



“It Is an Unpatriotic Act to Flee”: The Refugee Experience after the Treaty of Trianon. Between State Practices and Neglect*

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In the wake of World War I, the collapse of the Habsburg Monarchy and creation of new political borders in accordance with the peace treaties prompted more than 400,000 people from the lost territories to seek refuge in Hungary. In this essay, I map the policies adopted by the Hungarian state in its efforts to integrate and pacify refugees, but also at times to discourage refugees from coming to Trianon Hungary. These policies were implemented with the participation of ministries, refugee organizations, large state-run enterprises, and municipal councils. I also interpret the various strategies used by individual actors in these processes. Taken together, the policies and strategies adopted by the state demonstrate the *de facto* prolongation of wartime administrative practices and offer examples of how the state turned against its own Christian, nationalist, and authoritarian ideology in the course of its efforts to keep prospective refugees from entering post-Trianon Hungary. How the questions raised by the refugee crises were tackled in the country was conditioned by multiple considerations and perspectives. The ambiguities of the policies that were adopted explain in part the long silence that has fallen over the issue of post-World War I refugees in Hungary.

Keywords: refugees, Trianon Peace Treaty, state administration, government, memory

The post-World War I flight of Hungarians was relatively organized and, most importantly, did not involve as much bloodshed as other exoduses during and after the war, such as the plights of the Greek-Turkish or Galician refugees. Moreover, this is an untold story in the Hungarian historiography. Recent articles by foreign scholars (especially Friederike Kind-Kovacs and Ilse Josepha Lazaroms) have drawn attention to this forgotten topic, focusing on children's relief or on Jewish wagon dwellers in Budapest, but they have tended to focus more narrowly on particular groups.¹

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1 Kind-Kovács: “The Great War, the Child’s Body and the ‘American Red Cross,’” 1–2, 33–62, and “Compassion for the Distant Other,” 129–59; Lazaroms: “Jewish Railway Car Dwellers in Post-World War I Hungary.”

During the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy in October and November 1918, the first wave of refugees from the borderlands reached the core territories of Hungary. This flow consisted essentially of railway workers, post officers, village and county clerks, and officers in the police forces and the gendarmerie. On October 31, Mihály Károlyi, an aristocrat, was nominated head of the government by Charles IV, the last emperor and king of the Monarchy. Károlyi would be the first prime minister of the newly formed Hungarian People's Republic and then, from January, the first president of the same People's Republic. His cabinet, composed of social democrats, the so-called bourgeois radicals (*polgári radikálisok*, a left-wing party consisting mostly of urban intellectuals), and people from the former Independence Party, had to confront the invasion of the former Hungarian territories by Serb, Czechoslovak, and Romanian troops, as well as the collapse of the public food supply, the Spanish flu, and a deepening political crisis inside the country. Károlyi's government had not been recognized by the Allies or the Paris Peace Conference, and his main activity in foreign affairs was limited essentially to making repeated protests concerning the advancement of foreign troops on Hungarian soil to the head of the Allied military mission in Budapest, Lieutenant-Colonel Fernand Vix, whose so-called second note (March 20, 1919) led to the demission of Mihály Károlyi as President of the People's Republic, which was followed by the communist takeover on March 21, 1919 and the proclamation of a Republic of Councils, which fell due to Romanian military intervention on August 1. That moment, followed then by the election of Miklós Horthy as Regent of Hungary on March 1, 1920, can be regarded as the beginning of the counterrevolutionary period, and it constituted a crucial shift in the handling the issue of refugees.²

This was an issue, however, which was relatively underrepresented in the Hungarian public sphere. Although the Hungarian press reported on it extensively in the first half of 1920s, the topic was barely taken up in political debate. The social side of the question was peddled by the opposition parties (social democrats, liberals, and the radical right), who wanted to demonstrate the government's incompetence in the matter.

Similarly there were no movies, plays, or novels of any remarkable success about the refugee issue, or at least there were no works which have since become part of canonized national culture. After 1945, for reasons quite different from the ones in the earlier period, this topic was not among the preferred themes

2 Romsics, *Hungary in the Twentieth Century*, 89–123.

of the state's memory regime. After 1956, for the Kádár regime, which was constructing its own legitimacy on anti-nationalist foundations, such a topic would have presumably been awkward, although the experience of flight appeared in some memoirs. There have been only a few attempts to explain the silence of the interwar period. While alongside its anti-communist and, at times, pronounced anti-Semitic stances the demand for the revision of the territorial boundaries of the Paris Treaties was one of the pillars of the Horthy era in Hungary (1920–1944), the regime did not wish to exploit the potential of the trope of flight, despite the uses it might have had in state propaganda. This paper discusses the possible reasons for this. Historians have not addressed the issue in depth. There is only one monographic study on the refugees in Hungary after the Treaty of Trianon. István I. Mocsy, an author who lives in the USA, attempted to present the issue on the basis of published materials. His location conditioned the type of sources on which he could draw.³

In this study, I analyze the reactions of Hungarian state organs (including the state railway), explore the motives behind their actions, and discuss images of refugees and the strategies which were developed by the community of refugees to promote their interests. First, I briefly present state policies and features of the social profile of wagon dwellers and of those who were repatriated. I do not interrogate sources to determine the reasons behind people's decisions to flee. I inquire, rather, into the relationship between the circumstances of integration and dissipation of refugees into Hungarian society despite state policies that neither were effective nor were products of measured reflection and the erasure and transformation of the memory of refugees.

Numbers of Refugees in Hungary and Their Places of Origin

The immediate prelude to the flight between 1918 and 1924 and the test of the Hungarian refugee policy was the large-scale movement from the eastern and southern border areas of Transylvania, which was triggered by the Romanian invasion in August 1916. More than 200,000 people fled to interior areas of Hungary, and since the Hungarian public administration could not stand the pressure, refugees appeared in Transdanubia as well.⁴ This shaped the ways in

3 Mocsy, *The Uprooted: Hungarian Refugees*. Recently Dékány, *Trianoni árvák*.

4 This figure relates to those who managed to cross Királyhágó (in Romanian: Pasul Craiului) the historical border between Transylvania and the Kingdom of Hungary. There are only estimates of the number of people who moved to new locations within Transylvania.

which authorities treated similar crisis situations, such as aid, child protection, and refugee reception centers (for instance, Hajdú County, the capital of which is the city of Debrecen, was designated for refugees coming from Csík County, today Ciuc County in Romania, and in particular the capital of the county, Csíkszereda, today Miercurea Ciuc).⁵

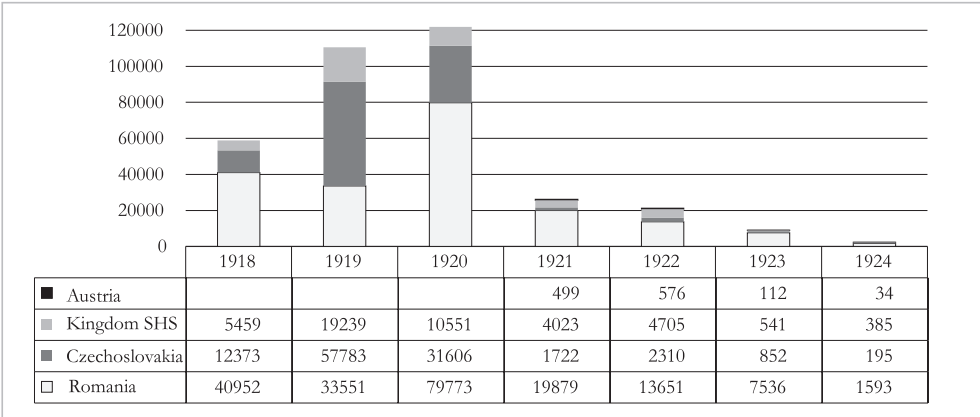


Table 1. Refugees arriving in Hungary from different countries, 1918–1924 (based on data from the National Office for Refugees)

The repatriation of Transylvanian refugees had hardly been completed when, in autumn 1918, large waves of refugees poured into the interior areas from all occupied territories, not only from Transylvania. Initially, the movement was spontaneous, but it was subsequently replaced with a practice of expulsion on behalf of citizens of the successor states. To the extent that the military activities and the blockade permitted, the stream of refugees continued during the Hungarian Soviet Republic. Despite research efforts, we have only scattered information about the institutional framework of refugee policy between March 1919 and August 1919. According to the National Office for Refugees, which was set up in 1920, by 1924 roughly 350,000 people had fled to Hungary due to the change of borders. (However, this figure is a suspiciously round number,

5 Hungarian historiography has not dealt with this aspect. There are partial results, however. The most recent include Ilona L. Juhász, *“Amikor mindenki a háború igája alatt roskadoz...” Erdélyi menekültek a mai Szlovákia területén* [When are all toiling under the burden of war...Transylvanian refugees in present-day Slovakia], Somorja/Samorín, 2015; József Buczkó, *“Szállást adunk bűséges magyar véreinknek”: Székely menekültek Hajdúnánáson, 1916–1918* [We provide lodging to our loyal kin], Nánási Füzetek 19, Hajdúnánás, 2011. The summary that the leading expert of the theme wrote, Csaba Csóti, “Menekülés Erdélyből 1916-ban,” *Rubicon* 27, no. 1 (2016): 74–81.

and it is likely that it is not precise.) The author of the monographic study that addressed the issue, Istvan Mocsy, estimated a much larger number in 1983. He talked estimated that there were between 420,000 and 425,000 refugees.⁶ According to official statistics, of the 350,000 refugees, 104,000 had had some form of employment (some 20,000 had been civil servants and 20,000 had been railway employees). Regarding this group, we need to correct two widespread beliefs which are based on stereotypes. First, most refugees did not depend on the state for employment, even if the proportion of civil servants was much larger among refugees than it was in the general population of the country. Second, we do not know the proportion of those who were expelled from the new states by the new authorities, nor do we know how many relocated because their professional positions made it practical to do so and how many simply chose to leave.⁷ In order to answer these questions, one would need a comparative study of citizenship policies in the surrounding states. For the moment, no such study has been done.⁸

The Policies of the Hungarian State

The activities of the Hungarian state related to the reception of refugees were ambiguous, to say the least. The first refugees in October-November 1918 were chiefly Hungarian State Railway employees and, to some extent, postal services employees who had left Croatia, Bosnia, or Fiume because of the advances of the Serbian and French army, uncertainty caused by revolutionary and national movements, or simply straightforward looting. In 1910, the Hungarian State Railways and other railway companies had nearly 110,000 employees.⁹ The relationship between railways and nation building deserves a separate study, but the Hungarian State Railway was definitely one of the symbols of Hungarian state authority in the areas where non-Hungarian ethnic groups dominated. From the last days of October 1918, Hungarian railway employees arrived by the dozens

6 Mocsy, *The Uprooted*.

7 Jelentés az Országos Menekültügyi Hivatal négy évi működéséről.

8 For Romania, see e.g. Constantin Iordachi, “Állampolgárság és nemzeti identitás Romániában” [Citizenship and national identity in Romania], *Regio* 11, no. 3 (2000): 27–57, 40–46. Compare with Lajos Nagy, *A kisebbségek alkotmányjogi helyzete Nagyromániában* [The constitutional position of minorities in Greater Romania], Cluj, 1944, 76–87. For Czechoslovakia: István Gaucsík, “Állam, polgár, jog. Megközelítések Csehszlovákia állampolgársági intézményének vizsgálatához” [State, citizen, law. Approaches to studying institutions of citizenship in Czechoslovakia], unpublished manuscript, 2019.

9 Szűts, “Vasutas vagonlakók és a MÁV menekültpolitikája,” 90.

and, then, by the hundreds to cities close to the southern borders of post-Trianon Hungary, such as Gyékényes, Nagykanizsa, Csurgó, Murakeresztúr, Barcs, Pécs, and Szeged.¹⁰ The directorate of the State Railway in Budapest experimented with local solutions and ordered station managements to find employment for the people who were arriving. However, it soon became apparent that local station managers were unable to do this even at the largest junctures. There were simply not enough posts. At first, railways, just like other state-owned companies and state organs, encouraged their employees to hold out and allowed them to swear allegiance to the new states. Then, it allowed them to leave, only later to reverse the policy and subsequently, encourage employees to stay at their posts until the spring of 1919.¹¹ Contradictory orders frequently figured as explanations in applications submitted by railway employees for compensation after 1919. One applicant, for instance, made the following complaint:

It is natural that, as in all things, the railway institution is the last to help its robbed emigre employees. While superiors, such as leisurely sheriffs and public notaries who grew fat during the war, do not fail to receive aid on time, it is odd that while we had little joy in the war and our supplies (compared to civil servants) were insufficient beyond measure, ... we are the ones who are at the end of the list in receiving aid. [...] Considering that our Directorate and Management ordered us to stay at our posts and thus, partially, caused our misery, we now ask the Directorate to differentiate us from those who were more fortunate and left with their belongings.¹²

The quote points to a certain competition among branches. The case of railway employees was dealt with at the company level. Initially, the Railway Syndicate was the authority responsible for refugee issues at the largest state owned company, and beginning at the end of 1919, the “Central Authority for Issues of Hungarian State Railway Refugees” played this role. Refugees could receive a few hundred Korona cash aid and possibly be sent to a new work station, but many of them would be reassigned to stations which were now on “the other side of the border,” such as Kolozsvár (Cluj in Romania), Szabadka (Subotica in Serbia), or Nagyvárad (Oradea in Romania), within weeks or months, which meant that

10 A case study: Matus, “A horvátországi vasútvonalak evakuálása.”

11 Cserhádi, “Az első világháború utóhatása a MÁV hivatalnokrétegére.”

12 MNL OL, Z 1610, box 119, 1919/12083. sz. Letter from Károly Kürthy, refugee railway officer from Zilah (Zalau, Romania), to the central directorate of the Hungarian State Railway. Debrecen, April 15, 1919.

they had to leave again. In late 1918, the management of the Hungarian State Railways began to assess which of their employees would remain employed in the new states. It is somewhat surprising that, despite chaotic conditions, among the declarations that were sent to Budapest about the willingness to be employed in those weeks we find documents written in both Croatian and Hungarian, and the names, which were from several different languages, were written in a diverse variety of ways. This indicates that the decision to stay or leave was not necessarily a question of ethnicity or national identity, at least not in the first period of state succession.¹³

At the ministry level, the Ministry of Interior appointed Pál Hegymegi Kiss, who would become a noted politician of the opposition in the interwar period, as Commissioner responsible for arranging accommodation for sheriffs and notaries, and he was also given responsibility for school teachers and the staffs of museums. While leaders at the university in Kolozsvár (Cluj) and Pozsony (Bratislava) decided to stay, professors and students of the forestry and mining college at Selmecbánya (Banska Stiavnica, in present-day Slovakia) left for Budapest and, subsequently, for Sopron.¹⁴ Crossing the mountain pass in winter and the act of leaving presented as something resembling an expedition from a periphery to the interior became part of the legendry of the institution, which still exists. However, the migration of the college was also the end of a prolonged debate in Hungarian educational policy, so professors arriving in Sopron received extra benefits that other fugitive civil servants did not have access to. This situation led to tensions and competition for the title of victim.¹⁵

Refugees kept continued arriving during the period of the Soviet Republic of Hungary, which lasted from March until August 1, 1919. Pauses due to military activity and border blockades were temporary. After the fall of the communist experiment, the new anti-revolutionary administration created the Transylvanian Department of the Office of Preparation for Peace Treaty Negotiations, which was explicitly tasked with providing aid for refugees from Transylvania. There were civilian organizations that tried to cover other regions (the Szepesi Szövetség or “Szepes Alliance,” the Területvédő Liga or “Territorial Defense League,” the Felvidéki Liga or “Upper Country League,” and the Délvidéki Liga or “Southern Country League”). In April 1920, i.e. relatively late, the government finally set

13 About this, see the same fond, box 120, File: Letters exchanged in 1919, *passim*.

14 Németh, “A Selmecbányai Bányatisztképzőből lett soproni Erdészeti és Faipari Egyetem.”

15 MNL OL, K 26, bundle 1264. 1921-XLIII. t., 10935-1920, Refugee civil servants’ petition to the Prime Minister, May 1921.

up the National Office for Refugees (*Országos Menekültügyi Hivatal – OMH*) and the National Council of Refugee Issues, which was its advisory and supervisory body. The head of the council was István Bethlen, who would later become prime minister and who was among the most influential politicians in Hungary in the interwar period, while the head of the office was a refugee aristocrat and former prefect, Emil Petrichevich-Horváth (1881–1945). Transylvanians had a marked presence throughout the lifetime of these institutions. Initially, the office worked within the framework of the Office for Preparation for Peace Treaty Negotiations, but shortly became directly subordinated to the Office of the Prime Minister. Beginning in 1922, it was part of the Ministry for Labor and Welfare, and the head of the office was a state secretary until the institution was closed in 1924.

The papers of the office are lost, probably destroyed by fire during the battle of Budapest in 1944–45. Since then, scholarship on refugees has relied chiefly on a single source, the office's own official record. However, these data should be treated with caution.¹⁶ OMH dealt with a range of issues, in addition to providing direct aid (clothes, cash, and coal) for refugees. It ran soup kitchens, organized re-training courses, provided legal counselling services, coordinated construction projects, and organized recreational holidays for children. It also established check points check newly arriving migrants, especially at the more important railway junctures which were also border stations.¹⁷ The explanation for this lay in the fact that, after the Treaty of Trianon had been signed on June 4, 1920, the Hungarian state faced the reality that the rate of immigration (290,000 refugees by the end of 1920) could not be sustained. In September 1920, Bethlen was very firmly in favor of stopping the flow, that is, immigration. In his view, 70 percent of the 300–500 refugees who were arriving daily were not really refugees, but people opting for citizenship, which they would only be able to do after the treaty had been ratified, which did not take place until November 1920. Bethlen felt that the attempt by these refugees to resettle in Hungary for reasons of personal economic interest “fundamentally threatened Hungarian national interests,” because it lessened the proportion of Hungarians in the lost territories, which would have been the basis for revision of the treaty). As Bethlen wrote in a letter to Prime Minister Pál Teleki in September 1920,

16 Petrichevich-Horváth, *Jelentés az Országos Menekültügyi Hivatal négy évi működéséről*.

17 Ibid.

the majority of the émigrés do not have sufficient reason to emigrate and do so in hope of finding easy employment [...] This way, in Transylvania and in the southern areas, houses which had been inhabited by Hungarians become empty, the number of Hungarians living in the cities is shrinking, and they are being replaced by a wave of foreign elements. Leaving this process without intervention would be a threat to the nation.¹⁸

In October 1920, Teleki adopted Bethlen's point of view (they were distantly related and both had family roots and lands in Transylvania) and ordered outposts to be set up to control and limit immigration. Teleki voiced his opinion publicly and used wording that was almost identical to Bethlen's. In addition to the idea of a “threat to the nation” and the urban dimensions of flight (i.e. the Hungarian population decreasing in towns and cities), he also mentioned the crisis of housing and damage to private property:

The rapid increase of the number of refugee officers fleeing from occupied territories is a national threat. We cannot push citizens out of their homes to provide housing for refugees. Doing so would be close to Bolshevism. [...] It is an unpatriotic act to flee if they not forced to leave but only do so because they have sold their property in Sokols, Lei, or Dinar and they even pay to be expelled.¹⁹

His words caused considerable uproar in some groups of refugee officials and on the political far right,²⁰ though they also caused echoes in other circles. The owner of a house expressed his anger with a refugee magistrate from Arad (Arad, Romania) when the refugee was allotted a portion of the property:

on seeing the order, he loudly protested against letting the property pass and stated that he didn't build a villa for refugees to live in it! We should have stayed where we were, did we think that ham grows by the

18 MNL OL K 26, bundle 1299. XLIII. t. Letter from István Bethlen to Prime Minister Pál Teleki, Budapest, September 16, 1920

19 “A kormány a menekültek beözönlése ellen” [Government against the flow of refugees]. *Pesti Napló*, October 30, 1920. 1.

20 MNL OL, K 26, bundle 1299. XLIII. t.–1922, Gálócsy Árpád továbbítja a Területvédő Liga tiltakozásának jegyzőkönyvét. Budapest, 1920. november 14. At the same location: Egri menekült tisztviselők memoranduma, Eger, November 26, 1920.

side of the road in Budapest? We are worse than the communists were, since they spared his villa, but we take it by force.²¹

The government did not think legal regulation was sufficient to tackle immigration, and it occasionally set up a border blockade (for example during the summer and early autumn of 1921). In such periods, no refugees were received mainly out of concern for the number of railway wagons needed during harvest. The government was firmly convinced that wagons that would have been used to transport and, perhaps, accommodate refugees were essential for the success of the operations related to harvest. In 1921, because of these policies, the number of migrants fell to one fifth of what it had been in 1920, and the total number in 1922 was 80 percent of the figure of 1921. In 1923, 9,043 people immigrated (or fled) to Hungary, while in 1924 this number had dropped to under 1,000.²² We do not have detailed statistics about their geographical location, such as place of departure and place of arrival. A recently released database about more than 15,000 refugees from the period (www.trianon100.hu/menekultek) shows an overrepresentation of urban migrants (coming from an urban milieu in the territories annexed by the successor states and arriving to cities, in particular Budapest, in postwar Hungary. However, this database is quite fragmented, and some groups (such as railway workers) may be overrepresented, so the results should be treated with caution. The reluctance of the government to accept all expellees, returnees, or “person moving in” (the Hungarian term used at the time was *beköltöző*) was probably motivated by fear of a “third wave” of revolutions led by distressed middle-class refugees whose loss of prestige and search for proper lodging would lead to clashes with the authorities at the beginning of the 1920s.²³

21 OSZKK, Quart Hung. 4313: Dezső Ottrubay, “Visszaemlékezés az 1914–1918. világháborúra” [Remembering the World War between 1914–1918] and “Háború utáni nehéz évek” [Hard years after the war] f. 211–12.

22 *Jelentés az Országos Menekültügyi Hivatal négy évi működéséről*, 37.

23 See i. e. “Vagonlakók a Lipótvárosi Kaszinóban és a Demokrata Körben” [Railway car dwellers in the Lipótváros Casino and in the Democrat’s Circle]. *Az Est*, November 9, 1920. 3. It should be noted that these institutions were considered as the seats of leftist or liberal associations and the process of moving in was facilitated by the far-right Association of Awakening Hungarians (ÉME).

Wagons and Barracks

The government constantly feared that refugees would become a source of social unrest and that this group, which for the most part had belonged to the middle class in the pre-war societies in which they had lived, would become the engine of a new wave of revolution. It is clear from statistics that the authorities did their best to keep the most visible elements, those who lived in wagons, away from the capital, which had already borne witness to several revolutions, occupation by a foreign army, and other traumatic upheavals in 1918–1919. Although these people and the conditions in which they lived became symbols for the suffering of post-Trianon Hungary, hardly more than 12–14 percent of them lived in wagons for extended periods of time. It can also be established that a maximum of 20,000 people lived in railway cars parked at railway junctures or side tracks at any one point of time. A family was usually allotted two wagons. They kept their furniture in one of them and lived in the other one. These wagons were not suitable for extended habitation (for instance, they could not be properly heated), and hygienic conditions became unbearable around them, as there was no running water and some of the families had domestic animals. Diseases and epidemics soon broke out, and there were many accidents. The latter chiefly affected children who played around the railway lines. Statistics allow us to track the efforts of the government to distribute wagon dwellers throughout the country and limit their numbers in the capital. In early 1921, county prefects along the borders complained in vain, asking the government to find places somewhere else for the refugees.²⁴ When statistical records began to be kept in October 1920, there were a recorded 1,540 wagons in Budapest with 3,840 people living in them, while outside the capital there were 4,137 wagons with 16,500 inhabitants. Subsequently, in Budapest, the number of wagon dwellers quickly declined until the spring of 1921, but this number began to grow again, reaching a peak in September 1921. In the second wave, the number of wagon dwellers dropped below 1,000 in September 1922, and a year later, there were less than 300 people living in such conditions. Newspapers in the capital triumphantly reported that there were no more wagon dwellers.²⁵

24 MNL OL K 26, bundle 1264. 1921-XLIII. t

25 For example: *8 Órai Újság*, January 15, 1925. 5.

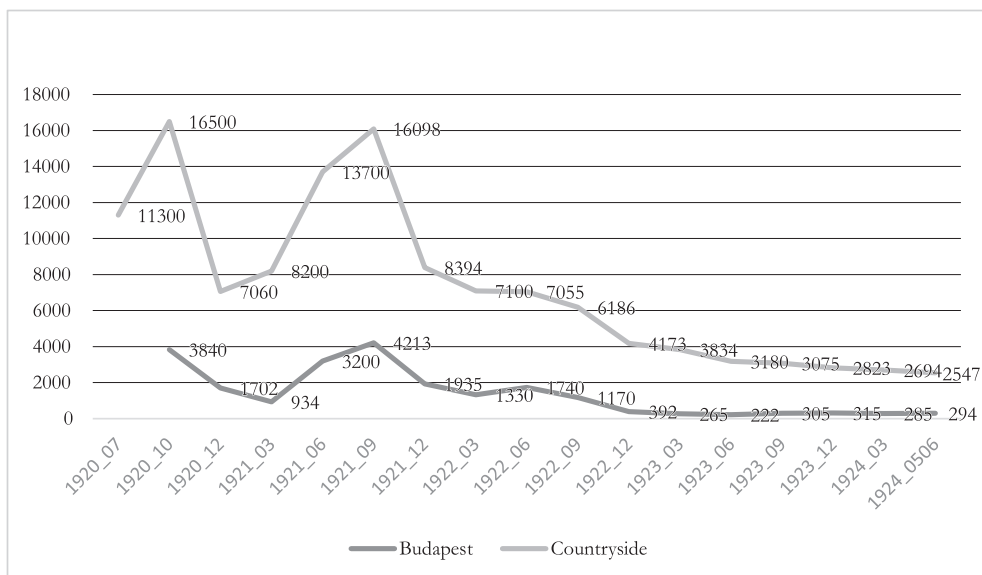


Table 2. Changes in the number of wagon dwellers in Budapest and in the countryside

The decline in these figures was much slower outside the capital. There were several examples when railway stations in villages (for example Mórág, Almásfüzitő, and Kecel) also received wagons with refugee families living in them.²⁶ This way, however, the sight of refugees became more familiar to people across the country, and the unpleasant conditions in which they lived served as a poignant illustration of the consequences of the Treaty of Trianon even in small communities. While wagon dwellers became symbols of the misery of the country and the tragedy of the Treaty of Trianon, newspapers hardly mentioned them after 1924–1925. Although in the mid-1920s, papers reported several times that “the last wagon dweller” had moved into proper housing, there nonetheless remained refugees who continued to live in wagons, temporary shelters and barracks. The wagon dwellers’ suffering became part of a narrative of suffering which followed the pattern of the Stations of the Cross and drew a parallel between the Crucifixion of Jesus and the fate of Hungary. It is a telling detail that the Jewish press in Hungary partially endorsed this view. At the same time, the papers hardly mentioned the multitudes of Jewish refugees.²⁷

26 On this see statistics that the Hungarian State Railway prepared in July 1920: MNL OL, Z 1610, box 120. Kimutatás a vagonban lakó menekültekről, 1920. június-július.

27 Zeidler, *Ideas on Territorial Revision in Hungary*; Lazaroms, “Jewish Railway Car Dwellers.” I am especially grateful to the author for having shared her paper with me.

Though wagon dwellers hardly made up one-seventh of all refugees, initially they were the subject of disproportionate attention (though interest in their plight had completely dwindled by 1924). Those that lived in barracks, former army hospital buildings, and schools dramatically outnumbered the wagon dwellers, but they did not become symbols of the postwar fate of the country to the same extent. This overrepresentation of the wagon dwellers in the imagery concerning the refugees could be explained by the fact that their conditions provided an apt and pithy image of the decline of the middle classes after the war, and the wagon itself became a symbol.²⁸

Although the government and local authorities tried to facilitate the settlement of refugees with programs for small flat construction and by creating residential colonies, if one considers the number of flats completed in the first half of the 1920s, this intervention was hardly efficient or sufficient.²⁹ More research is needed to determine how Hungarian society absorbed more than 100,000 refugees (or 400,000 if we include family members) who were mostly from middle class backgrounds and who had relatively high expectations when it came to living standards and material conditions. (There are countless examples of middle class refugees refusing to accept one-room apartments offered to them by municipalities, as they contended that these dwellings were of a “proletarian type.”³⁰) Based on randomized analysis of data, by the 1930s, the number of refugees sharply dropped in the barracks that had been built for them, and they were replaced by the urban poor.³¹ One possible explanation for this is that refugees might have built houses drawing on their own resources. One such example is the St. Emeric Suburb (*Szent Imre Kertváros*), which lay beyond the boundaries of Budapest at the time. The community, which consisted primarily of former civil servants, struggled for ten years for the right to move to their new homes. The cross erected in the central square, which was named Hargita (a mountain range in Transylvania and also the name of a county in Transylvania), reminded the 280 owners of the Treaty of Trianon, as did the street names, decorations, and the designs of some of the houses.³²

28 The wagon dwellers are “the martyrs of the homelessness” (*Népszava*, July 24, 1926. 9.) or the wagon became the symbol of “distress, bitterness, suffering” (*Miskolczi Napló*, April 6, 1920, 5.).

29 On this, see Umbrai, *A szociális kislakásépítés története*, 69–75.

30 A late example: *Újság*, September 4, 1925. 8.

31 Dr. György Szalai, *Barakk lakók a Horthy-korszak Budapestjén: Történet-szociográfiai áttekintés* [Barrack-dwellers in Budapest during the Horthy Era. A historical-sociological account]. Budapest, 1963. Fővárosi Szabó Ervin Könyvtár Kézirattára, Bq 333/135.

32 Teplán, “Szent Imre Kertváros.”

Institutions

Apart from futile initiatives, such as the launching of the so-called Székely National Party in 1920–21, the refugees did not appear as political force. After June 1921, the Bethlen government banned associations which openly irredentist views, such as defense leagues and relocated/expelled municipal authorities formed in Hungary (*menekült törvényhatóságok*) and associations that formed on a territorial basis and had territorial revision in their articles of association.³³ These measures created a serious limitation to ability of refugees to give expression to their interests through civil bodies. A centralized institutional setting funded Hungarian associations across the border in a covert way, but until the formation of *Revíziós Liga* (League for Revision) in 1927, only those organizations were allowed to exist that organized activities that did not go beyond reminding members of their common cultural heritage. Yet, the orientation of these organizations was not in doubt: the organizations that operated in areas that were outside of the territories reannexed between 1938–41 quickly dissolved. The remainder of the associations functioned under close government control: the papers of the Prime Minister's Office (Department of Nationalities and Minorities) and those of the Ministry of Home Affairs offer proof of the strict surveillance under which the activities of every refugee organization were kept. The first exercised its influence by granting or retaining subsidies, while the latter used the means of legal controls.

Being a refugee had importance in individual career paths. Almanacs kept by the Parliament of the time clearly illustrate that having come from one of the lost territories, having suffered the experience of flight, or having played an active role in an irredentist organization were assets in politics. These experiences complemented the “Good Hungarian, Good Patriot” image even in cases of politicians who had little to do with Transylvania. They did not however, become a basis of group formation.

Some refugee communities developed strategies with which to address the new circumstances. The migrants from Szepesség/Zips/Spiš often had German origins, and they used their associations as a kind of network of pressure/interest groups targeting pensions, jobs, and benefits. The pattern of migration among intellectuals of the Szepes region, which had been a palpable tendency since the nineteenth century, remained an observable trend, as did attachment

33 Iratok az ellenforradalom történetéhez, 2:177–81.

to ethno-regional identities and the maintenance of ties to the homeland. These ties were nurtured through organized tours, regular exchange of information, and organized holidays for children.³⁴ The associations around the much larger group of people who had left eastern Transylvania and especially the Association of Székely University and College Students (SZEFE) and the network of associations around it had a different strategy. They did not build a network of influence. Instead, they sought to act in a Messianic way and integrate elements of Székely cultural heritage (military borderland identity, free peasant community, mythical Hun origins) into the national canon in order to transform Hungarian society, regardless of whether change came from radical Left or radical Right. One of the central figures put their mission in the following way: “I absolutely believe in Transylvania. I believe that all light, health, talent, good, beauty, and moral power comes from there. If Hungarians can still be saved, this can only be done via Transylvania.”³⁵ This presence proved so powerful that it survived decades of state socialism. The revival in the post-1990 era of the Székely Anthem and a runic script allegedly used well before Hungarians adopted the Latin alphabet is partially a sign of the success of their and their successors’ efforts.³⁶ The Zipser and the Székely refugee community had pronounced contours and defined itself vis-à-vis the state. While the first wished to use state infrastructure to promote their individual and group level goals and to protect cultural heritage, the second wished to integrate this heritage into the national canon.

Between 1918 and 1924, alongside people and artifacts, institutions were also relocated to a new country. Professors and students at the university of Kolozsvár (Cluj) and Pozsony (Bratislava) came to Budapest and, subsequently, to Szeged and Pécs, where their successors operate to this day. The Forestry and Mining College found its new home in Sopron, and the law schools of Máramarossziget and Eperjes also moved to Hungary. Although these individual histories are well explored, the question of institutional level flight has hardly been made the subject of study, and the comparative studies of policies towards universities are not complete in their scope or framework.³⁷ From the

34 See Szűts, *A szepesi menekültek sajtója*, and Ablonczy, “‘Lesz még kikelet a Szepesség felett’.”

35 György Csanády’s Papers (Budapest, private property), manuscript notes ad. 3–7. d. n. [1928]. Csanády was a radio program editor, one of the five founders of SZEFE, and the author of the Székely Anthem.

36 On the Székelys, see Ablonczy, “Székely identitásépítés Magyarországon.” On the frameworks of Székely ideology, see Hermann, Orbán, *Csillagösvény és göröngyös út*.

37 Ladányi, *Klebelsberg felsőoktatási politikája*, 28–39. On the university in Kolozsvár, see Vincze, *A száműzött egyetem*.

perspective of the broader context, it is worth noting that the leadership of the universities initially adopted a strict legalistic point of view at the time of the political changeover and tried to continue working at their locations until they were forced to leave in 1919. Some of the institutions and the more specialized training institution in Selmezbánya found their place, since the development of universities was a matter of state policy in the 1920s. Institutions that did not fit the prevailing concept, however, barely survived or lost state subsidies and had to close down. I am thinking, for instance, of law schools whose curricula did not harmonize with the state's concept of development.

Images and Imagination

If we look at remembrance of flight and repatriation, we find a picture that is more complex than the picture of victimhood. It is useful to consider memoirs written between the second half of 1920s and the 1980s about experiences of flight between 1918 and 1924.³⁸ I considered it important, from a methodological point of view, to use memoirs that form a control group. I identified three memoir writers who hesitated and eventually chose remain in the lands of their birth. Their motivations are at least as telling about the circumstances of repatriation as the writings of those who left.

The individuals who decided to stay did not adopt a heroic pose (“loyalty to Transylvania”) when making this decision. Their motivations were fear of material uncertainty, a rejection or fear of the ideology of the Hungarian Soviet Republic, or fear of the so-called white terror. The feature that the writings of those who left and those that stayed have in common is strong referentiality. None of them used arguments that stand on their own. Arguments that might well be accepted as reasonable explanations for the decision to leave would include fear for one's life or the desire not to become part of a national minority living in a new nation state. Instead, the memoir writers made references to more specific details of their individual circumstances. For instance, they would mention the advice given by a pastor, or they would mention the desire to free themselves from someone they despised. They also mentioned having lost their jobs or having been betrayed by (Hungarian) colleagues. In some cases, such as that of László Ravasz (a Calvinist preacher who was born in Transylvania and who emerged as a prominent representative of the Calvinist Church in the

38 See Ablonczy, “Menni vagy maradni?”

interwar period), there was even reference to a divine order. It is even more puzzling that the use of references to external persons or circumstances is independent of political regimes. It is just as typical of memoirs produced in the 1930s as it is of those written after 1947–48, i.e. in communist Hungary. The memoirs suggest that their authors felt the reasons for the decision to leave were not self-evident or understandable in the eyes of others. There was a need for *one more* explanation in the argument. The other feature that stands out is that those who went to Hungary adjusted to an expected mode of speaking. Memoir authors whose writings did not fit the prevailing ideological currents stayed and died outside of post-Trianon Hungary. One could mention Farkas Gyalui, the director of the library in Kolozsvár, who felt like vomiting when he thought of Mihály Károlyi, the communists, the anti-Semitism of the post-1920 regime, and the people he regarded “Hungarians in word only,” i.e. those who had left the land of their birth and resettled in Trianon Hungary.³⁹

The images of refugees in works of literature are no less loaded. No great novels were written about the plights of the refugees, and refugees often did not recognize themselves in the works that were produced. Zoltán Szitnyai (1893–1978) was a journalist and a writer whose novels were frequently published in the interwar period. Since he was born in Selmechánya/Banska Stiavnica, his works often revolved around the city and the people who left for Trianon Hungary. In his novel *Hodinai Hodinák* (“Árpád from Hodina,” 1936), some of the expelled Hungarians living in Budapest drew up lists of alleged traitors, in their eyes, those who remained and continued to maintain the pre-war patriarchal world. They were more like merry tourists: their behavior did not reflect any suffering or pain. Szitnyai used the same framework in his work about the association of refugees that was published in Kassa (Kosice) in the early 1930s (*Szeptemberi majális* or “May Day in September”). The author/observer was critical of the loftiness and emptiness of the leaders and members of the association and the fawning attitudes that they exhibited on the tenth anniversary of the founding of the association. They were looking forward to seeing a minister who had been sent to see them, and they all hoped that their requests would enjoy the support of the influential politician. Lajos Zilahy (1891–1974) was one of the best-selling authors of interwar Hungary. His novel *Földönfutó város* (“Beggar Town”), which was published in 1939, was not one of his major successes. It builds on experience he gained during his work as a journalist, and it offers a (man’s

39 Gyalui, *Emlékirataim 1914–1924*.

perception of a) female perspective on the society of refugees. It is the story of a family falling apart. Following the death of her husband, the widow decides to repatriate and become a wagon dweller. Although the novel has a surprisingly tolerant tone (it does not contain anti-Semitic formulas and it addresses taboos such as homosexuality), it is not optimistic in its final judgement: emigration, moral degradation, and human pettiness and the ill-will of refugee society provide an allegorical framework for the fate of the family. The mother saves her new love from the police, but her children leave her, and it seems unlikely that her new relationship will last.

Addressing the plights of refugees in the tradition crafted by memoirs and literary works was burdensome, and this may explain why their stories remain largely untold in Hungary. Under pressure from official and public discourse, these narratives were distorted and used to legitimize flight. The fact that these stories have gone untold has constituted a barrier to the memory of the community, and it has prevented this memory from being integrated into the larger national narrative of victimhood.

Conclusion

One can speak of the refugee policy of the Hungarian state in its true sense from the end of 1919, when the state set up certain institutions to manage the flow of immigrants arriving in the country and initiated and coordinated welfare efforts. This approach replaced earlier approaches that were used in a time of flight in 1916. Beginning in the second half of 1920, the government focused on drastically cutting back the number of new arrivals. They were motivated by concern for public order and hypothetical revision of the peace treaty in the future, rather than by humanitarian considerations. State companies, Churches, and state institutions or local municipalities had different and inconsistent policies. The latter used the refugee issue in their battles for material resources, in fights against control from center of the state, and in internal political battles. With the closure of the National Office for Refugees, the problems faced by immigrants disappeared from public view and, except for a few marked groups (Zipsers and Székelys), refugees were not able to represent themselves in the public or political spheres. Refugees not only had to face limitations imposed on them by government policies, but also had to grapple with the obstacles which arose because of the simple fact that many people in the communities in which they sought to settle saw them as competitors for available resources, so their

cause did not evolve into a national outcry. Their flight forced them to justify their decisions and redefine their identities. Although state efforts were neither satisfactory nor consistent, Hungarian society finally integrated and absorbed this predominantly middle-class crowd of refugees, but the details (the technical details and networks) of this integration should be subjected to further study. In this sense, integration was a success story, though not thanks to the state. However, in many cases, the cost of success was silence.

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