

The 'German Question' in Hungary after World War II

János Angi
Debreceni Egyetem



A két világháború közötti időszakban körülbelül fél millió német nemzetiségű lakos élt az első világháborút követő békeszerződés következtében megnövekedett Magyarország területén, ami az ország összlakosságának 6-7 százalékát jelentette. A második világháborúban Magyarország Németország szövetségeseként vett részt a magyarországi németek válaszfeltétel, hogy a magyar vagy a német hadsereg kötelékében harcolnak. A többség a magyar fegyveres erőket választotta, ám a németek egy jelentékeny kisebbség a Waffen SS-ben szolgált. A második világháborút követően valamennyi győztes nagyhatalom magáévá tette a kollektív felelősség elvét a kelet-európai németekkel kapcsolatban, ami világos módon megfogalmazták a Potsdami nyilatkozatban. A nyilatkozat fél millió magyarországi német kitelepítését irányozta elő, akiket az amerikai megszállás övezetbe kellett szállítani. A korabeli magyar kormány javítani igyekezett azon a orosz pozícióján, ami a háború elvesztéséből adódott - igyekezett a győztesek kedvében járni, és maradéktalanul teljesíteni a nyilatkozat ajánlásait. S bár a szomszédos országokban élő magyar nemzetiségű kisebbségek miatt a kollektív felelősség elvét az akkori magyar politikai pártok elvetették, egyedül a Független Kisgazdapárt tiltakozott a németek kitelepítése ellen. Az igazságosság persze az is hozzátartozik, hogy Magyarország soha nem volt katonai megszállás alatt, ezért a kormányon lévő kisgazdapárt sem tobotett semmit. A kormány által elfogadott kitelepítési dekrétum csak nagyon keveseket mentesítette a kitelepítés hatálya alól, akiknek magyar házastársuk és kiskorú gyermekeik voltak, vagy határozott évenél idősebb nagyszülők éltek ugyanazon háztartásban; akik az úgynevezett «demokratikus» pártok tagjai voltak; akiknek üldözéseiben volt részükhöz a háború alatti magyar kormányok részéről. A kitelepítés végrehajtását két alapvető tényező akadályozta. Mivel a hátráló német csapatokkal több tízezer magyarországi német is elhagyta az országot a háború alatt, egyszerűen nem volt elég német az országban a fél milliót kóvá kitöltéséhez. Másodszor, a magyar csendőrség - amelynek emlékeztében még élénken élt a zsidóság deportálásának emléke - sok esetben vonakodott végrehajtani azt. Ezért, a Kommunista Párt ellenőrzése alatt álló belügyminisztérium irányítása alá tartozó Államvédelmi Osztály speciális egységet szervezett a deportálások lebonyolítására. 1946 nyarán mintegy 120 000 ezer németet szállítottak az amerikai megszállás övezetbe. Ekkor azonban a deportálást leállították, mivel a győztes nagyhatalma közötti viszony kiegyenlítődésének köszönhetően, az amerikaiak nem voltak hajlandók több német fogadására. A kitelepítések mégsem fejeződtek be teljesen, s 1948. októberéig amikor Magyarországon a Kommunista Párt kezébe került a hatalom - további mintegy 50 (000) németet deportáltak Németország szovjet megszállás övezetbe. A magyar statisztikák 185 655 főben adták meg a kitelepítettek számát, míg a németországi adatok 213 196 személyről szólnak. Ebben azonban azok is benne vannak, akik a háború végén menekültek el Magyarországról.



János Angi is associate professor of history at the Department of History of the University of Debrecen, where he was educated. One of his main fields of interest is the history of enlightened absolutism in East-Central Europe, especially in Russia. He completed his doctoral dissertation about the enlightened absolutism of Catherine II of Russia in 1999. He also has an interest in the history of Eastern Europe after World War II. He has published several studies and articles concerning his two main fields of interest in different journals. Besides teaching, he is active as an editor of a publishing house and a weekly journal in Debrecen.



Hungary, the Hungarians, and the various nationalities living together with the Hungarians in the Carpathian basin could not avoid becoming subject to genocide, deportation, violence, and humiliation during and after the Second World War.

Among a series of tragedies the calamity of the Hungarian-Germans was one of the most shocking. The majority of Hungarians did not lay blame on their German minorities for the disaster of the war, nor did they take revenge against them as happened in other East-Central European countries. Yet the Hungarian political leadership still exercised collective punishment against them for crimes committed by their alleged *Vaterland*, the Third Reich. Though the Germans within the borders of a much reduced Hungary, sanctioned by the treaty of Trianon of 1920, avoided persecution on the level of their cousins, the *Donauschwaben* of Yugoslavia, this fact cannot exempt the Hungarian political leaders from blame. They applied collective punishment against a national minority that had coexisted in harmony with the Hungarian majority for centuries, and many of them had lived in the Carpathian basin for a longer period of time than some of the ethnic groups, who, in the course of the centuries, became assimilated with the Hungarians. These included the Cumans, various Slavic nationalities and many Romanians.

German settlers had reached the Carpathian Basin and found new homes in the Kingdom of Hungary in two large waves. The first of these migration waves took place in the 12th and the 13th centuries, when the migrant Germans settled both in Upper Hungary in the region of *Szepesség* or *Zipserland*, as well as in Transylvania. Although these Germans came from various regions of the Holy Roman Empire, the Hungarians called them “Saxons” – a term that these German settlers themselves came to adopt as their own. “Saxon” became a legal category in Hungarian constitutional developments.

These German settlers established towns in Hungary’s northern and eastern regions, where they received special privileges and immunities under the so-called “Saxon law.” The Transylvanian Saxons, as *hospes*, gained their legal charter from king Andrew II (r. 1205-1235), named after him *Andreanum*. The rights granted in this document were extended to all German-speaking inhabitants of Transylvania in 1486. The Germans of the *Szepesség* were granted a similar charter by king Stephen V (r. 1270-1272) in 1271. During the era of Reformation, in the 16th century, most of the Hungarian “Saxons” became Lutherans, or “Evangelicals”, as they are known in Hungary.

The expulsion of the Turks in the late 17th century was followed by a second wave of migration in the 18th, when the Habsburg rulers of Hungary made it their policy to repopulate the reconquered and depopulated Hungarian territories of central and south-central Hungary. Although the ranks of the new settlers included Slovaks, Serbians, the majority of them were Catholic Germans from the Rhine region, who in Hungary came to be known as “Swabians”. They settled primarily in four of the country’s regions: 1) the central plains, 2) southeastern Trans-Danubia, 3) Szatmár County in eastern Hungary, and 4) the southern borderlands, known as *Délvidék*.

To counteract the appeal to Protestantism, the Viennese court wanted to settle mainly Catholic Germans in Hungary. Accordingly they selected the “Swabians” who arrived from the area situated between the upper Danube and Lake Boden. This region had suffered greatly during the Thirty Years War, and the impact of that calamity was still being felt a century later. Therefore, its population was eager to move to new territories with greater promise of a good life.

Once settled, the Germans of both these two major migration waves were generally better off than the local Hungarian population. There were several interrelated reasons for this: 1) the town-dwellers among the settlers were on a higher level of urbanization than their Hungarian counterparts, and they were also more receptive to innovations; 2) the agriculturalists among them brought with themselves a higher level of material culture and more advanced agricultural technology and methods of cultivation; 3) they all enjoyed privileges and immunities – such as temporary exemption from taxation, followed by favorable tax regulations, living under their own laws, etc. – that were not available to the native Hungarian population; 4) the settlers followed the principle of primogeniture, which left all the property in one piece in the hands of first-born son, while Hungarian practice favored the division of the property among all male children; 5) the Germans also appeared to be more diligent and more productive than the country’s other ethnic groups, including the Hungarians. While this generally accepted view cannot be verified on the basis of hard evidence, there is no question that the Germans were more successful than their neighbors, which only increased their confidence and their drive to succeed.

By the early 20th century the Germans in the Kingdom of Hungary numbered close to two million, or slightly over 10% of the population. This figure, however, included not only the “Saxons” and the “Swabians”, but also those Austrians who had settled on Hungary’s western frontierlands, adjacent to Austria. Although bilingual and bicultural, most of these Germans still retained much of their German identity.

Following World War I and the dismemberment of Austria-Hungary (1919-1920), there remained approximately half a million Germans in the much reduced post-Trianon Hungary. They comprised the only substantial ethnic minority in the country (6 to 7%) in a country of eight million inhabitants. The proportion of all other minorities together did not reach 2%.

The position of these Germans changed significantly after the *Anschluss* (1938), when Hitler annexed Austria, and for a while Hungary became the immediate neighbor of the much-enlarged and aggressive Third Reich. In 1940, when Hungary joined the Tripartite pact, the Hungarian-Germans were given the choice of joining either the Hungarian or the

Table 1. Nationalities (native language declared by inhabitants) of Hungary (1880-1910).

Native language	1890		1900		1910	
	number of people	%	number of people	%	number of people	%
Hungarian	6 165 455	44.8	8 651 520	51.4	9 944 627	54.4
German	1 799 232	13.1	1 999 060	11.9	1 903 357	10.4
Slovak	1 790 485	13.0	2 002 165	11.9	1 946 357	10.7
Romanian	2 323 794	16.9	2 798 559	16.6	2 948 186	16.1
Ruthenian	342 354	2.6	424 774	2.5	464 270	2.5
Croatian	613 394 *	4.6	191 432	1.1	194 808	1.1
Serb			437 737	3.1	461 516	2.5
Other **	714 889	5.2	333 008	1.4	401 412	2.3
Total	13 749 603	100	16 838 255	100	18 264 533	100

* Croatian and Serb people were counted together in 1890; ** including non-speaking people

German armed forces. The majority of the conscripts felt sufficiently Hungarian that they chose the Hungarian Army. A significant minority, however, joined the Waffen SS, which placed them under direct German command. Although Hungary joined the war on Germany's side, after 1941 German-Hungarian relations became more and more strained. Hitler became increasingly distrustful of regent Miklós Horthy's political sympathies and leadership in the war. This strained relationship eventually led to the German occupation of Hungary (19 March 1944), and then to regent Horthy's unsuccessful attempt to leave the war altogether (15 October 1944).

The Soviet Red Army reached Hungary's borders following the Romanian *volte-face* in the late summer of 1944 and occupied the country by the spring of 1945. Among the tens of thousands of Hungarians who fled the country with German troops, there were also some 60,000 to 70,000 Hungarian-Germans. Having been classified as Germans, they were most concerned about Soviet retaliation. These fears were well justified in their case, for the vic-



Fig. 1
The Potsdam conference.

torious Allies agreed to accept the principle of collective responsibility, which was incorporated into the Potsdam Declaration in 1945:

The Allied armies are in occupation of the whole of Germany and the German people have begun to atone for the terrible crimes committed under the leadership of those whom in the hour of their success, they openly approved and blindly obeyed.

The Potsdam Declaration permitted Poland and Czechoslovakia – victims of Germany – to punish and to expel their German minority population. The existence of the latter within those states had been used by Hitler as a justification for the German attacks against them and for their dismemberment. Curiously, the Potsdam Declaration was also applied to Hungary, even though it had been an ally of Nazi Germany:

The conference reached the following agreement on the removal of Germans from Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary:

The three governments having considered the question in all its aspects, recognize that the transfer to Germany of German populations, or elements thereof, remaining in Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary, will have to be undertaken. They agree that any transfers that take place should be effected in an orderly and humane manner.

[...] they consider that the Allied Control Council in Germany should in the first instance examine the problem with special regard to the question of the equitable distribution of these Germans among the several zones of occupation.

The Allied Control Commission set the number of Germans to be expelled at 6.5 million, half a million of whom were to come from Hungary. The Hungarian-Germans to be expelled were assigned to the American Zone. Though the text of the decree only made *allowance* for the resettlement of German minorities, the Hungarian government – eager to appease the victors – interpreted it as a *request* and *command*. Thus, this statement was incorporated into the Hungarian expatriating order. In consequence of this, an ethnic minority whose ancestors had lived in Hungary long before the ancestors of many assimilated nationalities were expelled from their homeland. They also lost their Hungarian citizenship.

In theory at least, the Hungarian political parties were against collective punishment, since the same principle could also be applied against the Hungarians by the Romanians in Transylvania, by the Slovaks in Upper Hungary, and by the Serbs in *Bácska* (the upper half of Voivodina). Yet, it was only the Independent Smallholders' Party that resolutely opposed German expulsion. As the sole legally operating right-of-center party, it could count on the support of Hungary's German minority. The Communists, the Social Democrats and the National Peasants' Party welcomed deportations, since they were bound to weaken the electoral base of their chief rival – which had received more than 50% of the vote at the 1945 elections. The expellees would also lose their land holdings, which could then be distributed among Hungarian peasants.

During these expulsions Hungary was under Soviet military occupation, and until the Paris Peace Treaty of 1947 all executive powers *de facto* were in the hands of the Allied Control Commission. It was chaired by Marshal Voroshilov, who was in charge of the Soviet occupying forces in Hungary. Thus, even though the country had a Smallholder prime minister

in the person of Zoltán Tildy, he was in no position to resist the will of the Hungarian communists and the Soviet occupiers. The position of the minister of interior – by Soviet instructions – was given to the communist László Rajk. It was Rajk who was responsible for organizing deportation of the Hungarian-Germans.

The Deportation Decree used the census of 1941 as the basis for the decision as to who should be expelled, even though this policy violated the promises made by the framers of the 1941 census. The Decree stated:

Those Hungarian citizens who in the last census claimed to be German-speaking or of German nationality, who reassumed their former German names in place of their Hungarianized names, and who became members of the Volksbund or other German armed organizations (SS) should be resettled in Germany.

Only very few in the above categories were exempt from deportation. These included: 1) those who had non-German marriage partners and under-age children, or grandparents above age sixty-five living in the same household; 2) members of the so called “democratic” parties, which in contemporary communist terminology included the Communist Party, Social Democratic Party, and the Peasants’ Party; 3) those who had suffered persecution at the hands of war-time governments.

These exemptions did not apply to name-changers, to members of German associations, and to those who had served in the German armed forces.

Once the program was implemented, two major problems emerged concerning the deportation: 1) Because of the previous flight of many Germans to the West, there were simply “not enough” (half a million) ethnic Germans left in Hungary to fill the quota; 2) Hungarian police forces – who remembered the deportation of the rural Jewry with the help of the Hungarian gendarmerie – in many instances refused to carry out the orders for deportation.

As it turned out, it was simply impossible to implement the orders for the deportation of 500,000 Germans. The State Security Department (ÁVO) did set up a special unit for the execution of the decree, and most of the deportations were in fact carried out by the members of this unit. By the summer of 1946 120,000 Germans had been deported to the American Zone of Germany. But in that year – because of the turns of great-power politics and the beginning of the Cold War – deportations were stopped. American authorities in Germany did not want to accept more Germans, and they alluded to the hygienic deficiencies in the transport carriages, as well as to the deportation of innocent people.

Resettlement, however, did not stop at that point. After the communist take-over in 1947-1948, the Hungarian government deported an additional 50,000 Germans, but this time to the Soviet zone of Germany. On 1 October 1948 all deportations were suspended, and on 23 September 1949 they were officially stopped. Hungarian statistical data gives the number of deported Germans as 185,655. German official statistics, on the other hand, speak of 213,196. The latter data, however, also include those Germans who had fled voluntarily prior the implementation of the deportations.

This tragedy, the unjustified expulsion of hundreds of thousands of people, was further complicated by the fact that the homes of some of the deported Trans-Danubian Germans

were given to Székelys from Bukovina, who had been resettled several times before and during the war. Following the Second Vienna Arbitration Award of 1940, which returned Northern Transylvania to Hungary, and then the Hungarian reoccupation of *Délvidék* (Northern Voivodina), these Hungarian-speaking people from beyond the northeastern Carpathians were first settled in *Bácska*. After the war, however, with the loss of *Bácska* and the massacres of some 30,000 Hungarians by Tito's partisans, they fled back to Hungary and there were resettled in Trans-Danubia. Although they have now lived in the same villages in Tolna county since 1945-1946, there is still a strong ill feeling between Hungarian Germans and Bukovina Székelys. The passage of over half a century has not healed the wounds of the Székelys and the Germans; their plight appears to be a never-ending story.



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SOURCE

The Berlin Conference of the Three Heads of Government of the U.S.S.R., U. S. A., and U. K., which took place from July 17 to August 2, 1945, came to the following conclusions:

[...]

IX. Conclusion on Peace Treaties and Admission to the United Nations Organization

The three Governments consider it desirable that the present anomalous position of Italy, Bulgaria, Finland, Hungary and Rumania should be terminated by the conclusion of Peace Treaties. They trust that the other interested Allied Governments will share these views.

[...]

XII. Orderly transfer of German Populations

The Three Governments, having considered the question in all its aspects, recognize that the transfer to Germany of German populations, or elements thereof remaining in Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary, will have to be undertaken. They agree that any transfers that take place should be effected in an orderly and humane manner.

Since the influx of a large number of Germans into Germany would increase the burden already resting on the occupying authorities, they consider that the Control Council in Germany should in the first instance examine the problem, with special regard to the question of the equitable distribution of these Germans among the several zones of occupation. They are accordingly instructing their respective representatives on the Control Council to report to their Governments as soon as possible the extent to which such persons have already entered Germany from Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary, to submit an estimate of the time and rate at which further transfers could be carried out having regard to the present situation in Germany.

The Czechslovak Government, the Polish Provisional Government and the Control Council in Hungary are at the same time being informed of the above and are being requested meanwhile to suspend further expulsions pending an examination by the Governments concerned of the report from their representatives on the Control Council.

