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Hungarian Intellectuals during World War II

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Attila József wrote in a poem about his Fatherland, a few years before World War II:

> Let man be more human
> and the Hungarian be more Hungarian
> so the country not become a German colony...

He did not live long enough to see his country subjugated by the Germans. Neither he, nor other Hungarian poets had the power to do anything about that subjugation.

The scope allotted to this paper is both too tight and too generous to explain why progressive thinkers and politicians in Hungary failed to maintain the country's neutrality and independence. Certainly too generous, if we must appraise resistance by the number of sabotage acts committed, occupation troops killed, or tanks disabled. There were a few acts of sabotage perpetrated by Hungarian patriots during the war, such as the bomb planted at the foot of the statue of Gyula Gömbös, the first prime minister with a clearly pro-Nazi foreign policy. All these actions, however, occurred towards the end of the war. As far as I have been able to ascertain, no Hungarian soldiers or gendarmes were killed for political reasons until the fall of 1944. The same applies to the members of the German occupation force stationed on the territory of Trianon Hungary.[1]

On the other hand, if we measure resistance by the number of victims, the numbers of those suffering or killed, or by the extent of pain, this article would require considerably more time and space. It is not easy to explain why Hungarian resistance deserves to be mentioned alongside movements in countries that have earned themselves a reputation for heroism. Conversely, how could there be victims of resistance, if there was no organized resistance? Equally paradoxically, why did Nazi Germany decide to invade and occupy a country which fought as its ally in the war, and was even regarded as a fellow Fascist nation, a member

of the anti-Comintern pact? It would take more than a paper to explain these paradoxes and anomalies.

Nevertheless, we can begin to make distinctions based on common sense. What sort of acts can be classified as resistance in the Hungarian context? Who may be included among those who resisted? Is it proper to dismiss the actions of Jews, or of Hungarians of Jewish descent, on the grounds that it was only natural for them to resist, as a matter of self-defense and survival?

For example, it is hardly possible to speak of organized Jewish resistance in Hungary. Jewish intellectuals were persecuted and struck down not simply because they were Jews, but because they were anti-Fascist. In fact, most of them tended to be "assimilated" rather than Jewish hence, when they acted politically they acted not only as anti-Fascist, but as Hungarian patriots, in what they conceived to be the best interest of the Hungarian nation.

Our biggest dilemma, however, concerns the period from 1941 to 1944, when Hungary fought as an ally of Germany, but was able to preserve a certain freedom of action. Against whom did the Hungarian patriots resist in this period? Was it against the Horthy regime, against the establishment? Against pressures from Nazi Germany? Or against the pro-Nazi and pro-German aspects of the policies of the Hungarian state?

It may be more appropriate to speak, not of a Horthy regime, but of a conservative establishment in which two conflicting tendencies struggled for supremacy. These tendencies were manifest in foreign rather than domestic affairs, a) to align the country's policies with those of Germany, either as a matter of sympathy and preference, or because it seemed unavoidable b) to resist German pressures, and curry favour with the Allies, preferably the Anglo-Americans. Hence, in the Hungarian context then, the term resistance may mean one of two things, resistance against the established conservative regime, regardless of whether it was pro-German or not; or resistance against the German pressures and the German orientation.

If we are talking about resistance against the established regime, several factors deserve to be mentioned. We should include the legal and usually loyal opposition the Social Democratic party, almost unique within the German sphere of influence the party of Rassay, the most prestigious leader of the liberal bourgeoisie [2] and the National Peasant Party, founded by

members of the March Front back in 1939.[3] There was also a true opposition, usually underground: the newspapers of the period continually report on individuals or groups arrested for illegal organizing, for dissemination of "Communist propaganda," or for membership in "cells." For instance, in Cluj (Kolozsvár) under Hungarian jurisdiction as a result of the Second Vienna Award, 664 persons were charged with "Communist activities" in the fall of 1943; they were "mostly Jews," specified the correspondent.[4] Unlike in neighbouring General government, or in Croatia and Serbia, only few of these "subversives" were hanged, but the judges seemed firmly convinced that the victims would be compelled to sit out their harsh prison terms to the bitter end. As in Germany, the public was hardly aware that the war was lost, even after Stalingrad and the rout of the Hungarian army at the Don River. It is only fair to add, however, that by 1942 agitators from the Arrow-Cross and other parties of the radical right were also officially persecuted.[5]

In most of Europe, the term resistance implied resistance against Nazi oppression. Thus we may plausibly argue that the first victim of this struggle in Hungary was Prime Minister Count Pál Teleki, who committed suicide as German troops were entering Hungarian territory in preparation for an attack on Yugoslavia. One of the later victims of this same struggle was Prime Minister Miklós Kállay, in charge from March of 1942 until the country's occupation by the Germans two years later; he was eventually deported to the concentration camp at Mauthausen. The Kállay regime had done nothing in an open or dramatic fashion against German interests, but its caution, designed to forestall a German invasion, proved futile. The stance of the regime was not cautious enough to delay the German invasion until the arrival of an Allied rescue force, nor was it clearcut enough by far to earn the country good points in the eyes of the Allies. Nevertheless, the Teleki government, and especially the Kállay government were covertly anti-Nazi and this attitude was understood by progressive and liberal intellectuals, even without tangible evidence. (It was also understood by the Germans who did have tangible evidence thanks to their efficient intelligence work and their awareness of secret Hungarian peace negotiations.)

This line of hesitant, often half-hearted official resistance did

not cease with the arrival of the German occupation forces. It surfaced again at the time of the Géza Lakatos cabinet in the summer of 1944. This time the Regent took a more determined stand as well and, as we know, the Hungarian government was able to halt the deportations and save the lives of close to 200,000 Jews, in spite of the presence of German troops.

What course of action was left open to the progressive intellectuals in the period 1941 to 1944? To be sure, they might have joined the underground Communist party. Few people did, however the Communist party in Hungary had no more than a handful of members, intellectual or otherwise. On the other hand, the progressive intellectuals could support the timid, wavering policies of the regime, encouraging it, perhaps, to follow a steadier, more decidedly anti-Nazi course. Indeed, many noteworthy intellectuals had decided to take precisely this line of action, or of inaction, and thus their resistance remained invisible, discounted by the historians. They had little impact, either in the short run or in the long run, much like the Kállay government itself.

There was, however, another alternative. Let us take a closer look at two particular groups of intellectuals who constitute something of an exception, who did have an impact. These two groups were the March Front of populist writers, and certain organizations of lower-class university students. My selection is not altogether arbitrary, for we know that writers, including poets, have often played a role of moral and political leadership in Eastern Europe, more so than anywhere else. Imre Kovács himself has gone so far as to claim that "Hungarian literature is perhaps the most political literature in the world." [6] University students were chosen as well not because they played a special function in Eastern Europe, but because so often they have been in the forefront of political agitation the world over.

Some of Hungary's most eminent young writers came together in a group that called itself the March Front, in homage to the spirit of March 1848. The cause that brought them together in 1937 was the neglect and exploitation of the Hungarian peasant and the misery of the country's villages. Politically, the Front had little impact, although their program was spelled out in "points," and included demands for individual freedom, universal suffrage, a minimum wage, a forty hour work-week, but most of all for the expropriation of the large estates. [7] Among the

members of the Front Imre Kovács, Péter Veres, Gyula Illyés. István Bibó and László Németh can be described as fellow-travellers of the Front. Each had produced novels, tracts and monographs revealing the plight of the peasant the best known, perhaps, being the autobiographical masterpiece of Illyés, *A puszták népe* (People of the puszta).[8]

Hungary's entry in the war did not elicit a united stand from these writers; several seemed impressed by the series of spectacular German successes. As Veres, one of the most prominent and progressive members of the Front stated, "the leaders of authoritarian and anti-Semitic movements in all countries were intellectuals." Only a minority of intellectuals had the courage, or even the inclination, to protest.[9] As progressive as he was, Veres himself attempted to make a distinction between "anti-Semite," a label he rejected, and *fajvédő* (rassen-schützlerich), one who defends his race, the latter a trait to which he ascribed a positive value.[10] The distinction strikes me as being rather subtle, not convincing.

The members of the Front, never a close-knit organization in any case, did not take a public stand against Hitlerism, whether in Germany or in Hungary; but several of them wrote of the "tradition" of Hungarian humanism, of the need to preserve the country's independence and its freedom of action. At the same time, they were unhesitatingly anti-regime, against the "semi-feudal system" which seemed to have survived in Hungary long after its demise elsewhere. It is not surprising that some of them were victimized alongside writers who were more explicitly socialist.[11] Thus Kovács was imprisoned in 1940 and charged with "lack of respect for the Hungarian nation, and agitation against the class of landowners."[12]

The organs of the Front were literary periodicals such as the *Magyar Csillag* (Hungarian Star), which was initiated in August or September 1941, under the editorship of Illyés and Aladár Schöpflin. This review was bold enough to publish poetry by Jews and crypto-Communists such as Miklós Radnóti, or by the worker-writer-artist Lajos Kassák, who had established his reputation as leader of the avant-garde during World War I. The periodical occasionally reviewed books published in Allied countries, including Joe Davies' *Mission to Moscow* and Wendell Willkie's *One World* rather favourably, in spite of both authors' sympathetic portrayal of the Soviet Union.[13]

The distinguished literary historian, Gyula Borbándi, wrote that the *Magyar Csillag* was a centre of spiritual resistance against Nazi ideas, and that only because of the caution and diplomatic ability of Illyés could the periodical continue to appear until the German troops marched in.[14] Borbándi used the term resistance somewhat loosely, however. It is not easy to tell, perusing the volumes of the journal, that a world war was being fought, a total war in which Hungarian soldiers and civilians were tragically involved. Unlike its predecessor, the more bourgeois *Nyugat* in the period of World War I, the *Magyar Csillag* did not challenge the censors, did not deplore the war openly, did not discuss Hungary's fateful predicament, and published no passionate pacifist poems like the ones Mihály Babits had had the boldness to write and recite (although those of Illyés came close).

As for daily newspapers, the *Népszava* (People's voice), the official organ of the Social Democratic party, continued to appear during the war. Apart from an outspoken issue published at Christmas 1941, which included articles by Communists and anti-Nazi intellectuals, its most progressive aspect was its ongoing polemics with members of the Arrow- Cross movement and the radical right-wing press. There was also the *Magyar Nemzet* (Hungarian Nation) and the *Magyarország* (Hungary), which dared to praise democracy at a time when democracy was a bad word, and reported on the events of the war in such a way that it was possible to read the truth between the lines. For instance, the August 17, 1943 issue of *Magyarország* reported without commentary the ridiculously bloated figures supplied by German propaganda agencies: 43,642 Soviet aircraft downed since the beginning of the war, and a daily toll in Allied aircraft over Germany that often exceeded three hundred. On the other hand, I have pored through the daily papers in vain in search of direct or indirect evidence of sabotage or of active resistance.

The March Front, and other progessive writers, often collaborated with groups of university students, especially those with a peasant background, in evoking the heroic past and in honouring the heroes of the Hungarian revolution of 1848-49. Some of them organized the Historical Memorial Committee, which is considered by some historians as a Communist "front," by others as a front for the resistance in general.[15] The specific task of the Committee was to lay wreaths at the monuments

dedicated to Lajos Batthyány, to Lajos Kossuth, to Mihály Táncsics. The gesture could not be misinterpreted, all were leaders of the movement of independence from the Austro-Germans in the 1840s, whereas Táncsics was also the most eminent representative of the left or even socialist wing of that revolutionary period.[16] Similar demonstrations took place on March 15 of each year by the statue of the poet Petőfi. Moreover, if we discuss the resistance of intellectuals, or of the political function of literature, then surely Petőfi deserves mention, even though the poet has been dead for almost a century.

During the war some university students participated in the so-called "People's Colleges" or NEKOSZ. At the outset, it is true, these colleges were not political associations, but merely dormitories specially funded to house impoverished indigent students, particularly those of a peasant background. The residents of the first and most prominent of these, the István Győrffy College in Budapest, soon recognized the need for political involvement. The tenor of the involvement was provided by a cell of Communist students instrumental in organizing conferences dealing with Marxism, socialism and related themes, at a time these were proscribed all over the country. The students at this College were present at or leading the anti-Nazi demonstrations. Many of them attended the writers' conference at Szárszó in August 1943, where resistance against Nazi domination was explicitly discussed by László Németh and others.[17] The College dissolved itself, under official pressure, on April 22, 1944, shortly after the arrival of the German occupation force.[18]

It is not helpful to compare resistance in Hungary to French, Belgian, Yugoslav, Polish, Slovak, or any other kind of resistance. Nor is it helpful to claim, as a number of Hungarian authors have done, that Hungary was a Fascist country by predilection, or that practically all Hungarians had accepted, passively or actively, German tutelage throughout the war.[19] It must be conceded, however, that resistance was almost always passive, seldom armed. This was particularly true of the intellectuals who tend to be a timid lot in any case. This was also true of the churches, of course, although religious organizations and individual clergymen directly or indirectly intervened to save the lives of many thousands of Jews, jeopardizing their own in the

process.[20] The one pistol shot fired by the opposition member of parliament Endre Bajcsy-Zsilinszky, when a Gestapo unit banged on his door on March 20, 1944, was the lone heroic gesture of the day. Arrested, but released by the Horthy regime, Bajcsy-Zsilinszky and others had the opportunity to organize a resistance group, but the group was wiped out, and its leaders executed, before it could cause damage. Bajcsy-Zsilinszky was not a writer but he had regularly met with, and enjoyed the support of many Hungarian intellectuals.[21]

What may be more pertinent would be to explain and understand why resistance in Hungary assumed such a passive form. I have discussed one of the reasons: resistance to Nazi pressures was carried out, in however lukewarm a fashion, by the regime itself. Acts of physical violence against the Germans could have frustrated the government's efforts to resist Nazi pressures. Another factor, however, needs to be emphasized: the impact of a constant bombardment of anti-Semitic and anti-democratic propaganda over the years. It is debatable that Hungary was a dictatorship, let alone a totalitarian regime or a Fascist country between 1920 and 1944; but the anti-Semitic propaganda directed at the working-class and the petty bourgeoisie remained unchecked for twenty years.

At the same time, the Hungarian public was wounded in its nationalist sentiments by the punitive peace treaty of Trianon. The "average" Hungarian fell for Hitler and for Nazi Germany for the same reasons as the "average" German, a) because Hitler catered to the petty bourgeois mentality that felt its livelihood threatened by the presence of a sizeable Jewish minority, b) because Hitler presented the prospect of the recovery of lost territories, the revision of the treaties signed at Versailles in 1919 and 1920. Indeed, Hungary did increase temporarily as a result of Hitler's intercession and Hungarian nationalists would have required unusual acumen and self-denial not to feel gratitude, not to accept the gift they felt they deserved. Any act against Hitler or against his policies must have seemed an act of ingratitude. The resisters, those who denounced German pressure or Nazi Germany itself, could be seen as ungrateful, at best. Unlike the Yugoslav partisan, or the fighter in the French maquis, those who resisted in Hungary had to brave public opinion in their own country.

NOTES

1. Ferenc Mucs, "Quelques aspects de la Résistance armée en Hongrie contre le Fascisme," in *European Resistance Movements 1939-1945* (Macmillan, 1964), vol. 2, 155-69.

2. L. Nagy Zsuzsa, "A liberális polgári ellenzék pártjai és szervezetei (1919-1941)" ("The parties and organs of the liberal bourgeois opposition"), *Történelmi Szemle* (1976), no. 3, 335-60.

3. Imre Kovács, *A márciusi front* (The March Front) (New Brunswick, 1980), 64.

4. *Magyarország*, 20 October 1943.

5. The Arrow-Cross movement had peaked by 1942, and its advocates seemed to be carrying out rearguard action. In any case, the movement was clearly anti-establishment and its acts often had, explicitly or implicitly, an edge of social protest.

6. Kovács, *op. cit.*, 15.

7. S.B. Várdy, "The World of Hungarian Populism" (review article), *The Canadian-American Review of Hungarian Studies*, vol. V, no. 1 (Spring 1978), 41-50.

8. István Bibó, *Harmadik út* (Third Way) (London: Magyar Könyves Céh, 1960), 186. The masterpiece by Illyés is available in English translation under the title *People of the Puszta* (Budapest: Corvina, 1967).

9. "Egyenes beszéddel" ("In plain words"), *Magyar Csillag*, vol. III, no. 23 (December 1943), 653.

10. "Az író politikája" ("The politics of the writer"), *Magyar Csillag*, vol. IV, no. 1 (January 1944), 8.

11. *Wir Kampften Treu für die Revolution* (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1979), 462. Among the more explicitly socialist writers one might mention Zoltán Fábry in Tiso's Slovakia, and György Bálint in Budapest.

12. Kovács, *op. cit.*, 83-84.

13. Both review by Imre Csécsy, vol. III, no. 22 (November 1943), 620-4; and vol. III, no. 24 (December 1943), 742-6.

14. *Der ungarische Populismus* (Mainz: Hase and Koehler Verlag, 1976), 201.

15. A Communist front according to István Pintér, "Le role joué par les Communistes...," in *European Resistance Movements*, 170-90; a front for the resistance movement in general according to Borbándi, *op cit.*, 231.

16. *Sej, a mi lobogónkat fényes szelek fújják* (Bright winds blow our banner) (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1977); also *Népszava*, 11 November 1941.

17. See, for instance, Sándor Csoóri, "A magyar apokalipszis," *Tiszatáj*, vol. 24, no. 10 (October 1980), 28.

18. *Sej, a mi lobogónkat...*, 104-5.

19. See, for instance, Zoltán Horváth, *Hogy vizsgázott a magyarság* (Budapest: Népszava, 1947), 2. The historian Gyula Szekfű, likewise deplores the lack of resistance, and ascribes it to a love of comfort and safety in *Forradalom után* (After the revolution) (Budapest: Cserépfalvi, 1947).

20. For a detailed and thoughtful discussion of the attitude of the churches in Hungary see László T. László, *Szellemi honvédelem* (Spiritual defense) (Rome: Katolikus Szemle, 1980), as well as Professor László's writings in this volume.

21. Borbándi, *op. cit.*, 229.