

## **Symposium: Minorities and Minority Affairs in Hungary, 1935-1980**

### **Introduction**

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The question of minorities and minority affairs is usually associated with pre-1919 Hungary. There is some justification for this assumption. The minority problems of the old, "historic" Hungary dwarfed those of post-World War I "rump" Hungary in scope if not always in intensity. This fact is illustrated by statistics on national minorities in Hungary before and after that country's dramatic transformation in the wake of the First World War. From a country in which the dominant nationality barely made up the majority, post-war Hungary became one in which Hungarians comprised 90 percent of the population.<sup>1</sup> At first glance then, it might seem that the post-war peace settlement just about "solved" Hungary's nationality problem. On closer scrutiny, however, it becomes evident that this is not what happened. First of all, while the Treaty of Trianon detached from Hungary virtually all territories inhabited by such groups as the Slovaks, Rumanians and Croats, it also incorporated large regions inhabited by Hungarians into the successor states of Czechoslovakia, Rumania and Yugoslavia. As far as Hungary was concerned then, the treaty merely replaced a minority problem in the country with the problem of Hungarian irredenta in the neighboring states; in effect the Treaty of Trianon transferred the issue of national minorities from one country to three others.<sup>2</sup>

The post-war peace settlement failed to solve Hungary's nationality problem in another respect also. It left in that country enough minorities to plant the seeds of future trouble, especially under the unusual circumstances that were imposed on Hungary as a result of the rise of the Third Reich. The three papers that follow examine aspects of Hungary's minority politics

and policies in the context of the coming (and departure) of the “Hitler era” in Central European history.

The largest national minority left in Hungary after the Treaty of Trianon was the German. People of German background made up 6.8 percent of the country’s population in 1920.<sup>3</sup> Under ordinary circumstances a minority of this size did not in those days pose serious problems for a country. But for a number of extraordinary reasons the German minority of Hungary did. First of all, most of Hungary’s Germans, or Swabians as they were somewhat inaccurately called,<sup>4</sup> lived in so-called ethnic enclaves. Some of these German-populated regions, as Professor Spira points out in his study, were in strategically important locations either close to Hungary’s borders, or near Budapest, the capital. The German minority issue in Hungary also assumed unusual significance when Hitler began his programme of expanding German power in East Central Europe. One of the by-products of this process was the radicalization of a sizable portion of Hungary’s Swabian minority. This development further complicated the affairs of a nation already under a great deal of stress caused by internal political developments—such as the rise of right-wing movements—and international tension.

The expansion of Nazi German influence in East Central Europe, and eventually the imposition of German rule over this entire region during the Second World War, caused another minority issue to surface in Hungary. This was the question of the country’s Jewry. Undoubtedly, the “Jewish problem” in Hungary on the eve and during the Second World War owed its existence mainly to external factors, the foremost being Adolf Hitler’s plans for the Jews of Europe. But the issue had a Hungarian side to it as well, as a peculiar brand of anti-semitism did exist in contemporary Hungary. Several factors can be singled out as being the roots of these sentiments. One was the massive growth of country’s Jewish population in the preceding decades. From a quarter million in the early 1840s, Hungary’s Jewish group more than doubled by 1870; thereafter it grew by about 100,000 persons almost every decade. On the eve of World War I, Jews made up 5 percent of the country’s population—23.5 percent of that in Budapest.<sup>5</sup> Much of this growth was the result of the immigration of Jews from the Habsburg Empire’s Polish provinces. Obviously, such influx could not be integrated into national life in a short time and without some difficulties. But

there were further complicating factors. One of these was the predominance Jews had gained by the early decades of the twentieth century in Hungary's business life, in her professions and, especially, within the Hungarian intelligentsia. As a result, the Jews became an easily identifiable, "high profile" minority. They composed much of the country's middle class, indeed, as some observers say, they were the "only bourgeoisie" and, consequently, it was easy to identify them with the "negative side of middle class culture."<sup>6</sup> In Hungarian popular myth, the Jew was often the capitalist, the "usurer," or paradoxically, the radical intellectual ready to destroy the established political and social order. Hostile feelings against members of this group were easily aroused, even though many Jews had given enthusiastic demonstrations of their loyalty to Hungary and her national values and traditions.

Anti-semitic tendencies in Hungary were translated into legislative measures in 1938-1941, during the years when Nazi influence made the greatest inroads in the country and when the Nazi example in international politics made the greatest impression on public opinion in Hungary. Interestingly enough the years 1942 and 1943 saw a relative relaxation in official anti-semitism, a fact which no doubt contributed to Hitler's eventual decision to occupy Hungary and impose stringent conditions on her. One of these conditions was the solution of the Jewish question according to the requirements of Nazi ideology. As Professor Laszlo explains in his article, soon after the country's occupation by the *Wehrmacht* in March of 1944, the deportation of the Jews to concentration camps outside the country was started. But the ghastly undertaking was not carried to its ultimate conclusion: the liquidation of the entire Hungarian Jewry. At a propitious moment—after the Allied landings in Normandy when Hitler could not spare additional divisions to enforce his will in Hungary—the deportations were halted on orders from Regent Miklos Horthy, and a large group of Jews, those of Budapest, were saved from certain extermination. That this was done was in no small measure the work of Hungary's Churches.

After World War II Hungary became an even more homogeneous state than she had been earlier. Yet numerous problems remained in the realm of dealing with minorities and formulating minority policies. The first of these was the question

of the country's German minority. This issue was "solved" in the draconian way so familiar of the 1940s: most Germans were expelled from the country. The second major problem was the question of the formulation of a nationality policy that reflected the country's socialist transformation. The third problem was a more complex one: it concerned the adoption in Hungary of a minority policy that was to serve the interests of not only the country's nationalities, but also as much as possible, those of the Hungarian minorities in neighboring socialist states.

The three papers that follow this introduction each deal with some aspects of Hungary's minority problems at one time or another in the four and a half decades after 1935. Professor Spira's article examines the process of the radicalization of elements of Hungary's German minority on the eve of World War II. In the next study Professor Laszlo looks at the role that Hungary's Churches played in the stopping of the deportation of Jews to Nazi death camps. In the last paper Dr. Vago surveys the evolution of Hungary's minority policies after 1945 partly in the context of the three problems referred to in the foregoing paragraph.<sup>7</sup> Each of these three articles contributes to the knowledge of a particular phase and aspect of the minority issue in modern Hungary. Though there are no overt interrelationships among them, grouped together in a mini-collection, they also help in the understanding of the larger question of minority affairs in a country passing through an age of national and international turmoil.

#### NOTES

1. Andrew C. Janos, *The Politics of Backwardness in Hungary, 1825-1945* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982): 205.
2. On this see Steven B. Vardy, "The Impact of Trianon upon Hungary and the Hungarian Mind: The Nature of Interwar Hungarian Irredentism," in N.F. Dreisziger, ed., *Hungary and the Second World War* (Toronto: Hungarian Studies Review, 1983) : 21-5. This study is part of a special volume of the *Hungarian Studies Review*, Vol. X (1983). Also, Thomas L. Sakmyster, *Hungary, the Great Powers, and the Danubian Crisis, 1936-1939* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1980, Chapter 1.
3. Janos, p.205. The proportion of minorities in "rump" Hungary declined gradually as the years passed. By 1930, Hungarians made up 93 percent of the total population: the remainder consisted of Germans and miniscule groups of Slovaks, Rumanians and Croats. Jews were not considered a national minority.
4. Some of Hungary's Germans were not of "Swabian" background but hailed from Saxony, Austria, or from the Zipser-German districts of Upper Hungary, or from the Saxon counties of Transylvania.
5. *Ibid*, p.113, and also, pp.79-83.
6. N.M. Nagy-Talavera, *The Green Shirts and the Others; A History of Fascism in Hungary and Rumania* (Stanford, California: Hoover, 1976): 41. For a classic analysis of

the Jewish problem in Hungary see George Barany, "Magyar Jew or Jewish Magyar," *Canadian-American Slavic Studies*, VII, 1 (Spring 1974): 1-44.

7. As English is not the language of Dr. Vago's usual academic environment, his paper was more extensively edited from the point of style and presentation than the other essays in this volume.