



## The Life of the Hungarian Population During World War II

### **ETERNAL ECHOES**

Teach and Learn About the Holocaust

# The Life of the Hungarian Population During World War II

## Introduction

The transition from peace to war was not obvious for the Hungarian people. While nothing changed within the country on September 1, 1939, when Nazi Germany invaded Poland and World War II broke out, Hungarian troops had already clashed with Czechoslovakian forces in Transcarpathia on March 15, 1939. On April 12, 1941 Hungary attacked Yugoslavia, which officially already had ceased to exist, and marched into Vojvodina, the most northern part of Yugoslavia (today's Serbia).

On June 26, 1941 prime minister László Bárdossy declared a state of war between Hungary and the Soviet Union, after the town of Kosice was bombed by unknown, but suspected Soviet airplanes. Great Britain declared war on Hungary on December 7, 1941, while Hungary declared war on the US a few days later. The first bombs fell on Budapest unexpectedly in September 1942. This bombing, which was carried out by long range aircrafts, caused only minor damages. Until April 3, 1944 the Hungarian residents didn't have to face the full horror of aerial warfare.



Hungarian Arrow Cross militia and a German Tiger II tank in Budapest, October 1944.

© Bundesarchiv, Bild 1011-680-8283A-12A

## The Peaceful Rural Areas

Food supply in Hungary was relatively plentiful until 1944, only the lack of certain raw materials (e.g. raw leather) caused tensions in the supply chain. In September 1941 rationing for bread and flour was introduced, milk and meat was included into the system in May 1942, but everything remained available on the free market. According to the plans of the state secretary for agriculture, compulsory product delivery for the state was only adopted in 1943. This system was based on the value of the soil, not depending on the actually produced quantity. Life standards, compared to those during World War I, did not drop even despite this system. Moreover, compared to Germany and the occupied territories, Hungary seemed to be an oasis of peace and welfare.

Tensions were primarily caused by the ethnic issue. Due to the areal expansions 27 per cent of the country's population was not mother-tongue Hungarian. The Hungarian-Slovakian and Hungarian-Romanian relations were the worst during the war. On the Hungarian-Romanian border the military incidents became constant, and some ended in casualties.

## Theatre of War

Hungary became a theater of war from the end of August 1944. From September on, tens of thousands of refugees from Transylvania had to be accommodated, and the number of wartime refugees was constantly growing. The country was declared to be a military area of operation. In several places, German and Hungarian military headquarters

commandeered consumer's goods by force. On October 15, 1944 Miklós Horthy tried to sign an armistice with the Soviet Union, but his attempt quickly failed, and the Arrow-Cross Party took over power with German help.

The government of Ferenc Szálasi was a coalition government, including representatives of smaller extreme-right parties. The Arrow-Cross shift of power meant the break-away of unlimited terror. The Arrow-Cross Party received jurisdiction of an authority with no opportunity to appeal. Robbing, dragging away and murdering of people became a mass phenomenon, particularly in Budapest, but in many rural towns as well. However, after 1944 the rule of Szálasi in practice extended only to the northeastern counties of Transdanubia, an area west of Budapest.

## Soviet Troops Cross the Hungarian Border

In September 1944 the Red Army had reached the Hungarian border. Generally it can be stated that the behavior towards the Hungarian population of the Soviet troops, compared to the German occupation, was even harsher. The atrocities can be divided into two categories: the actions of single Soviet soldiers and war crimes organized by the Red Army, which primarily meant mass rape of women, robbery and murders. The second category includes deporting the population to captivity (mostly ethnic Germans), and the planned and systematic plunder of the national treasure.

## Fatalities

The Hungarian fatalities follow the German, Polish, Yugoslavian and Soviet numbers, and by doing so they belong to the highest category. From the 14.6 million population (considering the 1941 borders), around 340 000–360 000 military and 590 000 civilian victims are to be found. Around 450 000–490 000 people were persecuted and murdered because of their Jewish ancestry. The 1944–1945 bombings demanded 20 000–30 000 victims. At least 30 000 civilians lost their lives in battles. In the war 690 000 soldiers and 230 000 civilians (the majority of the latter from within the 1938 borders) – in total 920 000 people – were taken prisoners of war. 56 per cent of the soldiers and almost every deported civilian, in total about 616 000 people were deported to the Soviet Union. Approximately one third died in captivity, the rest returned to Hungary after the war.

© 2014, 2019 the author and the Swedish Committee Against Antisemitism

Text: Krisztián Ungváry, historian

Translation: Andrea Szonyi

Graphic design: Cecilia Undemark Péterfy