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HEROES? VICTIMS? PERPETRATORS? CHANGES IN THE IMAGE OF HUNGARIAN SOLDIERS FIGHTING ON THE EASTERN FRONT¹

Between 1941 and 1945, hundreds of thousands of soldiers of the Hungarian Royal Army fought against the Red Army. Perception of these soldiers has changed significantly since World War II. In examining this, I distinguish three different views: that they were heroes, that they were victims, and that they were perpetrators. A hero cult had already emerged in connection with Hungarian soldiers before the war against the Soviet Union. Hungarian society revered veterans of the War of Independence of 1848-1849 and the First World War as heroes. The Horthy regime in particular was characterized by militarism. After the total defeat of Hungary in World War II, power and society in Hungary could no longer consider those who fought against the Soviet Union as heroes. In addition, it was not clear how the new political elite and Hungarian public society would judge the soldiers. An anti-fascist hero cult could not be based on the Hungarian soldiers since significant resistance did not emerge within the Honvéd Army on the Eastern front. The war crimes committed against the Soviet civilian population were not dealt with, as this would have made it more difficult for the Hungarian-Soviet relationship to develop. In the years of state-socialism, the roles played in the war by officers and enlisted men were differently interpreted. Officers were seen as guilty, while rank-and-file soldiers were regarded as victims of the Horthy-fascist regime. According to this narrative, Horthyist military officers committed their sins not primarily against the Soviet population but against the Hungarian people.

Keywords: Second World War, history of Hungary, memory politics, state socialism, hero cult, Soviet history

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During the Second World War, hundreds of thousands of soldiers of the Royal Hungarian Army served and fought on the Eastern Front. In the 80 years since the war, public perception of these soldiers has changed dramatically. In my paper, I will look at the changes to and key features of their image from the Second World War until the period following the regime change. I will focus on the perception of Hungary's combat and occupation activities in the Soviet territories during the war against the Soviet Union. Thus, I will not examine the perception of war crimes committed in the reoccupied territories or how fighting in Hungary is remembered. It is also beyond the scope of my study to examine memory politics in relation to the Hungarian Labor Service.

In line with the title of the study, I will interpret how the soldiers were perceived in relation to three key concepts. The concept of the hero is one of the oldest topoi in European culture. With the emergence of nation states, we can discover two changes concerning the concept of the hero compared to the one in the ancient and Christian cultures. On the one hand, heroism increasingly came to mean heroism linked to the nation, the latter definition also being linked to the state. Think of the increased number of military decorations or the emergence of the definition of 'the heroic dead.' On the other hand, the hero himself has become democratized. We are no longer talking about superhuman heroes; with the advent of the modern mass army, a cult has been created in relation to enlisted men, previously regarded as the "scum of society."² The other key concept is sacrifice, which can mean sacrificing one's life for one's country, for the nation, i.e., a heroic death, or, after a lost war, can refer to the victims of a regime that sacrificed its soldiers and other citizens for meaningless or immoral purposes.³ Moreover, the mass violence and genocide against civilians that accompanied the wars of the 20th century has led to soldiers increasingly being represented as perpetrators of war crimes.⁴

Even before the Second World War, Hungarian society and public opinion had a strong militaristic tradition. When entering the war, a well-

2 SINKÓ KATALIN, „A nemzeti emlékmű és nemzeti tudat változásai”, *Művészettörténeti Értesítő* 32. no. 4 (1983): 185–201., TANGL BALÁZS, „Ezredideológiák és ezredkultúrák a cs. (és) kir. hadseregben”, *Hadtörténelmi Közlemények* 129, no. 3 (2016): 674–78.

3 REINHART KOSELLECK, “Die Diskontinuität der Erinnerung”, *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie* 47, no. 2 (1999): 215–6. <https://doi.org/10.1524/dzph.1999.47.2.213>

4 Cf. GERŐ ANDRÁS, „Három az egyben: hősi halott, áldozat, felelős”, in *Hindu istenek, sziámi tigrisek. Balogh András 70 éves*, ed. MAJOROS ISTVÁN, ANTAL GÁBOR, HÁDA BÉLA, HEVŐ PÉTER, MADARÁSZ ANITA (Budapest: ELTE BTK Új- és Jelenkori Egyetemes Történeti Tanszék, 2014), 177–194.

established press and war reporting system was ready to interpret the war against the Soviet Union. The image of the Defense Forces in public and even in private conversations was also regulated by criminal law. This meant that charges of defamation and subversion of public order could be brought against anyone criticizing the army. Under these circumstances, the Hungarian public's image of Hungarian soldiers was highly simplistic and schematic.

Beyond the representation of classical military virtues, interpretation of the actions of Hungarian soldiers was based on antagonistic opposites. On one side stood the Hungarian soldier defending the Christian Hungarian homeland; on the other, there was the red menace of the Soviet regime preparing to invade Europe. Since Hungary had no territorial claims or other conflicts with the Soviet Union, the Hungarian soldier's mission was perceived negatively. That is, the Hungarian soldier was not primarily fighting for something but against something. The image of the Soviet enemy arose both from the anti-Soviet and antisemitic public life of the Horthy regime and was adapted to the image of the enemy in the Nazi worldview. A peculiar feature of war propaganda is that several elements of revisionist propaganda – such as the defense of the millennial borders of Hungary and the image of Greater Hungary – appeared in the construction of the meaning of the war, even though Hungary fought together with Slovakia and Romania against the Soviet Union.⁵

It was ordered in April 1942 that the names of the heroic dead of the “operations since 1938” should be added to the First World War memorials.⁶ Otherwise, the state authorities basically made these losses a taboo

5 MOLNÁR SIMON, „Konstruált katonatípusok a második világháború magyar sajtójában: Magyarországi időszaki sajtó 1943. évi lapszámái alapján”, Szakdolgozat (Budapest: Zsigmond Király Egyetem Kommunikáció- és Művelődéstudományi Intézet, 2018) https://www.academia.edu/37331163/Konstru%C3%A1lt_katonat%C3%ADpusok_a_m%C3%A1sodik_vil%C3%A1gh%C3%A1bor%C3%BA_magyar_sajt%C3%B3j%C3%A1ban;PIHURIK_JUDIT,Naplók_és_memoárok_a_Don-kanyarból,_1942–1943. (Budapest: Napvilág, 2015), 29–44; TURBUCZ DÁVID, „Horthy Miklós vezérkultusza és a háborús propaganda”, in *1944/1945: Társadalom a háborúban: Folytonosság és változás Magyarországon*, ed. BÓDY ZSOMBOR, HORVÁTH SÁNDOR (Budapest: MTA BTK TTI, 2015), 260–263.

6 „A m. kir. belügyminiszter 1942. évi 28.282. számú rendelete, a hősi halottak emlékének megörökítéséről”, *Rendeleték Tára* 76 (1942): Bp. 974–975.; „24.364/el.22.-1942. számú körrendelet. A hősi halottak emlékének megörökítése”, *Honvédségi Közlöny* 69, no. 20. (May 5, 1942): 235.; These decrees were repealed in 1944 in reference to Act XX of 1942. „A m. kir. belügyminiszter 47.219/1943. B. M. rendelete. A hősi halottak emlékének megörökítéséről szóló 28.282/1942. B. M.1) számú rendelet hatályon kívül helyezése”, *Belügyi Közlöny* 49, no. 3 (January 16, 1944): 76–77.

subject, apart from the commemoration of the death of the deputy regent, which was promulgated in law.⁷ This can be seen not only in the concealment of casualty figures but also in the avoidance of depicting the wartime suffering of Hungarian soldiers.

There was no public discussion of Hungarian soldiers in the role of perpetrators; only in the context of the January 1942 raid in the south of Hungary did the issue of atrocities come up in Parliament.⁸ The civilian and military authorities were also careful not to publish reports or photographs that reported or depicted executions, even if they approved of the events. In at least one case, a book was censored because of an account of a mass killing,⁹ and photographs of executions were banned at the front.¹⁰

The crimes committed by Hungarians were reported in various enemy sources: in reports of the Telegraph Agency of the Soviet Union (TASS),¹¹ local press in the territories liberated from Hungarian rule,¹² diplomatic reports,¹³ and internal military propaganda.¹⁴ However, the Soviets did not thematize these issues in the broader public sphere, unlike the German mass murders. That may have been because the primary aim was for

7 „1942. évi XX. törvénycikk a hősi halált halt vitéz nagybányai Horthy István kormányzóhelyettes úr emlékének és a nemzet hálájának megőrkítéséről”, in *1942. évi törvénycikkek*, ed. DEGRÉ MIKLÓS, VÁRADY-BRENNER ALAJOS (Budapest: Franklin Társulat, [1942/1943]), 161–164.

8 VIGH KÁROLY, „Bajcsy-Zsilinszky Endre és a »hideg napok«, *Történelmi Szemle* 11, no. 1–2 (1968) 81–103.

9 FÓRIS ÁKOS, „»A zsidó aranka a keresztény lucernán« – a dnyepropetrovszki zsidóság megsemmisítésének magyar leírása”, in *Holokausz, csend, beszéd, emlékezet*, üzenet, ed. KELEMEN ZOLTÁN (Szeged: Universitas Szeged Kiadó, 2019), 173–85.

10 FÓRIS ÁKOS, „Fotódokumentumok a magyar megszálló csapatok szovjet területeken elkövetett bűncselekményeiről”, *Az antiszemitizmus történeti formái a cári birodalomban és a Szovjetunió területén*, ed. KRAUSZ TAMÁS, BARTA TAMÁS (Budapest: Russica Pannonica, 2014): 341–343., UNGVÁRY KRISZTIÁN, *Magyar megszálló csapatok a Szovjetunióban 1941–1944. Esemény – elbeszélés – utóélet* (Budapest: Osiris Kiadó, 2015), 224–225.

11 TASS report about the Hungarian war crimes quoted in Magyar Nemzeti Levéltár Országos Levéltár K 428 t.) 2395. sz. Házi Tájékoztató, 1941. július 3. 19 óra 40 perc; 7030. sz. Házi Tájékoztató, 1942. december 30. 11 óra 30. perc

12 E.g., KRAUSZ TAMÁS, VARGA ÉVA MÁRIA (eds.), *A magyar megszálló csapatok a Szovjetunióban.: Levéltári dokumentumok 1941–1947*. (Budapest: L'Harmattan, 2013), 489–490.

13 FÓRIS ÁKOS, „A megszállt szovjet területek kérdése a magyar polgári szerveknél”, in *Az első világháború irodalmi és történelmi aspektusai a kelet-európai régióban*, ed. FODOR JÓZSEF PÉTER, MAROSI RENÁTA, MIKLÓS DÁNIEL, PÉRO KRISZTINA, SZABÓ ROLAND (Budapest: Trefort-kert Alapítvány, 2017), 77–78.

14 E. g., Центральний архів Міністерства оборони Російської Федерації Фонд: 6863, Опись: 150638, Дело: 8, Л. 35. Журнал боевых действий 311 гв. сп.

Hungarians to oppose their German ally.¹⁵ For this reason, the Soviets primarily highlighted the war responsibility of the Germans, and the war crimes committed by the Hungarian and other German-Allied armies in the Soviet Union received less attention.

After Hungary's defeat in the war, perception of both the war against the Soviet Union and the Horthy regime changed radically. The cult of the heroic dead was primarily reserved for the benefit of the Soviet and Allied soldiers who liberated Hungary. The creation of new, anti-fascist heroes from Hungarian soldiers was problematic because there was no demonstrable resistance until the Arrow Cross Party took power.¹⁶ Béla Illés also noted bitterly in a post-war article that the number of Hungarians who fought alongside the Soviets during the Russian civil war was significantly higher than in the later conflict: "We cannot speak of thousands, or even hundreds, during the Great Patriotic War, but only a few."¹⁷ The number of "heroes" that could be counted was further reduced because many Hungarian military officers who fought against the German occupiers or defected to the Soviets were convicted in political trials in the 1940s and 1950s.¹⁸

In this way, Hungarian soldiers could only be considered as victims or perpetrators. Interestingly, both Mátyás Rákosi and Gyula Háy gave detailed accounts of mass murder by the Hungarian occupying forces in their lectures to Hungarian soldiers who were taken prisoner of war by the Soviets during the war.¹⁹ However, the post-war Sovietization of Hungarian power and society did not address the issue of responsibility. Several factors contributed to this failure. On the one hand, neither the new Hungarian state power nor the Soviet Union had any interest in bringing the crimes against the Soviet population into the public consciousness, as this

15 NYIKOLAJ GYERZSALUK, „A magyar antifasiszták részvétele a frontpropagandában”, *Had-történeti Közlemények* 26, no. 3 (1979): 425–52.; PIHURIK JUDIT, „»Agitgránátok« – antifasiszta propaganda a szovjet hadifogolytáborokban”, *Múltunk* 65. no. 1 (2020) 35–58.

16 BARTHA ÁKOS, *Véres város. Fegyveres ellenállás Budapesten 1944–1945* (Budapest: Jaffa, 2021); SZAKÁLY SÁNDOR, „A katonai ellátási mozgalom Magyarországon a második világháború éveiben”, *Honvédségi Szemle* 41, no. 9. (September 1987): 12–19.

17 ILLÉS BÉLA, „Magyarok a Szovjet Hadseregben 1941–1945”, *Szabad Hazánkért* 3, no. 3–4 (March–April 1955): 10.

18 OKVÁTH IMRE (ed.), *Katonai perek a kommunista diktatúra időszakában, 1945–1958. Tanulmányok a fegyveres testületek tagjai elleni megtorlásokról a hidegháború kezdeti időszakában* (Budapest: Történeti Hivatal, 2001).

19 HÁY GYULA, *Partizánok tükre* (Moszkva: Idegennyelvű Irodalmi Kiadó, 1943); RÁKOSI MÁTYÁS, *A magyar jövőért* (Budapest: Szikra, 1945).

would have hindered the improvement of Hungarian-Soviet relations.²⁰ The case of the People's Court against Károly Sztatkovszky is a typical example of this attitude. The case against Sztatkovszky was brought because he was found with photographs in which he is seen standing with a "serene expression" next to hanging partisans. The Budapest People's Court did not convict him for war crimes, but he was convicted under Article 13 of the Law on the People's Court for "engaging in activities [...] which are conducive to obstruction of peace or cooperation among peoples after the war."²¹

On the other hand, the primary ideological basis for the post-war prosecution was that the perpetrators of war crimes committed their acts not only against specific victims but also against the Hungarian people. This is how a view was developed that separated responsibility for war crimes from the "Hungarian people" and defined it on a nationality or class basis.²² On the one hand, this has encouraged the perception, which has persisted until recent years, that Hungarian soldiers were more humane than Germans in their treatment of the population of the occupied territories. Only the writer Béla Illés, who had returned from the Soviet Union, held a contrary view in Hungarian public opinion.²³ On the other hand, a radical distinction was made between the responsibility borne by officers and conscripts. While officers were a burden to the new state power because of their social status and often German origins, privates were seen as the social base of the new regime. In this way, a worker or peasant could only commit crimes under the guidance of his commanders.

The conflict between officers and enlisted men was most visibly highlighted during the trial of Gusztáv Jány, the commander of the Hungarian 2nd Army. Due to the meaninglessness and the high casualties of the fighting around 1,500 kilometres away from the Hungarian border, the defeat of this army by the Don River (the so-called "Don Bend") became the

20 Cf. KRAUSZ TAMÁS, „Előszó: Az elhallgatott népiértés”, in *A magyar megszálló csapatok a Szovjetunióban. Levéltári dokumentumok 1941–1947*, ed. KRAUSZ TAMÁS, VARGA ÉVA MÁRIA (Budapest: L'Harmattan, 2013), 20–23.

21 Budapest Főváros Levéltára XXV.1.a 1530/1945. Budapesti Népbíróság ítélete Sztatkovszky Károly ügyében. 1945. július 18.

22 Cf. FÓRIS ÁKOS, „A Szovjetunió elleni háború képe a háború utáni felelősségre vonásban,” in *Háborúk és békék: hagyomány és megújulás a szláv népek történelmében és kultúrájában V. A 2015-ös tudományos felolvasóülés anyaga*, ed. SZABÓ TÜNDE, SZILI SÁNDOR (Szombathely: Szláv Történelmi és Filológiai Társaság, 2015), 78–91; UNGVÁRY, *Magyar megszálló csapatok*, 416–417.

23 E. g., ILLÉS BÉLA, „Voronyezstől Budapestig”, *Új Szó* 3, no. 9 (1947. január 12.; January 12, 1947), 1.

symbol of the Eastern Front after the war.²⁴ The former army commander personified the officers who sent their enlisted men to their deaths on the Eastern Front.²⁵ However, during the trials, there was no emphasis on the question of responsibility concerning the 2nd Army's actions against the civilian population, even when testimonies and documents revealed such activities.²⁶

However, the victim status of the Hungarian soldiers meant that public commemoration was not allowed, nor were monuments erected to the fallen Hungarian soldiers. This was because it was feared that the war against the Soviet Union would also be legitimized by commemorating the fallen soldiers. Thus, in the case of the crimes of the officers and the Germans, the ordinary soldiers were presented as victims, but the issue of the fallen soldiers remained taboo in public discourse until István Nemeskürty's *Requiem for an Army*, and no memorials were erected until the period of regime change.

Although former "Horthyist" officers were treated as class enemies and prosecuted for real war crimes and charges of espionage in the 1950s,²⁷ the role of the Hungarian Defense Forces in the Second World War was not dealt with in detail in the public sphere. The war against the Soviet Union came to the fore again in the 1950s and 1960s. In 1958, a collection of sources was published under the title "The Destruction of the 2nd Hungarian Army at the Don."²⁸ The importance of this book is shown by the fact that the foreword was written by Ferenc Münnich, Prime Minister of Hungary, and Péter Bokor directed a documentary film based

24 Cf. FÓRIS, ÁKOS "'The Sacrificed Army' – The Hungarian 2nd Army Between Memory and History", *Міжнародні зв'язки України: наукові пошуки і знахідки* 30 (2021): 304–324. <https://doi.org/10.15407/mzu2021.30.304>; OLASZ LAJOS, „A Don-kanyar és a történelmi emlékezet”, in *Hely, identitás, emlékezet*, ed. KESZEI ANDRÁS (Budapest: L'Harmattan, 2015), 419–441.

25 FÓRIS, "'The Sacrificed Army'", 313–314; Szabó Péter, *Magyarok a Don-kanyarban. A magyar királyi 2. honvéd hadsereg története (1942–1943)* (Budapest: Kossuth, 2019), 496–498; SZAKÁLY SÁNDOR: „Három dokumentum a 2. magyar hadsereg doni katasztrófájáról”, *Hadtörténelmi Közlemények* 28, no. 4 (1981): 638–642.

26 VARGA LÁSZLÓ, „Forradalmi törvényesség. Jogszolgáltatás 1945 után Magyarországon”, *Beszélő* 4, no. 11 (November 1999): 57–73.

27 PIHURIK JUDIT, „Katonadolog 1945–1962. A „horthysta katonatiszt:” bűnbak vagy ellenség?”, in *Bűnbak minden időben. Bűnbakok a magyar és az egyetemes történelemben*, ed. GYARMATI GYÖRGY, LENGVÁRI ISTVÁN, PÓK ATTILA, VONYÓ JÓZSEF (Pécs: Kronosz Kiadó, Magyar Történelmi Társulat, Állambiztonsági Szolgálatok Történelmi Levéltára, 2013), 456–72.; RAINER M. JÁNOS, *Századosok* (Budapest: Osiris Kiadó, 2018), 150–208.

28 HORVÁTH MIKLÓS (ed.), *A 2. magyar hadsereg megsemmisülése a Donnál* (Budapest: Zrínyi Katonai Könyv- és Lapkiadó, 1958).

on the documents in the book, entitled *Death Bend*.²⁹ Münnich saw the relevance of the book in the fact that the “counter-revolution of 1956” had shown that “the youth brought up since liberation” no longer knew “the immense crimes committed by the rulers of the counter-revolution.” These crimes were, however, committed not primarily against the Soviet Union but against the Hungarian people. In his interpretation, the Horthy regime had sent “tens of thousands of Hungarian workers, peasants and progressive intellectuals” to their deaths. Here we see the idea, later more widely disseminated by István Nemeskürty, that the Hungarian political and military leadership had the deliberate aim of killing opponents of the regime on the front line. This contrast is further underlined by the fact that, in Münnich’s interpretation, the Soviet forces also showed “mercy” towards the Hungarians, even at the cost of sacrificing their own soldiers.³⁰ Although the 2nd edition of the volume mentioned earlier was the first to report on the army’s anti-partisan fighting, it did not report on the crimes committed by Hungarian soldiers.³¹

In the end, the memory of the soldiers of the 2nd Army was not made a topic of public discussion by the book mentioned earlier, but by István Nemeskürty’s *Requiem for an Army*, written in 1972.³² The author basically followed the Jány trial and the narrative of Münnich in his book. The novel aspect of the book was that it presented the events from the point of view of the soldiers in the regiment, as well as the junior officers and reserve officers. Nemeskürty also drew a parallel with Mohács, i.e., he compared the consequences of the attack of January 1943 with the defeat in battle that brought about the fall of the medieval Hungarian state.³³ The soldiers serving in the “death-row army” were clearly victims of the Horthy regime. However, the book’s final chapter interpreted the defeat as part of a kind of salvation process, claiming that “the Don disaster was an unintended preparatory step in the building of the new Hungary.”³⁴ In this way, the fallen became martyrs of “the people’s Hungary,” and those who joined the resistance because of what happened at the Don thus qualified as heroes.

29 BERNÁTH LÁSZLÓ, „A doni halálkanyar. Kétszázézer magyar katona pusztulásáról készítenek filmet a „Boszorkánykőnyha „alkotói”, *Esti Hírlap* 5, no. 292 (December 5, 1960), 2.

30 HORVÁTH, A 2. *hadserg*, 5–8.

31 HORVÁTH MIKLÓS (ed.), *A 2. magyar hadsereg megsemmisülése a Donnál*, 2nd ed. (Budapest: Zrínyi Katonai Könyv- és Lapkiadó, 1959), 351–368.

32 NEMESKÜRTY ISTVÁN, *Requiem egy hadseregért* (Budapest: Magvető, 1973).

33 *Ibid.* 263., 286–87.

34 *Ibid.* 288.

Nemeskürty's writing triggered an explosion of memories. It led to the publication of several memoirs and diaries in the 1970s and Sándor Sára's video interviews with Don veterans. The latter resulted in the 25-part documentary series called *Chronicle*. Although the traumas of war and persecution under the state socialist regime led many soldiers to keep specific issues taboo – such as individual heroism – Sándor Sára's work is still considered the most authentic step in the mental processing of the history of the Eastern Front. While the film nuanced many of the earlier findings, it focused on the victimhood of ordinary soldiers.³⁵

However, the discontinuation of the film series in the last decade of the socialist regime highlighted the limitations of memory policy. In the state party newspaper, János Berecz criticized the lack of attention given to the Soviets fighting for their homeland and the aggression against the Soviet population.³⁶ Major General Mihály Berki, as the chief officer of the Hungarian People's Army, condemned the film's excessive forbearance towards the "Horthy Army".³⁷

Complaints sent to the president of the state television company criticized the inclusion of contemporary film newsreels conveying an interpretation of the Horthy era and the discussion of the relationship between Hungarian soldiers and local women.³⁸ However, comments on the living conditions of the local population and the Stalinist regime or references to the mass deaths of Hungarians taken as prisoners of war by the Soviet Union went beyond the official interpretation of history. The section on the deployment of the 2nd Army was the first to deal in detail with the Hungarian soldiers' treatment of the local population.

Since the fall of the state socialist regime, we can no longer speak of a unified memory policy as in the preceding decades. This has not only led to a pluralism of memories but also to a lack of works and events that canonize the politics of memory. This is also because, with the collapse of the state socialist system, the focus shifted from the period before the Second World War and the attack against the Soviet Union to the consequences of the Second World War and how the Soviet presence changed from liberation to occupation. The past 30 years have given more

35 SÁRKÖZY RÉKA, „Lenyomatok. A Don kanyar emlékezetének filmes narratívája”, in *Bűvőpatakok – A feltárás*, ed. RAINER M JÁNOS (Budapest: 1956-os Intézet, 2012), 166–208.

36 BERE CZ JÁNOS, „A Don-kanyar krónikájához”, *Népszabadság* 41, no. 79 (April 3, 1983): 17.

37 BERKI MIHÁLY: „Példaképek? Ellenállók? Áldozatok?”, *Honvédelem* 34, no. 7 (1983): 92–7.

38 UNGVÁRY KRISZTIÁN (ed.), *A második világháború* (Budapest: Osiris: 2005), 665–668; SÁRKÖZY, “Lenyomatok”, 170.

significant space to the commemoration of fallen soldiers. Even so, such commemorative events recurrently generate unproductive debates about whether the soldiers who died on the Eastern Front died a heroic death for the nation or were sacrificed by the Horthy regime.

A new space for dealing with the past has been opened up by revelations concerning the crimes of the Hungarian Defense Forces on the Eastern Front. Péter Erdélyi's documentary film *Doni-tükör* [Mirror of the Don] approached the history of the 2nd Army not from the perspective of heroism or mourning, but from the local experience of the people living there. Here, the Hungarian soldiers were already seen as oppressors and perpetrators of atrocities. The documentary was not allowed to be broadcast on television – a gesture that showed resistance to the subject.³⁹ In the 2010s, the activities of the Hungarian occupation troops, previously only mentioned on the sidelines, came to the fore. Two historical works – a collection of sources edited by Tamás Krausz and Éva Mária Varga, and a monograph by Krisztián Ungváry – have generated interest beyond the narrow professional sphere. Although the debate between the authors of the two works about the Soviet partisan movement and its activities excited considerable controversy, both volumes highlighted the scale of the mass killings committed by the occupation troops.⁴⁰

Overall, despite the changes in political regimes, it is victimhood that is dominant in the representation of Hungarian soldiers. On the one hand, this reflects the loss suffered by Hungarian society; on the other hand, it is a part of avoiding responsibility. Overcoming the latter would be necessary in order to understand the history of the Second World War from a transnational perspective, leaving behind the frame of grievances and including the viewpoints of former enemies.

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