
Gábor Szabó-Zsoldos**Differing Interpretations of the South African War in Hungary¹**

One can ask that what kind of connection could really exist between the South African War (1899 – 1902) (the Anglo-Boer War, the Tweede Vrijheidsoorlog in Dutch or as it is known mostly in our country the Boer War) and Hungary or we can say that the Carpathian Basin which is situated thousands of miles away from the South African subcontinent? That was the first main question that awakened my attention about the Hungarian aspects of the South African War and the starting line of my research in 2008. Furthermore, not just that issue but the South African War as well has been just very superficially examined by Hungarian scholars. In consequence of that only just a few data have been known about these points of connection between the South African War and the Hungarians. Moreover, there is another reason which proves that theme is worth for researching. Through the example of the South African War, one can get closer to understand how the Hungarian public opinion interpreted those wars and conflicts which took place far from the borders of Austria-Hungary during the second half of the 19th century.

During the first years of the research, Hungarians who took part actively in the South African War stood at the focus of the examination. Especially one of these Hungarian participants, namely Tibor Péchy, a former Hungarian cavalry (hussar) officer who moved in 1896 to South Africa in order to start a new life and make his fortune in Transvaal. Then, in the direction of broadening the scope of the research, other aspects of the mentioned topic became involved, for instance reception of the South African War in different dimensions of the contemporary Hungarian public opinion such as the press or the Parliament.

During the research mainly with four groups of sources were examined:

- 1 Private papers (diaries, correspondence) of the Hungarian volunteers who participated in the war
- 2 Official (public) documents: for instance documentation of the

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British horse purchasing in Hungary as well as the Hungarian and British Parliamentary Debates

3 Hungarian books about the South African War: three of the Hungarian volunteers wrote books about their South African experience, the war or the history and culture of the subcontinent: Károly Bulyovszky², Vilmos Simon³ and Lajos Szigethy.⁴

4 Contemporary Hungarian articles and pamphlets

The Hungarian aspects of the South African War can be classified into five categories. To the first one, which means the closest relation between the South African War and the Hungarians or we can say that the Carpathian Basin, belong those Hungarians who took part actively as a volunteer, a soldier or an interpreter in that war. According to the recent state of research, sixteen Hungarians are identified, whose activity in the South African War can be proved by the sources. The overwhelming majority of them chose the Boer side of the war, twelve of the sixteen participants exactly (Kálmán Bornemissza; Károly Bulyovszky; Gyula Edvi Illés; Mihály Ferenczy; Pál Fleischer; Géza Gössing; Lajos Janssen; Félix Luzsészky; Pál Mészáros; Tibor Péchy; Vilmos Simon; Lajos Szigethy; Albert Wass), and four Hungarians served in the British Army (Pál Bornemissza; Albert Teophilus Duka; János Propper; Lajos Vadász).

Several interesting stories and curiosity belong to some of the Hungarian volunteers. For instance Tibor Péchy, who met Paul Kruger, (the president of the South African Republic, 1883 – 1900) and had a coffee in the presidents' residence. Péchy was misidentified as the nephew of Pope Leo XIII by one of the South African correspondents of *The Illustrated London News*.⁵ Namely an article was published in the said journal on the foreign officers who supported the cause of the Boer republics. The journalist of *The Illustrated London News* described the foreign volunteers as mercenaries, “*soldiers of fortune*” grasping the chance of the South African War in order to make their fortune. Tibor Péchy (who can be easily identified by the photo attached to the said article – that photograph can be found in Tibor Péchy's private papers as well) was misidentified as “*Count Pecci (Nephew of the Pope)*”.

2 Károly Bulyovszky, *Boer-angol tűzben*. [In Boer-English fire] Budapest, 1901.

3 Vilmos Simon, *A búr szabadságharcz*. [The Boer war of freedom] Budapest, 1901.

4 Lajos Szigethy, *Búr földön*. [On Boer land] Sopron, 1901.

5 Foreign Officers with the Boers. *The Illustrated London News*, November 22, 1900, 939.

Regarding the nephew of Pope Leo XIII the article is telling that: “*These wandering soldiers of fortune, who mostly belong to Italy and France, even when they are classed as serving with the Hungarian legion, include a nephew of Pope Leo XIII., Lieutenant Count Pecci, not the first of his family to seek a roving life far away from the narrow bounds of the family home of the Peccis in Carpineto.*”⁶ Some of the Hungarian journalists reflected for this serious fault and traced back that misidentification for the similarity of the surnames of the Pope, whose name was Gioacchino Pecci and Tibor Pechy. Pecci and Péchy might have sounded very similar for the English correspondent.⁷ There was no connection between the family of Pope Leo XIII and the Péchy family, in fact Tibor Péchy was protestant, Calvinist.

The second class consists of the commercial and economic relations. For example, the British Army purchased hundreds of horses in Hungary and transported them through the port of Fiume to the South African frontlines.⁸

To the third category belong the Hungarian political reflections (committed by Hungarian MPs) for the South African War. The fourth dimension, which is at the centre of the present paper, contains the reactions for that war from the Hungarian press and the public opinion. At last but not at least, several poems and novels were written by outstanding Hungarian poets and novelists such as Endre Ady⁹ or Dezső Kosztolányi¹⁰, (and that is the fifth category,) which were concerned with the South African War.

The present paper discusses the different interpretations of the South African War in the contemporary Hungarian press and public opinion (the fourth class in the present order). Furthermore, it aims the comparison of the characteristics of the Hungarian pro-Boer and pro-

6 Ibid.

7 Magyarok a boer hadseregben. [Hungarians In. the Boer Army] = *Vasárnapi Ujság*, XLVII (52), 1900. 876.; XIII. Leó pápa [Pope Leo XIII] = *Szalon Ujság*, VIII (13), 1903. 7.

8 Report of the Committee on Horse Purchase In. Austro-Hungary, together Minutes of Evidence and Appendices. 1902. NA, WO 32/8757

9 Endre Ady, *Búrok* [Boers]. In. József Láng – Pál Schweitzer (eds.), *Ady Endre összes versei* 2. [Ady’s poems] Budapest, 1982. 471.

10 Dezső Kosztolányi, Ó, búrok, ha én most csak húszéves lennék [Oh, Boers, if I was only 20]. In. Pál Réz (ed.), *Kosztolányi Dezső összes versei*. Bratislava, 1989. 441.; Kosztolányi, Öreg pap [Old priest]. In. Pál Réz (ed.), *Kosztolányi Dezső összes novellái II.* [Kosztolányi’s short stories] Szeged, 2002. 325–327.

British journalism as well as the different narratives of a Hungarian volunteer, Tibor Péchy about the said war.

PRO-BOER JOURNALISM

One can easily categorize the Hungarian articles, news and journalism concerning the South African War by examining the attitude of the writers and journalists towards to that war. Through that process two main categories and attitudes could be identified: a pro-Boer and a pro-British one.

In line with the contemporary European press, except of course the British, the overwhelming majority of the Hungarian journals during the last decade of the nineteenth century and the first years of the twentieth century were pro-Boer. One can state that there is nothing special in that, because the bulk of the continental journals, especially the French or German newspapers and the public opinion of the mentioned countries supported the Boer's cause as well. In some cases it is true that the Hungarian newspapers took war stories, news of course and caricatures from French, German or even from British journals, dailies. For instance the cruelty of the concentration camps or the blood thirst and greediness of British war leaders, such as General Horatio Kitchener or Lord Chamberlain were overemphasized in these columns. Similar symbolism, symbols and representation of the Boer's fights against the British imperialism were implemented by the Hungarian and other European press either. Although there are similarities between the Hungarian and the other continental pro-Boer attitudes and statements, significant differences can be found as well. Differences or one can say special characteristics of the Hungarian way of interpretation, which highlight the Hungarian pro-Boer press and opinions from the other Europeans. Which are these factors and characteristics?

The bulk of the Hungarian journalists who sympathized with the cause of the Boer republics (Orange Free State, South African Republic) found serious and numerous similarities between the history, culture and some kind of fate or destiny of the Hungarians and the Boers. For instance the said columnists and editors emphasized that both of these nations were small nations and above all, characterised by freedom-loving. The most interesting point of that comparison was the parallel drawn between the Hungarian war of independence, 1848-49 and the South African War.

The main element of the said parallel was that the Boers had to fight desperately and hopelessly for the freedom of their republics against the British oppression just as the Hungarians had done it fifty years before against the Habsburg rule. Thus both of the said small freedom-loving nations faced with gigantic empires which outnumbered them not just in the field of power but in wealth and supply. According to these interpretations, although justice was in both cases on the heroic freedom fighter's (namely the Hungarians' and the Boers') side, and in the first part of the wars the Boers and the Hungarians won battles, they could not achieve the victory against the devilish enemy and failed. From the pro-Boer journalists' aspect two factors led to the failure in both cases as well: the numerical superiority of the enemy, the empires and the fact that the other foreign powers closed their eyes and did not support the cause of these small nations.

Apart from these elements, the war leaders and political leaders of the Boers and Hungarians, namely Stephanus Johannes Paulus Kruger (president of the South African Republic) and Lajos Kossuth (the emblematic leader of the Hungarian democratic opposition of the parliament and Governor of Hungary, 1848-49) were compared too. Paul Kruger was represented in some Hungarian articles as the "*Boer Lajos Kossuth*".¹¹ Similarities could be easily found between the President of the Transvaal who was described as a wise leader, fought tirelessly and with an uncompromising attitude for the freedom of his people and the former Hungarian Governor who is still pictured in that way in Hungary. The fact that Kruger had to leave his country because of the downfall of the Boer republics and Lajos Kossuth had emigrated from Hungary and finished his life far from his homeland just strengthened that parallel. Furthermore, Kruger himself expressed his views on the similarities between the past and present of the Hungarians and the Boers for a Hungarian delegation which visited him in 1901 in Netherlands: "[...] you [*i.e.* – namely the Hungarians] had a war of independence as well, but you were not left as alone as we are. Nobody cares with us and nothing is done for us."¹²

11 Krüger Európai útja [Kruger's European journey] = *Vasárnapi Ujság*, XLVII (50), 1900. 832

12 Krüger a magyarokról [Kruger on Hungarians]. = *Világkrónika*, XXV (22), 1901. 172.

PRO-BRITISH JOURNALISM AND THEODORE DUKA

First of all it is necessary to emphasize that in comparison with the pro-Boer journalism, those who supported the British side of the South African War meant the minority. Nevertheless, the picture of Cecil Rhodes was in some ways quite positive. In case of his death the *Vasárnapi Ujság*, which was a popular journal in Hungary (and published pro-Boer and pro-British articles as well), brought attention to Rhodes' vital role in the expanding the British territories in Africa.¹³

Only few pro-British articles and a book remained and the most of these belongs to one public figure, Tivadar Duka, or as he is well-known in the Western World: Theodore Duka. Duka is famous for his research on the life and times of an outstanding Hungarian explorer, Sándor Kőrösi Csoma (who edited the first Sanskrit-Tibetan-English Vocabulary) as well as the books he wrote and based on his travels around India and his knowledge in the field of medical studies.¹⁴ So he was a well-known person in Hungary and in Great Britain as well.

Theodore Duka had perpetually attempted to criticize the pro-Boer Hungarian writings since December 1899.¹⁵ Every time when he had found something wrong or problematic (of course from his pro-British point of view) in the Hungarian newspapers about the South African War he sent an article or an open letter to that journal in which he corrected the said faults. Then, in 1901 Duka published a book (its title is: *Letters about the Boer-Anglo War*) which was a collection of his articles, open letters and other writings.¹⁶

Duka had three main intentions with reference to his pro-British activity:

- 1 to moderate the superiority of the pro-Boers in the Hungarian public opinion
- 2 to correct the misunderstandings and misinformation about the South African War

13 Rhodes Cecil = *Vasárnapi Ujság*, XLIX (15), 1902. 294.

14 Gyula Paczolay, *Duka Tivadar*. Budapest, 1998. 40.

15 Tivadar Duka, A boer háború Dél-Afrikában [The Boer war in South Africa]. = *Vasárnapi Ujság*, XLVI (51), 1899. 850–851.

16 Tivadar Duka, *Levelek a boer-angol háborúról* [Letters ont he Boer-English war]. Budapest, 1901.

3 and, at last but not at least to refute the parallel between the South African War and the Hungarian war of independence 1848-49.

As it is emphasized in the prologue of his book: *‘The purpose of the hereby collected, mostly already published letters and articles is to raise the question: is there any relevant similarity between the South African War and our war of independence of 1848-49?’*¹⁷

According to his argument the contrast between the said two wars was too sharp to draw such a parallel. First of all, while Hungary had been attacked by the Habsburg Monarchy, in case of the South African War, the Boers were who started the war with an ultimatum to Great Britain.¹⁸ Moreover, he highlighted that the British people sympathized with the Hungarian cause in 1848-1849.¹⁹

Duka attempted to prove that the comparison of Paul Kruger to Lajos Kossuth was absolutely pointless. He reminded his readers and the pro-Boer Hungarians for the fact that Kossuth was welcome in Britain after the end of the war: *‘Kruger possesses millions, his retinue is abundantly supplied; the bulk of our fellows who survived, needed benefits from England and Kossuth died in abroad as a very poor man.’*²⁰ Furthermore, as one of the strongest points of his argument, he noticed that he took part actively in the Hungarian war of independence, thus he really possessed the experience required to examine properly the wars and he found nothing similar between them.²¹

Which factors stood behind these arguments? – One can conclude that the pro-Boer part of the contemporary Hungarian press and public opinion interpreted the South African War according to the journalists’ and editors’ attitudes towards their history and the actual political relations of Hungary. In line with this approach, it can be seen that the parallels and similarities between the Boers and Hungarians were emphasized mostly by those newspapers and public figures who criticized the conciliation with the Habsburg Monarchy and who were loyal to the ideals of the revolution of 1848.²² The fact that Kálmán Széll, who was the Prime

17 Ibid. 3.

18 Ibid. 40.

19 Ibid. 20.

20 Ibid. 40.

21 Ibid. 44.

22 Zoltán Tefner, *Külpolitika, népcsoport, tömegtájékoztatás* [Foreign policy, people group, mass communication]. = *Valóság*, 45, 2002. no. 6.

Minister of Hungary during the South African War (1899 – 1903), took an absolutely neutral position about that war may prove the said approach. Széll attempted to moderate the harsh verbal attacks against Britain in the Hungarian Parliament. He reminded his pro-Boer opposition that while Great Britain was a world power, Hungary was just a small nation and the small nations like Hungary, required the friendship of great powers like Britain.²³ This was a very political standpoint.

In case of Theodore Duka, it is necessary to examine his personal history, his past. In my opinion, two factors could stand behind his pro-British attitude:

1 The borders of Great Britain were opened for Duka after the end of the Hungarian war of independence and he was loyal to Britain as his new home, his adopted country. In addition to this, he had been serving in the British Army in Bengal (1854 – 1874) as a major in the Medical Service. Thus, Britain meant for him a new home which provided him a chance for rebuild his life, make existence and start a new, successful carrier.

2 The second could be that one of his two sons', namely Dr Albert Theophilus Duka involvement in the South African War. He served as a surgeon captain in the 3rd Queensland Mounted Infantry and was designed with the Distinguished Service Order (DSO) for his great pluck proved in the defence of the Elands River Post and he is still known in Australia as the "*hero of Elands River*".²⁴

TIBOR PÉCHY'S INTERPRETATION

In comparison of the Hungarian articles and columns about the South African War and the way how the Hungarian participants interpreted that war, similarities and differences can be found as well. For instance, in case of Tibor Péchy (one of the Hungarian pro-Boer volunteers who served for nine month in the Boer army) the contrast is harsh between the picture of the Boers in his South African correspondence or diaries and in his lectures and articles written after he came back from the South African subcontinent.

23 Széll, Kálmán in the Parliament, December 11, 1901

[<http://www3.arcanum.hu/onap/opt/a090302.htm?v=pdf&q=WRD%3D%28b%FAr%20h%E1bor%FA%29&s=SORT&m=7&a=rec> – January 23, 2015)

24 Hero of Elands River, *Boer War Despatches*, March 2013. 5.

Péchy and his writings can be a very interesting object of the said comparison from several aspects. First of all Tibor Péchy had already been living in South Africa three years before the outbreak of the war. Thus he had not had a close contact with the way how the Hungarian public opinion reflected for the war before he travelled back to Hungary during the autumn of 1900. Furthermore among the Hungarian participants, Tibor Péchy spent far the most time in South Africa and opposite to the others he got closer to the culture of the Boers and other South Africans.

In the letters he wrote in the South African trenches, not at least one word can be found about the heroism of the Boers, the dignity of their cause or the parallel between the South African War and the Hungarian war of independence of 1848-49. Rather these lines testify about disappointment, apathy and high degree of criticism towards the Boers.

The first passage is from Tibor Péchy's journal which was written in Transvaal, during the war (in the spring of 1900 exactly): "*Now I start to believe that the war will end with English victory, but because of the Boers themselves; now they are paying for the faults they committed and at most their cowardice and that they do not need European officers.*"²⁵ The expression: "*European officers*" refers to Péchy himself. As a former highly educated and commissioned officer, a first lieutenant of the Austro-Hungarian cavalry he had expected to start his career in the Boer army as an officer and not a private. Here is the second passage from Péchy's lecture composed after he had come back from South Africa: "[...] *when the hyena of Omdurman sentences to death the last Boer hero or when the Almighty finally helps that heroic small nation*".²⁶ It is not so difficult to notice the differences between the present passages. Although both of these texts belong to the same author and both of these lines concerned with the same issue, the picture of the Boers in the first and the second quotation differ from each other in many ways. One can easily compare the language of the quoted texts and it is easy to note the difference between expressions, nouns and adjectives referred to the Boers in the first and the second passage, for instance: cowardice-heroic. While the Boers are characterized in the first passage by cowardice, in the second they are described as a heroic nation.

It is worth to make another comparison as well, namely the comparison of Péchy's papers, the text of his lectures and articles born

25 Tibor Péchy's War Diaries in the Transvaal, April 16-28, 1900. 68., Péchy Papers [hereinafter PP]

26 Péchy, Előadás Dél-Afrikáról, [Lecture on South Africa] PP.

after he arrived home and the pro-Boer writings. The first is a passage from an article (whose title is *Világos of the Boers*) published in the *Debreczeni Ujság*, the second one is from Péchy's paper on his South African experience. The first: "*On days of March we commemorate more painfully wars of forces. – The March wind brings back the past, dark memories. Concerning the Boers, appear the battle scenes gleaming in light of fire and under the flag with Virgin Mary on it charge the victorious giants from the darkness of the graves, who waged the battle for our freedom fifty years ago. [...] Thus, the tragedy of our nation revived in far South, in the country of the Transvaaler rocks.*"²⁷ The second one: "[...] *may the Almighty, who enforces the justice every time and everywhere, help these heroes to attain their independence in that bloodthirsty and the most unrighteous fight of the modern age which is happening in sight of all the European powers.*"²⁸

The similarities are obvious between the quoted texts and there is no harsh contrast between the way how the columnist of the *Debreczeni Ujság* and Tibor Péchy (in that case in Hungary) interpreted the South African war and the war efforts of the Boers. In both of these passages, expressions can be found which refer to the Hungarian pro-Boer interpretation of the South African War. Expressions, for instance: victorious giants – heroes; as well as freedom – independence are a quite typical elements of the positive image of the Boers in Hungary and referring to the parallel that the Hungarian pro-Boer journalism drew between the South African War and the Hungarian war of independence of 1848-49.

CONCLUSION

As a conclusion it is necessary to emphasize that the South African War as a topic had a special place and a special role in the contemporary Hungarian press and public opinion. The ideals of the revolution and war of independence of 1848-1849 and that historical event itself was a good brand (in some ways it is still a very good brand in Hungary and in abroad as well) and it influenced unquestionably the way and the patterns how the Hungarian public opinion interpreted the South African War. In other words, one can conclude that there was a special dimension of interpretation in Hungary during the second part of the 19th century whose borders was marked with the principles and ideals of the revolution and

27 A burok Világosa = *Debreczeni Ujság*, V (73), 1901. 1.

28 Péchy, Előadás Dél-Afrikáról, PP.

war of independence of 1848-49, and the contemporary Hungarian public opinion interpreted the South African War within the limits and borders of that dimension.

In case of the pro-Boer Hungarian volunteers, for instance Tibor Péchy or Félix Luzsénszky²⁹ references for the Hungarian revolution and war of independence as well as the similarities between the history of the Boers and the Hungarians appeared in the articles, columns they wrote after the arrival back to Hungary. Regarding Tibor Péchy, serious differences can be found between the text of his lectures or other published writings and his private papers written in the South African trenches. In South Africa, in his journal or his letters to her mother (Erzsébet Móricz) Péchy emphasized the negative characteristics of the Boers. For instance the Boers are characterised in these papers as coward, stubborn, greedy and arrogant people: “*Just who lives here or in a place similar to this may have any idea about the horrible arrogance and foolishness mixed with cruelty that a decent person step by step experiences here.*”³⁰ Furthermore, he became fed up with the Transvaal and returning back to Hungary meant a salvation for him: “[...] *day after day I hate more this country and its popular Boer population, so I think I will praised be the hour when I leave it even if I will have worse time there than here.*”³¹ Opposite to this, Péchy depicted the Boers for the audience and readers in Hungary as a heroic small nation fighting against a great power (just like the Hungarians did in 1848-49). Péchy harmonized his narrative on the Boers to the Hungarian pro-Boer interpretation which process can be proved through the comparison of the text of his lectures or articles with the Hungarian pro-Boer articles.

Two factors could stand behind the said change in Péchy’s views about the Boers and the war. First of all, he could be influenced by pro-Boer journalism which absolutely dominated the contemporary Hungarian press and public opinion. Moreover, probably he altered his narrative in order to turn his story easily acceptable for the Hungarian readers and audience as well as to improve the marketing of his articles and lectures.

29 Félix Luzsénszky, Magyarok Transvaalban [Hungarians in Transvaal]. = *Magyar Salon*, 1900. 461–464.

30 Péchy to Erzsébet Móricz, October 24, 1896, Pretoria, PP.

31 Péchy to E. Móricz, November 17, 1896, Pretoria, PP.

