918. For this reason, he was widely considered a supporter of King Charles IV. At the same time, Prime Minister Gyula Károlyi was aware that if he wanted to achieve recognition or demonstrate results, he needed a military force. He kept it firmly in mind, knowing that officers who wanted to fight the Bolsheviks and/or for Hungary were gathering at the Kas Hotel in Szeged. At the same time, in the early summer of 1919, they had not yet developed a substantive "road map"; their ideas about the future were more phantasmagoric than realistic. Miklós Horthy became one of their members because he could not just sit idly and "could no longer listen" to the growth of grass on his estate, and therefore joined them. Soon, Horthy became the de facto leader of the assembled regular and reserve officers.³¹

It must be recalled that the Károlyi government in Szeged was under French protection and was placed in quarantine by the French. Furthermore, the international public opinion still considered neither the Károlyi government to be a legitimate Hungarian

²⁷ Ibolya Murber "Az osztrák és a magyar válságkezelés 1918–1920 - Hasonlóságok és különbségek a közös birodalom összeomlását követően", *Századok*, no. 6 (2018), 1293–1320.

²⁸ Gyula Károlyi (Nyírbakta, 7 May 1871–Budapest, 23 April 1947) later served as prime minister in 1931–32. Count Károlyi Gyula and count Károlyi Mihály were cousins.

²⁹ Hungarian National Archive Csongrád-Csanád County Archive K 32. Letter from Prime Minister Gyula Károlyi to the Serbian Royal Government Commissioner, Szeged, 30 May, 1919.

³⁰ Szeged, situated on the banks of the Tisza River, is one of Hungary's largest cities, located near the Romanian and Serbian (Yugoslav) borders; it is the capital of Csongrád-Csanád County and an important university town.

³¹ M. Kozma, *op. cit.*, 397–399.

government, nor the Revolutionary Governing Council. In other words, as a first step, Károlyi had to reach an agreement with the French military leaders occupying Szeged and the surrounding area on the issue of establishing any army.³² According to available, but limited, archival sources from mid-June about the establishment of the National Army, one relevant document provides summarising details on its establishment and organisation, as well as the expectations from it, dated 15 June 1919. According to this document:

“... I order the establishment of a Hungarian national army to combat the Red Terror and to restore legal order and security.

Guidelines for organisation.

1. The Hungarian national army shall serve the Hungarian nation, and as such, shall be an instrument of national defence and law enforcement.

2. The Hungarian national army shall not serve party interests.

3. Individuals who actually serve in the Hungarian national army shall not participate in the activity of a political party. [. . .]

7. In the Hungarian national army, discipline and service order shall be ensured in accordance with the rules of the army. The military organisation, which has been dissolved since 31 October 1918, must be restored as soon as possible with the utmost severity, but those who have committed crimes against it must be brought before a court-martial. [. . .]

10. For the time being, the Hungarian national army shall be formed: from reliable professional officers and non-commissioned officers, if they did not exceed the age of 50 and performed military service on 31 October 1918 [...].”³³

However, after convincing the French, it was more difficult to reach an agreement with the Romanian and later with the Serbian troops, which occupied large parts of Hungary. Interestingly, though, this was arranged surprisingly quickly and easily, not least thanks to Miklós Kozma³⁴ and Horthy himself.

There are quite contradictory, and at the same time rather sporadic, sources on the exact number of officers gathered in Szeged, and various recollections also treat this issue with some imprecision. Based on various sources, the figure of around 1,300 military personnel was the most frequently mentioned number in historical references, which can be considered realistic and, at the time, obviously true. Commanders of the French forces occupying Szeged and its surroundings – who were changing surprisingly frequently – included Colonels August Boblet, then Alfred Bétrix³⁵, and finally Ámedes Rondenay,

³² Gusztáv Gratz, *Forradalmak korában – Magyarország története 1918–1920* (Budapest: Magyar Szemle Társaság, 1935), 187–222.

³³ Magyar Hadügyminiszter (Hungarian Ministry of Defense) 40/1919, See: Tibor Hetés and Tamásné Morva (szerk.), *Csak szolgálati használatra! Iratok a Horthy-hadsereg történetéhez 1919–1938* (Budapest: Zrínyi Kiadó, 1968) 57–59.

³⁴ Miklós Kozma de Leveid (Nagyvárad (Oradea), 5 September 1884–Ungvár (Uzhhorod), 8 December 1941) was a Hungarian politician who served as president of the Hungarian Telegraph Office, Minister of the Interior from 1935 to 1937, and then as Governor-General of Carpathian Ruthenia from 1940. In this capacity, he played a key role in the deportations of so-called “Jews of unclear citizenship” living in the region during the summer of 1941.

³⁵ According to intermittent reports, Colonel Bétrix is said to have engaged in collaboration with communist elements with the objective of reestablishing public order and bestowing upon Hungary a robust governmental structure. See: G. Gratz, *op. cit.*, 205.

who allowed the replenishment of the same number of troops from July.³⁶ However, from May 1919 (!) Rondenay permitted a weekly increase of 500 military personnel to join the ranks of the National Army once the 1,300 limit had been reached.³⁷ Overall, it can be assumed that the number of military personnel increased continuously, leading to the formation of new battalions.

The Independent National Army

The third counter-government in Szeged, formed on 12 July 1919, was no longer headed by Count Gyula Károlyi, but by Dezső Pattantyús-Ábrahám.³⁸ Horthy, even if he never said so, did not consider Pattantyús-Ábrahám an equal partner. Horthy presumably assessed, and not entirely without foundation, that the real force was under his leadership. At the same time, Horthy was increasingly accepted as a leader – not only by the officers gathering in Szeged – but also by the French, as well as General Georghe Mardarescu, the commander of the Romanian troops in Hungary.³⁹

Horthy increasingly wanted to break with the government, which, however, did not like the rear admiral's growing popularity and political ambitions. Another key event of the summer of 1919 was the fall of the Soviet Republic on 31 July 1919. On the one hand, this only exacerbated the country's already existing political anarchy; on the other, the Romanian army marched into the Hungarian capital without resistance and occupied part of Transdanubia.

Horthy decided to make his final decision at the beginning of August 1919. On the one hand, he broke with the government and, consequently, became independent, establishing the General Command, which he obviously headed himself. And there was, naturally, no question that the units of the National Army would follow Horthy rather than the government based in Szeged.⁴⁰ Starting from 9 August 1919, the units of the National Army left Szeged in several stages, and the General Command moved its headquarters to Southern Transdanubia. It is a good indication of the "courage" of Horthy and the National Army that they intended to leave the city on the banks of the River Tisza in the greatest secrecy, fearing the French reaction. Leaving Szeged indeed was not to the liking of the French. Still, they could not, or perhaps did not, want to interfere with Horthy's increasingly visible rise. However, it is also possible that they did not want to get involved in the confusing Hungarian political affairs. At the same time, good fortune was on Miklós Horthy's side, as a few fortunate coincidences aided him. One of these lucky moments was when Miklós Kozma mediated between the Serbian troops and the National Army.⁴¹

³⁶ Ferenc Pölösei, *Horthy és hatalmi rendszere (1919–1922)* (Budapest: Kossuth Könyvkiadó, 1977), 22.

³⁷ Mihály Perneki, [sajtó alá rendezte, bevezetőt írta, jegyzetekkel ellátta], *Shvoy Kálmán titkos naplója és emlékirata 1918–1945* (Budapest: Kossuth Könyvkiadó, 1983) 48.

³⁸ Dezső Pattantyús-Ábrahám de Dancka (Debrecen, 10 July 1875–Budapest, 25 July 1973) the high point of this politician of Armenian descent's political career came in 1919, when he became prime minister. Between 1920 and 1944, he worked as a lawyer, while also running for office in every election, though he was unsuccessful each time. He continued to try to re-enter political life after 1945, but remained unsuccessful. He was under surveillance by the Hungarian state security services until 1971.

³⁹ The Romanian General was born in Iasi on 4 August 1866 and died in Neuheimbad, Germany, on 5 September 1938. He held the position of Minister of War between 1922 and 1927.

⁴⁰ Miklós Horthy, *Emlékirataim* (Buenos Aires: 1953), 119.

⁴¹ M. Kozma, *op. cit.*, 402–403.

Thus, for example, crossing the River Danube did not cause any particular problems to the National Army with its quite “mixed” equipment. All this also required the supportive neutrality of the Romanian troops, especially that of Romanian General Mardarescu, who sympathised with Horthy, thus enabling him to occupy the still “free” Southern Transdanubia. Thus, on 9 August 1919, the National Army finally set off for the “still free” Southern Transdanubia to unite there with the troops gathering in Southern and Western Transdanubia, primarily under the leadership of Colonel Antal Lehár. At that time, Lehár’s army numbered about five battalions, five batteries, four armoured trains and a total of about 2000 men. This was later reinforced by four more battalions, two batteries, and one cavalry company. In addition to the divisional strength, four gendarmerie battalions and 14 gendarmerie armed forces companies were established. It is worth noting that Colonel Antal Lehár accepted the leadership of Horthy, who, in any case, as far as military rank was concerned, was his military superior.

The General Command established its headquarters in Siófok⁴² on 13 August, 1919.⁴³ The enthusiastic military officers immediately began organising the troops and increasing the number of personnel. Less than a week later, on 19 August, military districts were set up in Siófok, Kaposvár⁴⁴ and Szombathely⁴⁵, and a few days later in Szeged and Miskolc.⁴⁶ The district commanders were endowed with full power, not only in the narrow sense of military matters, but also in counter-espionage and civil administration.⁴⁷

In order to facilitate the organisation, the government led by István Friedrich, who ruled in Budapest – but was not recognised by the Entente – authorised the General Staff at the meeting of the Council of Ministers on 20 August 1919, to supplement the number of military personnel by conscription for a period of up to six months. Thus, by the end of September, two divisions, about 30,000 men, were already deployed in Transdanubia, at Miklós Horthy’s disposal. However, it remained a significant challenge to address the lack of financial resources and weapons, which delayed the National Army’s ability to act.⁴⁸

The first company of the officers’ detachment hallmarked by the name of Pál Prónay⁴⁹ was the first of the formations that crossed the River Danube to reach Szekszárd on 10 August 1919, under the command of János Gömbös.⁵⁰ Based on a letter dated 28

⁴² Siófok is a town in Somogy County, Hungary, located on the southern shore of Lake Balaton. It has been a popular vacation destination and spa town since the early 20th century.

⁴³ Horthy arrived here by airplane, he, presumably, had talks earlier with General Mardarescu.

⁴⁴ Kaposvár is a city with county status located in southwestern Hungary, on the southern shore of Lake Balaton, capital of Somogy County and was once an important military centre.

⁴⁵ Szombathely is a city in western Hungary, capital of Vas County, and also a bishopric

⁴⁶ Miskolc is a major city in northern Hungary and an important industrial centre.

⁴⁷ M. Kozma, *op. cit.*, 402–404.

⁴⁸ M. Kozma, *op. cit.*, 403–410.

⁴⁹ Pál Sándor István Gábor Prónay (Romhány, 2 November 1874– ?) was a key figure during the White Terror, then one of the commanders of the so-called fights on Western Hungary. Although he made efforts, he was unable to build up a political career. He led a unit defending Budapest in November and December 1944. The Red Army arrested him during the siege of Budapest, and the Special Council of the State Security Organs of the Soviet Union sentenced him to 20 years of forced labour.

⁵⁰ The Romanian forces did not allow Prónay to move through the Great Hungarian Plain towards Budapest and forced him to cross the River Danube. He was only capable of doing this with the assistance of the engineering units of the Serbian troops.

August 1919, we can assert that Horthy knew exactly how and against whom he imagined the reestablishment of public order:

“I expect all military commands and administrative authorities to act as quickly and vigorously as possible, first of all against the criminals of Communism, and on the other hand, to prevent the justice by the people. If either the authority or some of the people holding leading positions continue to operate with helpless softness, I will immediately relieve them of their jobs...”⁵¹

In another speech delivered in Szekszárd on 7 October 1919, Horthy evaluated the activities of his men as follows:

“... What the national army is pursuing is not terror, it is a punitive expedition, but not against innocent people, but against those who betrayed the Hungarian nation, trampled it in the mud and conducted bloody torture against the Hungarian people.”⁵²

Prónay himself described the task awaiting the officers’ detachments as a “punitive expedition”. However, the concept of who was a Communist had not been clearly defined in any decree or official form. In other words, a Communist was basically the person who was declared to be a Communist. The question is how Horthy’s people could decide who the “Communists” were in Southern Transdanubia, which was largely unknown to them, or, a little later, in Budapest? In 1919, a young man named Tibor Wayand, later a detective investigating political matters, witnessed how the officers’ detachment commanded by Lieutenant Herman Salm carried out a procedure at Fonyód on the shore of Lake Balaton. Prónay sent Salm to Fonyód with a platoon of soldiers to punish the local Communists.⁵³ The Prónay detachment was informed about the Communists by the local postmistress and a dental technician on vacation there. The accused three residents, who were of Jewish origin, were arrested on the charge that they had bought up the weapons of Mackensen’s army (!), they wanted to sell them to the Red Army, and that they had also financially supported the Communist regime.⁵⁴ The accusation itself was quite absurd, as was the case with the whole so-called “criminal procedure”. The next day, without any special trial, those arrested were executed based on a judgment adopted by a so-called “people’s tribunal”. “This is where I first encountered the reaction of the dictatorship of the proletariat,” Wayand wrote in his confession after World War II.⁵⁵

Few archival sources have survived about the operation of the General Command in Southern Transdanubia, so Horthy’s ideas for the future could only be assumed. In any case, it is a fact that the local civilian and military leaders accepted Horthy as a leader. If you think about it, they couldn’t and didn’t have any other choice.

⁵¹ Gyula Dobos, *Ellenforradalom és konszolidáció* (Szekszárd: Tolna Megyei Tanács Levéltára, 1987), 243.

⁵² G. Dobos, *op. cit.*, 247.

⁵³ Salm Herfman (? 1888–Caracas 1952) became a military officer as the son of a diplomat, and he came to Hungary as the husband of his wife. He actively participated in the White Terror, he was a well-known society figure during the 1920s and 1930s, and a car dealer. There is not much information in his life during World War II. What is certain is that he left Hungary in 1944/45 and emigrated to South America.

⁵⁴ Field Marshall August von Mackensen played a key role in the victory of the Central Powers over Romania. At the end of the war, the retreating Mackensen offered assistance to the Government led by Count Mihály Károlyi, but his offer was rejected.

⁵⁵ Állambiztonsági Szolgálatok Történeti Levéltára (Historical Archives of the Hungarian State Security), 4. 1. A-795 (File Wayand), 4.

A good example of this acceptance is Horthy's visit to Kaposvár on 8 September 1919.⁵⁶ The Rear Admiral, who arrived by train from Siófok, was received by Kornél Bernátskay, the commander of the military district, and Antal Kovács, the military commander of Somogy-Baranya counties, as well as Andor Tallián, deputy vice-chancellor, who represented the civilian authorities. The visit, which lasted only for a few hours, was not free of theatrical manifestations. In many ways, it was similar to Horthy's famous entry into Budapest on 16 November 1919. Upon arrival, Horthy delivered a short speech in Hungarian outlining the tasks of the National Army and the crimes of Bolshevism, emphasising that the most important task was the eradication of Bolshevism. All this was not an empty phrase: his military formations were already in full swing in Somogy and Tolna counties. After that, at the so-called Honvéd Square (Army Square)⁵⁷, where the garrison and police of Kaposvár waited for him, lined up in a rectangular shape. Here, after a short camp mass, the soldiers swore an oath to four things: 1) the laws of the homeland; 2) to fight against Bolshevism; 3) the Commander-in-Chief; 4) to defend the homeland.

The text of the oath is interesting in several ways and raises at least one question. Why did Horthy request the soldiers to swear to him? After all, he could have chosen one from the several governments, although each had disputed legitimacy. We can assume that Horthy did not trust non-military organs, including the governments that ruled in Budapest after 1 August 1919, and which were generally not recognised by anyone. This state of affairs lasted until November 1919. At that time, under the tutelage of a British diplomat sent to Budapest, George Clerk, the government headed by Károly Huszár⁵⁸ was established on 24 November 1919. The Entente recognised the government.

In addition, Horthy presumably seriously believed that if the soldiers swore personally to him, then the troops would be loyal to him to the end. In 1921, Horthy, who had already been elected as Governor, may have already forgotten to whom he had taken the oath in 1916. In any case, it seems from the events that the General Command did not establish any command in Kaposvár; rather, the local troops joined Horthy.

Although the organisational structure of the General Command changed several times, the structure of December 1919 is known and can be regarded as somewhat permanent.⁵⁹ Based on the date, we can assume that this organisational scheme already provides a clear and accurate picture of the National Army's leadership structure. There were minor changes in the structure of the High Command, but it was basically made up of about the following seven groups: 1) Military Operations Group; 2) Intelligence Group; 3) Organizing Group; 4) Personnel matters; 5) Military Supply; 6) Politico-Military Group; 7) Auxiliary Office.

⁵⁶ This visit was only featured in *Új Somogy* (New Somogy) daily, a local newspaper, in its 10 September 1919 issue.

⁵⁷ It was never officially called as Army Square, it was its nickname because it was regularly used by the armed forces.

⁵⁸ Károly Huszár de Sárvár (born as Károly Schorn, Nußdorf am Attersee 10 September 1882–Budapest, 27 October 1941) He served as a member of the National Assembly until 1927, when he was appointed President of the National Social Security Institute. He later became a member of the Hungarian Senate. In 1934, he retired from public life.

⁵⁹ Éva Beránné Nemes and Ervin Hollós (szerk.), *Megfigyelés alatt... Dokumentumok a horthysta titkosrendőrség működéséből (1920-1944)* (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1977), 32–34.

Of these, the Politico-Military Group is of particular importance. The Group, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Béla Jánky, who was serving in the General Staff, consisted of the following three departments: 1) Internal Affairs (headed by Captain Miklós Kozma); 2) Foreign Affairs (headed by Captain Richárd Macher); 3) Press (headed by Ferenc Walla, Captain of the General Staff).⁶⁰

Of the three departments, the Department of Internal Affairs, led by Captain Kozma, was undoubtedly the most important, which performed his duties from the beginning, that is, from the summer of 1919. However, in his memoirs, Pál Prónay wrote a rather degrading comment about it, labelling it as “some kind of intelligence agency”. According to him, those who served there was able to operate without any danger or risk, in contrast to the officers’ detachments that risked their lives, or even the so-called army officers called the “Ragged Guardsmen” who appeared later on the scene.⁶¹

These opinions seem somewhat contradictory to the often-exaggerated ideas of Kozma and his colleagues. He actually extended his intelligence activities to the leftists who emigrated, the Communists who fled to Vienna, the social democrats and the supporters of Count Mihály Károlyi. It can be proved that Kozma and his colleagues were in constant contact with the Hungarian Ambassador in Vienna, and they received information from him. Plans were even made for how to kidnap Béla Kun⁶² and his escaped companions from Vienna and bring them back to Hungary. Such an operation, however, should have been executed by the officers’ detachment under Prónay’s command.⁶³

The Internal Affairs Group was responsible for advising on all civilian and legislative matters, as well as dealing with various complaints and submissions. Among the many tasks of the department, the direction of propaganda activities and the operations of the so-called “Red Protection” organisation deserve special attention. Its task was to monitor the population and the public administration. According to the decree of the General Staff of 21 August 1919, “... in the interest of defensive service against the Reds and to conduct national propaganda, it needs to get a unified picture of the general mood of the entire territory of the country”.⁶⁴

Thus, Kozma ordered all military commands to establish a defensive department under the leadership of a suitable officer. These departments were subordinated to the Internal Affairs Department of the Politico-Military Group of the General Command. Kozma and his department – similarly to almost all members of the High Command – interpreted their task seriously and quite broadly. It can be assumed that Kozma was in regular contact with the so-called “nationalist elements” of the Red Army

⁶⁰ E. Beránné, E. Hollós, *op. cit.*, 34.

⁶¹ Ágnes Szabó and Ervin Pamlényi [szerk., és bevezető tanulmánnyal ellátta], *A határban a halál kaszál. Fejezetek Prónay Pál naplójából* (Budapest: Kossuth Könyvkiadó, 1963), 100.

⁶² Kun Béla (born: Kohn; Lele, 20 February 1886–Moscow, 29 August 1938) was a Hungarian communist revolutionary and politician who led the Hungarian Soviet Republic in 1919. After its collapse, he fled to Vienna and then to the Soviet Union. There, during Stalin’s purges, he was charged and subsequently executed in a show trial.

⁶³ MNL OL, K-429 and Szabó - Pamlényi, 134–135.

⁶⁴ T. Hetés, T. Morva, *op. cit.*, 188–189.

of the Soviet Republic, – such as Döme Sztójay⁶⁵ – and typically with his former comrades in the K. und K. armed forces.⁶⁶

The leadership of the National Army, which had already entered the capital on 16 November 1919, wanted, by all means, to legally clarify the issues and the extent of the authority of its military investigators. A confidential memorandum no. 1665/1920 dated 20 February 1920, once again provided appropriate instructions on this issue. In fact, it was codified once again that, under the difficult circumstances of the time, only the army can maintain public order as the “only supporting pillar of public order”. At the same time, the military leadership did not want to come into conflict with the civilian investigative bodies that had been established and strengthened in the meantime. According to the memorandum, the civil authorities were competent to investigate “Bolshevik or similar acts” committed before 1 August 1919. At the same time, “Bolshevik-like” crimes committed after 1 August 1919, by whomever they were perpetrated, were considered cases involving the military (Military Penal Code, Section 327), thus they remained under the authority of military investigators until the end of the investigation.⁶⁷

The Ministry of Justice responded with a lengthy legal explanation of why it did not consider the military's proposal a good or acceptable idea. They analysed in detail which general legal and criminal law principles the National Army plan violated, as well as how impractical and difficult it would be to implement. Overall, they asked the High Command to comply with the regulations in force, namely not to investigate civilians who do not fall under their jurisdiction.⁶⁸ At that time, the dispute between the two ministries was still a struggle between unequal parties.

In the midst of consolidating conditions

By the beginning of 1920, the Hungarian political situation seemed to be going through consolidation. As part of this, the question of the state's form was determined, and Hungary remained a kingdom. However, the Hungarian National Assembly postponed the decision on who should be king to a later date. And until this decision was made, a Governor had to be elected. As a result of a political game, Miklós Horthy was finally elected Governor of the Kingdom of Hungary.⁶⁹ However, even at the time, many people were disgusted by the fact that armed soldiers “supervised order” and the voting procedure in the chamber of the legislative building, and that the military secured the Parliament building itself. These military personnel were, of course, members of the National Army.⁷⁰

⁶⁵ He was born as Dimitrije Sztojakovics (Versec, 5 January 1883–Budapest, 22 August 1946). He was a military officer of the K. u K., later the Head of High Command II. (intelligence and espionage) of the Red Army under the Soviet Republic. He joined the National Army. He was appointed as Ambassador to Berlin, and became Prime Minister after the German occupation of Hungary on 19 March 1944. He was executed as a war criminal after World War II.

⁶⁶ A. Szabó, E. Pamlényi, *op. cit.*, 134–135.

⁶⁷ E. Beránné, E. Hollós, *op. cit.*, 36–38.

⁶⁸ T. Kovács, *op. cit.*, 66.

⁶⁹ M. Horthy, *op. cit.*

⁷⁰ G. Gratz, *op. cit.*, 221., 260–261.

One month after the election of the Governor, on 1 April 1920, the General Staff, as well as the officers' detachments, were officially abolished. The new goal was to restore public order and public safety. The incumbent government, led by Count Pál Teleki⁷¹, envisaged this being carried out under the authority of the Ministry of Interior. The question, however, was to what extent the army should participate in maintaining order, and the issue of "Red Defence" remained on the agenda. One manifestation of this was the proposal, on 3 May 1920, by General Károly Soós of Bádok for establishing a unified "anti-Bolshevist organisation".

After a long deliberation, the draft concluded that: "... the leadership of the concentrated Red Defence should be placed in the hands of the military.... but I consider it natural that as soon as the conditions were consolidated, and the interconnection between foreign complications and Bolshevism ceased, this body should be transformed from the military to the framework of the Ministry of Interior, and I will be the first person to propose it at the time."⁷²

Not much later, on 16 June, 1920, the decision concerning the various armed law enforcement and military detachments was announced in the Parliament. The former were assigned to the gendarmerie, and the detachments were dissolved *pro forma*. The next day, Decree no. 102929 of the Ministry of Defence established the so-called Information Service (T), or Information Department, whose tasks were eerily similar to those previously proposed by the Ministry of Defence and General Soós.⁷³ Thus, we have to say that the still-strong military line seems to have carried through its position. It was obvious that the officers' detachments thus received their new positions at the information (T) service.⁷⁴

There was an idea, or rather a dream, in Hungarian government circles that Hungarian troops would be required during an intervention in Soviet Russia. Another such wishful thinking was that Communist uprisings might break out in the neighbouring states and these countries would ask for Hungary's military assistance... Not only did all this not happen, but the Entente states were also explicitly dismissive of the Hungarian offer in connection with the intervention in Soviet Russia.

In the autumn of 1920, the National Army consisted of 52 infantry battalions, 20 cavalry companies, and about 26 batteries, but the time had come to disarm the Hungarian army to the numbers and levels specified in the Treaty of Trianon. It can also be considered part of the consolidation that the name National Army was abolished, and that, as from 1 January 1922, the official name of the Hungarian army became the Royal Hungarian Army.

The country's internal relations began to consolidate, albeit slowly. Although the years 1919–1920 were still known as the so-called golden age of "awakenings",

⁷¹ Count Pál János Ede de Teleki de Szék (Budapest, 1 November 1879–Budapest, 3 April 1941) was a Hungarian politician who served as Prime Minister of the Kingdom of Hungary from 1920 to 1921 and again from 1939 to 1941. He is associated with several anti-Semitic laws, as well as with aiding Poles who had fled to Hungary in 1939. In 1941, he committed suicide because he did not want Hungary to participate in the war against Yugoslavia.

⁷² E. Beránné, E. Hollós, *op. cit.*, 43.

⁷³ T. Kovács, *op. cit.*, 85.

⁷⁴ T. Kovács, *op. cit.*, 89–90.

that is, the radical-extreme right-wing student movements, the prevailing social demand was to achieve consolidation even in this context.⁷⁵ The royal coups of 1921, that is, King Charles IV's two attempts to return to Hungary, caused some excitement in both foreign and domestic politics. Still, the Hungarian political leadership handled them well on the whole. In addition, there was no real danger of a leftist-Communist turn in Hungary. On the one hand, a significant number of the leaders of the Soviet Republic had fled, while others were released in 1922 as part of a prisoner exchange and returned to the Soviet Union. On the other hand, the ruling conservative political force made a compromise with the Social Democratic Party in an agreement signed on 22 December 1921.⁷⁶

Final steps toward consolidation

In addition to Prime Minister István Bethlen's wise foreign policy, another factor contributed to Hungary's consolidation after World War I. Namely, the Ministry of Interior, the police, and the gendarmerie – presumably supported by the Ministry of Justice in this regard – assumed responsibility for ensuring internal order in the country. The two so-called Club Café raids, in one of which a police officer lost his life, gave a good reason and an excuse to permanently abolish the officers' detachments that had become inconvenient, as many of their members served in the T (information) department at the time.⁷⁷ It soon became clear that the killers could be found among the members of the officers' detachments now coming under the T department. While the goal of the police was to find the killer, the officers' detachment/T-class people tried to protect their comrades.⁷⁸

Although on the recommendation of the Minister of Defence, the Council of Ministers adopted a resolution on 8 February 1921, according to which counter-espionage, Red protection and national defence must be organised at all central authorities. Still, the background of the work related to this and the ideas of the bodies involved can only be guessed at. We can only assume these in vague and general terms.⁷⁹

In the absence of exact sources, it is not possible to know what the Governor's position was in this debate. We can duly assume that Horthy listened to Prime Minister Bethlen rather than to the hot-headed soldiers by this time. In any case, it is a fact that on 26 June 1921, the supervision of the "T" department was transferred to the Ministry of Interior. The independent "T" department and service continued to operate for another year. Then Minister of Interior Kunó Klebelsberg abolished it on 1 June 1922 (Res. no. 1715/1922).⁸⁰

Conclusion

With this step, the plan of Prime Minister Count Bethlen and that of the leadership of the Ministry of Interior, which ensured public order and domestic safety, were the tasks of civilian, not military, authorities. Horthy also realised that in order

⁷⁵ See: Tibor Zinner, *Az ébredők fénykora 1919–1923* (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1989).

⁷⁶ This is known in Hungarian history as the Bethlen-Peyer Pact, referring to the names of Prime Minister Count István Bethlen and the President of the Hungarian Social Democratic Party.

⁷⁷ T. Zinner, *op. cit.*, 81–84.

⁷⁸ T. Zinner, *op. cit.*, 71–73.

⁷⁹ T. Kovács, *op. cit.*, 91.

⁸⁰ T. Kovács, *op. cit.*, 92.

to keep his power, he needed the support, and perhaps the goodwill, of the international community much more. And in obtaining it, Prime Minister Count István Bethlen could support him the most, because he was the kind of person who made a decision only after sober deliberation and, if necessary, cold calculation. Count Bethlen was aware that at the beginning of the 1920s, political consolidation, the restoration of public order and public security, and the suppression of open anti-Semitism were important, if only because Hungary was facing further serious, now economic, problems, such as the division of the Monarchy's national debt with Austria, or the establishment of an independent national bank and the introduction of an independent national currency.

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THE SPECIAL ROLE OF THE ARMED FORCES ON MIKLÓS HORTHY'S TO POWER

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Summary

By the end of the fifth year of World War I, the situation of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy had become critical. Although there were no Entente troops stationed in the territory of the Monarchy, the unresolved political and economic problems emerged, and the internal disintegration of the army had already started. The state of Austria-Hungary essentially collapsed in a matter of weeks, followed by a serious and protracted political crisis in Hungary. Under the already unfavourable foreign policy circumstances, which were sometimes further exploited by neighbouring states, the incumbent Hungarian governments made a series of miscalculated decisions. They often demonstrated a high degree of political naivety as well. After the Communist takeover (21 March 1919), several centres against the Soviet Republic were established. However, after the Communist attempt failed, right-wing politicians were unable to seize power, but Rear-Admiral Miklós Horthy, who gradually shifted towards independence, was able to organise an armed force that became known as the National Army. It is interesting that, on the one hand, Horthy was supported by Serbian and Romanian troops, and, on the other hand, over time, various Hungarian military formations essentially joined the National Army. However, the National Army and the soldiers during this period felt it was their duty to detect and punish the Communists. In addition to the fact that this would have been the task of the police according to the existing laws of the time, these actions were also accompanied by strong anti-Semitic sentiments. After Horthy was elected Governor, the military leadership lobbied hard to retain control over anti-communist political investigations. The result of this lobbying activity was the establishment and operation of the so-called “T” (information) department, whose activities were also not free of scandal. All this, of course, served as a good reason for strengthening the resolve of civilian (non-military) politicians to take the system of investigations into Communists and law enforcement in general out of the hands of the army. Horthy, who was already elected Governor, listened at this time to professional politicians rather than to the hot-headed military. Thus, as one of the final steps in the consolidation process, the military's right to investigate political matters was abolished. The military had provided to Horthy what its “duty” was. Still, in consolidating the country, the Governor was already relying on the civilian authorities.

KEYWORDS: World War I, Hungarian Soviet Republic, political violence, extreme right movements

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