



**THE TWO WARS OF THE 27TH SZEKLER LIGHT DIVISION
1944**

by

SANDOR MAGYAROSI

THESIS FOR THE DEGREE OF PHD

DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF IRELAND, MAYNOOTH

HEAD OF DEPARTMENT: Professor Ian Speller

Supervisor of Research: Dr John Paul Newman

February 2026

Table of Contents

Table of Contents	i
Author's Note	iv
List of Maps and Illustrations	v
Introduction	1
1. Historiography and Analytical Framework.....	2
2. Sources.....	10
Archival Sources.....	11
Military-Historical Works by Émigré Officers.....	13
Newspapers and Periodicals.....	18
Diaries, Memoirs and Oral Testimonies.....	18
3. Structure	29
Chapter I: Formation, Recruitment, and Structure	33
1. Historical Background.....	33
2. The Formation of the 27th Light Division.....	35
3. Conscription and Military Service.....	38
4. The Structure of the Light Division.....	44
5. Conclusion	48
Chapter II: Constructing War Aims: Leader Cult and War Propaganda	50
1. Horthy: leader legitimacy and combat motivation.....	51
Horthy's Visits to the Szekler Region.....	54
Horthy and the Military Oath.....	62
2. Mediating the War: Representation and Perception.....	72
Parallel Voices: German and Hungarian Wartime Propaganda.....	74
The Press: War in the Papers.....	81
Newsreels: War on Film.....	92
3. Defeat at the Don River.....	100

4. The German Occupation and the Deployment of the 27th Light Division.....	111
5. Conclusion.....	118
Chapter III: The Battle for Kutý, Kosów, and Pistyn.....	121
1. The April 1944 Offensive of the Hungarian First Army.....	121
2. The Battle of Kutý.....	126
3. The Battle of Pistyn.....	133
4. The Battle of Kosów.....	141
5. Conclusion.....	143
Chapter IV: The 27th Light Division in Galicia.....	149
1. Defence at the Foothills of the Carpathians.....	149
2. Manning the Trenches.....	160
3. Patrols and Raids.....	167
4. Addressing Deficiencies in Weaponry and Training.....	177
5. Coping with Fear.....	188
6. Primary Group and Unit Cohesion	199
7. The Battle of Delatyn and Mikuliczyn.....	205
Conclusion.....	223
Chapter V: From Transylvania to the Tisza River.....	229
1. The 27th Light Division in Transylvania.....	229
Soldiers and Civilians.....	234
The 27th Reconnaissance Battalion.....	242
The 27/I Battalion.....	249
Other Units and the Reorganisation of the 27th Light Division.....	254
Conclusion.....	256
2. The Withdrawal from Transylvania.....	258
The 27th Infantry Division's Withdrawal.....	261
Horthy's Armistice Attempt.....	263
Cases of Desertion.....	271

Renewing the Withdrawal.....	280
Defence on the Tisza River.....	283
Reverting to coercion.....	310
Conclusion.....	320
Bibliography.....	331
Primary sources.....	331
Secondary sources.....	348

Author's Note

The following convention is used in this thesis for the naming of military units and formations:

Armies	The names of Hungarian, German and Axis armies are spelled in full (Second Army, First Panzer Army), whereas Soviet Armies are denoted using Arabic numerals (40th Army).
Corps	German and Hungarian Corps are denoted using Roman numerals (VI Corps); while Soviet Corps are named using Arabic numerals (18th Independent Rifle Corps)
Divisions, regiments, companies	All divisions, regiments and companies are named using Arabic numerals (27th Division, 57th Regiment, 2nd Company).
Battalions	Hungarian infantry battalions are indicated by the regiment's number (Arabic numerals), followed by an oblique, followed by the battalion's number (Roman numerals), so 27/I translates as the First Battalion of the 27th Regiment.

List of Maps and Illustrations

Fig. 1. Major General István Kozma and a ceremonial unit of the 27/I Battalion at the inauguration of the state flag in Sepsiszentgyörgy.....	68
Fig. 2. The state flag of Sepsiszentgyörgy.....	68
Fig. 3. Terrain conditions around Kutty on a 3D map.....	137
Fig. 4. Mykietynce and Pistyn, as well as Kosów on a 3D map.....	137
Fig. 5. The line of the 27th Light Division in July.....	175
Fig. 6. The situation of the Hungarian First Army on 23 July.....	212
Fig. 7. The four Soviet attacks launched during the fighting around Mikuliczyn....	216
Fig. 8. The 27th Light Division in Transylvania.....	250
Fig. 9. Operations of the 27th Infantry Division along the Tisza River.....	287

Introduction

The spring of 1944 witnessed two major developments in the course of the Second World War that significantly affected the fate of Hungary. First, during one of the longest offensives on the Eastern Front, the Red Army broke through the German lines, and in the north Soviet forces advanced to the immediate vicinity of the Hungarian borders. Almost simultaneously, German forces occupied the country, as a result of which the Hungarian First Army was deployed to the Eastern Front. One of its formations was the 27th Szekler Light Division, whose history forms the subject of this thesis.

Thus began the light division's 'first war': the period spent by the formation's troops on the Eastern Front – more precisely in Galicia – between April and September 1944. One of the questions examined in this respect concerns how its soldiers related to military service and deployment to the front, only a year after another Hungarian army – also fighting against the Soviet Union – had suffered a catastrophic defeat. It will be argued that both the population's – and, by extension, the soldiers' – relationship with Hungary's head of state at the time, Miklós Horthy, and the media-shaped perception of the war played a significant role in influencing the attitudes of the troops. A second question concerns the wartime experience of the light division's soldiers on the Eastern Front. Accordingly, the analysis seeks, in part, to provide a comprehensive overview of the formation's participation in both open battles and periods of positional warfare, as well as a detailed examination of a series of other factors that shaped this experience.

The period termed the 'second war' refers roughly to the months between September and December 1944. At the beginning of this phase, the 27th Light Division was briefly redeployed to Northern Transylvania – the home region of most of its personnel, which had by then become a theatre of war following Romania's realignment on 23 August 1944. For the troops, the fighting there effectively amounted to the defence of their broader homeland, but lasted only until early October, when the formation – by this time reorganised as a division – was withdrawn towards the Tisza River, into territory that had formed part of Hungary during the interwar period. Its

remaining personnel then saw combat along the defensive line established on the river before being gradually pushed northwards out of the country.

While the phase termed the ‘first war’ was marked by a strengthening of small-group bonds, attachment to the unit, and a certain improvement in the light division’s combat effectiveness, the second was characterised by a series of crises. These included the separation of Hungarian troops from their own command structure and their integration into German units, the psychological impact of witnessing wartime destruction in their home region, and the consequences of Miklós Horthy’s unsuccessful attempt to conclude an armistice, which resulted in the emergence of a new political regime. All these developments placed considerable strain on the relationships that bound the soldier to his immediate comrades and to his unit, while simultaneously undermining the perceived legitimacy of the demands placed upon him by the country’s political leadership. Ultimately, they led to the disintegration of the division – although the formation itself did not cease to exist, even if it temporarily lost its combat effectiveness.

1. Historiography and Analytical Framework

Thus, the main question of the thesis revolves around combat and combat motivation – or, simply put, why soldiers fight and under what circumstances they stop fighting – a subject frequently explored by military sociologists and historians. Most studies addressing this question build on the theory advanced by Edward A. Shils and Morris Janowitz in their article entitled ‘Cohesion and Disintegration in the Wehrmacht in World War II’. The two authors focus on the German army’s performance during the final months of the war and argue that military effectiveness is closely linked to the cohesion of the primary group; at the same time, they contend that secondary symbols – such as political ideals or the figure of a strong leader – have only a limited impact on soldiers’ behaviour in combat.¹ A critique of this theory was formulated by Omer Bartov, who argues that under the conditions of the Eastern Front there was little scope

¹ Edward A. Shils and Morris Janowitz, ‘Cohesion and Disintegration in the Wehrmacht in World War II’ in *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, vol. xii, no. 2 (Summer, 1948).

for the maintenance of primary groups; in his view, their role was instead assumed by ideological motivation.²

In an article entitled ‘The Potential for Military Disintegration’, Stephen D. Wesbrook develops a more complex model that takes into account not only the role that primary-group bonds play in cohesion but also other forms of group affiliation. Rather than focusing on combat performance, Wesbrook approaches the issue from the perspective of the factors that help prevent disintegration. He argues that the existence of different forms of attachment and loyalty – including bonds linking the individual to the primary group, the unit, and the national socio-political system – is in itself insufficient to prevent an army’s collapse. Despite the soldier’s moral involvement with these groups, disintegration may still occur if the average soldier comes to perceive the hierarchy that makes demands of him as illegitimate. In this respect, Wesbrook – in contrast to Shils and Janowitz – emphasises the importance of the soldier’s relationship with his military and political leaders, whose perceived legitimacy plays a crucial role in sustaining compliance.³

Focusing on the French Revolutionary army between 1791 and 1794, John Lynn puts forward a similar model of military effectiveness. Based on the idea that citizen-soldiers identify their interests with those of the nation – and that obedience therefore rests on their willing agreement – Lynn argues that troop motivation results from a pattern of attitudes, relationships, and structures linked together in a coherent system. He distinguishes between what he calls a motivational system – which includes elements such as morale and small-group cohesion, that is, the attitudes and relationships influencing a soldier’s performance – and a military system, which largely determines the functioning of the army as an institution. From an analytical point of view, Lynn’s definition of morale is particularly significant: he describes it as ‘the climate of opinion within an army’, a complex concept shaped by both ideological and practical factors. These include the opinions and codes derived from army indoctrination, as well as soldiers’ reactions to service conditions such as supply,

² Omer Bartov, *Hitler’s Army. Soldiers, Nazis, and War in the Third Reich* (New York and Oxford, 1991).

³ Stephen D. Wesbrook, ‘The Potential for Military Disintegration’ in Sam. C. Sarkesian (ed.) *Combat Effectiveness. Cohesion, Stress and the Volunteer Military* (Beverly Hills, London, 1980), pp 244-278.

equipment efficiency, the frequency of mail, the nature of discipline, and the attitude and competence of commanders.⁴

While twentieth-century armies can, in part, be understood as normative organisations founded on voluntary compliance, coercive elements were by no means absent from their functioning. Moreover, compliance was not constant but rather the outcome of continual negotiation, through which soldiers – often acting out of self-interest – sought to assert their agency without openly challenging the hierarchy. In *Trench Warfare 1914–1918: The Live and Let Live System*, Tony Ashworth shows how, during the First World War, an informal system of cooperative exchange developed between opposing forces. Within this system, both sides – seeking to avoid retaliation – often limited their activities to maintaining the appearance of combat rather than engaging in genuine fighting.⁵

Under certain conditions, however, soldiers may become willing to risk overt resistance to authority. Leonard V. Smith's theory is particularly significant in this regard. In *Between Mutiny and Obedience*, Smith argues that, once their unreflective obedience to command authority had led to defeat, French soldiers began to assess the military utility of their efforts for themselves and sought to impose their own sense of proportionality on the command structure.⁶

A few additional works that approach the study of military experience from a somewhat broader perspective also deserve mention. One of the most nuanced approaches to combat performance and military resilience in the First World War is offered by Alexander Watson in his book *Enduring the Great War*. In a comparative study of the British and German armies, Watson examines both institutional factors within the military and the individual coping strategies that enabled soldiers to endure the conditions created by this new form of warfare, while also addressing forms of covert resistance such as shirking and desertion.⁷ Adopting a considerably broader chronological and thematic perspective, Richard Holmes, in *Acts of War*, offers a

⁴ John A. Lynn, *The Bayonets of the Republic: Motivation and Tactics in the Army of Revolutionary France, 1791–94* (London and New York, 2019).

⁵ Tony Ashworth, *Trench Warfare 1914–1918. The Live and Let Live System* (London, 2000).

⁶ Leonard Smith, *Between Mutiny and Obedience. The Case of the French Fifth Infantry Division during World War I* (Princeton, Chichester, 1994).

⁷ Alexander Watson, *Enduring the Great War. Combat, Morale and Collapse in the German and British Armies, 1914–1918* (Cambridge, 2009).

comprehensive account that encompasses virtually every aspect of military life, from recruitment and training to the return to civilian society after the war.⁸ An equally important contribution, albeit from a more explicitly sociological perspective, is the monumental project undertaken by Samuel Stouffer and his colleagues, *The American Soldier*, which provides an exceptionally detailed analysis of the experiences, attitudes, and motivations of a mass conscript army during the Second World War. The second volume, *Combat and Its Aftermath*, is especially relevant in this regard, as it offers an in-depth examination of what might be termed the culture of the frontline soldier, encompassing attitudes towards combat, relations with officers, and perceptions of the divide between frontline units and rear-echelon personnel, to mention but a few examples.⁹ In addition to the studies considered thus far, Martin van Creveld's *Fighting Power: German and U.S. Army Performance, 1939–1945* sets out a useful framework for analysing military effectiveness, arguing that combat performance depends not only on material resources but also on organisational, cultural, and societal considerations.¹⁰ Similar questions are addressed in the third volume of *Military Effectiveness*, edited by Allan R. Millett and Williamson Murray, in which the contributors examine the performance of the principal belligerent armies during the Second World War.¹¹ Finally, Margaret MacMillan's *War: How Conflict Shaped Us* and Richard Overy's *Why War?* provide important insights into the wider historical and societal dimensions of warfare.¹²

The analytical framework within which the activity of the 27th Light Division will be examined is provided by Westbrook's model of compliance, which focuses on whether soldiers perceive the hierarchy that makes demands of them as legitimate, as well as by John Lynn's notions of initial and sustaining motivation. In Lynn's understanding, initial motivation refers to one's decision to become a soldier – to enlist or at least to

⁸ Richard Holmes, *Acts of War. The Behaviour of Men in Battle* (London, 2004).

⁹ Samuel A. Stouffer, Arthur A. Lumsdaine, Marion Harper Lumsdaine, Robin M. Williams, Jr., M. Brewster Smith, Irving L. Janis, Shirley A. Star, Leonard S. Cottrell, Jr., *The American Soldier*, ii: *Combat and Its Aftermath* (Princeton, New Jersey, 1949).

¹⁰ Martin van Creveld, *Fighting Power: German and U.S. Army Performance, 1939–1945* (Westport, 1982).

¹¹ Allan R. Millett and Williamson Murray (eds), *Military Effectiveness*, iii: *The Second World War* (Cambridge, 2010).

¹² Margaret MacMillan, *War: How Conflict Shaped Us* (New York, 2020). Richard Overy, *Why War?* (New York, 2024).

comply with conscription – while sustaining motivation denotes the factors that render military life acceptable to the individual. The significance of this approach lies in the fact that it incorporates elements such as small-group pressure, patriotism, and ideology alongside soldiers' acceptance of hierarchical authority.¹³ The interpretative framework of the thesis is further informed by Lynn's concept of combat motivation, which treats combat as a unique situation because of the overwhelming presence of fear. With regard to this type of motivation, Lynn emphasises the paramount importance of primary-group dynamics, while also noting that a unit's performance in combat depends heavily on how effectively it fulfilled its duties prior to entering battle, for example in terms of training. Finally, as mentioned earlier, Lynn distinguishes between what he describes as the motivational system and the military system. Whereas the former refers to the attitudes and relationships that influence soldiers' willingness to fight, the latter encompasses the institutional and practical elements that structure the functioning of an army. Within the military system, Lynn also identifies a tactical system comprising the foundations of battlefield practice: weapons, doctrine, training, and experience.¹⁴

In light of the preceding discussion, the thesis advances two closely interrelated interpretations. First, with regard to battlefield practice, it suggests that both small-group cohesion and elements of the tactical system are best understood not as static conditions but as processes in constant transformation. Second, it argues that the primary group's capacity to sustain its members in combat depends on the larger unit to which it belongs – a unit that presupposes a degree of cohesion among the small groups that compose it. In the absence of such cohesion, members of otherwise cohesive small groups may come to regard themselves as operating within a structure whose other elements are indifferent or even somewhat hostile towards them; as a result, the fundamental aims of the small group – such as survival – may come into conflict with those of the military organisation as a whole.

As for the broader historical context of the formation, the analysis will draw on relevant works of Hungarian historiography. As Deborah S. Cornelius observes in

¹³ Lynn, *Bayonets of the Republic*, p. 35.

¹⁴ Lynn, *Bayonets of the Republic*, pp 36-37.

Hungary in World War II: Caught in the Cauldron, scholarly interest in Hungary's role in the Second World War increased markedly following the collapse of the communist regime in 1989–1990.¹⁵ Although Cornelius's observation is largely valid, it should not obscure the fact that a number of historical studies, most of them more limited in scope, had already appeared several decades earlier. Some of these were authored by former Hungarian military officers who had served in the Second World War and remained abroad after 1945, publishing their works outside the Soviet bloc. As many of the articles and books falling within this category cannot readily be regarded as contributions to academic historiography, they are discussed separately below as primary sources. Péter Gosztonyi, who published his German-language works under the name Peter Gosztony, constitutes a notable exception among these authors. Although himself a former officer, he did not serve during the Second World War but instead participated in the Hungarian Revolution of 1956. Following its suppression, he emigrated to Switzerland, where he pursued an academic career and obtained a doctorate from the University of Zurich in 1963. He subsequently produced a substantial body of scholarship on Hungary's role in the Second World War and on the history of the 1956 Revolution, establishing himself as a prominent representative of Hungarian émigré military historiography.¹⁶

At roughly the same time as the first publications by the military officers mentioned above, and only a few years before the appearance of Gosztonyi's earliest works, communist Hungary also produced a number of scholarly studies on the subject. Of particular significance was János Csima's 1961 monograph on the organisation and operational history of the Hungarian armed forces during the Second World War.¹⁷ Although the book was not intended for general commercial sale, it was accessible to

¹⁵ Deborah S. Cornelius, *Hungary in World War II: Caught in the Cauldron* (New York, 2011), p. 1.

¹⁶ From 1963 onwards, Gosztonyi published extensively, initially mainly in German. Equally important was his systematic effort to gather source material by contacting, either personally or through correspondence, individuals who had played a role in Hungary's wartime history and were still available to be consulted. Among those he approached were German and Hungarian diplomats, politicians, and military officers. Gosztonyi subsequently organised and preserved their correspondence, testimonies, and the documents they entrusted to him. His scholarly output included numerous studies on the Second World War, among them *Magyarország a második világháborúban* [Hungary in the Second World War], 3 vols. (Munich, 1984), as well as many other books and articles devoted primarily to military history, and by the 1980s he was widely regarded in Hungary as one of the leading authorities on the country's role in the Second World War.

¹⁷ János Csima, *Adalékok a Horthy-hadsereg szervezetének és háborús tevékenységének tanulmányozásához (1938–1945)* [Contributions to the Study of the Organisation and Wartime Activities of the Armed Forces of the Horthy Regime (1938–1945)] (Budapest, 1961).

researchers, and its influence is reflected in the fact that it was cited extensively in articles published before 1989. The late communist period also saw the publication of Ignác Ölvedi's study of the Hungarian First Army, the only scholarly work devoted specifically to the history of the higher formation within which the 27th Light Division operated.¹⁸ Ölvedi's approach is heavily influenced by the historiographical conventions of the communist era, being grounded in the concept of class struggle and reflecting a distinctly Soviet interpretation of the Second World War; nevertheless, it can serve as a valuable source when subjected to appropriate critical scrutiny, as can many studies produced in the period in question.

The collapse of communism in 1989–1990, however, created the conditions for a new wave of scholarship that was no longer constrained by the ideological framework characteristic of the preceding era. Regarding the operational history of the conflict, a detailed two-volume monograph authored by the military historians Péter Szabó and Norbert Számvéber has been published, while a comprehensive account of the Hungarian Army's role in the war has been offered by Krisztián Ungváry.¹⁹ Moving beyond operational history and grand narratives, valuable insights into the experiences of Hungarian soldiers on the Eastern Front have been provided by the studies of Judit Pihurik, who analysed the diaries and memoirs of soldiers who took part in the Don River campaign of 1942–1943, and Ákos Fóris, who examined reports written by military chaplains deployed in the same theatre of operations. The significance of both works lies in their adoption of a history-from-below perspective, highlighting aspects of military life that were largely omitted from the army's official reports.²⁰

Several historians have also examined the distinctive political and military situation of Northern Transylvania, a region of particular importance to the history of the 27th

¹⁸ Ignác Ölvedi, *Az 1. Magyar Hadsereg története 1944 január 6-tól október 17-ig* [The History of the Hungarian First Army from 6 January 1944 until 17 October (Budapest, 1989).

¹⁹ Péter Szabó and Norbert Számvéber, *A keleti hadszíntér és Magyarország 1941–1943* [The Eastern Theatre of War and Hungary 1941–1943] (Budapest, 2003) and Péter Szabó and Norbert Számvéber, *A keleti hadszíntér és Magyarország 1943–1945* [The Eastern Theatre of War and Hungary 1943–1945] (Budapest, 2003). Krisztián Ungváry, *A magyar honvédség a második világháborúban* [The Hungarian Honvéd Army in the Second World War] (Budapest, 2005).

²⁰ Ákos Fóris, “‘Pehely voltam a nagy viharban’ – A magyar 2. hadsereg tábori lelkészeinek tűzkeresztsege a Donnál” [‘I Was a Feather in the Great Storm’ – The Baptism of Fire of the Hungarian Second Army's Military Chaplains on the Don] (<https://ujkor.hu/content/pehely-voltam-a-nagy-viharban-a-magyar-2-hadsereg-tabori-lelkeszeinek-tuzkeresztsege-a-donnal>) (09 September 2015); Judit Pihurik, *Naplók és memoárok a Don-kanyarból, 1942–1943* [Diaries and Memoirs from the Don Bend, 1942–1943] (Budapest, 2007).

Light Division, both as its principal recruiting area and as one of its main theatres of operations in 1944. In his book *Erdély mint hadszíntér* (Transylvania as a Battlefield), István Ravasz provided the first comprehensive account of the fighting that took place there. A second edition of the work appeared in 2002 under a slightly different title.²¹ A more comprehensive study of the same subject was published in 2005 by Péter Illésfalvi, Péter Szabó, and Norbert Számvéber, who, in addition to providing a more detailed account of the military operations in question, examined the integration of Northern Transylvania into Hungary's military system.²² A narrower aspect of the latter issue is addressed by József Nagy in his book *Békeévek Mars árnyékában* (Years of Peace in the Shadow of Mars), which focuses exclusively on the Szekler region and traces the development of its distinctive military system, comprising conventional infantry, border rifle troops, and border militia units, a military arrangement unique to the Szekler region and unparalleled elsewhere in Northern Transylvania or in Hungary as a whole.²³

Turning from the broader literature to studies focusing specifically on the 27th Szekler Light Division, particular mention must be made of the work of Árpád Róbert Berekméri. His contribution to the historiography of the formation has been considerable. In his book *Fegyver alatt* (Under Arms), he compiled biographical entries on officers who served in the light division throughout its existence, while the online edition broadened the database by including non-commissioned officers.²⁴ Berekméri is also the author of *Lesz még kikelet!* (Spring Will Come Again!), the first comprehensive history of the formation.²⁵ While the book's greatest merit undoubtedly lies in bringing together a diverse and often fragmentary body of evidence, it is primarily concerned with the factual reconstruction of the light division's history. The present study seeks to complement this achievement by

²¹ István Ravasz, *Erdély mint hadszíntér* [Transylvania as a Theatre of War] (Budapest, 1997). István Ravasz, *Erdély ismét hadszíntér* [Transylvania Once Again a Theatre of War] (Budapest, 2002).

²² Péter Illésfalvi, Péter Szabó, and Norbert Számvéber, *Erdély a hadak útján* [Transylvania on the Road of Armies] (Budapest, 2005).

²³ József Nagy, *Békeévek Mars árnyékában. A Székely Határvédelmi Erők története (1940–1944)* [Years of Peace in the Shadow of Mars: The History of the Szekler Border Guard Forces (1940–1944)] (Kolozsvár, 2021).

²⁴ Árpád Róbert Berekméri, *Fegyver alatt* [Under Arms] (Marosvásárhely, 2008); Árpád Róbert Berekméri, 'A marosvásárhelyi magyar királyi 27. székely honvéd könnyű hadosztály tiszti és altiszti kara, 1940–1945' [The Officers and Non-Commissioned Officers of the Royal Hungarian 27th Szekler Light Division, 1940–1945] available at <https://www.hungarianarmedforces.com/berekmeri27.htm> (09 September 2015)

²⁵ Árpád Róbert Berekméri, *Lesz még kikelet!* [Spring Will Come Again!] (Marosvásárhely, 2015).

adopting a more analytical approach, while also building on the author's previous research, including several articles and an MA thesis focused on certain aspects of the formation's wartime experience on the Eastern Front.²⁶

Finally, mention should also be made of several non-Hungarian scholars whose work has contributed to our understanding of the region's history. In her book *Hungary in World War II: Caught in the Cauldron*, Deborah S. Cornelius provides an extensive synthesis of Hungary's political, military, and social history during the Second World War.²⁷ The eighth volume of the monumental German series *Germany and the Second World War*, edited by Karl-Heinz Frieser (*The Eastern Front 1943–1944*), merits particular attention for its broader contextual perspective.²⁸ No less significant is the work of Holly Case, which offers an analysis that interrelates the Transylvanian question with the wartime objectives of both Hungary and Romania, as well as Grant T. Harward's study examining the behaviour and motivations of soldiers from another Axis ally, Romania, on the Eastern Front.²⁹

2. Sources

Due to the nature of the subject, the analysis of the history of the 27th Light Division employs a multi-source qualitative approach, drawing on archival records, accounts written by former officers concerning both the wartime activities of their own units and the wider course of the war, reports by war correspondents, articles published in specialist Second World War military journals dealing with tactical issues and often

²⁶ Sándor Magyarosi, 'A 27. székely könnyűhadosztály első napjai a keleti fronton' [The First Days of the 27th Szekler Light Division on the Eastern Front] in *Acta Siculica 2012–2013* (Sepsiszentgyörgy, 2013), pp 399–412; Sándor Magyarosi, 'Háromszéki katonák a második világháborúban' [Soldiers from Háromszék in the Second World War] in *Háromszék*, 14 December 2013; 'Háromszéki katonák a második világháborúban 2' in *Háromszék*, 21 December 2013; Sándor Magyarosi, 'The 27th Szekler Light Division' (National University of Ireland, Maynooth, 2016).

²⁷ Karl-Heinz Frieser (ed.), *Germany and the Second World War*, viii: *The Eastern Front 1943–1944: The War in the East and on the Neighbouring Fronts* (Oxford, 2017).

²⁸ Deborah S. Cornelius, *Hungary in World War II: Caught in the Cauldron* (New York, 2011).

²⁹ Holly Case, *Between States: The Transylvanian Question and the European Idea during World War II* (Stanford, 2009). Grant T. Harward, *Romania's Holy War: Soldiers, Motivation, and the Holocaust* (Ithaca, 2021).

informed by combat experience, ego-documents, and oral history interviews. As will be seen, each of these types of source types has its own merits and shortcomings.

Archival Sources

As regards archival sources, one of the principal difficulties in researching Hungary's military history during the Second World War, and particularly the history of individual formations, is the scarcity of the surviving source material. A considerable proportion of the records produced by the Royal Hungarian Army during the war were either captured by enemy forces – chiefly the Soviets – destroyed by the ravages of war when the institutions that held them were engulfed by military operations, or deliberately disposed of by Hungarian troops themselves. The latter acted in accordance with orders to eliminate all military records at the end of the war so as to prevent sensitive documents from falling into enemy hands. In this respect, the 27th Light Division represents a typical example rather than an exception. The surviving sources indicate that part of the division headquarters' records were destroyed, while the remainder were buried in a tar-sealed barrel by three officers in a forest near Groß-Siegharts, Austria, on 6 May 1945.³⁰ It is further known that the records of the 57/III Battalion were disposed of on 10 May, by which point the battalion had already been reached by Red Army units, while the 57/I Battalion, which during this period was en route to territory controlled by American forces, received orders from the 57th Regiment to carry out the same measures on 11 May.³¹ In sum, none of the war diaries maintained by the divisional staff, the regiments, or the battalions are preserved in Hungarian archives.³²

³⁰ Ferenc Bereczki, 'Honvéd voltam a II. világháborúban. Hadtörténeti események a m. kir. 27. székely könnyűhadosztály alegységein belül 1942–1945' [I Was a Honvéd (Hungarian Soldier) in the Second World War: Military Events within the Subunits of the Royal Hungarian 27th Szekler Light Division, 1942–1945] (Hungarian Military History Archives, Budapest, TGy 3405), p. 62. The destruction of part of the division's records and the burial of the remainder are also recounted by the former Reserve Ensign Jenő Blénessy in a letter to Árpád Róbert Berekméri. Blénessy, who gives the same location as Bereczki, claims that he was one of three officers who personally disposed of the records. See Berekméri, *Lesz még kikelet!*, p. 284.

³¹ For the 57/III Battalion records, see Bereczki, 'Honvéd voltam', p. 63. For the 57/I Battalion, see Mihály Ferencz, 'Fogalmunk sem volt a nagypolitikáról' [We Knew Nothing of High Politics] in József Gocz (ed.), *3006 év hadifogságban* [3006 Years in Captivity] (Sepsiszentgyörgy, 2001), pp 182–183.

³² The present study relies almost exclusively on Hungarian archival sources. At the same time, the research has taken into account the possibility that relevant materials may also exist outside Hungary. In this regard, relevant records may be found primarily in German, Soviet (today largely Russian), American, and British archives. German archives are especially important because they contain the

Some records produced by higher command echelons, however, have survived. From a general perspective, the most important among them are the diaries of the Operations Department of the General Staff of the Royal Hungarian Honvéd Army, which consist of brief summaries of the daily reports received from the front.³³ These are held in the Military History Archives in Budapest. The archives also contain the records of the Royal Hungarian First Army Command, as well as those of numerous Second World War brigades, light divisions, and divisions. With regard to 1944, however, these holdings are highly fragmentary; moreover, many of the surviving documents concern personnel, administrative, and other matters. Even so, reports relating to the operations in which the 27th Light Division participated during July and August 1944, along with a number of highly valuable map annexes, have survived both in the records of VI Corps and in those of the 2nd Mountain Brigade.³⁴ The repository further preserves the personal files of members of the officer corps, while the Military History Institute and Museum provides access to a number of searchable online databases, including a casualty database.³⁵

records of formations and headquarters with which Hungarian units cooperated or under whose command they served. Soviet and American archives are likewise significant because they contain Hungarian documents captured during and after the war, while Soviet archival collections also preserve extensive records of the Red Army formations that fought against Hungarian units, thereby providing valuable additional perspectives on these operations. Finally, various British governmental, military, and intelligence bodies concerned with the region may also have produced materials of relevance to Hungarian military history. Although these sources have not been systematically examined in the present study, they offer considerable potential for future research.

Particular attention should be paid to the Russian case, where significant changes have taken place in recent decades. Considerable efforts have been made to digitise German records held in Russian archives, thereby making them substantially more accessible to researchers. However, no comparable project has been undertaken with respect to captured Hungarian materials, and consequently these remain much more difficult for researchers to consult. At the same time, substantial portions of Red Army records have been digitised, creating new opportunities for research into the Soviet side of the conflict and the operations of the formations that confronted Hungarian units.

For German documents held in Russian archival collections, see:

<https://germandocsinrussia.org/de/nodes/1-rossiysko-germanskiy-proekt-po-otsifrovke-trofeynyh-kollektsiy> (10 January 2026). Access to records of the Red Army is available at: <https://pamyat-naroda.ru> (10 January 2026).

³³ Papers of the Chief of the General Staff of the Royal Hungarian Honvéd Army, from 9 April to 31 August 1944. Reports on the daily situation (Hungarian Military History Archives, Budapest, I. M. kir. Honvéd Vezérkar főnöke iratai, VKF iratok, 1944-1945, 281 d).

³⁴ Combat Report of the Royal Hungarian VI Corps, Delatyn–Mikuliczyn, 24 July–10 August) (Hungarian Military History Archives, Budapest, II. 1452. M. KIR. 1. HONV. HADS., 1944, A m. kir. VI. hadtest harctudósítása (Delatyn–Mikuliczyn, július 24–augusztus 10.); Combat Report of the Royal Hungarian 2nd Mountain Brigade on the Fighting of July–August 1944 (Hungarian Military History Archives, Budapest, II. 1656. M. KIR. 2. HONVÉD HEGYIDANDÁR, 1944, Harctudósítás az 1944. július–augusztusi harcokról).

³⁵ The database can be accessed at: <https://katonahoseink.militaria.hu> (10 January 2026). The same material was also published in book form in three volumes by János Bús and Péter Szabó under the title *Béke poraikra...* [Peace to Their Ashes...] (Budapest, 1999, 2001, and 2013). The first volume covers

Hungarian archives also contain a substantial body of records relating to the Second World War that was generated by the communist regime. Part of this material stemmed from the post-war trials conducted by the so-called People's Tribunals, which were intended both to prosecute individuals accused of wartime crimes and to facilitate the dismantling of the former military elite. Another important category of sources is constituted by the files compiled by the political police on former officers during Hungary's socialist period. Whereas the former are preserved in the Budapest City Archives, the latter are held in the Historical Archives of the Hungarian State Security Services (Állambiztonsági Szolgálatok Történeti Levéltára).

The principal advantage of records produced on the battlefield is that they were generally created either during military operations or shortly thereafter. At the same time, most of these documents were intended to record often highly complex events in as clear and comprehensible a manner as possible, which inevitably led to the omission of details and a degree of generalisation. Quite different concerns arise in relation to court records, primarily because the People's Tribunals operated within a particular political and ideological framework that could influence both the proceedings themselves and the testimonies presented before them. However, when compared with other sources, both types of records prove highly valuable: the former for reconstructing the factual course of military operations, and the latter for bringing together the testimonies of numerous witnesses to particular events.

Military-Historical Works by Émigré Officers

A further distinctive category of sources consists of works written by Hungarian military officers who had served during the Second World War and chose not to return to Hungary after it came under Soviet influence. Besides their own firsthand experience of military operations, many of them succeeded in taking records, documents, and personal notes into exile. These officers, who had found themselves in Germany and Austria at the end of the war, sought to establish an organisation that would unite former members of the Royal Hungarian Army dispersed throughout

losses on the Eastern Front, the second those incurred within the territory of contemporary Hungary, and third contains the details of soldiers who died on the Western Front or while in Western Allied captivity.

Western Europe and overseas. On 23 October 1948, the Association of Hungarian Veterans was founded in Klagenfurt, with branches subsequently established in France, Belgium, Britain, the United States, Canada, and elsewhere in the world.³⁶ On 1 November 1948, the first issue of the association's bulletin appeared, later giving way to the monthly periodical *Hadak Útján* (On the Path of War). The organisation served a dual purpose in facilitating the production of military-historical works: it enabled former officers to maintain contact with one another and to pool the documents and records they had brought with them into exile, while also providing a platform for the publication of their writings.

The first comprehensive study of Hungary's participation in the Second World War, *A magyar katona a második világháborúban, 1941–1945* (The Hungarian Soldier in the Second World War, 1941–1945), was published in 1954.³⁷ Its author, Ferenc Adonyi, held a variety of appointments during the war and, from June 1944 onwards, served as chief of staff first of the 7th Infantry Division and subsequently of the 25th Infantry Division, both subordinate to the Hungarian First Army. The book is divided into two parts: the author's own study of the Second World War and a further twenty or so contributions by other authors. These latter pieces may be regarded as case studies, focusing on the combat experiences of particular military formations during specific phases of the war, on military operations in particular regions, or on individual acts of heroism. Among them, particularly relevant to the history of the 27th Szekler Light Division is a brief piece whose author is identified only by initials and which examines the wartime operations of the formation's artillery units.³⁸ Also noteworthy is the article on the Royal Hungarian 1st Mountain Brigade during the period in which it operated in the immediate vicinity of the 27th Light Division, written by the brigade's former commander, Ferenc Lóskay.³⁹

³⁶ The organisation's Hungarian name, *Magyar Harcosok Bajtársi Községe*, is commonly translated as the *Association of Hungarian Veterans*, although a more literal rendering would be the *Hungarian Warriors' Comrades-in-Arms Association*.

³⁷ Ferenc Adonyi, *A magyar katona a második világháborúban 1941–1945* [The Hungarian Soldier in the Second World War 1941–1945] (Klagenfurt, 1954).

³⁸ L. G. 'A székely tüzérek harcaiból' [From the Combat Experiences of the Szekler Artillerymen] in Adonyi, *A magyar katona*, pp 221–223.

³⁹ Ferenc Lóskay, 'A m. kir. 1. hegyi-dandár harcai a Tatárhágó előterében 1944 áprilisában' [The Operations of the Royal Hungarian 1st Mountain Brigade in Front of the Tatar Pass in April 1944] in Adonyi, *A magyar katona*, pp 195–199.

Although Adonyi's work is based on documents, sources, and notes preserved by émigré officers, the author himself did not regard it as a military-historical study in the strict sense of the term. As he noted elsewhere, while the book undoubtedly synthesised the available knowledge concerning Hungarian participation in the Second World War, it did not substantially advance contemporary understanding of the subject.⁴⁰ It must also be borne in mind that both Adonyi and the other contributors to the volume sought to highlight the heroism and martial virtues of the Hungarian soldier during the Second World War.

Another major undertaking of this kind was carried out through the journal *Hadak Útján* and focused on the activities of the Royal Hungarian Honvéd Army in 1944–45. The project consisted of three interconnected series, published in instalments typically two to three pages in length. The first covered the fighting for Budapest and ran from February 1962 to January 1973.⁴¹ The second dealt with the final battles fought on Hungarian soil and commenced in February 1973.⁴² After its forty-eighth instalment, a third series, concerning the experiences of Hungarian soldiers beyond Hungary's borders during the closing stages of the war and in the immediate post-war period, began in September 1980 and continued until May 1985.⁴³ Although the project was initiated by András Zákó, the former commander of the 27th Light Division, responsibility for the series passed to Pál Darnóy, himself a former officer of the Royal Hungarian Army, from the sixth instalment of the first series onwards. Darnóy, whose expertise was highly regarded even by the military historian Péter Gosztonyi, came perhaps closest among the émigré military authors to meeting scholarly standards.⁴⁴ Drawing upon documents preserved by the émigré military community and on an extensive correspondence with many of its members, he provided a detailed account

⁴⁰ Ferenc Adonyi-Naredy, 'Gondolatok a Magyarország honvédelme a II. világháború előtt és alatt (1920–1945) című könyvsorozat III. kötetéhez' [Reflections on Volume III of The Defence of Hungary before and during the Second World War (1920–1945)] in *Hadtörténelmi Közlemények*, vol. civ, no. 2 (1991), pp 218–224.

⁴¹ András Zákó and Pál Darnóy, 'A Budapestért vívott harc. Hadtörténelmi részletek a magyar térségben lefolyt küzdelem döntő szakaszáról, 1944/45' [The Battle for Budapest: Military-Historical Aspects of the Decisive Phase of the Fighting in Hungary, 1944–45].

⁴² Pál Darnóy, 'Végső harcok magyar földön. Hadtörténelmi részletek a főváros elesését követő hadműveletekből, 1945' [Final Battles on Hungarian Soil. Military-Historical Aspects of the Military Operations Following the Fall of the Capital, 1945].

⁴³ Pál Darnóy, 'Honvédeink idegen földön' [Our Soldiers on Foreign Soil].

⁴⁴ See Péter Gosztonyi's memorial tribute to Pál Darnóy in *Bécsi Napló*, 1 September 1987.

of the defensive operations fought by the Royal Hungarian Honvéd Army during the period in question.⁴⁵

A third major work on the Hungarian armed forces before and during the Second World War was produced under the editorship of Lajos Veress, whose experiences set him apart from most other émigré military officers. During Miklós Horthy's attempt to withdraw Hungary from the war on 15 October 1944, Veress, then commander of the Second Hungarian Army, sought to carry out the Regent's orders and was consequently arrested by the Germans.⁴⁶ Unlike many of his fellow officers, Veress remained in Hungary after the end of the war and was subsequently imprisoned by the communist regime in 1947. It was only in 1956 that he regained his freedom and was able to leave the country. These circumstances also influenced, to some extent, the conception of the work he came to edit. As he wrote in its preface, the project had been undertaken to produce a history of the Royal Hungarian Army in the Second World War that would counter the distortions propagated by the state-controlled communist media in Hungary, as well as by those seeking to justify their own wartime conduct. The latter was likely a reference to those émigré officers who, rather than actively supporting Horthy's attempt to withdraw Hungary from the war in October 1944, chose instead to await developments and subsequently continued fighting alongside the Germans. The three volumes edited by Veress and published between 1972 and 1974 were the collaborative work of more than ten former officers, who drew not only on the papers of the Hungarian émigré military community but also on the captured German military records held by the U.S. National Archives and Records Administration (NARA). Among the contributions, the chapter on the history of the Royal Hungarian First Army, written by its former Chief of Staff, Viktor Jolsvai, is of particular interest, as the 27th Light Division formed part of this army between April and September 1944.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ The works authored by Darnóy (and, to a lesser extent, Zákó) are discussed by Károly Borbás, then editor of *Hadak Útján*, in his 1992 account of the journal's history. See *Hadak Útján*, vol. xlv no. 425 (1992), pp 8-10.

⁴⁶ The Hungarian Second Army referred to here was the formation created in September 1944 for the defence of Northern Transylvania and should be distinguished from the Hungarian Second Army deployed to the Don River in 1942.

⁴⁷ Viktor Jolsvai, 'A Magyar Királyi 1. Honvéd Hadsereg története' [The History of the Royal Hungarian First Army] in Lajos Veress (ed.), *Magyarország honvédelme a II. világháború előtt és alatt (1920–1945)*. II. kötet [Hungary's Defence before and during the Second World War (1920–1945), vol. II] (München, 1974), pp 179-275.

Two further works merit attention owing to their close association with the history of the light division, whether by virtue of their authorship or through the subjects they address. The first is Ferenc Farkas's *Tatárhágó visszanéz* (The Tatar Pass Looks Back), published in Buenos Aires in 1952.⁴⁸ Farkas, who had commanded VI Corps – one of the First Army's corps, to which the 27th Light Division was attached between April and September 1944 – essentially reconstructed the history of the corps, drawing on both his own experiences and a wide range of other sources, including various dispatches – some reproduced in full – and numerous sketch maps depicting the positions of First Army formations during particular engagements. His account, however, also has its limitations. In some cases, it treats events in a rather sketchy manner, providing only slightly more detail than the surviving General Staff records held in Budapest, while incidents regarded by the military as dishonourable – such as episodes of panic – are omitted altogether. The maps reproduced in the volume likewise require careful scrutiny: although indispensable for understanding certain aspects of the fighting, they are not always accurate in their identification of the units concerned. Nevertheless, the significance of the work lies in its treatment of a number of operations involving the 27th Light Division and in the accompanying maps.

The second of these works was authored by András Zákó, the former commander of the 27th Light Division. Although the book deals in rather general terms with the fighting that took place on Hungarian soil in the autumn of 1944 and devotes comparatively little attention to Zákó's own role as commander or to the activities of the light division itself, it nevertheless helps illuminate the events that unfolded within the formation's command on 15 October 1944, when Miklós Horthy attempted to withdraw Hungary from the war, notwithstanding the considerable bias evident in the author's account.⁴⁹

One of the undeniable merits of the works listed above is that they complement the archival material relating to Hungary's participation in the Second World War, both by incorporating documents unavailable elsewhere and by including the accounts of participants, almost exclusively officers. At the same time, this latter feature also

⁴⁸ Ferenc Farkas, *Tatárhágó visszanéz* [The Tatar Pass Looks Back] (Buenos Aires, 1952). The meaning of the title is clarified in the book's preface: Farkas depicts the personified Tatar Pass, the route into Hungary now in enemy hands, as looking back towards its former defenders, as if appealing to them for help.

⁴⁹ András Reszneki Zákó, *Őszi harcok 1944* [Autumn Battles, 1944] (Budapest, 1991).

constitutes one of their principal limitations, since these officers generally interpreted and articulated their experiences in the light of Hungary's military defeat and the country's failure to withdraw from the war, which, depending on their views on the withdrawal attempt, may have involved a measure of self-justification. Their recollections were likewise shaped by the wartime ethos of the Hungarian officer corps and often displayed a tendency to present events in a heroic light.

Newspapers and Periodicals

Contemporary newspapers and periodicals, such as the daily newspaper *Székely Nép* and the military journal entitled *Magyar Katonai Szemle* (Hungarian Military Review), likewise serve as an important source base for the present study. Coverage of the war in general and of major military operations in the daily press provides important insights both into the functioning of wartime propaganda and into the manner in which a politically controlled media sought to soften the effects of unfavourable developments at the front and influence public opinion. The accounts of war correspondents describing particular small-scale actions, on the other hand, are of considerable value for analysing combat at the tactical level, largely because of the richness of their detail. It should nevertheless be emphasised that, apart from their factual content, observations concerning relations between officers and enlisted men, soldiers' morale, and other aspects susceptible to propagandistic exploitation require careful critical evaluation. The contributions published in *Magyar Katonai Szemle*, by contrast, are noteworthy not so much for their treatment of specific events as for what they reveal about contemporary military thinking on tactical questions and the analysis and dissemination of battlefield experience within military circles.

Diaries, Memoirs and Oral Testimonies

One of the most important groups of sources for this thesis undoubtedly consists of the diaries and memoirs written by soldiers of the 27th Light Division, together with the oral history interviews conducted with them. Whereas the circumstances under which the diaries were kept are relatively straightforward, memoirs and oral testimonies – or, more broadly, processes of oral remembrance – must be considered

in light of the wider political context within which, and in response to which, they were produced and practised. This context also partly explains the considerable delay in the recording of Second World War memories by former participants, as well as the relatively late emergence of oral history interviews.

With regard to diary writing, the First World War witnessed a remarkable expansion of this practice among soldiers, including many who had not previously been accustomed to recording their experiences in written form. The Second World War was no different in this respect. As far as the 27th Light Division is concerned, six surviving diaries have been identified. Five were written by members of the formation itself, while the sixth was kept by a soldier of the 20th Border Rifle Battalion, which was temporarily attached to the light division during its operations in Galicia.

The briefest of these is that of Mihály Ferencz, who served as a field post courier in the 57/I Battalion. In his pocket diary, Ferencz recorded primarily the names of places, accompanied by one- or two-sentence remarks.⁵⁰ Nevertheless, he later used these diary entries as the basis for a short memoir. Another relatively concise diary is that of Géza Basa, an ensign in the hussar company of the 27th Reconnaissance Battalion. Although his entries are likewise brief, they are particularly valuable for the insights they provide into events that Basa witnessed or participated in as a mounted scout.⁵¹ The diary covering the shortest period is that of Ensign Ferenc Harmath and is especially interesting because he was wounded in the fighting at Kutý on 28 April, almost immediately after arriving at the front. As a result, his account is devoted entirely to this single engagement, which he describes in considerable detail.⁵²

The two most extensive diaries, however, are those of János Mirk and László Ocsovszky.⁵³ The fact that Mirk served as a clerk in the Operations Department of the divisional headquarters and was therefore privy to numerous sensitive military matters influenced the content of his entries to a considerable extent. As he himself explains

⁵⁰ Mihály Ferencz, *Untitled wartime diary* (Manuscript in the possession of Zoltán Ferencz, County Covasna, Romania).

⁵¹ Géza Basa, 'Napló 1944. márc. 26-tól' [Diary from 26 March 1944] (Manuscript in the possession of Árpád Róbert Berekméri, County Mureş, Romania).

⁵² Ferenc Harmath, *Diary* (Manuscript in the possession of Ferenc Harmath, County Mures, Romania).

⁵³ János Mirk, 'Napló 1944. április hótól 1945. szeptember hó 12-ig' [Diary from April 1944 to 12 September 1945] (Manuscript in the possession of Szidónia Mirk, County Harghita, Romania).

in his memoir, he deliberately excluded information relating to these matters in order to avoid arousing suspicions of espionage should the diary come into the hands of a superior officer and to ensure that, if captured, he would not be found in possession of material that might expose him to prolonged interrogation.⁵⁴ By contrast, Ocsovszky, a medical officer in the 27th Reconnaissance Battalion, made a conscious effort to record the activities of the 27th Light Division as accurately as possible. As he himself notes, his battalion was frequently attached to different combat groups, and providing timely support to them required a detailed knowledge of the disposition of individual units. Moreover, his close contacts with the commanders of the battalion's various sub-units, together with his good relationship with the battalion commander and adjutant, provided him with first-hand information about ongoing operations as well as timely notice of non-classified orders and instructions. Combined with his own curiosity, which often brought him close to unfolding events, these circumstances gave him a broader perspective on the activities of the division than that afforded by his immediate personal experience alone, as is evident from the contents of his diary.⁵⁵ It should also be noted that Ocsovszky lent his diary to at least one of his comrades, who later commented on it in a letter to him. Mirk likewise allowed Ferenc Bereczki to draw on his diary when writing his own memoirs.⁵⁶ These examples suggest that both diaries were regarded by their fellow soldiers as reliable and authoritative accounts of their wartime experiences. Although such personal records generally afford their authors the least opportunity to reflect on and interpret their experiences, the practice discussed above nevertheless suggests that, in certain cases, even those who never contemplated publishing their diaries wrote with an audience in mind, thereby informing both the selection of experiences deemed worthy of recording and the manner in which they were presented.

Before turning to the memoirs and oral history interviews relating to the 27th Light Division, a few preliminary observations are necessary. First, after Northern Transylvania became part of Romania once again in 1944, most of the division's men

⁵⁴ János Mirk, 'Visszaemlékezés az elmúlt hatvan évre' [Reflections on the Past Sixty Years], (Manuscript in the possession of Szidónia Mirk, Harghita County, Romania), p. 116.

⁵⁵ Ocsovszky, László. 'Katonanaplóm' [My War Diary] (Manuscript in the possession of Árpád Róbert Berekméri, County Mures, Romania), pp 137-138.

⁵⁶ Bereczki also kept a diary during the war. See Ferenc Bereczki, 'Honvéd voltam', p. 3.

– or at least those who chose to return to their home region after the war – found themselves under Romanian rule. Once the Communists came to power, soldiers who had fought on the Eastern Front came to be seen – regardless of their ethnic background – as misguided at best and criminal at worst.⁵⁷ Under such circumstances, keeping written records of wartime experiences could be perceived as a dangerous or even potentially incriminating activity. János Antal, for example, began making notes during the war about his own experiences and continued to do so while a prisoner of war in the Soviet Union. Following his release from captivity, he committed his recollections to paper in the form of memoirs during the winter of 1948–1949. However, he was subsequently reported to the authorities. In 1952, the notorious Romanian political police, the Securitate, searched his home, detained him, and subjected him to interrogation. Among the charges brought against him was a poem in which he wrote that, although Romania was his native land, as an ethnic Hungarian he did not feel at home in the Romanian state. Another aspect of his writings deemed objectionable was his favourable description of his brief period of American captivity at the end of the war (many Hungarian soldiers surrendered to American forces; however, after their release, most of them were intercepted by Soviet troops while returning home and were subsequently deported to the Soviet Union). On account of these two matters, Antal was accused of denigrating the Romanian People's Democratic regime and glorifying American imperialism. Although released after two days, he was warned against engaging in similar writing in the future.⁵⁸

The situation deteriorated further in this respect during the 1980s, when, according to Maria Bucur, official Romanian representations of the Second World War under Nicolae Ceaușescu's regime⁵⁹ took on a markedly anti-Hungarian character. As part of this campaign, the authorities compiled an inventory of war memorials in Transylvania linked to the Hungarian past, which they considered a threat to the Romanian state, and in certain instances recommended either their conversion into monuments with an explicitly Romanian national character or their complete removal. At the same time, greater prominence was given to atrocities committed against Romanians and Jews in Northern Transylvania under Hungarian rule, while the history of the Holocaust in

⁵⁷ Maria Bucur, *Heroes and Victims* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, 2009), pp 194-195, 202.

⁵⁸ János Antal, *Fogságom naplója* [Diary of My Captivity] (Budapest, 2008), p. 10.

⁵⁹ Nicolae Ceaușescu was a Romanian communist politician who led Romania as general secretary of the Romanian Communist Party from 1965 and as president from 1974 until his execution in 1989.

Romania itself was downplayed or suppressed. The campaign also involved the circulation of photographs depicting the deportation of Romanians during this period alongside images of the deportation of Jews, thereby drawing an explicit parallel between the two experiences and suggesting that the Hungarian authorities had intended to subject the Romanian population of Northern Transylvania to the same fate as the Jewish community following the German occupation of Hungary.⁶⁰ This, too, may have contributed to the fact that in the 1980s many former soldiers committed their wartime experiences to paper, sometimes at the request of their families, while in Szekler villages, where several dozen ex-servicemen often lived, they regularly gathered to recount their experiences to one another. Such activities may be seen as an attempt to reclaim their own memory of the war in the face of an official narrative that offered an increasingly distorted representation of the period they had experienced firsthand. As we have seen, however, even the writing of personal recollections could attract the attention of the political police. It was probably for this reason that János Mirk concluded his 1980 memoirs with a request that they be read exclusively by family members, followed by the emphatic warning, written in capital letters: 'IT MUST NOT FALL INTO STRANGERS' HANDS!'⁶¹

All this gradually changed after the fall of communism. During the 1990s, former veterans increasingly entered the public sphere, owing partly to legislation adopted in both Romania and Hungary that granted monthly compensation to former prisoners of war who had spent prolonged periods in Soviet captivity after the Second World War, and partly to the fact that former Hungarian veterans were now free to organise their own commemorative events. Within the former recruitment area of the 27th Light Division, the surviving veteran population remained substantial during this period. In Mureş County, approximately 4,500 former prisoners of war were registered in 1993, while in Harghita County their number exceeded 4,000 in 1994. For Covasna County, only the number of compensation claims is available, totalling 3,474 applications.⁶² By this time, of course, there were no longer any barriers to either the writing and publication of memoirs or the conduct of oral history interviews.

⁶⁰ Bucur, *Heroes and Victims*, pp 183-187.

⁶¹ Mirk, 'Visszaemlékezés', p. 217.

⁶² *Népújság*, 3 November 1993 (Mureş County); *Hargita Népe*, 6 September 1994 (Harghita County); *Háromszék*, 7 December 2001 (Covasna County).

Research for this thesis identified approximately 35 published and unpublished memoirs and memoir excerpts connected with the 27th Light Division. Most were written by soldiers who served with the formation throughout the war, and some were authored by men whose units were attached to it only temporarily or who joined the division during the final months of 1944. The authors likewise display considerable diversity in terms of rank. Although the collection includes both professional and reserve officers (mostly lieutenants and ensigns), accounts written by ordinary soldiers are also relatively numerous. The memoirs themselves vary considerably in both length and chronological scope: while some focus exclusively on wartime experiences and subsequent captivity in the Soviet Union, others treat the war as only one episode within a broader life narrative. Alongside complete texts, many memoirs survive only in the form of excerpts published in collected volumes, with the selection determined by the authors or editors concerned.

The motivations behind these memoirs are equally diverse. Some authors wrote at the request of family members or with their relatives as the intended audience; Ferenc Bereczki, on the other hand, began writing his memoirs at the encouragement of one of his former officers.⁶³ Yet, where the authors reflect on the matter at all, many share a common desire to tell a story that they felt would otherwise remain unheard. Elemér Damó, for instance, sought to commemorate the soldiers who had served under his command, while Bereczki hoped to provide military historians with a source on the history of the 27th Light Division.⁶⁴ Others wished to record wartime experiences – including the years they spent in captivity in the Soviet Union. Accounts concerning the latter period were of considerable value not only because the experiences of prisoners of war deported to various Soviet labour camps had been entirely absent from the official narrative, but also because their authors often recorded the names of their fellow prisoners. Until the fall of communism, these memoirs were in many cases the only sources available concerning those who had perished in the camps. Finally, some veterans, as they became increasingly conscious of the gradual fading of their

⁶³ Bereczki, 'Honvéd voltam', p. 3.

⁶⁴ Elemér Damó, *Névtelen katonák: a 115. önálló utász század a háború utolsó évében* [Unknown Soldiers: the 115th Independent Engineer Company in the Last Year of the War] (Budapest, 1994).

memories, sought to preserve their recollections for posterity, although, as already mentioned, in most cases they intended them only for members of their own families.

It is also important to note that, in several cases, the authors relied on contemporary diary entries when writing their memoirs. This is known to have been the case for Ferenc Bereczki, János Mirk, Mihály Ferencz, and Ferenc Harmath, all of whom drew on diaries kept during the war. Ferenc Bereczki went a step further: as he himself notes, he also consulted János Mirk's diary when preparing his own account. Particularly revealing in this respect are the memoirs written by Sándor Gál in 1993, in which the author explicitly reflects on the limitations of memory:

These recollections are somewhat fragmentary, for it was only fifty years later, at the age of seventy-one, that I found the courage to write down a few of the incidents that remained in my memory. What follows is merely a brief outline. Much more happened, both during the fighting and in captivity. Some things I could no longer recall with certainty and therefore left unwritten. Everything that I have recorded, however, did indeed occur.⁶⁵

Although Gál explicitly points to the shortcomings of his memoirs, he later reveals that, when recalling the names of the settlements in Galicia, Slovakia, and Austria through which he had passed during the war, he, too, relied on notes taken at the time.

The evidential value of these memoirs is nonetheless uneven. Some are distinguished by the remarkable observational skills of their authors, while others consist of brief accounts of only ten or twenty pages, dealing mainly with the itineraries followed during the war and with a few episodes recalled in connection with them. Particularly noteworthy is the memoir of Ferenc Bereczki, who, by virtue of his service at battalion headquarters and the access it afforded him to a wide range of information, produced a remarkably detailed account of his wartime experiences the history of the light division. Imre Erdélyi's recollections are equally valuable for their vivid descriptions of patrol activity conducted in no man's land and for the author's keen eye for the details of such operations.⁶⁶ Ensign László Makrai, a mortar officer, is less precise with regard to dates, yet offers important insights into the realities of combat.⁶⁷ Finally,

⁶⁵ Sándor Gál, 'Visszaemlékezéseim' [My Reminiscences] (Manuscript in the possession of Árpád Róbert Berekméri, County Mures, Romania), p. 8. The Sándor Gál referred to here should not be confused with the commander of the 57th Regiment, whose surname was spelled Gáll, with a double *l*.

⁶⁶ Erdélyi, *Megnőttek a hegyek* [The Mountains Have Grown Taller] (Marosvásárhely, 2022).

⁶⁷ Makrai, László, 'Ki tudja, merre, merre visz a végzet' [Who Knows Where Fate Will Lead Us] (Hungarian Military History Archives, Budapest, TGY 3616).

Elemér Damó, who served in the rear areas of the 27th Light Division only for a limited period, left a number of exceptionally perceptive observations on the routines and everyday life of soldiers at the front.

However, if we extend our focus beyond the texts written by soldiers of the 27th Light Division and consider the First Army as a whole, the number of relevant memoirs increases significantly. Several officers serving in senior or otherwise significant posts also left written accounts, including General Colonel Géza Lakatos, commander of the First Army between 1 April and 15 May 1944, and Captain László Eszenyi, who served on the army headquarters staff. While Lakatos treated the First Army's operations only briefly, devoting most of his attention to the wider trajectory of his career, Eszenyi, by contrast, sought to offer a far more detailed and comprehensive account of the events he witnessed on the Galician Front.⁶⁸ Memoirs written by men who served in other formations of the First Army and experienced the war from the perspective of the front-line soldier should also be mentioned. These include, among others, Sándor Fülöp of the 1st Mountain Brigade and the 33rd Border Rifle Battalion, and László Kékkői of the 25th Infantry Division.⁶⁹

Naturally, the evidence provided by these sources must be verified against other materials. Nevertheless, many of them are valuable also because they preserve information that their authors were scarcely aware of recording and that was incidental to the primary purpose of their testimony. In doing so, they unconsciously revealed attitudes, assumptions, and patterns of everyday life that may be of considerable value for historical analysis.⁷⁰

The collection of oral history interviews – particularly among ethnic Hungarians in Romania – likewise became possible only after the collapse of communism. In the absence of institutional efforts aimed at preserving veterans' stories and memories, such interviews were conducted primarily by journalists (Lajos Sylvester), historians

⁶⁸ Géza Lakatos, *Ahogy én láttam (Visszaemlékezések)* [As I Saw It (Memoirs)] (München, 1981). László Eszenyi, *Trianoni nemzedék* [The Trianon Generation] (Budapest, 1989).

⁶⁹ Sándor Fülöp, *Elindultam Kolozsvárról, megérkeztem Clujra* [I Set Out from Kolozsvár and Returned to Cluj] (Csíkszereda, 2010). László Kékkői, *Tűzözőn – Ahogy én láttam* [Inferno – As I Saw It] (Budapest, 2015).

⁷⁰ On the value of information recorded incidentally, see John Tosh, *The Pursuit of History: Aims, Methods and New Directions in the Study of Modern History* (London, 2002), p. 100.

(Levente Benkő), or military historians (Róbert Árpád Berekméri and József Nagy).⁷¹ The interviewers were usually interested in the wartime experiences of the interviewees in general or, in some cases, aimed to record recollections related to specific events and locations. The most impressive results in this respect were achieved by the military historian József Nagy. Between 2007 and 2015, Nagy interviewed some 251 veterans in the Szekler region alone. The questions in these semi-structured interviews concern the beginning of military service, life in the barracks, relations with instructors who usually came from interwar Hungary, the officers serving in particular units, the equipment of the Honvéd Army, the German occupation of Hungary, the mobilisation of 1944, and the military operations that took place in the autumn of that year.⁷² The author of the present thesis likewise conducted interviews with a number of former servicemen. Among the soldiers of the 27th Light Division were Andor Albert, Miklós Felcser, and Mihály Ferencz, to name but a few; Albert and Felcser, in particular, were interviewed on several occasions. Conversations with the family members of certain veterans also deserve mention, as they proved valuable in interpreting photographs and other materials left behind by the individuals concerned and in clarifying various aspects of their lives and wartime experiences. As far as the 27th Light Division is concerned, however, approximately 41 former soldiers and junior officers were interviewed by various researchers over the years.

Sources of this kind, of course, possess both advantages and disadvantages. More generally, they provide access to individuals and social groups whose written histories are either absent or distorted and shed light on aspects of everyday life that seldom find their way into documentary sources. In this regard, they share many of the characteristics of the ego-documents discussed above. Interviews may also reveal previously unknown events or uncover new dimensions of events that are already known.⁷³ At the same time, the use of testimonies recorded many decades after the

⁷¹ Levente Benkő, *Fogolykönyv* [Book of Prisoners of War] (Sepsiszentgyörgy, 1999). Sylvester Lajos, *Úz-völgyi hegyomlás* [Landslide in the Úz Valley] (Sepsiszentgyörgy, 1996). Whereas Sylvester focused on soldiers who had fought in the Úz Valley following the Soviet offensive of August 1944 – a subject on which he also produced a documentary film of the same title – Benkő's work dealt primarily with prisoners of war who were taken to the Soviet Union at the end of the Second World War.

⁷² See Nagy, *Békeévek*, pp 10-11.

⁷³ See Alessandro Portelli, 'What Makes Oral History Different' in Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (eds), *The Oral History Reader* (London, 1998).

events they describe raises important questions regarding their reliability and the extent to which memories may have been reshaped over time or, in some cases, affected by memory loss. Nevertheless, the recording and use of such late testimonies are by no means unique to ethnic Hungarians in Romania. As Rodney Earl Walto has observed, it was not until the 1980s and 1990s that many American Second World War veterans, then approaching the end of their lives, became willing to speak about their wartime experiences, and a similar tendency has been noted among Holocaust survivors. This development was, of course, also closely connected to the renewed public and scholarly interest in the Second World War during these decades. Drawing on interviews conducted during the 1990s with American veterans who had participated in the Battle of Okinawa (April–June 1945), Walto also addressed the trustworthiness of such testimonies. He found that the veterans' recollections were generally reliable and accurate, although they tended to remember their initial experiences during the campaign in greater detail, whereas memories of later events were often less vivid⁷⁴ – a tendency that is likewise evident among those who served in the 27th Light Division.

A further instructive example concerning the reliability of retrospective testimony is provided by Fred H. Allison. He examined the case of a Vietnam veteran who, as a member of a patrol, participated in a firefight on 16 February 1968 and was interviewed shortly after the engagement and again in 2002. Whereas the 1968 interview presents a disjointed yet exceedingly detailed description of what had occurred, reflecting the confusion and uncertainty that surrounded the fighting, the later interview offers a much more structured account, emphasising what the veteran regarded as most important, providing additional context, and justifying his own conduct during the incident. Nevertheless, Allison found that the basic facts and sequence of events in the later account corresponded closely to those recorded in the original interview.⁷⁵

These observations, however, while largely applicable to the oral testimonies of the former soldiers of the 27th Light Division, require some additional remarks. On the one hand, a number of the available interviews constitute historical sources of

⁷⁴ Rodney Earl Walto, 'Memories from the Edge of the Abyss: Evaluating the Oral Accounts of World War II Veterans' in *The Oral History Review*, vol. xxxvii, no. 1 (2010), pp 18-34.

⁷⁵ Fred H. Allison, 'Remembering a Vietnam War Firefight: Changing Perspectives over Time' in *The Oral History Review*, vol. xxxi, no. 2 (2004), pp 69-83.

considerable value in their own right, comparable to the oral testimonies examined by Walto and Allison. This is particularly well illustrated by the interview conducted by Árpád Róbert Berekméri with József Kiss. As a former platoon leader, Kiss often reveals important details of small-unit tactics almost in passing when recounting particular incidents. Even when describing something as seemingly mundane as the approach to a potentially dangerous, forested hill, his account provides valuable insights into how he deployed and manoeuvred his men in situations where danger was sensed rather than directly observed. Similarly, his frustration at being assigned service-unit soldiers who lacked even the most basic knowledge required to eliminate a small enemy position sheds light on the extent to which military training had become second nature to experienced soldiers and on the difficulties that arose when their comrades lacked such skills. By contrast, at the other end of the spectrum are interviews in which the interviewer systematically works through a prepared set of questions but receives little substantive information in response to some of them. This may partly be explained by the fact that the interviewee may have occupied a position that entailed relatively monotonous duties even at the front, and therefore lacked the kind of insights the interviewer sought. At the same time, other factors must also be taken into account, including a desire to forget wartime experiences rather than revisit them, the effects of memory loss, and, in some cases, an unwillingness or inability to put such memories into words. Nevertheless, even seemingly unremarkable interviews may occasionally yield details that, when considered alongside other sources, are of considerable value to the researcher.

Alessandro Portelli draws attention to another important characteristic of oral history sources: they possess something that no other type of source can provide to the same extent, namely the speaker's subjectivity. If the approach to research is sufficiently broad and nuanced, Portelli argues, a cross-section of the subjectivity of a particular group or social class may emerge, since oral sources reveal not only what people did, but also what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, and what they later came to think they had done.⁷⁶ In the present thesis, however, oral history sources, as with any other type of source, will be compared with other forms of evidence in

⁷⁶ Portelli, 'What Makes Oral History Different', p. 67.

order to identify inaccuracies and distortions and to contribute to a more nuanced historical interpretation.

3. Structure

As far as the structure of the thesis is concerned, the analysis follows the history of the 27th Light Division in largely chronological order. The first chapter offers a brief overview of the history of Transylvania in the twentieth century and examines how Hungarian military structures and organisations were established in the province in 1940, during the Second World War, before narrowing its focus to the Szekler region and the specific military system developed there. The chapter also explores the system of military service and the relationship that emerged between Transylvanian Hungarians – who typically served as recruits – and soldiers from interwar Hungary, who most often occupied instructional roles. Particular attention is devoted to the establishment, deployment, and internal structure of the Light Division, its training practices, and the state of its equipment. Taken together, these elements aim to provide a nuanced picture of the military framework into which the 27th Light Division was integrated and of the personnel who composed the formation at the time it went to war.

The second chapter examines the efforts of both the Hungarian and German governments to shape the values and views – and, through them, the loyalties and perceptions of war – of Szekler soldiers. First, the question of leadership legitimacy is addressed, with particular attention to the personality cult that developed around Miklós Horthy. The analysis focuses not only on the top-down perspective of propaganda but also on the cult as a set of rituals and on participation in them, in order to explore the dynamics of the relationship between the leader and the populace. The scope of this inquiry is then narrowed to public ceremonies that formalised the relationship between the leader and those serving in the military, such as the taking of the military oath. The following section reviews wartime propaganda – both German and Hungarian – and is complemented by an analysis of the printed press and newsreels. Particular attention is given to the representation of the German and Hungarian war efforts in general and of the army in particular, as well as to the ways

in which the media reported on the events and developments of the war. This is followed by a discussion of the participation of a unit of the 27th Light Division during a particular phase of the conflict, with the aim of assessing whether the experiences of a smaller contingent could have influenced public opinion. The chapter concludes with a brief discussion of the German occupation of Hungary and the attitudes displayed by Szekler soldiers in response to the announcement of mobilisation.

The third chapter focuses on the relatively narrow topic of the initial combat experiences of soldiers serving in the 27th Light Division. Following the formation's arrival at the front, the troops took part in the offensive operations of the Hungarian First Army on the right flank of the VI Corps, with the specific objective of capturing three settlements – Kutý, Kosów, and Pistyn. Drawing on fragmentary and highly heterogeneous sources, the chapter examines how these small-scale engagements were perceived by the soldiers themselves, as well as the demands placed upon them in combat. Particular attention is devoted to the extent to which platoon- and company-level leadership – and, conversely, its breakdown – shaped soldiers' behaviour in combat. Finally, the chapter considers how participation in these engagements was interpreted at different levels of the command structure and what consequences these interpretations had for the soldiers involved.

The aim of the fourth chapter is to capture the frontline experience of the Szekler soldiers in more general terms. In order to outline the broader context, the chapter first examines the multi-layered defensive system established north of the Hungarian border, on which the main line of battle of the Hungarian First Army was based. This is followed by an overview of the positions held by the 27th Light Division and an analysis of the characteristics of positional warfare within the formation's sector. Within this framework, several key elements of combat are addressed, and, in addition, attention is also given to the soldiers' perceptions of the adequacy and limitations of their equipment, as well as to the training activities conducted in rear areas behind the front. The aim is to conceptualise the frontline experience – largely shaped by battlefield practice – not as a static condition but as an ongoing process.

Two further themes are also explored: the question of fear – an issue frequently mentioned by the soldiers themselves – and the role of various communities and unit-level structures that sustained soldiers under frontline conditions. In relation to the military primary group, the analysis considers whether such forms of cohesion could emerge under the conditions of the Eastern Front, even when the army's system of mobilisation worked against their formation. As far as unit cohesion is concerned, the discussion focuses on larger military formations within which face-to-face relationships can no longer play a significant role, and explores whether a sense of bonding can nevertheless emerge without deliberate construction. Finally, the chapter concludes with an examination of the engagements fought in the vicinity of Delatyn and Mikuliczyn.

The fifth chapter examines what may be termed the second war of the 27th Light Division – the period during which the formation was redeployed to Northern Transylvania and subsequently compelled to withdraw onto the territory of interwar Hungary. As a result of this redeployment, and of the political changes that occurred in Hungary during the same period, the Szekler soldiers' perception of the war underwent a significant transformation, which in turn affected their morale and combat performance. In order to trace these changes, the chapter first analyses how the nature of combat was altered by the changing characteristics of the front – above all by the absence of the defensive infrastructure that had characterised the previous line – as well as by the fragmentation of the light division and the subordination of its units to German formations. The redeployment was also a direct consequence of the fact that the very region from which many of these soldiers had originated had itself become a battlefield. Accordingly, attention is paid to what Szekler soldiers observed of the impact of the war on the civilian population, and to the effects on their morale of the evacuation of their native region by the Hungarian state and by Hungarian and German troops. The chapter also discusses Miklós Horthy's attempt to remove Hungary from the war, the subsequent change of power, and the ways in which Szekler soldiers responded to the cumulative impact of these developments. Finally, it examines how, once the soldiers had effectively withdrawn their consent to further participation in the

war, both the political leadership and the army resorted to coercion in order to secure compliance – and how the soldiers, in turn, reacted to such measures.

The thesis concludes with a chapter that summarises its main argument. It shows that two parallel processes unfolded on the Galician front: on the one hand, a form of tactical professionalisation developed; on the other, bonds characteristic of small military groups and larger units emerged, which also influenced combat effectiveness. By contrast, developments on the Hungarian front are viewed as a process determined by various disintegrating factors whose cumulative impact ultimately led to the breakdown of the formation, despite the coercive measures employed by the military authorities.

Chapter I: Formation, Recruitment, and Structure

In many respects, the 27th Light Division may be regarded as a distinctive military formation, whose particular character derived from the region's changing state affiliation and its ethnic composition. Although the unit itself formed part of the Hungarian Honvéd Army during the Second World War, the majority of its soldiers – Hungarian-speaking Szeklers – had spent most of their lives – largely coinciding with the interwar period – within the borders of Romania. As such, the division's history cannot be understood without situating it within the shifting frameworks of sovereignty in Transylvania.

Accordingly, this chapter outlines the history of Transylvania during the first half of the twentieth century, tracing how it came under Romanian control after the First World War, and how its northern part, in 1940, was reincorporated into Hungary for a limited period. This change of sovereignty necessitated not only administrative but also military integration. The following section therefore examines the establishment of IX Corps, covering the predominantly Szekler-inhabited Hungarian-speaking region, and the formation of the 27th Light Division, which was originally organised as a brigade. The third section turns to processes of conscription and mobilisation in the Szekler region, with particular attention to the challenges posed by the integration of predominantly ethnic Hungarian recruits socialized in Romania into the Hungarian military structure.

Finally, the chapter concludes with a brief analysis of the unit's organizational structure at the moment of its mobilization and deployment to the front

1. Historical Background

The history of the 27th Light Division, established in 1940 in Northern Transylvania – more specifically, in a region inhabited by the Szeklers – is inseparable from the wider developments of twentieth-century Hungarian history, especially the peace treaty signed by Hungary in 1920 at the Grand Trianon Palace in Versailles following the First World War. As a result of the treaty, the Szeklers – an ethnographic subgroup of the Hungarian nation distinguished by a strong regional identity and continuous presence in eastern Transylvania since the thirteenth century – came under Romanian rule, a process that had, in practice, already begun in 1918. Unlike other Hungarian

communities dispersed throughout Transylvania, the Szeklers constituted an absolute majority within a relatively extensive territory located in the geographical centre of Greater Romania and were regarded by most Romanian political actors as a challenge to the legitimacy of Romanian territorial sovereignty. State policies concerning the Szekler population, simultaneously encompassing measures such as cultural assimilation and legal discrimination, ultimately contributed to the political and social alienation of both the Szekler elite – and, it is perhaps not an exaggeration to suggest, the community as a whole – from the newly established nationalizing Romanian state. By the end of the 1930s, shifts in the international balance of power contributed to the gradual revision of the peace treaties concluded after the First World War. On 30 August 1940, as a consequence of the Second Vienna Award, arbitrated by Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy, Transylvania was divided into two parts, and the territory designated as Northern Transylvania – approximately 43,104 km², including the majority of the Szekler region – was transferred from Romania to Hungary.¹ As a result of these territorial changes, the Szekler population was once again incorporated into the Hungarian state.

The initial stage of the transfer of sovereignty commenced on 5 September 1940, when Hungarian forces crossed the interwar border. Over the following week, they advanced towards the Carpathian Mountains, entering the Szekler region on 9 September and reaching their final objective – the southernmost point of the newly established Romanian–Hungarian border – on 13 September. This advance was preceded by the withdrawal of Romanian state authorities and armed forces. While ethnic Hungarians in the region greeted the change with jubilation, expressed through celebrations and festive parades, Romanian sources describe endless columns of vehicles carrying the belongings of refugees fleeing the ceded territories and recount scenes in which ethnic Romanians who chose to remain clung to departing Romanian soldiers in an effort to dissuade them from leaving.²

Although Hungarian troops were instructed not to initiate or tolerate reprisals against the Romanian population for offenses – real or perceived – committed against local Hungarians during the twenty-two years of Romanian rule, several cases of mistreatment and even murder were nevertheless reported. The most serious events

¹ Magyarosi, 'The 27th Szekler Light Division', pp 6-7.

² Nagy, *Békeévek*, pp 17-18.

occurred in Szilágy County and involved Hungarian units that had entered the region; 157 individuals were killed in the village of Szilágyipp and 93 in the village of Ördökgút. In both cases, the perpetrators justified the massacres as responses to alleged sporadic acts of irregular resistance.³

Upon entering Northern Transylvania, the military also assumed responsibility for providing a transitional administration of the territory from 14 September until 26 November, when the newly organized Hungarian civil administration became operational. As the army was unable to spare personnel from among active-duty officers, administrative positions were typically filled by retired officers recalled to service. Among the numerous challenges faced by the transitional authorities was the disruption of the railway line between Kolozsvár and Marosvásárhely, which was divided by the new border in such a way that a large section of the line remained in Romanian territory, thereby severing rail connections between the Szekler region and the rest of Hungary. As a result, provisioning the affected region became extremely difficult.

While the transitional administration undoubtedly facilitated the transfer of sovereignty and laid the groundwork for the military integration of the region within Hungary's armed forces, in civil affairs the soldier-administrators frequently made well-intentioned but flawed decisions. These included measures that transformed the linguistic landscape of the region, such as renaming streets and replacing Romanian shop signs with Hungarian ones. While some of these actions were welcomed by segments of the local Hungarian population, they simultaneously contributed to the further alienation of ethnic Romanians, who increasingly perceived them as demonstrations of power by a foreign occupying force.

2. The Formation of the 27th Light Division

As far as the military structures of the region were concerned, they had to be created virtually from scratch. Accordingly, a new Hungarian army corps, the IX Corps, was established, and under its command various military formations were organized,

³ Case, *Between states*, p. 100.

including units designated for stationing in the Szekler region. In organizing the latter, however, several factors had to be taken into consideration. First, the new borders transformed the Szekler region into a salient with a base only about seventy kilometres wide – referred to by the colloquial designations Kosna-neck, Göring's Elbow, and Göring's Belly – which was extremely vulnerable to being cut off. Secondly, the eastern boundaries of the salient ran along the range of the Eastern Carpathians, the mountains acting as a natural border between Hungary and Romania. Consequently, some of the Szekler units to be established had to be trained in mountain warfare. Thirdly, a symbolic factor also influenced the process of organizing the region's military structure – namely, the military traditions of the Szeklers, which gave rise to the Szekler Border Guard Battalions, a militia-like force composed of over-age (and later under-age) men. Although they were not originally intended to serve as a combat force, in 1944 the Border Guards nonetheless ended up on the front line.

The main formations of the IX Corps were to be the 25th Brigade located in Nagyvárad, the 26th Brigade located in Dées, and the 27th Brigade, which had its headquarters in Marosvásárhely. The three battalions of the 27th Brigade were garrisoned in the towns of Sepsiszentgyörgy (27/I Battalion), Székelyudvarhely (27/II Battalion), and Marosvásárhely (27/III Battalion). Since its recruiting district approximately coincided with the Szekler region, the brigade – similarly to the county titles of British regiments – was permitted to include the word 'Székely' (that is, Szekler) in its name.⁴ Colonel József Császy, its first commander, took up his duties on 15 November 1940, and the first group of draftees to be trained by the 27th Brigade began their three-year military service in early December 1940.

On 12 February 1942, all infantry brigades of the Hungarian army were redesignated as light divisions (that is, understrength divisions with only two regiments each). On 1 October 1943, when the so-called Szabolcs Plan superseded the previous organization, the light divisions were consolidated into regular infantry divisions, each consisting of three regiments – except for the Szekler formation, which was reorganized as a three-regiment infantry division only in October 1944, during the retreat of German and Hungarian forces from Transylvania. In peacetime, however, a light division contained only a single regiment – the 27th Infantry Regiment. Upon

⁴ Magyarosi, 'The 27th Szekler Light Division', p. 8.

mobilisation, this regiment was to be duplicated using the peacetime framework: the original unit would be split into two cadres, each of which would then be brought up to wartime strength through the call-up of reservists. The newly formed regiment was designated the 57th Infantry Regiment.⁵

The 27th Light Division was integrated into a rather distinctive military structure. During the Second World War, responsibility for Hungary's border security was assigned to the border rifle battalions, which were tasked with patrolling the frontier but, in the event of war, could also be mobilized as combat forces. Seven such battalions were subordinated to the IX Corps and were distinguished not only by numerical designation but – similarly to the regiments of the 27th Light Division – were also assigned 'Szekler' as a regional title. Since the eastern (and southern) border of Hungary, which largely coincided with the Szekler region, ran along the ranges of the Eastern Carpathians, four of the seven Szekler battalions were organized and trained for mountain warfare.⁶

Finally, in the spring of 1942, some 20 Szekler Border Guard battalions were formed from reservists who had served in the First World War (two-thirds of the men in question belonged to the 42–48 age group, and the remaining one-third to the 48–60 age group). Typically, the inhabitants of a village formed a platoon, a civil parish a company, and a district a battalion. When mobilized, the battalions – some 900–1,100 men strong – consisted of one heavy weapons company and three infantry companies, but in peacetime they were maintained only at cadre strength. Contrary to their name, these militia-like units were not entrusted with actual border defence; their initial duty was to protect their respective settlements against enemy infiltration or looting in the event of war. The officers and NCOs of the border guards were also drawn from among the local population, except for the battalion commanders, who, according to the original plans, were to be majors, lieutenant colonels, or colonels (that is, officers of field rank, referred to in the Honvéd Army as staff officers). However, since the militia was rather unpopular with such officers, these positions were ultimately filled by first lieutenants and captains.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Illésfalvi, Szabó, and Számvéber, *Erdély a hadak útján*, pp 38-39.

The training of border guard militiamen took place on weekends, typically near their homes, and lacked the rigour and brutality associated with active military service. The composition of this force changed somewhat in the autumn of 1943, when members of the 18–19 age group were called up, trained as active-service soldiers, and assigned to the existing border guard battalions. It was characteristic of these formations that neighbours served in the same unit; however, as a consequence of this new development, fathers and sons also ended up serving together.⁷ The lack of adequate training, on the one hand, and the intricate web of social relationships carried over from civilian life, on the other, proved detrimental to the combat value of the border guard battalions. From 1 October 1943, however, border rifle and border guard battalions, along with fortress companies (manning fortified positions constructed in the valleys of the Carpathians to block the mountain passes), were organized into various border rifle groups. After August 1944, when the Soviet Army reached the Szekler region, the border guard militia battalions were also committed to combat alongside the other types of units mentioned above.

3. Conscription and Military Service

The first age group to be drafted into the Hungarian Honvéd Army consisted of men born in 1919; under certain conditions, volunteers from the age groups of 1916–1918 and 1920–1923 were also permitted to enlist. Since, in the autumn of 1940, the army had only just begun to establish its infrastructure in Northern Transylvania, all data on potential draftees were initially provided by the local authorities, and those liable for service were instructed to report, on a given date, to one of nine travelling draft committees tasked with covering the entire territory. These recruits began their service on 2 December 1940. From 1941 onwards, however, the registration of military-age male citizens was taken over by the military authorities – in the case of IX Corps, by nine conscription offices, three of which were located in the Szekler region. The draft process itself took place between 15 February and 15 June and primarily concerned men born in 1920, those born in 1919 who had not been registered in the autumn of 1940, Hungarian refugees from southern – that is, Romanian – Transylvania who had

⁷ Nagy, *Békeévek*, p. 134.

already been naturalised and granted Hungarian citizenship, and volunteers for military service. Former Austro-Hungarian NCOs were also permitted to apply for re-enlistment, provided they were under 55 years of age and had not served in the Romanian army after 1920.

Finally, in the autumn of 1941, some of the men born between 1893 and 1918 were also registered, along with those born in 1921. In 1942, military registration took place in two distinct periods: between 23 March and 22 May, and between 15 September and 20 December. During the latter period, the authorities registered those born in 1922, who were to begin their military service in October 1943.⁸ The general rule was that members of the 1919 age group began their service in 1940; those born in 1920 in 1941; those of the 1921 age group in 1942, and so on. There were, however, some exceptions. The 1923 age group, on the one hand, was scheduled to report for service in the autumn of 1944, but by that time Soviet forces had entered the Szekler region. In theory, upon news of the enemy's approach, members of this age group were to be rounded up and evacuated along with the withdrawing civilian and military authorities. However, in many cases these orders could not be carried out, and many of the draftees escaped military service – and front-line experience – altogether, while those relocated by the authorities were first sent to regions still controlled by the Hungarian government and, at a later stage, transferred to Germany for military training. By contrast, the age groups born in 1924 and 1925 were called up in 1942 and began their military training on 1 October 1943 in eleven provisional training camps built specifically for this purpose (as noted above, they were later assigned to the border guard battalions).⁹

As far as men serving with the border rifle units are concerned, as well as those forming the younger contingent of the border guard battalions, they experienced their baptism by fire when Soviet forces reached the Szekler region. Later, when the remnants of the border guard battalions were integrated into other units, it was primarily members of these two age groups who were transferred to regular formations – among them the 27th Light Division. Pál Incze, for example, took part in combat

⁸ Nagy, *Békeévek*, p. 36.

⁹ Nagy, *Békeévek*, pp 173-174.

operations with the 11th Border Guard Battalion along the borders of the Szekler region in September 1944. During the withdrawal from Transylvania, however, when soldiers who had become separated from their units or whose units had been destroyed were rounded up and sent to Miskolc, he decided to join the ammunition train (composed of horse-drawn wagons) of the 27th Light Division. A similar pattern can also be observed in certain cases involving officers. Captain Gábor Éltető, who had originally served in the 62nd Border Rifle Patrol Battalion, was transferred to the light division following several reassignments: in October 1944, after the disbandment of his unit, he was assigned to the 28/II Battalion, before assuming command of the 27th Field Training Battalion in December 1944.

Men belonging to the age classes of 1906–1918, who had completed their military service in the Romanian Army during the interwar period, were also called up, beginning on 1 March 1941, for a period of twelve weeks to be retrained in accordance with Hungarian military standards. The purpose of this training was to integrate them into the Hungarian reserve system. The formations of IX Corps were expected to retrain a total of 2,500 reserve officers and some 57,500 rank-and-file personnel. However, as the existing staff proved unable to cope with such numbers, only 1,513 reserve officers and 19,744 rank-and-file personnel were accepted, while 402 former officers and 11,286 rank-and-file personnel were transferred to the other eight army corps.¹⁰ These men were to make up the pool of reservists the army could tap into upon mobilisation. Consequently, when the 27th Light Division was deployed in 1944, the formation was manned by active-duty soldiers born in 1919, 1920, and 1921, who were still performing their compulsory military service, as well as by reservists called up from the age groups mentioned above. As will be discussed, the former – young, unmarried men – experienced the war differently from the latter, most of whom were older men with families.

At the beginning of their service, all active-duty soldiers underwent basic training, followed by a period of service-specific instruction. Based on their performance

¹⁰ Nagy, *Békeévek*, p. 86.

during basic training, some recruits were selected in the second phase and sent to junior NCO schools, whereas high school graduates appointed as volunteer privates (*karpaszományos honvéd*) began a two-year training programme as reserve officer candidates. At the end of the first year, the latter attained the rank of cadet warrant officer (*hadapród őrmester*) and, upon completion of their training, were commissioned as reserve ensigns (*tartalékos zászlós*). By contrast, regular officers were required to attend one of the military academies, graduating with the rank of second lieutenant.¹¹

In the year of the re-annexation of Northern Transylvania, the time required to establish Hungarian military structures meant that recruits began their basic training in December 1940, somewhat later than was customary in the Royal Hungarian Honvéd Army, and completed it on 31 March 1941. For those called up in 1941, by contrast, service followed the established pattern: basic training took place between October and January, followed by section-level training in February and March, platoon-level training in April and May, and battalion-level training in June. In July, the troops were granted leave to assist with the summer harvest, followed by battalion-level manoeuvres in August–September. During the second year of their service, soldiers typically performed routine duties in the barracks, participated in the training of new recruits as instructors, and attended various specialist training courses. Although the prescribed period of service was three years, in peacetime military service lasted only two years, followed by a one-year leave before transfer to the reserves. During the war, however, active-duty soldiers served for three years – or, in the military parlance of the period, were retained for a third year of service.¹²

In the interwar period, military training in Hungary was based partly on Austro–Hungarian traditions, while from the 1930s onwards elements of the German Army’s training system were also adopted. However, preparation for modern warfare posed a considerable challenge to the Hungarian military. As Illésfalvi, Szabó, and Számvéber note, in 1943 attempts were made in several garrisons in Transylvania to introduce troops to tank warfare. The exercises included both cooperation with armoured units

¹¹ Magyarosi, ‘The 27th Szekler Light Division’, p. 9.

¹² Nagy, *Békeévek*, pp 50–51.

and anti-tank tactics, and even involved tanks driving over trenches while soldiers took cover inside them, familiarising them with one of the more daunting, though common, features of modern mechanised warfare. However, because the tanks employed for training purposes rotated between garrisons rather than being permanently assigned to particular formations, such exercises amounted to isolated demonstrations rather than systematic training in infantry–armour cooperation and anti-tank tactics.¹³

Owing to the geography of the region, the formations of IX Corps also received training in winter warfare. The programme provided soldiers, including those of the 27th Light Division, with instruction in the skills necessary for survival and combat in winter, including the construction of shelters and concealed positions adapted to snowy terrain and cold weather. Ski training was likewise provided, though not to the same extent as in the border rifle units.¹⁴

Despite these efforts, Hungarian military training continued to suffer from serious shortcomings. Owing to the lack of adequate financial resources, the troops were constantly short of ammunition and therefore never achieved the same level of proficiency in handling their weapons as their German counterparts – at least not under training conditions. As Imre Erdélyi, who served in the 57/III Battalion, recalls, his squad's light mortar had never been fired prior to their first encounter with the enemy.¹⁵ In a similar vein, László Eszenyi, an officer serving at the headquarters of the Hungarian First Army in 1944, noted on the basis of his experience with German training methods that these involved live-fire exercises conducted at the level of full-strength divisions, in which every soldier participated. By contrast, Hungarian officer cadets completed their four-year training at the Ludovika Academy without ever experiencing machine guns – let alone artillery – being fired above their heads.¹⁶ In his analysis, military historian József Nagy similarly concluded that, owing to the shortage of certain modern weapons and adequate training grounds, the preparation of Hungarian troops lacked practical effectiveness.¹⁷

¹³ Illésfalvi, Szabó, and Számvéber, *Erdély a hadak útján*, p. 45.

¹⁴ See Illésfalvi, Szabó, and Számvéber, *Erdély a hadak útján*, p. 45. Berekméri, *Lesz még kikelet*, p. 38.

¹⁵ Erdélyi, *Megnőttek a hegyek*, p. 62.

¹⁶ Eszenyi, *Trianoni nemzedék*, pp 77-78.

¹⁷ Nagy, *Békeévek*, p. 50.

The fact that Northern Transylvania had belonged to Romania during the interwar period also had important implications for instructor–recruit relations during military training. Szekler recruits were typically placed under the command of junior NCOs, NCOs, and officers drawn from various regions of interwar Hungary, where, following the First World War, a revival of myths associated with the Szekler past had taken place. As a result, the Szeklers came to be regarded as the ‘purest’ of Hungarians who had preserved their ethnic identity and culture in the face of Romanian rule.¹⁸ An important element of this imagery was related to the wave of commemorations that followed the First World War, during which – much as in numerous contemporary articles and books – Szekler soldiers were praised for their wartime heroism. In practice, however, the recruits – young men of rural origin with limited formal education – did not conform to these expectations, a discrepancy that was by no means unique to Northern Transylvania but was also characteristic of conscripted soldiers throughout interwar Hungary, who were measured against a similarly idealised image of the Hungarian soldier. In Transylvania, however, both NCOs and officers tended to explain this phenomenon by suggesting that the local Hungarian population had been ‘corrupted’ by Romanian influence. It was not uncommon for them to refer to the recruits as ‘Romanians’ or *oláh* – a pejorative term for Romanians that was regarded as particularly offensive by Szeklers, who believed that they had been subjected to discrimination during the interwar period precisely because of their Hungarian identity.

Although some officers were well aware that Szeklers were extremely sensitive to insults directed at their ethnic identity, the practice of name-calling became so widespread that specific orders had to be issued prohibiting it. Tensions between NCOs and officers, on the one hand, and recruits, on the other, diminished only in 1943–44, as increasing numbers of newly commissioned Transylvanian-born officers and reserve officers were assigned to garrisons in the region.¹⁹ Those most affected by

¹⁸ Stefano Bottoni, ‘National Projects, Regional Identities, Everyday Compromises: Szeklerland in Greater Romania (1919–1940)’ *Hungarian Historical Review*, vol. ii, no. 3 (2013), p. 499. See also Magyarosi, ‘The 27th Szekler Light Division’, p. 9.

¹⁹ Illésfalvi, Szabó, and Számvéber, *Erdély a hadak útján*, p. 41. See also Magyarosi, ‘The 27th Szekler Light Division’, pp 10–11.

this phenomenon were reservists called up for retraining, many of them men with families and established careers.

Nonetheless, military life held considerable appeal for younger and less educated men, as reflected in the high number of volunteers, particularly in the initial phase. From the nineteenth century onwards – as in other European countries – the defence of the nation came to be regarded as the duty of every male citizen to the collectivity. For Hungarians – and especially for the Szeklers – this shift was closely linked to the Revolution of 1848, when volunteering for the Honvéd army to fight against the Austrians – and later against the Russian troops sent to support them – was perceived as an act of loyalty to the nation. The introduction of compulsory military service in 1867, as ethnologist Vilmos Keszeg argues, also had a significant impact on civic mentality and patterns of behaviour, becoming a key factor in the construction of masculine identity.²⁰ Szeklers who volunteered for service in the Hungarian military during the war likewise frequently cited patriotism as their principal motivation; at the same time, however, the lack of employment opportunities in the region meant that even the prospect of a modest military career appeared economically attractive to many.²¹

4. The Structure of the Light Division

The 27th Light Division, in which a large number of Szekler recruits served during the Second World War, was a newly established formation created after Hungary's re-annexation of Northern Transylvania. Initially organised as a brigade, it subsequently underwent – apart from one notable exception – the same structural changes as the rest of the Royal Hungarian Army during the Second World War. Of these measures, however, only those necessary for understanding the character of the formation deployed to the front will be considered, together with a brief examination of the division's internal structure.

²⁰ Vilmos Keszeg, 'Az eltűnt katona emlékére' [In Memory of the Missing Soldier] in Sándor Ilyés and Vilmos Keszeg (eds.), *Az eltűnt katona. Kriza János Néprajzi Társaság Évkönyve 16* [The Missing Soldier. Annual of the Kriza János Ethnographic Society No. 16] (Kolozsvár 2008), p. 7.

²¹ Nagy, *Békeévek*, pp 40-42.

At the beginning of 1944 – that is, in the period immediately preceding the deployment of the 27th Light Division to the front – the Hungarian military was undergoing a comprehensive reorganisation. In accordance with the Szabolcs Plan – a military development programme that came into effect on 10 August 1943 – the existing light divisions were reorganised into infantry divisions, each comprising three infantry regiments and four artillery battalions. Consequently, the army consisted of eight infantry divisions, eight reserve divisions (each with only three artillery battalions), one light infantry division (the 27th Szekler Light Division), two mountain brigades, two armoured divisions, one cavalry division, one river guard brigade, three anti-aircraft brigades, and three air brigades. Given the capacity of Hungary's wartime industry, however, the newly formed units could not be fully equipped before the autumn of 1944 at the earliest, while the production of certain weapons was not expected to be completed until the end of 1947. The situation was further exacerbated by Allied air raids on Hungarian targets following the German occupation of the country. With up to 80 per cent of production capacity in some sectors destroyed, it became increasingly clear that neither the objectives of the Szabolcs Plan could be achieved nor the mobilised units fully equipped. Consequently, Hungarian infantry divisions suffered from serious deficiencies in their armament. As an analysis by military historian Krisztián Ungváry demonstrates, the number of machine guns prescribed by the table of organisation and equipment had to be reduced by 25 per cent, and that of submachine guns by 75 per cent. In practical terms, this meant that, although a Hungarian division was 60 per cent larger than its German counterpart, it possessed considerably weaker firepower and, in terms of equipment, did not surpass Soviet divisions; indeed, in the case of submachine guns, the Soviets enjoyed a clear advantage.²² As Ungváry further notes, the Hungarian Army suffered from several additional shortcomings. Divisions that had not been mobilised were deprived of their anti-tank gun platoons, each equipped with three 7.5 cm guns, and because these were reassigned to mobilised formations, no anti-tank guns remained in the hinterland for training purposes. Trucks were likewise in such short supply that divisional transport columns, comprising a variety of vehicles, could move a given formation's materiel only in several successive stages during both advances and withdrawals, creating the

²² Ungváry, *A magyar honvédség*, pp 236, 256.

risk that valuable military stores – including artillery pieces and heavy weapons – might have to be abandoned during a retreat.²³

Although the 27th Light Division remained the only formation to retain a two-regiment structure in 1944, it was nevertheless affected by certain innovations introduced under the Szabolcs Plan. In peacetime, only one of its two prescribed regiments – the 27th Infantry Regiment – was maintained, comprising three infantry battalions stationed in three towns in the Szekler region as follows: the 27/I Battalion in Sepsiszentgyörgy, the 27/II Battalion in Székelyudvarhely, and the 27/III Battalion in Marosvásárhely. Szekler recruits – along with a small proportion of conscripts from other parts of Hungary – were assigned to these units to complete their compulsory military service. The second regiment – designated the 57th Infantry Regiment – was created upon mobilisation by splitting the original unit and bringing both formations up to full strength through the call-up of reservists. As will be shown, this organisational system had a detrimental impact on small-unit cohesion during the initial phase of frontline deployment and, consequently, on combat effectiveness.

To provide a clearer understanding of the internal structure of the 27th Light Division, it is necessary briefly to describe its component units. This overview, however, is intended merely as a framework for understanding the units discussed below rather than as a comprehensive account. As noted earlier, the division comprised two regiments, each consisting of three infantry battalions. In their designation, the regiment was indicated by Arabic numerals and the battalion by Roman numerals; thus, the first battalion of the 27th Infantry Regiment was designated the 27/I Infantry Battalion. In addition to the battalions, the regimental structure included a mortar company, an anti-tank gun company, a cavalry platoon, a sapper platoon, and a signals platoon.

Each battalion, in turn, comprised one heavy weapons company and three rifle companies, as well as various service elements. A rifle company consisted of five officers and 190 other ranks and was divided into four rifle platoons, each of which comprised four sections. A heavy weapons company, consisting of a company

²³ Ungváry, *A magyar honvédség*, pp 240, 256.

headquarters, one mortar platoon, and three machine-gun platoons, was somewhat larger, numbering approximately 270 men. In addition, a signals platoon, an anti-tank gun platoon (equipped with four 3.7 cm M36 guns), and logistical transport elements – best rendered in English as the battalion train (*csapatvonat*) – were also subordinate to battalion headquarters.

Alongside its two infantry regiments, the light division's order of battle included six divisional-level units, only those relevant to the present discussion being considered here. One of these was the 27th Light Field Artillery Regiment, which comprised two battalions: the 27/I Battalion contained three batteries – two of them equipped with obsolete guns – while the 27/II Battalion consisted of four batteries. All artillery pieces were horse-drawn. Another divisional-level unit frequently mentioned in accounts of the fighting was the reconnaissance battalion, numbering approximately 700 men. Its components included, among others, a cavalry company (202 men) – also referred to as hussars – a bicycle company (218 men), and an anti-tank platoon. A third such unit was the combat engineer (*utász*) company, which numbered nearly 300 men.²⁴

In terms of personal weapons, the infantrymen of the 27th Light Division were initially equipped with 8 mm M31 and M31/A rifles and carbines. Despite their designation, these were in fact weapons manufactured before, during, and after the First World War and converted in 1931 ('31' indicating the year of conversion, while 'A' signified that the barrel had also been shortened). In contrast to traditional bolt-action rifles, in which the bolt handle is lifted, drawn to the rear, then pushed forward and rotated downward, straight-pull rifles operate through a purely linear motion of chambering and extraction. While this allows for more rapid, successive fire, the mechanism – particularly the need to lock the bolt securely to prevent rearward movement upon firing – is more complex and more prone to overheating and jamming under sustained use. In cases of malfunction, soldiers often attempted to force the bolt open by kicking it, frequently breaking the bolt handle and thereby rendering the weapon unusable.²⁵

²⁴ Berekméri, *Lesz még kikelet!*, p. 93. Szabó and Számvéver, *A keleti hadszíntér és Magyarország. 1943–1945*, p. 239.

²⁵ Damó, *Névtelen katonák*, p. 25.

As far as submachine guns were concerned, data recorded on 17 April 1944 indicate that the 27th Light Division was to be equipped with 1,489 submachine guns, 9,205 rifles, 253 light machine guns, 108 machine guns, and 42 anti-tank rifles. For comparison, a standard infantry division had an authorised complement of 2,307 submachine guns, 15,740 rifles, 376 light machine guns, 167 machine guns, and 64 anti-tank rifles. Although no data survive on the weapons actually issued to the troops, a report dated 1 June 1944 indicates that the formations of the Hungarian First Army possessed a total of 5,961 submachine guns and faced a shortfall of 15,131. According to Krisztián Ungváry, this deficit was not the result of the fighting in April and May; rather, he argues that the Hungarian formations had been deployed to the Eastern Front without being fully equipped.²⁶ As will be discussed below, soldiers at the front quickly became aware of the importance of submachine guns as infantry weapons and of the problems created by their scarcity.

The shortage of anti-tank weapons likewise posed a serious problem. Although the General Staff intended to equip the light division with 7.5 cm Pak 40 anti-tank guns, in practice most anti-tank units had to make do with older 3.7 cm and 4 cm models, none of which proved adequate against Soviet T-34 and KV-1 tanks. As a result, the division's anti-tank capability was severely limited: upon mobilisation, only one platoon was equipped with three of the more effective Pak 40 guns.²⁷ These shortcomings – as in the case of submachine guns – did not go unnoticed by the soldiers.

Conclusion

Although the circumstances surrounding the establishment of the 27th Light Division were rather distinctive, by 1944 it had effectively become one of the Hungarian Honvéd Army's regular formations, even though it retained its two-regiment structure rather than being reorganised into a three-regiment infantry division like its counterparts. Yet because the second regiment was created only upon mobilisation in the manner described above – thereby disrupting pre-existing primary-group ties – and because the division's original three battalions were stationed in separate towns,

²⁶ Ungváry, *A magyar honvédség*, p. 256.

²⁷ Berekméri, *Lesz még kikelet!*, p. 90.

preventing the emergence of strong bonds between soldiers and their larger units, the forms of cohesion that normally underpin military effectiveness could not fully develop before the division entered combat.

These difficulties were further compounded by a number of additional deficiencies. As discussed above, the formation faced shortages of submachine guns and anti-tank guns, some of its artillery pieces were obsolete, all were horse-drawn, and insufficient numbers of trucks were available to support rapid and effective advances or withdrawals. Moreover, while the training of the active-duty personnel left much to be desired, that of the reservists who would be called up in the event of mobilisation was even more inadequate. It was in this condition that the light division experienced the German occupation of Hungary in March 1944 and was subsequently committed to the Eastern Front.

Chapter II: Constructing War Aims: Leader Cult and War Propaganda

By the time the soldiers of the 27th Light Division were deployed to the front, the war had already entered a protracted phase; moreover, Hungarian participation also had its own prior history. Consequently, the Szekler soldiers did not encounter the war as an entirely unknown phenomenon; rather, they possessed pre-existing, if uneven and mediated, perceptions of the conflict, and they probably also understood their own role in it to some extent. At the same time, they were likely to have developed views on the national and socio-political system that mobilised them, as well as on the expectations and obligations it imposed upon them. This chapter engages primarily with these issues. The first question it seeks to examine concerns the legitimacy of the socio-political system that articulates demands directed at soldiers, and which, in wartime Hungary – more specifically in Northern Transylvania – was inseparable from Miklós Horthy and the personality cult constructed around him. Accordingly, the first half of the chapter analyses Horthy's visits to Transylvania and his complex relationship with the military, while its central focus lies on the question of leader legitimacy. The second part turns to the perception of war, with particular emphasis on how such perceptions evolved over the course of the conflict. In this context, it examines, on the one hand, wartime propaganda in general, and, on the other, more specifically, the ways in which media available in the Szekler region – most notably newspapers and newsreels – represented the events of the war. The third and fourth parts focus on two events that should have been disruptive from the perspective of wartime participation: the defeat suffered by the Hungarian army along the Don, and the German occupation of the country, which in fact led to the mobilisation and deployment of the 27th Light Division. Finally, the chapter concludes by addressing the views of the soldiers departing for the front. The main argument is that the cult of a popular leader, the interpretation of events that might otherwise have proved disruptive, and certain themes propagated by an almost continuously evolving wartime propaganda together provided a war aim with which the soldiers themselves could identify – or, put differently, a minimal consensus regarding the necessity of participation.

1. Horthy: Leader Legitimacy and Combat Motivation

According to compliance theory, one of the most comprehensive approaches to military motivation, the relationship between soldiers and their leaders is of critical importance in determining whether soldiers are willing to fight. A central tenet of this relationship is the perception of the legitimacy of military and political leaders and the acceptance of their authority, as these determine the extent to which the demands they articulate are regarded as legitimate. Given that direct knowledge of the performance of higher leaders is limited, soldiers generally rely, in this respect, on interpretive information transmitted through the news media.¹ In the case of the wartime participation of the 27th Light Division, Miklós Horthy, Hungary's head of state at the time, and the personality cult surrounding him played a central role in shaping combat motivation.

While most scholarly approaches to leader-focused propaganda imply a primarily 'top-down' logic of social agency, Xavier Márquez suggests that a cult can also be interpreted as a set of interaction rituals centred on leader symbols, emphasizing the active participation of the 'cult public' in the process of cult construction. Whenever leaders come to embody the deep hopes or core values of specific segments of society, Márquez continues, cult rituals may emerge as mechanisms of group integration, with participation in such rituals serving to express support for, and reinforce commitment to, the leader. Accordingly, the following analysis examines the ritual occasions in which the men of the 27th Light Division participated – whether as soldiers or prior to their conscription – and how these experiences shaped their perceptions of Miklós Horthy as a leader, as well as their engagement with the war effort.²

Hungary's participation in the Second World War, as historians have repeatedly emphasized, was profoundly influenced by the country's defeat in the First World War and the events that followed. Between 1918–1920, large portions of Hungarian territory were occupied by neighbouring forces – Serbian, Czechoslovak, and Romanian troops; a short-lived Bolshevik regime briefly assumed power; and the

¹ Wesbrook, 'The Potential for Military Disintegration', pp 263–273.

² For a detailed discussion of the ritual dimensions of leader cults, see Xavier Márquez, 'Two Models of Political Leader Cults: Propaganda and Ritual' in *Politics, Religion & Ideology*, xix, no. 3 (2018), pp 265–284.

peace treaty signed at the Grand Trianon Palace in Versailles formalized the loss of two-thirds of Hungary's territory and three-fifths of its population, more than three million of whom identified as Hungarian. It was also at the end of this period that Miklós Horthy, the fifty-two-year-old head of the National Army, was elected Regent in 1920. Although the office was initially conceived as a temporary arrangement, Horthy remained in power for twenty-four years, presiding over Hungary until 1944.³

Of these developments, the most consequential was the Treaty of Trianon and its aftermath. As Deborah S. Cornelius has argued, the impact of the resulting territorial and demographic losses was so pervasive that it produced a syndrome akin to a national disease, rendering it exceedingly difficult for Hungarians to accept the new political realities.⁴ The population's spontaneous reactions, Miklós Zeidler contends, were subsequently utilized by policy-makers, and gradually both the content and tone of anti-Trianon sentiment came to be defined by domestic propaganda, disseminated with the government's approval. Ignác Romsics likewise argues that the idea of revising the treaty permeated political, economic, and social discourse throughout the interwar period, becoming an issue – and, it should be noted, an objective – on which conservatives and right-wing radicals, both young and old, could agree.⁵ Consequently, a new revisionist ideological paradigm took shape, complete with its own myths and rituals.⁶ Its most prominent manifestations were the cult of irredentism and the personality cult constructed around Miklós Horthy.

The cult of irredentism was grounded in the conviction that the dismemberment of historic Hungary constituted a fundamental injustice and was detrimental not only to the Hungarian nation but to Europe as a whole. Consequently, the restoration of the pre-Trianon frontiers, to the greatest extent possible, came to be regarded as a principal objective of Hungarian society. In line with this, a range of irredentist slogans emerged, and from the second half of the 1920s onward, commemorations of the

³ Cornelius, *Hungary in World War II*, p. 7.

⁴ Cornelius, *Hungary in World War II*, p. 30.

⁵ Zeidler, Miklós. 'Irredentism in Everyday Life in Hungary during the Inter-war Period' in *Regio* (2002), p. 71.

Romsics, *Hungary in the Twentieth Century*, p. 130.

⁶ Balázs Apor, *The Invisible Shining. The Cult of Mátyás Rákosi in Stalinist Hungary, 1945–1956* (Budapest–New York, 2017), p. 41.

national tragedy associated with the peace treaty became regularized as part of state holidays and semi-official mass gatherings, while irredentist monuments proliferated throughout the country. This process also encompassed the State Flag Movement, which will be discussed later in this chapter. Finally, from the early 1920s, various irredentist commercial goods – primarily souvenirs – appeared and entered circulation; soon thereafter, characteristic motifs began to feature on everyday household items.⁷

In contrast to irredentism, which tended to define the population and territory to be ‘reclaimed’ on grounds rooted in the distant and often mythical past, interwar Hungarian foreign policy was revisionist in character, seeking the renegotiation of international treaties within the framework of diplomacy and international law and thus exhibiting a more pragmatic and compromise-oriented approach.⁸ At the same time, its propaganda frequently drew on the rhetoric of irredentism, as did the personality cult constructed around Miklós Horthy, in which this duality was likewise evident. Horthy came to personify both the ideal of restoring Hungary’s national glory and former territorial unity – a central tenet of irredentist thought – and the efforts aimed at revising the peace treaty and reclaiming at least some of the territories inhabited predominantly by ethnic Hungarians.

Two episodes in Miklós Horthy’s life merit particular attention, both of which later contributed to the development of the cult surrounding him. The first is the Battle of the Otranto Straits (15 May 1917), during which the cruiser group under his command attacked the Allied naval blockade. Although the operation did not eliminate the blockade, it ended in an Austro-Hungarian victory, and the press hailed Horthy as the ‘hero of Otranto’.⁹ The second episode was in fact a series of recurring events associated with 1919, when a substantial part of the country was under Romanian occupation. During this period, Horthy, serving as commander-in-chief of the National Army, undertook a series of visits to towns in the unoccupied territories. Organized according to the protocol of pre-1918 royal tours, these visits constituted a ritual framework that laid the foundations for the liberation myth attached to his person, shaping the image of the ‘victorious leader’ and defining the symbolic content of the

⁷ Miklós Zeidler, *A magyar irredenta kultusz a két világháború között* [The Hungarian Cult of Irredentism Between the Two World Wars] (Budapest, 2002), p. 11.

⁸ Zeidler, *A magyar irredenta kultusz*, pp 11-13.

⁹ Dávid Turbucz, *A Horthy-kultusz 1919–1944* [The Horthy Cult, 1919–1944] (Budapest, 2015), pp 54-55.

Horthy cult.¹⁰ Of these, the most significant was Horthy's entry into Budapest on 16 November 1919, staged as a symbolic act of Hungary's liberation, or reconquest. As part of the ceremony, he led his troops on a white stallion to Gellért Square, where the mayor of Budapest and other dignitaries formally received him. Elements of the address he delivered later that day from the steps of the Parliament building – including a clear dissociation from the recent past, an appeal for national unity, and references to the national ideal and Christian morality – would recur in subsequent ceremonial contexts.¹¹

Beyond his entry into Budapest, anniversaries associated with Horthy's person functioned, year after year, as recurring occasions for the cultivation and reinforcement of his public image within structured ritual frameworks. The principal commemorative dates of the cult – including the anniversary of his election as Regent (1 March), his birthday (18 June), and his name day (6 December) – reveal the systematic integration of political and personal temporalities.¹² The process of cult-building, as Dávid Turbucz argues, intensified in the mid-1930s, with Horthy's popularity reaching its apogee after 1938, when territories lost under the Treaty of Trianon were partially restored to Hungary. Following Hungary's abandonment of neutrality and entry into the war in June 1941, the function of the personality cult expanded significantly, assuming an increasingly prominent role in wartime propaganda. More importantly, after September 1940, its ritual practices were also staged in Northern Transylvania, where they acquired particular significance for the region's inhabitants.

Horthy's Visits to the Szekler Region

Even charismatic leaders require real successes if they are to maintain high levels of support, Xavier Márquez argues; pure propaganda cannot easily substitute for general improvements in living standards, victory in war, or other visible achievements.¹³ In this respect, Miklós Horthy became the head of a state that regained authority over

¹⁰ Turbucz, *A Horthy-kultusz*, pp 61-62.

¹¹ Thomas Sakmyster, *Hungary's Admiral on Horseback: Miklós Horthy, 1918–1944* (Colorado, 1994), p. 33.

¹² Sakmyster, *Hungary's Admiral on Horseback*, p. 119.

¹³ Márquez, 'Two Models of Political Leader Cults', p. 272.

Northern Transylvania at the height of his popularity. Between 1938 and 1941, Hungary recovered more than half of the territories lost in 1920, including northern Transylvania, which encompassed the Szekler-inhabited region. The significance of these territorial gains cannot be overstated: to cite just one example, the suicide rate in Hungary fell from 29.3 deaths per 100,000 people in 1938 to 23.6 per 100,000 in 1939, and remained at roughly the same level throughout the war.¹⁴ The great surge in nationalist feelings that had accompanied the recovery of previously lost territories contributed greatly to Horthy's popularity, for he was widely hailed as the man to whom these successes were to be attributed, the true 'expander of the country'.¹⁵

Horthy's first public appearances in northern Transylvania took place during the Hungarian army's advance into the region and were organized in accordance with a familiar ritualized scenario, elements of which dated back to 1919, when he rose to political prominence. As the first army units crossed the interwar border on 5 September, Hungarian-inhabited towns and villages were gripped by a jubilant atmosphere: makeshift triumphal arches were erected and decorated with flowers and Hungarian and German flags, while locals, dressed in their Sunday best, gathered to await the arrival of the first soldiers. The inhabitants of smaller, more remote villages, unwilling to miss the return of Hungarian rule, often walked to the nearest town or city along the army's route of advance.

The arrival of Hungarian units was, in fact, a carefully orchestrated victory parade, the precise scenario of which had been published in advance in the local press of each major locality. In Szatmárnémeti and Nagyvárad, the two towns reached on the first and second days of the advance, Horthy personally led the ceremonial entry, riding a white stallion – an image once again compared in the press to the arrival of the conquering Magyars in the Carpathian Basin, but in fact modelled on Horthy's entry into Budapest on 16 November 1919. Thereafter, the Regent took his place on a tribune adorned with the Hungarian national colours and his own portrait, while high-ranking politicians, local notables, and representatives of various associations delivered speeches honouring both the occasion and Horthy's purported role in it. The day concluded with a second ceremonial procession: this time, groups representing local associations and schools marched past the podium alongside the army units that had

¹⁴ Ignác Romsics, *Hungary in the Twentieth Century* (Budapest, 1999), p. 203.

¹⁵ Sakmyster, *Hungary's Admiral on Horseback*, p. 243.

entered earlier that day. Representatives of smaller localities, as well as those from towns and villages that were to remain under Romanian rule, also took part in the event.¹⁶

The Regent, however, did not always keep pace with the army: the advancing troops reached Marosvásárhely on 10 September and Kolozsvár on 11 September, but Horthy's official visits to the two cities took place – in reverse order – only on 15 and 16 September, respectively. During the celebrations organized on these occasions, army units re-entered the cities, this time in the presence of Miklós Horthy, his wife, and various representatives of the Hungarian government. Thus, the welcome ceremonies organized for the army and Horthy's first visits followed broadly similar patterns. The visit to the Szekler region, by contrast, took place only in October, well after the army's arrival, and proceeded according to a somewhat different script, which nevertheless included gestures characteristic of the personality cult surrounding Horthy.

Ferenc Harmath, who would later serve as an officer in the 27th Light Division, witnessed both the arrival of the Hungarian units and Horthy's visit to Marosvásárhely. He provides, however, a detailed account only of the former, while referring to the latter merely in passing. By contrast, he points out that the news that the decision of the Second Vienna Award would soon be implemented generated a certain degree of agitation among the ethnic Hungarian population. Preparations to welcome the Hungarian troops were quickly set in motion: tailors' and dressmakers' workshops began producing flags and coats of arms, while the organisers of the welcome ceremonies attended to the practicalities of the forthcoming celebrations. According to József Gocz's recollection, similar arrangements were made in Sepsiszentgyörgy, most of them carried out at night in order to conceal them from the Romanian authorities. The significance of the event is perhaps best reflected in the fact that Gocz's elder sister had ordered a *díszmagyar* – a traditional Hungarian ceremonial costume typically worn by public figures on festive occasions – specifically for the

¹⁶ Turbucz, *A Horthy-kultusz*, pp 208-209.

celebrations.¹⁷ Harmath, however, does not discuss Horthy's visit in greater detail in his memoir, though he maintains that it, like the arrival of the Hungarian troops, left a lasting impression on him.¹⁸

The Regent arrived in Marosvásárhely on 16 September, only a day after his ceremonial entry into Kolozsvár. *Reggeli Újság*, the local daily, reported on both events in the same issue, although the former received somewhat greater prominence than the latter. On this occasion, Horthy arrived by car, accompanied by his wife, and took his place on the platform prepared for him. He thus participated in the celebration in his capacity as head of state rather than as Supreme Warlord personally leading his troops – a distinction that can presumably be explained by the fact that, upon the entry of Hungarian troops, General Vilmos Nagy had already performed the symbolic act of reclaiming – or, in contemporary discourse, 'liberating' – the territory. The event, which drew a crowd of some twenty to thirty thousand people, began at 11:45, when the Regent and his wife took their places on the platform, and lasted until about 13:00. Speeches were delivered by the local leader of the Hungarian Party of Transylvania, by representatives of the Roman Catholic, Reformed, Unitarian and Evangelical churches, as well as by a First World War veteran speaking on behalf of the *Tűzharcos* Association, an organisation of former frontline fighters. According to the newspaper report, a particularly moving moment for Horthy was the presence of a delegation of former naval servicemen, whose representative not only delivered a speech but also presented the Regent – their former commander – with a gift: a sailor's anchor mounted on a block of aragonite. The ceremony concluded with a military parade.

Although Horthy himself did not deliver a speech at the celebration in Marosvásárhely, the local newspaper, in addition to reporting on the event, published the address he gave in Kolozsvár. The text, in which elements of the cult of irredentism – along with certain motifs also characteristic of the Horthy cult – clearly appear, merits brief summarisation – not least because the newspaper made it accessible to those who, for whatever reason, had been unable to attend either ceremony. Horthy began by

¹⁷ József Gocz, *Magas észak nyírfájától a hazai gyertyánig* [From the Northern Birch to the Hornbeam at Home] in József Gocz (ed.), *3006 év hadifogságban* [3006 Years in Captivity] (Sepsiszentgyörgy, 2001), p. 101.

¹⁸ Ferenc Harmath, *Az emlékek megszólalnak* [The Memories Begin to Speak] (Kolozsvár, 2010), p. 32.

reflecting on the past, characterising the interwar years as ‘twenty-two years of bitter trials’ – a formulation to which the press would repeatedly return thereafter – and offering his own interpretation of the historical events that had given rise to this period. Drawing on a familiar trope, he invoked the image of Hungary as the defender of Europe, compelled to fight while other nations developed in peace. He also referred to the nationalities to whom Hungary had offered a home, insisting that the country had been partitioned under the pretext of their alleged oppression – not by force of arms, but by the peace treaty. Turning to the present, he expressed gratitude to Germany and Italy for their mediation, through which the Hungarian territories had been restored peacefully ‘in the midst of a Europe engulfed in flames’. ‘A sorrowful chapter of Hungarian history is now coming to a close,’ he proclaimed, presenting the vision of a new beginning and urging that the celebrations be followed by labour in which everyone was expected to take part. Finally, he insisted on reconciliation and fair treatment for non-Hungarian inhabitants, framing this in terms of reciprocity and implying that Hungary expected Romania to act likewise towards the Hungarians who had remained under its rule.¹⁹ The address was received with exuberant enthusiasm by those gathered; yet it must also be acknowledged – although this does not fall directly within the scope of the present study – that those on the losing side of the territorial re-annexation viewed the restoration of Hungarian rule in far less favourable terms.²⁰

In contrast to his visit to Marosvásárhely, Horthy’s journey to the Szekler region did not take place immediately after the entry of Hungarian forces, but only in October 1940; accordingly, it was not organized as a customary triumphal procession. Nonetheless, the occasion was associated with an event of considerable symbolic significance. On this trip the Regent travelled by special train, the main objective being to attend the Day of a Thousand Szekler Maidens, a youth festival held at Csíksomlyó, which in earlier years had been banned by the Romanian authorities and was revived following the incorporation of Northern Transylvania into Hungary. Three additional Szekler towns were also included in the itinerary.

¹⁹ *Reggeli Újság*, 17 September 1940.

²⁰ Miklós Zeidler, *A revíziós gondolat* [The Revisionist Idea] (Budapest, 2001), pp 223-227.

The significance of the occasion can hardly be overstated. The Day of a Thousand Szekler Maidens was first conceived and organised in 1931 with the aim of reviving and showcasing the traditional Szekler folk costume, which, while similar in its essential features, nevertheless displayed variations from village to village. At the inaugural gathering, held on 7 June 1931, some 1,600 women and girls from forty-two localities took part. The occasion attracted a considerable audience and carried a strong symbolic charge: the 12 June 1931 issue of *Brassói Lapok* went so far as to describe it as a tremendous demonstration of Szekler identity, unity, morality, and future.²¹ The fact that the Romanian authorities banned it in 1936 was clearly perceived by the Szeklers as part of a broader series of measures directed against their community. (Another example of the measures directed against ethnic Hungarians at this time was the requirement that Hungarian-language newspapers use exclusively the Romanian forms of place names, whereas in 1931 the Hungarian versions had still been permitted.) The 1940 festival, attended by Horthy and his wife, was the first to be held since the ban.

The Regent's special train reached the Szekler region on 7 October and made its first stop at Gyergyószentmiklós, where the welcome ceremony took place at the railway station. According to the periodical *Csíki Lapok*, a crowd of some 10,000 assembled in front of the station, which had been adorned with pine branches, flowers and Hungarian flags, despite the fact that Horthy's train stopped in the town only for a short ceremony – which also included a brief exchange between the Regent, accompanied by his consort, and members of the crowd gathered to see them. Finally, the train departed in the direction of Csíkszereda. As the article noted, the stations along the route were likewise crowded with people eager to catch even a brief glimpse of the Regent and his spouse.

The next stop was in Csíkszereda and lasted only about five minutes. On this occasion, Horthy's wife was presented with a traditional Szekler costume, prompting the Regent to jokingly ask whether they had brought him a pair of *harisnya* as well – the traditional tight-fitting trousers worn by Szekler men. Horthy's words spread through the crowd within seconds, and the assembled people responded by chanting his name. Towards

²¹ *Brassói Lapok*, 12 June 1931.

the end of the stop, as the Regent's train prepared to depart for Háromszék, the other Szekler county, someone in the crowd began singing the Hungarian national anthem, and the train eventually pulled out of the station to the sound of the anthem, performed by the vast improvised choir of those gathered to see the Hungarian head of state.²²

The third stop was at Sepsiszentgyörgy, where the reception, as in the previous towns, was organised at the railway station. According to the local newspaper *Székely Nép*, spectators began to gather from around 2 p.m., and since only a limited number were allowed onto the platforms, those who could not be accommodated there formed a large crowd in the fields behind the railway lines. A tribune was erected for the head of state and, as at the previous ceremonies, the space in front of it was reserved for clearly defined groups and associations: the central section was occupied by members of the local intelligentsia and representatives of the churches and schools, followed by various associations, several local choirs, and the town's industrial workers, with the two largest factories represented separately. Among those present were a number of young men who would later join the ranks of the 27th Light Division. One of them, József Gocz, later a member of one of the division's artillery battalions, appeared as one of the flag-bearers of the Mikó Gymnasium, the town's renowned grammar school, even though he had already graduated by the autumn of 1940. Like Harmath in Marosvásárhely, he too was present at the ceremony marking the Hungarian army's entry into Sepsiszentgyörgy.²³

Horthy's train arrived at 16:18, and the Regent spent around forty minutes in the town. After the formal part of the ceremony, a reception was held during which he mingled with the local notabilities.²⁴ The Sepsiszentgyörgy visit concluded with a symbolic gesture that echoed the choreography of Horthy's earlier entries into the regained cities of northern Transylvania, but in this instance it was intended for those Hungarians of Transylvania who remained under Romanian rule: after leaving the town, the Regent's train proceeded to the new Hungarian–Romanian border, thereby symbolically reaching out to their compatriots across the frontier.²⁵

²² *Csíki Lapok*, 13 October 1940.

²³ Gocz, 'Magas észak nyírfájától', pp 103–100.

²⁴ *Székely Nép*, 8 October 1940.

²⁵ *Csíki Lapok*, 13 October 1940.

On the second day of the visit, Horthy once again returned to Csíkszereda, this time in order to take part in what constituted the principal purpose of his journey, the Day of a Thousand Szekler Maidens. The ceremony followed much the same choreography as in the other Szekler towns: after the three speakers had welcomed the distinguished guests, the Regent was introduced to the male members of the local intelligentsia, while his wife was presented to their wives. After the reception, the guests proceeded to Csíksomlyó, where they first visited the cathedral and then attended several parts of the festival program. According to estimates published in *Székely Nép*, some 20,000 men and women in traditional Szekler and Csángó²⁶ costumes took part in the celebration.²⁷

The final visit of the day was to Székelyudvarhely, home of the 82nd Imperial and Royal Regiment before the First World War and, at the time, the designated garrison town of the II Battalion of the 27th Light Division. On this occasion Horthy appeared in the capacity of a military commander: in accordance with the formalities for a superior's inspection, he first met the county's military commander, the city's commander, and the commanding general of the local garrison. The rest of the programme adhered to the established ceremonial format: speeches by local representatives, a formal reception, and finally Horthy's return to Csíkszereda before departing for Budapest.²⁸

Many of those who later became soldiers of the 27th Light Division were among the crowds gathered at these events, which – embedded in the symbolic framework of a personality cult – functioned as ritualized performances through which political authority was not merely displayed but actively experienced, thereby generating emotional mobilisation, reinforcing legitimacy, and – as the examples of Ferenc Harmath and József Gocz demonstrate – shaping lasting individual (and collective) memories. In addition, it is worth returning to the previously cited argument of Xavier

²⁶ The Csángós (Hungarian: *csángók*; Romanian: *ceangăi*) are a predominantly Roman Catholic ethnographic group living mainly in two regions: the Gyimes Pass, which connects Transylvania with Moldavia, and the historical region of Moldova itself. While the former group is almost exclusively Hungarian-speaking, the latter preserves old forms of the Hungarian language only in certain communities.

²⁷ *Székely Nép*, 13 October 1940.

²⁸ *Székely Közélet*, 12 October 1940.

Márquez and briefly considering the nature of these ritualized performances. In his analysis of leader cults, Márquez stressed the importance of visible achievements over propaganda. Horthy's visit clearly fulfilled this role, as many locals saw it as reversing not only the defeat suffered at the end of the First World War but also the consequences that had stemmed from it.

Horthy and the Military Oath

The question of how the military oath contributes to loyalty toward political leadership or resilience in wartime eludes any simple explanation, yet it cannot be readily dismissed. Most military historians agree that by joining an army – even in peacetime and as a citizen of a democratic country – a man crosses a clearly defined boundary within society and enters an organisation whose demands on its personnel are often wholly at odds with civilian inclinations and experience.²⁹ The transition from civilian life to the military world is invariably marked by the military's distinctive rite of passage, in which the military oath constitutes a significant element. At the same time, the oath may be regarded as a contractual relationship between the ruling authority and the subject or citizen, the violation or even the refusal of which could entail severe consequences, including capital punishment. This is in part the reason why, from the standpoint of political power, the formulation of the oath carries particular significance. A clear example of the power of language can be seen after Hitler was appointed Chancellor of Germany: in 1934, the military oath – previously binding soldiers to the constitution of the Weimar Republic and its legal institutions – was revised to express personal allegiance to Hitler and his new order. From the perspective of the subject or citizen, on the other hand, the taking of an oath – and its observance or violation – is intimately connected with the question of the leader's – or in more general terms, the political authority's – legitimacy.

In the following, the oath-taking of the soldiers of the 27th Light Division will be examined primarily from this latter perspective, with particular attention to its relationship to, for example, Horthy's leadership cult and the cult of irredentism. Before discussing the ceremonies themselves, it is worth briefly considering the oath

²⁹ Holmes, *Acts of War*, p. 57.

of allegiance employed in the Hungarian army during the Second World War – or, more precisely, during the period in which Miklós Horthy held the office of head of state. Upon closer examination, it becomes apparent that the text was derived from the pre–First World War oath of the Honvéd Army; however, rather than referring to Franz Joseph as king and employing terms such as *hódolat* – denoting homage in the sense of feudal submission – recruits were required to pledge their loyalty and obedience to Miklós Horthy, the elected governor, and to Hungary’s constitution, which supplanted the earlier reference to the ‘laws of our sacred homeland’. The section concerning obedience to one’s superiors was also somewhat expanded by a clause on the superiors’ duty to care for their subordinates and to do everything in their power to ensure that they fulfil their obligations under all circumstances. In the following, each oath included clauses requiring soldiers to fight bravely and never to abandon their units, flags, or weapons of war. The Horthy version, however, unlike the Franz Joseph one, referred not only to the enemy in general but explicitly to both external and internal enemies, and obliged servicemen not to join or support any movement hostile to the homeland or the nation, nor any organisation seeking to undermine the discipline of the army or of any other state body.³⁰ If we compare the oath used during the Horthy era with the previously mentioned Führer oath – the very purpose of which was to mark a departure from the spirit of the Weimar Republic – it becomes clear that the former, even with its references to internal enemies and subversive ideologies, likely alluding to the 1919 Hungarian Bolshevik Revolution and to left-wing movements, was intended primarily to suggest continuity.

As for the 27th Light Division’s battalion oath-taking ceremonies, following the formation’s establishment, each of its three peacetime infantry battalions stationed in Northern Transylvania held four oath-taking ceremonies: two in 1941, and one in each year of 1942 and 1943. The reason that two such ceremonies were held in 1941 lies partly in the established practices of the Royal Hungarian Army and partly in the fact that Northern Transylvania had come under Hungarian control only in September 1940. In Hungary, new recruits were generally called up each year in October and took

³⁰ Jolán Szijj and István Ravasz (eds), *Magyarország az első világháborúban. Lexikon* [Hungary in the First World War: An Encyclopaedia from A to Zs] (Budapest, 2000), p. 792. Péter Sipos and István Ravasz (eds), *Magyarország a második világháborúban. Lexikon A-ZS* [Hungary in the Second World War: Encyclopaedia from A to Zs] (Budapest, 1997), p. 215.

their oath in December, after completing their basic training. The timing of the ceremony also had symbolic significance, as it was scheduled to coincide with 6 December, the name day of Miklós Horthy. In order for conscription to be introduced in Northern Transylvania as well, the entire region first had to be integrated into the Hungarian military system, which delayed the call-up of recruits until December 1940 and the oath-taking ceremony until the first quarter of 1941.³¹

Detailed records of these ceremonies have survived only with regard to Marosvásárhely and Sepsiszentgyörgy. The event in Marosvásárhely took place on 26 January in the city centre and, according to the *Reggeli Újság*, attracted a considerable audience. A tribune was erected at the site for the city's officials, in front of which pine-branch-decorated cannons were placed (such ceremonial elements were characteristic of most events of this nature). The paper describes the occasion as one of historic importance, seeing its significance in the fact that, after twenty-two years, it marked the first time when, through the recruits, the bond between the Szekler community and the Hungarian army – 'violently torn asunder yet never in fact broken' – could once again be solemnly affirmed. The speech delivered by the regimental commander likewise revolved around the idea of unity, as he urged the soldiers to perform their duties as though the fate of the nation depended upon each of them individually. This was followed by the actual act of oath-taking, after which two captains and a warrant officer class I were decorated. Finally, the event concluded with a parade during which, according to the newspaper, the recruits demonstrated through an impressive march the training and discipline they had acquired during the initial months of their service.³²

The oath-taking ceremony of the Sepsiszentgyörgy battalion took place on 9 February 1941. Although held within the barracks, it was organised as a public festivity, attended by the county's leading dignitaries, the municipal authorities, representatives of various associations, members of the judiciary and the prosecution, as well as pupils and teachers from local schools. Many of the town's residents were likewise curious to witness the event, and veterans of the First World War from the town were also in

³¹ See also Berekméri, *Lesz még kikelet!*, p. 24.

³² *Reggeli Újság*, 27 January 1941.

attendance – a point to which we shall return in more detail below. A tribune had been prepared for the distinguished guests, in front of which – similarly to the ceremony in Marosvásárhely – weapons were laid out. The official proceedings commenced with an address delivered by a lieutenant colonel, after which another officer read aloud the text of the oath, while the recruits, raising their right hands and holding their helmets in their left, repeated the words after him. The subsequent part of the event followed a pattern almost identical to that discussed above: here, too, several officers were decorated, and a parade was also held. Following the ceremony, visitors were permitted to inspect the barracks, which had remained unfurnished during the transition from Romanian to Hungarian rule and which the battalion was required to refit within a short period of time.³³

The participation of First World War veterans in the Sepsiszentgyörgy ceremony is particularly noteworthy. By this time, they appear to have joined the *Tűzharcos Szövetség*, an association established in Hungary during the interwar period for those who had served at the front. The local branch of the association published a notice in *Székely Nép* on 9 February 1941, calling on its members – as the announcement put it – to regard it as their duty to enhance the solemnity of the oath-taking ceremony through their attendance. The text continued as follows: ‘Let our presence be a symbolic handshake with the recruits and a promise that we shall remain ready, alongside them, to sacrifice our lives for the homeland in the future as well.’³⁴

It is likely that the veterans required little encouragement: in interwar Romania, because the two countries had fought on opposing sides during the war, they were viewed, at the very least, with suspicion, and it was only after 1940 that their sacrifice could once again – probably for the first time since the end of the First World War – be publicly acknowledged. In any case, the fact that they attended the oath-taking ceremony and even took part in the subsequent parade alongside the recruits was a conscious attempt to express continuity – however symbolic – with pre-First World War Hungary.

As far as the subsequent oath-taking ceremonies are concerned, three factors should be mentioned that may have influenced their organisation, content, and the

³³ *Székely Nép*, 11 February 1941.

³⁴ *Székely Nép*, 9 February 1941.

participants' involvement alike. Of these, perhaps the most significant was that, on 27 June 1941, Hungary entered the war against the Soviet Union, as a result of which military service was no longer limited to training within the barracks but also carried the possibility of active participation in the war. The other two factors related to the locations and occasions of the ceremonies. On the one hand, in Transylvania an increasing number of towns and villages saw the construction of the so-called state flags (*országzászló*), and official ceremonies imbued with strong symbolic significance were frequently held in the squares in front of these monuments. On the other hand, Miklós Horthy turned seventy-five in 1943, as a result of which any event associated with him tended to be organised on a much grander scale.

With regard to state flags, the movement that led to the construction of these monuments was initiated by Nándor Urmánczy, a Transylvanian-born aristocrat. The original idea was to create a monument in Budapest incorporating a flagpole with a flag flown at half-mast – serving, on one hand, as a reminder of the territories lost under the Treaty of Trianon and their Hungarian-speaking populations, and, on the other, as a constant proclamation of the idea of Hungarian unity and resurrection – that is, the recovery of the territories in question. The first flag was erected in Budapest in 1928, and its inauguration, historian Miklós Zeidler argues, effectively clarified – through the language of symbols – the relationship between Hungary as the historical homeland, the revision of the territorial provisions of the peace treaty as a national mission, and Horthy as the Regent standing in place of the monarch.³⁵

The Budapest monument served as a model for other towns and villages across the country. A typical state flag usually comprised a monument-like pedestal resembling the base of a statue, often adorned with the coat of arms of Hungary; a flagpole mounted on this base; the flag itself; and an arrangement of flowers – all serving a single purpose: to remind the viewer of the country's pre-war greatness. However, various local initiatives often combined the construction of a state flag with the commemoration of soldiers who had fallen in the First World War – that is, the names

³⁵ Zeidler, *A revíziós gondolat*, p. 167.

of the latter were also inscribed on the pedestal – thus many of these monuments in rural areas acquired dual, yet closely interconnected, purposes.

After 1940, the movement spread into Northern Transylvania, where similar monuments were erected and dedicated through lengthy ceremonies involving the local population.³⁶ Here, however, the state flag acquired a new significance, at least on a local level: as reported by the daily *Székely Nép* in connection with the unveiling ceremonies held in two settlements in Csík County – one of the Szekler counties – they also became memorials to the return of the territories lost through the peace treaty to the homeland.³⁷

Among the towns where the battalions of the 27th Light Division were garrisoned, the inauguration of state flags took place as follows: in Székelyudvarhely on 5 September 1941, in Marosvásárhely on 13 September, and in Sepsiszentgyörgy on 15 November 1942.³⁸ Except for the latter city, the new recruits in 1942 took their military oath at the monuments mentioned above, which also became venues for numerous other ceremonies. In Sepsiszentgyörgy, for example, seven commemorative occasions were prescribed on which the flag had to be raised to its full height. Among these were the anniversary of the Second Vienna Award, the day marking the entry of the Hungarian army into Sepsiszentgyörgy, the name day of Miklós Horthy, and Heroes' Day, which had been enacted by law in 1917 to commemorate the soldiers and civilians who had sacrificed their lives for Hungary.³⁹ In other words, out of the seven prescribed occasions, only three were not directly related to the First World War or to the Horthy regime.

As far as the unveiling of the Sepsiszentgyörgy monument is concerned, it took place on 15 November 1942. According to the programme of the ceremony, published on 11 November 1942 in *Székely Nép*, the State Flag was to be inaugurated by the representative of the Minister of Defence, while from the subtitle and the

³⁶ Franz Sz. Horváth, 'The Divided War Remembrance of Transylvanian Magyars' in Mark Cornwall and John Paul Newman (eds), *Rebirth and Sacrifice. The Legacy of the Last Habsburg War* (New York and Oxford, 2016), pp 87-88.

³⁷ *Székely Nép*, 28 October 1942.

³⁸ For the inauguration of the Székelyudvarhely state flag, see historian Zsolt Kápolnási's article in *Udvarhelyi Híradó*, 27 August 2013. For Sepsiszentgyörgy, see József Álmos's article in *Háromszék*, 15 November 2017. For Marosvásárhely, see *Reggeli Újság*, 15 September 1942.

³⁹ *Háromszék*, 15 November 2017.



Fig. 1. Major General István Kozma and a ceremonial unit of the 27/I Battalion at the inauguration of the state flag in Sepsiszentgyörgy.



Fig. 2. The state flag of Sepsiszentgyörgy.

accompanying text it emerged that László Endre – a politician notorious for his extreme right-wing and antisemitic views⁴⁰ – was scheduled to attend the event. The mayor of the town was informed on the very day that the Minister of Defence would be represented by Major General István Kozma, commander of the 27th Light Division – then still organised as a brigade – who would not deliver a speech. The explanation given was that an active-duty military officer was not permitted, under regulation, to address such a public gathering.⁴¹ Thus, the ceremony itself was attended by honour guards from the 11th Border Guard Battalion and the 27/I Battalion of Sepsiszentgyörgy, yet no military officer was among the speakers. Interestingly enough, the town's daily, *Székely Nép* offered no detailed account of the speeches; instead, it published only a toast in honour of Miklós Horthy, made at the formal luncheon following the inauguration. The central idea of the address was that the State Flag embodied the Hungarian national ideal, and that the nation had been strong and powerful whenever it was united under it, whereas its disintegration was linked to the Bolshevik Revolution in Hungary and the subsequent peace treaty. Horthy's role was portrayed as central to national regeneration and the liberation of Northern Transylvania.⁴² The journal's decision to omit László Endre's otherwise overtly antisemitic speech may suggest an intention to frame the erection of the National Flag within the tropes of the Horthy cult, rather than associating it with antisemitism. Similar considerations may also have informed Major General István Kozma's decision to withdraw from delivering a speech. (This does not imply that such statements were absent from military ceremonies held elsewhere.)

As far as state flags are concerned, they became venues for oath-taking ceremonies quite early on: the recruits of the 27/II Battalion in Székelyudvarhely took their oath at the local state flag monument on 25 November 1941, and, on 6 December 1942, a similar ceremony involving the border rifle battalion stationed in the town was also held at the same location.⁴³

⁴⁰ Endre later emerged as one of the principal Hungarian perpetrators of the Holocaust, playing a key role in the ghettoisation and deportation of Hungarian Jews in 1944.

⁴¹ *Háromszék*, 17 November 2017.

⁴² *Székely Nép*, 17 November 1942.

⁴³ *Székely Nép*, 26 November 1941, 10 December 1942.

The most spectacular oath-taking ceremonies, however, were held in 1943. Since Horthy celebrated his seventy-fifth birthday on 18 June 1943 – an anniversary regarded as one of the most significant occasions in the construction of his cult – nearly all the events that year were organised in a more grandiose manner than usual. As Dávid Turbucz, one of the foremost scholars on the subject, observes, 6 December, the Regent's name day, was also commemorated by several institutions and associations through a more solemn version of their customary rites of veneration. The army, as one of the institutions involved in these celebrations, followed a prescribed scenario that set out the exact schedule of the event for all units.⁴⁴ In the case of the 27th Light Division, this meant that recruits were to pledge their allegiance on that very day in Marosvásárhely, Sepsiszentgyörgy, and Székelyudvarhely, respectively (as we have seen, this had not always taken place in such a highly coordinated manner before). On this occasion, however, allusions to the war became both more frequent and more pronounced in speeches delivered by local officials and officers alike, in which both the tropes of wartime propaganda associated with Horthy and the conflict-glorifying rhetoric of right-wing movements were present.

The daily *Székely Nép*, published in Sepsiszentgyörgy, devoted an entire page to the occasion, the title of which quoted a sentence from Prime Minister Kállay's telegram to the Regent: 'Your Majesty has probably never been as much the symbol of solidarity, will, and power as today.' The newspaper then went on to present accounts of various events held across the country in connection with the occasion; however, two thirds of the content focused on the celebrations in the Szekler region. In Sepsiszentgyörgy, an important moment of the ceremonies was a formal sitting of the county officials, during which Horthy's portrait was unveiled. In the addresses that followed, the speakers drew parallels between Horthy and the great Hungarian leaders who had emerged during periods of national crisis, emphasising that in recent times the country had been saved from destruction only through his assumption of leadership and decisive guidance. They further referred to his service in the Austro-Hungarian Navy, portraying the Regent as the 'Hero of Otranto', and reflected on the peace treaty and its aftermath, asserting that the Hungarian nation would not resign itself to the

⁴⁴ Turbucz, *A Horthy-kultusz*, p. 155.

reduction of its fellow nationals to a condition of servitude within their thousand-year-old homeland.

While the formal sitting was taking place, a crowd gathered around the state flag in the square, where the new recruits were to pledge their allegiance. The oath-taking ceremony, as in previous years, was attended by members of the local clergy, officers of the county's military command, and senior officials of the county administration. After the oath, an officer – whose exact rank is not specified, delivered a speech that, on this occasion, carried a harsher, more overtly ideological message than in previous years – invoking the notion of a 'decisive war' and reiterating the biases and preconceptions with which some soldiers and officials from interwar Hungary regarded Hungarians in the territories annexed to Romania after the peace treaty.⁴⁵ To put the discussed address in perspective, it is worth briefly considering several speeches delivered at the oath-taking ceremony held concurrently in Marosvásárhely. On that occasion, two chaplains participating in the event spoke about the profound significance of the oath in times of war, while a colonel emphasized the view that the Hungarian nation – surrounded by Germanic, Slavic, and Latin nations and lacking close kindred – has endured only through constant adversity. Although this latter discourse, similar to the Sepsiszentgyörgy address, also linked the nation's very existence with conflict, it did so primarily to invoke a heroic tradition of defending one's country.⁴⁶

Although, as has already been noted, it is difficult to assess the extent to which a military oath influenced soldiers' decisions in wartime, it is nevertheless beyond doubt that it held significance for many of them. It is somewhat easier, however, to approach the issue from the perspective of its content and form. In this sense, the Hungarian military oath taken during the Second World War exhibited a complex set of associations: while in some respects echoing the wording of oaths sworn prior to the First World War, it was – in its formulation – closely linked to the person of Miklós Horthy. The date of the ceremony was likewise tied to the Regent's person – although

⁴⁵ *Székelly Nép*, 7 December 1943.

⁴⁶ *Székelly Szó*, 7 December 1943.

this could not always be observed in newly established units – while, increasingly, the locations of these ceremonies came to be associated, more or less closely, with sites connected to his interwar personality cult, which was also extended to regions inhabited by ethnic Hungarians in Northern Transylvania, where it acquired renewed relevance. All this contributed to the emergence of a form of legitimacy whereby Horthy's person alone could lend a degree of acceptance to participation in the war – something no other ideological motivation could fully substitute.

2. Mediating the War: Representation and Perception

As noted earlier, the 27th Light Division was mobilised in March 1944. By that point, Hungarian society had already undergone a series of experiences that shaped how its soldiers perceived the war they were about to enter. In the preface to a volume on everyday life at the front and in the hinterland, historians György Gyarmati and Judit Pihurik propose a periodisation of the Hungarian wartime experience based on a chronology of political events. According to their framework, the years 1939–1940 – marked by the invasion of Poland, the so-called 'Phoney War', the Winter War between the Soviet Union and Finland, and the battle of France – were perceived by most Hungarians as distant conflicts, followed primarily through press reports. During this period, the average Hungarian remained focused on domestic concerns, above all the country's territorial revisions, which were widely interpreted as steps toward the restoration of national sovereignty. In this context, the entry of Hungarian military and administrative authorities into Northern Transylvania acquired particular symbolic significance.

In 1941, however, following Germany's attack on the Soviet Union, the situation changed as Hungary entered the war on the side of the Axis. Yet, at this stage, news reports continued to celebrate the triumphant advance of the Hungarian army – now on Soviet soil – with little or no mention of casualties. Domestically, compulsory military service, together with the employment generated by the Győr Programme – the rearmament programme launched in 1938 – kept unemployment extremely low. Despite the introduction of food rationing as early as 1940, living conditions remained relatively favourable.

The year 1942 brought major changes. With the defeats at Stalingrad and El Alamein, the course of the war began to turn against Germany and its allies. In the Hungarian context, Gyarmati and Pihurik identify the decisive turning point as the defeat of the Hungarian Second Army at the Don, which coincided with a gradual deterioration in living standards on the home front – partly as a result of large-scale deliveries of foodstuffs to Germany. Although the disaster of the Second Army was officially met with silence, they argue that the sheer number of notifications reporting soldiers killed, missing, or wounded in action silently testified to the scale of the tragedy.

Finally, 1944 brought a succession of dramatic changes, unlike those of the preceding years. Only one of these developments is directly relevant to this chapter: in the spring of 1944, German forces occupied Hungary, creating a situation profoundly different from what had come before. The new government that took office actively cooperated with the occupiers – intensifying the exploitation of Hungary’s economic resources, facilitating the deportation of most of the country’s Jewish population, and mobilising the armed forces on an unprecedented scale.⁴⁷ This was the context in which the 27th Light Division – along with the other Transylvanian military formation, the 25th Infantry Division – was deployed to the eastern theatre of war.

All these developments were accompanied by wartime propaganda, which in Hungary assumed a dual character – both German and Hungarian. The former frequently influenced the latter, yet both underwent continuous transformation, and their respective messages did not necessarily coincide at every stage of the conflict. Propaganda also played a substantial role in shaping what Hungarian society knew, or believed it knew, about the course of the war in general and about the participation of the Hungarian armed forces in particular. This process of mediation was carried out through the principal mass media of the period: the printed press, newsreels, and radio broadcasts.

The following section examines both German and Hungarian wartime propaganda through an analysis of two key media: the printed press, which offered the most

⁴⁷ György Gyarmati and Judit Pihurik, ‘Előszó’ [Preface] in György Gyarmati and Judit Pihurik (eds.), *Háborús hétköznapiak hadszíntéren, hátszágban 1939–1945* [Everyday Life in Wartime: At the Front and on the Home Front (1939–1945)] (Budapest and Pécs), pp 8-9.

frequent and detailed representations of the war, and the newsreel, closely linked to the popular institution of cinema and providing visually compelling – if not always timely – portrayals of current events. The analysis focuses primarily on the content communicated through these media, while also briefly addressing their audiences and the potential impact of the representations they disseminated.

Parallel Voices: German and Hungarian Wartime Propaganda

During the Second World War, as already noted, it was not only Hungarian but also German propaganda that exerted its influence in Hungary. With regard to its content, the latter largely reflected the principal themes that characterised Nazi propaganda as a whole. These included the persistent reiteration of the idea of a preventive war – that is, efforts to shift responsibility for the conflict onto the Soviet Union – the promotion of a new European order centred on the reorganisation of Europe under German leadership, as well as anti-British, anti-Bolshevik, and antisemitic campaigns. General war propaganda also formed an important part of this broader effort. German propaganda materials were inserted into Hungarian newspapers through an office specifically established for this purpose, and their origins were often deliberately obscured, with editors merely indicating that the information came from official German institutions, thereby lending it an appearance of credibility.

In practice, propaganda operations in Budapest functioned as follows: the German Embassy screened articles and photographs sent from Berlin and forwarded them to the aforementioned office, which prepared translations, adapted the content to local conditions, and disseminated it to Hungarian newspaper editors through personal contacts. Local newspapers were also provided with weekly summaries of key articles. As the German envoy in Budapest reported, the press was ‘literally flooded’ with German material. In addition, the Wehrmacht High Command sought to shape public opinion through its own publications. Its most consistently employed – and probably most effective – instrument was the illustrated magazine *Signal*, which showcased

German wartime achievements while downplaying those of the enemy. In Hungary, it circulated in both German and Hungarian editions.⁴⁸

From Hungary's perspective, there is little doubt that propaganda emphasising the reorganisation of Europe in 1940–1941 found the most receptive audience, as it coincided with the country's own foreign policy objectives. As Wolfram Wette observes, the repeated redistribution of territories in the aftermath of the First World War and during the late interwar period made it clear to what extent South-Eastern Europe was exposed to the interventions of the great powers. Nazi propaganda, in turn, left no doubt that the shaping of the region's future would be the responsibility of the Axis powers – Germany and Italy. France and Britain were not mentioned in this context, and the role of the Soviet Union was likewise passed over in silence.⁴⁹

The launch of the war against the Soviet Union in 1941 also brought about a transformation in Nazi European propaganda. The theme of shifting war guilt, which had already appeared during the invasion of Poland in the summer of 1939, resurfaced – this time reinforced by the integrative idea of anti-Bolshevism (Miklós Horthy, for instance, consolidated his rule by presenting himself as the nation's saviour from Bolshevism, while Romania, among other factors, had been compelled to cede Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina to the Soviet Union in 1940). Consequently, Germany's entry into the war was articulated along two principal lines. On the one hand, the aggression against the USSR was presented as a justified intervention; on the other, the Reich was portrayed as waging a preventive war not only in its own interest but also in that of Europe as a whole.

This messaging was all the more effective because, since 1933, with only minor interruptions, anti-Bolshevism had been a constant theme in Nazi propaganda, coupled with the trope of the 'last bulwark' defending Western culture against an allegedly uncivilised enemy – an image that various nations, from Bosnia to Ukraine to Estonia, and at times including Hungary, sought to appropriate for themselves.⁵⁰ The purpose

⁴⁸ Wolfram Wette, 'Német propaganda és a csatlósországek: Magyarország, Románia és Bulgária (1941–43)' [German Propaganda and the Satellite States: Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria (1941–43)] in *Történelmi szemle*, no. 1–2 (2005), pp 455–461.

⁴⁹ Wette, 'Német propaganda', pp 467–469.

⁵⁰ Case, *Between States*, pp 6–7.

of this rhetoric was to achieve the psychological mobilisation of both the population and the ruling elites across Germany and the allied states, to conceal from its allies the expansionist aims of the German leadership and the broader European ambitions closely linked to them, and to arouse sympathy among anti-communist circles in Western Europe. Even after the first military setbacks of the German army, this line of propaganda remained essentially unchanged. Only in late 1942 and early 1943, when the defeat of the German Sixth Army at Stalingrad made the turning point of the war apparent, did it shift from emphasising the necessity of a preventive strike to stressing the need to defend Europe.⁵¹

There were also two additional directions in German propaganda that deserve mention: the general tendency to emphasise ‘the invincibility of German arms and thereby the certainty of German victory’ – which hardly requires further explanation – and the theme of ‘comradeship-in-arms’. The latter was intended not merely to portray, as Hitler stated on 3 October 1941, ‘all those who are allied with us’ in a positive light, but also to suggest that they would share in Germany’s ultimate victory. Furthermore, by emphasising unity within the Axis alliance, this aspect of propaganda sought to mitigate the persistent tensions between Romania and Hungary.⁵²

During the war, propaganda in Hungary – and, after 1940, in Northern Transylvania – drew in part on German examples, while also developing its own distinctive themes, some of which had already emerged during the interwar period. Sándor Tóth addressed this issue in a 1979 article which, in keeping with the historiographical outlook of the socialist regime then in power, was written from a class-struggle perspective. Nonetheless, when approached with due critical distance, many of his conclusions remain valid. Tóth argues that the content of propaganda and indoctrination within the army did not differ in any significant respect from that directed at society as a whole; it was merely more intense and operated within a tightly controlled, strictly disciplined, and closed community.⁵³ It must be borne in mind, however, that until 1927 the army itself remained subject to the strict limitations imposed by the peace

⁵¹ Wette, ‘Német propaganda’, pp 476-479.

⁵² Wette, ‘Német propaganda’, pp 474-475.

⁵³ Sándor Tóth, ‘Háborús propaganda és nevelés a magyar hadseregben 1941-1944’ [Wartime Propaganda and Education in the Hungarian Army 1941–1944] in *Történelmi szemle*, vol. xxii, no. 3–4 (1979), p. 546.

treaty, which restricted its size and prohibited the maintenance of certain arms, such as heavy artillery, armoured units, and an air force. These restrictions not only provoked resentment in public opinion – owing to the country's perceived strategic vulnerability – but also reinforced perceptions of Hungary's military defencelessness. At the same time, they generated a need for propaganda with a specific ideological content, directed at society as a whole and particularly at those groups who, under different circumstances, would have been required to perform military service.

A didactic booklet issued in 1920 for a defence course organised within the army declared that, if the armed forces were small, then the entire Hungarian nation should be educated to become, at least in spirit, a single great army. Tóth considers these words to capture accurately the ideological atmosphere that characterised Hungary's mass propaganda and youth education up to the outbreak of the Second World War.⁵⁴ Accordingly, ideological instruction was provided within the school system, while physical training was organised through the Boy Scout Association and a separate institution established for this purpose – the Levente Youth Organisation – which likewise contributed to the ideological formation of young people.

As far as the educational system was concerned, a new curriculum was introduced in the 1920s. In response to the post-Trianon realities, greater importance was attached to the inculcation of specific ideological views, with increasing emphasis not only on Christianity and nationalism – the latter now encompassing the idea of an 'integral Hungary', that is, the revision of the peace treaty – but also on the condemnation and criticism of left-wing ideologies, primarily communism and social democracy, as well as of bourgeois democracy.⁵⁵

Great attention was devoted to instilling physical prowess, together with a religious and nationalist spirit, in young people both inside and outside the school system. As noted above, the Boy Scout and Levente movements were the two organisations that played a particularly significant role in this process; however, only the latter will be discussed in detail here, as the former reached a considerably narrower segment of society.

⁵⁴ Tóth, 'Háborús propaganda', pp 540-541.

⁵⁵ Romsics, *Hungary in the Twentieth Century*, pp 149-150.

The Levente Youth Organisation was established in 1921, partly for the reasons mentioned above – namely, the promotion of physical training – but also as a means of circumventing the prohibition on general conscription. Consequently, it was entrusted with the vital task of training and educating youth in the spirit of military discipline. Initially, membership was compulsory for males between the ages of twelve and twenty-one who did not attend schools offering regular physical education or who were not volunteer army recruits. In 1939, as preparations for war intensified, this requirement was extended to encompass all those within the specified age group. The organisation's activities were conducted under the supervision of former regular army or reserve officers. By the time a member reached the age of twenty-one, he had been introduced to the basic elements of military training, including drill, formation exercises, tactical manoeuvres, and field exercises, while due emphasis was also placed on the cultivation of moral, religious, and national values.⁵⁶ Reflecting on the effects of the propagandistic education he received within the movement, Árpád Kiss, a Szekler veteran of rural background, writes in his memoirs:

In Northern Transylvania, the Hungarians organised Levente associations, to which every boy aged fourteen and above became a member. It was a form of military training: we practised with wooden rifles on our shoulders, so it was essentially preparation for the war in which we would eventually take part, many of us falling victim to its harsh realities. At the time, while this training was ongoing, we did not fully comprehend its significance. We were simply enthusiastic, driven by patriotism.⁵⁷

Pál Incze, another veteran who participated in the movement in Sepsiszentgyörgy, recalls that they attended the cinema weekly and read a variety of periodicals – among them the previously mentioned *Signal* and *Magyar Futár* (Hungarian Courier), a lavishly illustrated and widely circulated magazine featuring photographs from the front, which also carried articles imbued with antisemitic overtones and – as is now known – maintained close ties with Germany.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Róbert Kerepeszki, 'A leventemozgalom' [The Levente Movement] in *Rubicon*, no. 4–5 (2010), pp 104–115.

⁵⁷ Sándor Magyarosi (ed.), 'A határőr, aki huszonnégy másodperc alatt rakta össze a géppuskát. Kiss Árpád visszaemlékezése' [The Border Guard Who Reassembled the Machine Gun in Twenty-Four Seconds: The Memoirs of Árpád Kiss] in *Székelyföld*, vol. xxiii, no. 9 (2019), p. 88.

⁵⁸ Pál Incze, *Gyűlölet nincs, csak fájdalom* [There Is No Hatred, Only Pain] (Sepsiszentgyörgy, 2014), pp 47, 58.

As for the army itself, its development began after the lifting of the restrictions; however, the major modernisation programmes did not, in fact, commence until the spring of 1938. Nonetheless, the military leadership had already been striving to ensure the ideological and moral preparation of its personnel, to guarantee their political reliability, and to cultivate an ethical spirit fully aligned with the objectives of peace-treaty revision (indeed, the army was regarded as one of the chief bearers of such national aspirations). In pursuit of this aim, as the previously cited Sándor Tóth writes, the slogan of the army's 'apolitical' character was central. This expressed the intention of those in power to keep the military, as an institution, distanced from the internal power struggles of various political factions, as well as from disputes both within and outside parliament. According to Tóth, the promotion of the army's political neutrality, together with its portrayal as an institution 'above society', was specifically designed to shield the rank and file from left-wing ideas – the potential appeal of which Tóth appears to have overestimated – and the officer corps primarily from the political influence of the far right. As Hungary's alignment with Hitler's Germany grew increasingly close and the official political line shifted steadily to the right, the fulfilment of this latter objective proved markedly less effective.⁵⁹

Finally, Tóth also touches upon a practice characteristic of many armies of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, generally associated with the regimental system – or, more precisely, with regimental identities – intended to strengthen *esprit de corps* or unit cohesion and to reinforce the fighting spirit of a unit. In essence, the idea rests on the principle that, from the moment a soldier enlists, it is impressed upon him that he belongs to a distinct fighting force and that it is his duty to prove himself worthy of this privilege.⁶⁰ As far as Hungary was concerned during the interwar period and the Second World War, propaganda did not build upon Austro-Hungarian traditions, within which *esprit de corps* had been primarily anchored in regimental identity, even though these traditions remained largely intact during the interwar period, as evidenced by the numerous regimental histories published at the time. Instead, martial qualities were redefined at the level of the nation through the introduction of a series of notions such as 'eternal Hungarian military virtues' and 'the Hungarian way of fighting', which were presented as enduring national characteristics,

⁵⁹ Tóth, 'Háborús propaganda', pp 542-543.

⁶⁰ Holmes, *Acts of War*, p. 312.

purported to have defined the Hungarian people for a thousand years and to have rendered them particularly capable soldiers. Such ideas, disseminated across a wide range of publications, served to cultivate a form of patriotism and to promote the idea of the Hungarian nation's 'historical mission in Europe' throughout society as a whole.⁶¹

On 22 June 1941, Germany attacked the Soviet Union, marking a new phase in the operation of Hungarian propaganda. Following the launch of the offensive, a press campaign was initiated that reiterated the principal themes of German propaganda – including the legitimacy of the 'preventive war', the 'defence of European Christian civilization', and the 'crusade against Bolshevism' – and emphasised that 'Hungary stands heart and soul on the side of the Axis powers in this war'. Although the country entered the conflict only five days later, on 27 June 1941, the government nevertheless succeeded in securing relatively swift public acceptance of the war. The widespread anti-Bolshevism that characterised the Horthy era – initially shaped in opposition to the short-lived Hungarian Soviet Republic of 1919 – helped to form the image of this new enemy. In addition, several publications critical of the Stalinist regime had already appeared in Hungary before the war, although little is known about their reception or influence. From the end of 1941, however, accounts written by soldiers returning from the front – conveying the appropriate propagandistic message – also began to circulate, while the press devoted increasing attention to reporting on the progress of the war.⁶²

At the time of the Second Army's deployment to the front in 1942, propaganda was still characterised by the proclamation of the 'Hungarian war' and by the notion that the homeland had to be defended 'far beyond its borders' from the 'Bolshevik menace'. Inspired by the successes of German troops advancing towards Stalingrad, it conveyed a strongly offensive spirit and the promise of an 'imminent final victory'. In the autumn of 1942, however, this approach underwent a subtle shift, as the idea emerged that Hungary was participating in the war not of its own free will but under the compulsion of fate. This notion was articulated in an order issued by Colonel General Ferenc Szombathelyi, Chief of the General Staff, at the conclusion of his inspection of the Second Army, and it soon became the dominant theme in sermons

⁶¹ Tóth, 'Háborús propaganda', p. 543.

⁶² Judit Pihurik, 'Háborús propaganda és a harctéri naplók valósága. A 2. magyar hadsereg katonái a szovjet fronton' [War Propaganda and the Reality of Battlefield Diaries: Soldiers of the Second Hungarian Army on the Soviet Front] in *Történelmi szemle*, no. 1–2 (2005), pp 100–101.

delivered at field masses, in military newspapers, and in the messages and songs addressed to the soldiers.⁶³

The defeat suffered by the Second Army in early 1943 marked a significant turning point in the evolution of wartime propaganda. According to Sándor Tóth, this was most clearly reflected in the gradual emergence of a duality: while German propaganda tropes – such as the notion of a common Hungarian–German destiny, the glorification of the Wehrmacht, and repeated invocations of ‘comradeship-in-arms’ – did not disappear entirely, the Hungarian press increasingly portrayed participation in the war as something the country had not sought and emphasised the need to pursue ‘independent Hungarian objectives’, thereby articulating the necessity of a new orientation.

From the spring of 1943, there were no Hungarian combat units on the Soviet front – only occupation forces – and the perceptible shifts in domestic politics, together with the Allied landings in Italy, raised hopes among some officers and enlisted men that the country’s leadership might find a way to withdraw from the war and reorient towards the Western Allies. By early 1944, however, this situation had changed under the impact of Soviet successes on the Eastern Front. The advance of the Red Army, drawing ever closer to Hungary’s borders and increasingly perceived as a direct threat, prompted the emergence in official propaganda of the notion of a ‘defensive war’ against the Bolshevik menace. Hardly had this new narrative taken shape, however, when the country was unexpectedly occupied by German forces.⁶⁴ Nonetheless, as will be shown, it eventually came to resonate with the soldiers.

The Press: War in the Papers

During the Second World War, the printed press was likely the most widespread medium of communication in Northern Transylvania. In contrast to interwar Hungary – where by the 1930s approximately one-fifth of the rural population read newspapers regularly, with significantly higher proportions in urban areas – only limited data are

⁶³ Tóth, ‘Háborús propaganda’, p. 546.

⁶⁴ Tóth, ‘Háborús propaganda’, p. 548.

available for Transylvania.⁶⁵ According to a publication from 1937, the total daily circulation of Hungarian-language newspapers and periodicals published in the province amounted to 150,000 copies, serving a Hungarian population of approximately 1.5 million.⁶⁶ In interpreting this figure, however, it must be borne in mind that it includes a number of short-lived or specialist journals that most likely never reached a wider readership. Another article, published on 16 January 1944, suggests that under Romanian rule the reading of Hungarian-language journals and newspapers came to be regarded, even in rural areas, as a means of preserving one's ethnic identity within a state that was not particularly tolerant of its Hungarian minority.⁶⁷ Ego-documents, however, suggest that reading became an especially popular pastime following the territory's re-annexation to Hungary. As János Antal, who came from a village in the Szekler region near Gyergyószentmiklós, recalls:

Large quantities of cheap literary products – newspapers, magazines, pulp fiction, and adventure novels – began to flow in from Hungary, and we practically started to collect them. Only the better-off owned radios; for us, reading was the only pastime. When we went out to the fields or the forest, we would always read while riding on the cart. Libraries were established even in the villages, and we young people gathered in reading circles and groups in the evenings. We pooled our money to buy the more expensive books and novels and exchanged magazines among ourselves.⁶⁸

As noted by Ignác Romsics, such reading circles were also common in interwar Hungary during the 1930s.⁶⁹

Beyond facilitating the dissemination of literary publications, the change of sovereignty also meant that the press regulations in force in Hungary were extended to Northern Transylvania and applied to its Hungarian-language newspapers. In this case – as opposed to radio or newsreels – the newly established Hungarian authorities had to transform an already existing institutional system, which had, moreover, become the most important instrument of Hungarian self-organisation in Transylvania during the interwar period. This process unfolded in two stages. First, a military administration was introduced in the re-annexed territory, which issued specific

⁶⁵ For Hungary, see Balázs Sipos, 'Sajtó, sajtópolitika és nyilvánosság' [Press, Press Policy, and The Public Sphere] in *Korunk*, vol. xxiii, no. 11 (November 2012), p. 81.

⁶⁶ Imre Mikes, 'A sajtó' [The Press] in István Győri Illés, *Metamorphosis Transylvaniae. Országgrészünk átalakulása 1918–1936* [Metamorphosis Transylvaniae: The Transformation of Our Region in 1918–1936] (Cluj, 1937), p. 38.

⁶⁷ *Székely Nép*, 16 January 1944.

⁶⁸ Antal, *Fogságom naplója*, pp 27–28.

⁶⁹ Romsics, *Hungary in the Twentieth Century*, p. 175.

instructions concerning the press. These included, on the one hand, a number of restrictions on content: coverage of political or religious disputes, criticism of Hungary, and comparisons reflecting unfavourably on the country were prohibited. Likewise, attacks on Hungarian politicians and the vilification of Transylvanian Romanians as a people were forbidden, while criticism of Romanian politicians was permitted only when based on objective arguments. On the other hand, the new provisions also included a precise list of newspapers, indicating which were to be prohibited: of the 235 listed titles, only 106 were authorised, including 13 in Romanian and two in German. These were divided into two categories – political and specialist publications – and only the former were permitted to publish political news.⁷⁰ Second, largely in connection with the introduction of civil administration, the measures previously adopted in Hungary were implemented: in early 1941, compulsory membership of the Press Chamber was introduced for journalists – a measure intended to limit the number of those of Jewish origin – together with the mandatory re-licensing of the newspapers that had remained in circulation, while censorship, already in force in Hungary since 1939, was likewise imposed.⁷¹

One of the most important bodies overseeing the press was the so-called Press Control Committee, which regulated content through directives that at times prescribed lines of argument and substantive points for specific articles. It also became standard practice to allocate particular materials to designated outlets; on occasion, the same topic was required to be presented in diametrically opposed ways. In addition to the materials proposed by the Committee and supervised by the censors, specialised German agencies, as noted above, regularly placed their own propaganda in Hungarian newspapers, chiefly in the form of news reports, war communiqués, and politicians' speeches. In the case of the latter, the Committee occasionally exercised editorial control when their publication was considered inconsistent with Hungarian interests.⁷²

⁷⁰ Tamás Sárándi, *Levezényelt visszacsatolás. A magyar katonai közigazgatás Észak-Erdélyben, 1940* [Re-annexation by Command: Hungary's Military Administration in Northern Transylvania, 1940] (Csíkszereda, 2016), pp 165-169. János Fleisz, *Az erdélyi magyar sajtó története 1940–1944* [The History of the Hungarian Press in Transylvania, 1940–1944] (Pécs, 2016), p. 76.

⁷¹ Fleisz, *Az erdélyi magyar sajtó*, p. 76.

⁷² László Márkus and Miklós Vásárhelyi, 'A sajtó szerepe Magyarországon a háborús propaganda terjesztésében' [The Role of the Press in Spreading War Propaganda in Hungary] in *Történelmi Szemle*, vol. xxii, no. 3–4 (1979.), p. 513.

All this was necessary because the general objective was to remain pro-German while avoiding the complete alienation of Great Britain and the United States. Naturally, significant changes and shifts of emphasis can be observed, depending on the course of military events and the orientation of those holding key decision-making positions.⁷³

The attack on the Soviet Union and Hungary's entry into the war created a new situation for the press, which, according to the research of László Márkus and Miklós Vásárhelyi, continued to preserve, to some extent, the illusion that a choice remained possible. As the initial euphoria of victory subsided, the Press Control Committee was instructed on 10 September 1941 not to facilitate the publication of reports suggesting that the outcome of the war had already been decided or offering predictions as to how the conflict would end.⁷⁴ Although it is impossible to generalise from a single example, the 10 October 1941 issue of the daily *Székely Nép* exemplified precisely those tendencies that, according to the aforementioned instruction, were to be avoided. First, the paper devoted both its front page and an inside page to accounts of ongoing military operations, with the main headline proclaiming: 'The eastern campaign has been decided militarily.' The issue also reproduced Hitler's war order of 2 October, which essentially summarised the main themes of German war propaganda – the concept of a preventive war and the notion of European unity in this endeavour: 'Perhaps this is the first time that all the nations of Europe are fighting together – as in a crusade – against the enemies of Christianity and civilisation.' The accompanying articles maintained this celebratory tone, drawing attention to the vast territories reportedly occupied, the immense numbers of Soviet soldiers taken prisoner, and the considerable quantities of enemy armaments – including aircraft and artillery – said to have been destroyed.⁷⁵

As the article in *Székely Nép* demonstrates, the outbreak of the war gave rise to a range of texts in the newspapers that, in one way or another, engaged with the conflict in

⁷³ Sipos Balázs, *Sajtó és hatalom a Horthy-korszakban* [Press and Power in the Horthy Era] (Budapest, 2011), p. 232.

⁷⁴ Márkus and Vásárhelyi, 'A sajtó szerepe', p. 519.

⁷⁵ *Székely Nép*, 10 October 1941.

general or with soldiers in particular. Those concerned with military events can, for the most part, be classified into four categories:⁷⁶

1. German communiqués and commentaries from various fronts. These were published on a daily basis, most frequently on the front pages of the newspapers.
2. Reports issued by the Hungarian General Staff, particularly concerning the activities of the Hungarian Second Army. The frequency of their publication varied according to developments at the front, and during quieter periods they were not issued regularly.
3. Addresses by political leaders and figures of authority, such as Miklós Horthy Jr., Prime Minister Miklós Kállay, and the Minister of Defence. These were delivered only on exceptional occasions and frequently employed familiar tropes of wartime propaganda, although shifts in political orientation can also be discerned within them.
4. Interviews and reports depicting everyday life at the front, written by war correspondents, as well as recurring columns such as ‘Magyar hősök’ (‘Hungarian Heroes’) and ‘Magyar katonabravúrok’ (‘Hungarian Acts of Bravery’), which appeared in several newspapers. The former – consisting of short pieces recounting the outstanding deeds of individual soldiers – was also published in *Székely Nép*.

Each of these categories had its own distinctive features. The events at the front, as reported in German communiqués concerning the course of the war, naturally carried particular significance in Hungary – including among Szeklers – since many believed, not without reason, that the maintenance of the new borders depended on a German victory. Nevertheless, this sense of involvement, as it were, remained rather indirect. Official addresses delivered by leading political and governmental figures, on the other hand, were largely rhetorical and programmatic in character, employing otherwise effective propaganda tropes that were, by their very nature, also rather generalising.

The content of the recurring columns and the articles from the front line differed somewhat in emphasis from the two categories discussed above. The columns typically recounted stories of individual acts of outstanding bravery – acts that could occur, and often did, even in battles that were ultimately lost. The articles, by contrast,

⁷⁶ Simon Molnár, ‘Konstruált katonatípusok a második világháború magyar sajtójában’ [Representations of Soldiers in the Hungarian Press during the Second World War] (Unpublished university paper, Zsigmond Király Egyetem, Budapest, 2018), pp 20-21.

portrayed soldiers as displaying exceptional devotion and respect towards their superiors, together with an irrepressible desire to go into battle. Yet, no matter how exaggerated these depictions of soldiers' attitudes may have been, the factual accuracy of the situations presented was of only secondary importance from the perspective of audience reception.

The drafters of the General Staff's reports faced a particularly demanding task, as they were responsible for covering the operations of the Hungarian Second Army on the Don front. They had to do so in such a way as to conceal a crushing defeat – or even present it as a series of successful operations – thereby serving the press's propagandistic function. At the same time, they were also required to fulfil the informative role of the media by preparing the public, at least to some extent, for the consequences of defeat – that is, by minimising the discrepancy between propagandistic reporting and what the wider public at home was to experience, at least to a degree sufficient to avert open outrage.

The developments at the Don were covered in a series of eleven reports – the first of which, No. 38, was issued on 17 January and the last, No. 48, on 21 March. However, the very first communiqué concerning the fighting originated from Berlin and was published as early as 12 January, reporting that German forces had repelled attacks by numerically superior Soviet infantry and armoured formations and had inflicted heavy losses on the enemy. The assault on the Hungarian positions – as the statements issued by the German High Command always summarised events from the previous day – was mentioned only a day later. By 14 and 15 January, the reports were already describing an offensive preceded by heavy artillery preparation, while also noting that in one sector the enemy had succeeded in breaching the Hungarian lines, although the majority of the attackers were subsequently destroyed.⁷⁷

The Hungarian High Command – more precisely, the Chief of the General Staff – issued its first communiqué, No. 38 of the *Military Reports*, only on 16 January; however, just two days later the next one, No. 39, had already appeared. These reports addressed, on the one hand, the circumstances of the fighting – noting that the Soviets had launched their offensive with considerable forces supported by armoured units – and, on the other, sought to describe the defenders' situation, who, in intense cold and

⁷⁷ Székely Nép, 12 January 1943; 14 January 1943; 15 January 1943.

with severely limited visibility, were compelled to engage the attackers without artillery or air support. Information was released gradually, partly because the High Command itself received reports on the unfolding events only in stages. Report No. 39 acknowledged that the enemy had achieved certain local gains, while stating that the Hungarian forces had first employed elastic defence and later adopted mobile tactics; at the same time, it also alluded to losses greater than usual.⁷⁸

On 31 January, newspapers reported that the entire Hungarian front line had been withdrawn and that new defensive positions had been established further to the rear. According to the press, by 7 February only a few divisions, closely cooperating with German formations, were still engaged in fighting in the area southwest of Voronezh, while relative calm prevailed along the remaining sectors of the front. On 18 February it was announced that the manoeuvres undertaken by the armies opposing the Bolsheviks – initiated four weeks earlier with the aim of shortening and consolidating the extensive front line – were still underway, although nearing completion. By 28 February, however, reports suggested that the Hungarian army operating in the East was still on the move – that is, undergoing redeployment, which was once again expected to be completed shortly. Finally, on 21 March the press noted that calm had returned along the Hungarian front, adding that the Chief of the General Staff would henceforth issue further military communiqués only when necessary.⁷⁹

With regard to the reliability of the reports, the overall picture is a decidedly uneven one. Some contained details that revealed the true severity of the fighting: for example, on 5 February, reference was made to scattered Hungarian units that had become isolated from their headquarters, while on 7 February it was stated that during the initial phase of the battle the encircled troops had held out to the very end – a euphemism implying that they had ultimately been killed or taken prisoner – or had fought their way out of enemy encirclements in desperate close combat. Similarly, on 18 February it was noted that a westward manoeuvre had been carried out to evade enemy pressure, and it was acknowledged that during the fighting of the preceding weeks the Hungarian formations had often found themselves in critical situations. Much more common, however, were formulations intended to conceal the actual state

⁷⁸ *Székely Nép*, 17 January 1943; 19 January 1943.

⁷⁹ *Székely Nép*, 31 January 1943; 7 February 1943; 18 February 1943; 28 February 1943; 21 March 1943.

of affairs. At first, efforts were made to present Soviet successes as less significant than they really were, while at the same time exaggerating the losses supposedly suffered by the enemy. When this interpretation could no longer be maintained due to the course of events, the withdrawals were redefined – as previously mentioned – as examples of ‘elastic defence,’ and later as ‘mobile defensive tactics. At the same time, emphasis was placed on the planned nature of the withdrawal: on the one hand, its execution was presented as a success, while on the other it was stressed that the troops would be able to engage the enemy far more effectively from the newly established defensive positions. Clarifying the terminology employed was likewise an effective means of deflection: on 10 February, the role of all-round defensive positions – referred to in Hungarian as ‘hedgehog positions’ – was discussed at length, while on 28 February attention was given to the concept and character of mobile defence. Additional arguments were also used for this purpose. One such claim was that the enemy’s operational objectives had been successfully thwarted and that, in other sectors of the theatre of war, it was the Red Army that had found itself in a difficult position.

One of the most sensitive questions was, of course, that of the casualties suffered. The issue was first raised on 23 January 1943, during the party day of the Hungarian Life Party [Magyar Élet Pártja], when Prime Minister Miklós Kállay himself reassured party members that, although these may have been greater than those reported at the time, they were far removed from the figures circulated by enemy news sources. A day later, Report No. 40 likewise dismissed the rumours on the matter, noting that they had originated from the radio stations in London, Moscow, and Kuybyshev (present-day Samara). At the same time, the clarification of the matter was slow to materialise. As of 31 January, it was still reported that the number of casualties could not yet be accurately determined, as during the counterattacks and subsequent withdrawal the units became scattered and intermingled along the front line. It was further noted that the troops were assembling at various designated rendezvous points, and that it would require weeks for the command to obtain a full and accurate assessment of the situation. The first figures – 15,550 wounded – appeared on 14 February. Although it was acknowledged that this number also included those wounded prior to the Soviet offensive, the report nonetheless sought to cast the matter in a positive light by

emphasising that the majority of these men had already been transported back to Hungary by the time the data were released.

Another attempt to mitigate the impact of the losses took the form of portraying them as heroic sacrifices; however, the narrative remained to some extent grounded in reality, by referring – however briefly – to the families of the fallen:

Our present casualties are the consequence of heroic perseverance. For this reason, Hungarian society must be prepared to assist and comfort the widows and orphans, and to help them understand that the supreme sacrifice their loved ones made for the homeland was not in vain. For this, gratitude and reward are the continued prosperity, flourishing, and survival of Hungary.⁸⁰

An effort was made to prepare the home front for the sight of the wounded, particularly cases of frostbite. At the same time, an evident intention to deflect responsibility can also be observed: it was stressed that such injuries had occurred despite the ostensibly satisfactory winter equipment – which, in reality, had been inadequate or missing altogether – and the First World War’s Carpathian campaign was evoked as a similar experience.⁸¹ It was further emphasised that such developments formed part of the inherent reality of war: ‘We have suffered casualties – which no one seeks to deny or to diminish – yet everyone knows that in war there are not only victories and advances, but also sacrifices, losses, and withdrawals.’⁸²

An important element in the interpretation of the course of events at the front was provided by the statements of political leaders. The first to speak was Prime Minister Miklós Kállay. In an address delivered on 26 February, he emphasised the need to further strengthen the Hungarian armed forces and declared that, throughout the war, Hungary would consistently place national interests above all else. Over the course of the speech, he subsequently nuanced this position, arguing that the objective could be fulfilled only if the Bolshevik threat were warded off.⁸³

In his turn, Minister of Defence Vilmos Nagy also addressed public opinion; he gave an interview to *Giornale d’Italia*, which *Székely Nép* also published on 13 March on its front page. In response to questions from an unnamed Italian journalist, he largely

⁸⁰ *Székely Nép*, 29 January 1943.

⁸¹ *Székely Nép*, 7 January 1943.

⁸² *Székely Nép*, 29 January 1943.

⁸³ *Székely Nép*, 26 February 1943.

reiterated the main themes of Hungarian propaganda. While invoking the events of 1919 and Hungarian Bolshevism – and the determination to prevent its return – he stated that Hungary had no territorial claims against the Soviet Union, repeated the familiar trope of a war forced upon the nation, and articulated the country's objectives by framing Hungary's participation as both a defence of its borders and a fulfilment of its duty to defend Europe. In response to a question about whether Hungary was growing weary of the conflict, Nagy stressed the importance of perseverance and willingness to make sacrifices, and referred to the example of István Horthy, who had died on the Eastern Front in 1942 in a flying accident, presenting his death as a symbol of patriotic devotion.⁸⁴

Another means of presenting the fighting was to highlight genuine examples of military achievement. The first such report appeared on 12 February and concerned the Hungarian armoured units, emphasizing their self-sacrificing heroism in supporting the infantry formations' struggle. According to the report, their brave and valiant conduct was commended in a special daily order issued by the Allied – in this context, German – army command. On 14 February, the achievements of the army's medical personnel were also praised. The most detailed account on this subject, however, appeared on 21 March. It concerned a Hungarian unit or formation that had left its positions along the Don only on 26 January and had served as a rearguard during the retreat. These troops – wrote the newspaper – fought side by side with German formations for thirteen days under increasingly severe conditions, displaying exceptional endurance and thereby making possible the orderly evacuation of the Voronezh bridgehead. Their withdrawal was carried out under similarly difficult conditions; they broke out of several enemy encirclements, conducting such operations not only against an overwhelmingly superior enemy, but also in temperatures around minus forty degrees, in blinding snowstorms, amid deprivation and, in more than one case, severe shortages of ammunition. The report described their achievements as truly superhuman.⁸⁵

Finally, it is worth addressing the reception of these reports as well. Between 1940 and 1944, *Székel Nép* advertised itself as the regional daily newspaper with the largest circulation in all of Hungary, and it probably reached most settlements in the Szekler

⁸⁴ *Székel Nép*, 13 March 1943.

⁸⁵ *Székel Nép*, 12 February 1943; 14 February 1943; 21 March 1943.

region. In his memoirs, Pál Incze explicitly notes that this newspaper was among the sources from which he learned about events at the front. The recollections of Árpád Kiss likewise suggest that he followed both the changes in the course of the war and the defeat along the Don through the media of the time. Incze, however, adds that although people could see that the Eastern Front was drawing ever closer to Hungary's borders – presumably referring to the year 1943 – they did not fully grasp what this might mean for the country.⁸⁶ It should be borne in mind, however, that both Incze and Kiss were called up for military service only in the autumn of 1943 – in other words, they were still civilians during the events discussed above. Members of the cohorts called up in previous years, by contrast, had no access to current news. János Antal describes the situation of actively serving soldiers as follows: 'In a way that was completely incomprehensible to us, we were cut off from the world. Newspapers were not allowed in, there were no radios, and we had no knowledge of how the war was progressing. In the barracks, dreadful posters were displayed, reading: "Don't talk politics!" and "Spreading rumours is treason!" Contact with our parents – even correspondence – was also forbidden.'⁸⁷

However, the defeat suffered at the Don exerted its influence on Hungarian society – and on the Szekler population in particular – not so much through its immediate as through its indirect effects, which were further compounded by subsequent changes in the course of the war. From the perspective of the soldiers of the 27th Light Division, it is the atmosphere prevailing in early 1944 that is of greater significance – an atmosphere most clearly captured in the articles published on 1 January 1944, which summarised the events of the preceding year and reflected on both public sentiment and prospects for the future. *Csiki Lapok* and *Székely Szó* each published a piece of this kind, whereas *Székely Nép* presented a factual overview of the foreign and strategic situation, addressing these issues only in the closing section of the text. The structure of the two former articles was largely identical: both underscored that Hungary – unlike the major powers such as Germany, France, or Great Britain – had been comparatively less affected by the devastation of war. The battle of the Don appeared only as a point of reference, illustrating that while a year earlier an entire Hungarian army had been engaged on the Eastern Front, by early 1944 only scattered

⁸⁶ See Incze, *Gyűlölet nincs*, pp 58-59; Magyarosi, 'A határőr', p. 88.

⁸⁷ Antal, *Fogságom naplója*, p. 32.

contingents of Hungarian soldiers remained deployed there. As observed in *Székely Szó*, Hungarian politicians never tired of emphasising that the primary duty of the Hungarian soldier was the defence of the homeland and its borders, and both newspapers clearly attributed this relative stability to the country's leadership – one of them mentioning Horthy, in his capacity as Regent, among those to whom this was owed.

At the same time, two of the three newspapers referred to a prevailing sense of tension. *Csiki Lapok* wrote: 'We enter this year with much anxiety, for we feel that we are stepping into a decisive one,' while at the end of its analysis *Székely Nép* similarly observed: 'People today, with strained nerves, face the New Year longing to see its outcome; they look to it for the clearing of the horizon.' With regard to the general situation, it was stressed that, despite territorial losses on the Eastern Front, the German forces remained undefeated, while the impending Allied landing in Europe was presented as the principal concern of public opinion. It was also observed that Hungary's fate – or, more specifically, that of the recently regained territories – would be determined only upon the conclusion of the war. Taken together, the articles in question suggested that the conflict might still end favourably for Hungary. A positive outcome, the argument went, would depend on both the population's capacity for sacrifice and its trust in the country's leadership – a trust represented as having been earned through the reduction of Hungary's military participation in the war and through the safeguarding of the country from greater devastation.

Newsreels: War on Film

By the outbreak of the Second World War, the Hungarian army was fully aware of the importance of film for military purposes. This recognition was articulated by Captain József Bánáss in an article published in June 1939, in which he emphasised, on the one hand, the systematic integration of film into training and educational programmes and, on the other, its potential use in shaping public opinion – though at that stage this referred primarily to promoting the image of the Hungarian soldier as one who loves his homeland and fights for it, in deliberate contrast to the earlier stereotype of the pleasure-seeking, hard-drinking officer. For the purposes of the present study, the first aspect – the military application – is of primary relevance. The films that Bánáss considered suitable for military use largely fell into two main categories – instructional

films and films of a propagandistic nature – although his own classification was not entirely consistent with this division.

Instructional films were divided into several subcategories. The first comprised films addressing general military issues such as tactics, chemical warfare, field fortifications, and the cooperation between different branches of the armed forces. The second category included films dealing with the functioning of particular branches and services, illustrating their activities, equipment, specific weapons, and their role in combat. Finally, a third group covered theoretical subjects, presenting the fundamentals of ballistics, characteristic forms of fire, and other essential principles of military science.

The second major group consisted of films that Bánáss considered suitable for public exhibition because of their educational influence and propagandistic content. Among these were *L'Armata Azzurra* (The Blue Army, 1932), a film with a fictional narrative intended to showcase Italy's air power, and *Stoßtrupp 1917* (Shock Troop, 1934), a German production that, lacking a coherent plot, sought to portray the everyday reality of trench warfare during the First World War.⁸⁸ The propagandistic value of these films lay primarily in their attempt to popularise specific branches of the armed forces – the air force in the former and the infantry in the latter – or, more generally, to present combat and combat-related activities as inherently heroic. In Bánáss's view, the film documenting Regent Miklós Horthy's journey to Rome likewise belonged to the same category as the examples mentioned above, together with those recordings he classified as historical – such as original footage depicting the battles of the First World War.

Finally, the article also noted that, for the training year beginning in the autumn of 1939, six films were scheduled to be shown. Since most military units at the time were not equipped with film projectors, these were in most cases screened in local cinemas that had been specifically contracted for this purpose.⁸⁹ In his study of the Szekler border guard forces, however, military historian József Nagy observes that sound-film instruction was not introduced until 1941, at least in the case of the units stationed in Northern Transylvania.⁹⁰

⁸⁸ In Hungary, the two films were released under the titles *Az égi hadsereg* and *Rohamcsapat, előre!*, respectively.

⁸⁹ József Bánáss, 'Film és honvédség' [Film and the Honvéd Army]. In *Magyar Film. Filmkamarai és moziegyesületi szaklap*, no. 18, (1939), pp 10-11.

⁹⁰ Nagy, *Békeévek*, p. 95.

Visual propaganda, however, was not confined to the military: by 1940, Hungarian newsreels as well as propaganda films were screened before every feature film in cinemas, and in 1942 this requirement was extended to non-theatrical venues equipped with 16 mm projectors. In addition, many cinemas also showed German newsreels. In assessing their dissemination, the painter and journalist Ernő (Ernest) Gyimesy Kásás noted in a 1943 article that in that year the audience of *Hungarian World News* – the country’s national newsreel – exceeded several times the readership of Hungary’s most influential daily newspapers.⁹¹ Although it is impossible to determine whether Gyimesy Kásás’s claim was exaggerated, the newsreel nevertheless reached an exceptionally large segment of the population.

Released on a weekly basis, a typical issue in the second half of 1940 ran for approximately eight to ten minutes, opened with an animated main title, and consisted of a relatively casual assortment of news items – usually between five and eight per issue – accompanied by explanatory voiceovers. Between September 1939 and December 1944, more than two thousand news stories were screened; according to the surviving material, approximately 77 per cent of the footage was filmed in Hungary, while the remainder originated from various foreign sources.⁹²

In the interwar period, the tone of Hungarian newsreels was largely neutral, with the exception of recurring materials advocating the revision of the Treaty of Trianon. In 1929, for example, an animated main title was introduced which, although it underwent various modifications over time, consistently included both a map of interwar Hungary and some form of visual reference to the territories lost after the First World War.⁹³ After 1938, as the propagandistic character of Hungarian newsreels became increasingly pronounced, the animated title sequence was also modified to reflect Hungary’s territorial gains. Deborah S. Cornelius describes the 1941 version as follows: first appeared the map of the historical Kingdom of Hungary outlined in white, superimposed with the map of interwar Hungary. Then, piece by piece, a white

⁹¹ Ernő Gyimesy Kásás, ‘A magyar híradófilm diadalútja. A Magyar Filmhíradó ezredik hete áll a nemzeti talpraállásunk szolgálatában’ [The Triumph of the Hungarian Newsreel: Celebrating the Hungarian Newsreel’s Thousandth Week in the Service of National Recovery] in *Magyar Film*, vol. v, no. 16 (1943), p. 8.

⁹² Bálint Fekete, ‘Newsreels and Propaganda in Horthy Era Hungary’ in *Carnival. Journal of International Students of History Association*, xvii (2015), p. 49.

⁹³ Janka Barkóczi, *Ezerszemű filmhíradó: A mozgóképes propaganda története Magyarországon 1930–1944* [Thousand-Eyed Newsreel: Visual Propaganda in Hungary 1930–1944] (Budapest, 2017), pp 92–94.

line delineated each of the recovered territories – first northern Hungary, then Ruthenia, Transylvania, and finally northern Yugoslavia.⁹⁴ This symbolic depiction of the country's territorial gains was frequently met with cheering and applause from the audience.⁹⁵

As far as Miklós Horthy's cult was concerned, newsreels played a considerably smaller role than the printed press, although the Regent's public appearances and international trips were regularly reported. Significant occasions of cult-building – such as Horthy's seventy-fifth birthday or the regime's principal national holidays – constituted the exception: between 1939 and 1944, approximately sixteen news stories covering such events were screened. One of these, entitled *Magyarország kormányzója* (The Governor of Hungary), released in 1943, ran for an exceptional twenty-six minutes. Its central message emphasised Horthy's crucial role for the Hungarian nation, explicitly articulated in the commentary, which presented him as the embodiment of national unity.⁹⁶ Hungary's territorial gains between 1938 and 1941 – particularly the recovery of Northern Transylvania – were also attributed to the Regent, – a connection that Horthy himself actively sought to reinforce, as discussed earlier.⁹⁷

From 1941 onwards – and particularly after Hungary's entry into the war against the Soviet Union – the focus of the newsreels shifted markedly. During that year, the majority of news items – 129 out of a total of 648 – concerned the army and law enforcement, followed by ninety-six reports on various celebrations and sixty-three on sports. Hungary's participation in the 1941 German offensive against the Soviet Union, for instance, was depicted as an unequivocal success: reports on the advancing Hungarian troops frequently referred to captured Red Army soldiers, destroyed enemy equipment, and repelled Soviet counterattacks. Combat scenes, when shown, were typically filmed in open fields or in generic, non-specific urban settings.⁹⁸ As for the Soviet offensive launched against the Hungarian Second Army in 1943, it was represented in a similar manner, with no acknowledgement whatsoever of the Hungarian defeat. Issues nos. 987, 988 and 989 of *Hungarian World News* comprise a compilation of scenes depicting Hungarian ski troops advancing as heavy weapons –

⁹⁴ Cornelius, *Hungary in World War II*, p. 146.

⁹⁵ Barkóczy, *Ezerszemű filmhíradó*, p. 92.

⁹⁶ Turbucz, *A Horthy-kultusz*, p. 279.

⁹⁷ Turbucz, *A Horthy-kultusz*, p. 201.

⁹⁸ Janka Barkóczy, 'Vizuális propaganda Magyarországon 1931-1944' [Visual Propaganda in Hungary 1931-1944] (PhD thesis, Corvinus University, Budapest, 2020), pp 179-180.

machine guns and artillery – fire at an unseen enemy. The accompanying commentary, composed of brief declarative sentences, informs viewers that Hungarian forces, fighting under extreme winter conditions, are successfully repelling Soviet attacks. In a certain sense, issue no. 995, released in March 1943, may be regarded as an exception to this pattern: although it likewise omits any mention of the defeat or of the scale of the losses, it offers a relatively detailed account of the procedures that wounded soldiers underwent upon returning from the front, before being transferred to hospitals closer to their homes.⁹⁹ The newsreels, however, sought to influence audiences not only by emphasising victories and suppressing defeats, but also through their very composition. As Bálint Fekete observes, reports from the combat zones were typically presented alongside news from the home front, suggesting that the country was not only equal to the challenges posed by the war but was also functioning smoothly despite its ongoing military engagements.¹⁰⁰

In addition to domestic reports, foreign news items were also frequently included in Hungarian newsreels. In the early stages of the war, for instance, the fighting on the Western Front was presented from the perspectives of both opposing sides, but over time material produced in Germany gradually came to dominate the selection. Although these segments were undoubtedly the most visually striking elements of the Hungarian newsreels, they clearly functioned as vehicles for the dissemination of the Nazi regime's propagandistic messages.¹⁰¹ Alongside these, complete German-produced newsreels were also screened in Hungary. As early as September 1939, a separate newsreel intended for distribution abroad was produced in Germany, and by the end of 1943 it was available in thirty-six languages – including Hungarian. Although historians note that the series created for international circulation was officially designated *Auslandstonwoche*, contemporary Hungarian press discourse nonetheless continued to refer to the German newsreels shown in local cinemas simply as 'UFA newsreels'.¹⁰² With regard to their regular exhibition, it can be inferred that

⁹⁹ Newsreels released during the war are available on the following website: <https://filmhiradokonline.hu/index.php#home> (05 May 2025).

¹⁰⁰ Fekete, 'Newsreels and Propaganda', p. 48.

¹⁰¹ Barkóczy, *Ezerszemű filmhíradó*, p. 40. Fekete, 'Newsreels and Propaganda', p. 49.

¹⁰² Roel Vande Winkel, 'Nazi Newsreels in Europe: The Many Faces of Ufa's Foreign Weekly Newsreel (*Auslandstonwoche*) versus the Germany Weekly Newsreel (*Deutsche Wochenschau*)' in *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, vol. xxiv, no. 1 (2004), pp 7, 11.

the first issue was shown in October 1939, after which new releases followed on a weekly basis. From 1941, evidence suggests that Marosvásárhely – where the 27/III Battalion was stationed – was among the localities that screened German newsreels upon release, while cinemas in Sepsiszentgyörgy and Székelyudvarhely also screened them, although it remains uncertain how soon after their premiere they were shown in these towns.

Information about the content of these newsreels and their reception among Hungarian audiences can be gleaned from an article published in *Nemzeti Sport* on 18 August 1941 – though it should be borne in mind that the author likely employed a certain degree of exaggeration in describing their impact. According to the article, from their initial screening onward, the popularity of German newsreels steadily increased, owing in part to Hungarians' presumed sympathy toward Germany and in part to the complexity with which the war was represented in them. As the journalist emphasised:

The battlefield footage is shot by military cameramen on the very front lines – on land, in the air, and at sea. The news editors, however, never forget the world behind the front, where people live, work, and even entertain themselves. One of the *Ufa Newsreel*'s images is taken in mid-air by a military cameraman descending with his paratrooper comrades; another is filmed from a theatre box in a Berlin cabaret by a home-front reporter; and a third is shot in the vast workshop of a cannon factory working at full steam. The *Ufa Newsreel* presents authentic reports to its contemporaries while at the same time continuously collecting historical records for posterity.¹⁰³

The same issue – that is, the hundredth newsreel – was also discussed in the 26 August edition of the paper. On this occasion, the spectacular quality of the footage recorded at the front was highlighted, with particular reference to the shots taken from the cockpit of a dive bomber during an attack. At the same time, it was emphasised that the other recordings from Russia were equally remarkable, especially as almost all of them had been filmed on the very front line.¹⁰⁴

The question arises as to how the Battle of Stalingrad and the ensuing turn of the war affected the reception of German newsreels. No studies have so far examined this issue in the Hungarian context; Kay Hoffmann, however, offers a detailed analysis of the matter with regard to German audiences, and some of her observations also allow

¹⁰³ *Nemzeti Sport*, 18 August 1941.

¹⁰⁴ *Nemzeti Sport*, 26 August 1941.

cautious parallels to be drawn with Hungarian viewers. One of the problems she identified was that, as the conflict progressed, the very similarly structured images were reiterated week after week, which soon produced a sense of monotony among German audiences. Even more significant changes occurred during and after the Battle of Stalingrad, when German propaganda had shifted its focus from reporting on victories to concealing defeats. To this end, the fighting was invariably described as a successful advance, while the animated maps – which had previously played a central role in visualising military operations – no longer made clear where the troops were actually engaged. Another technique employed to obscure the real situation was the replacement of reports on current events with accounts of personal achievements and the heroism of individual soldiers. All this, Hoffmann concludes, led to the German newsreel losing both its credibility and its appeal to the German public after 1942–1943.¹⁰⁵

As far as Hungary – and, within it, the Szekler region in particular – is concerned, one can only speculate in this regard. Drawing on Hoffmann's argument about monotony, it seems reasonable to assume that the initial impact of the German newsreels likewise diminished, at least to some extent, among Hungarian audiences. In addition to popularity, the question of credibility must also be addressed – though here, too, only indirect conclusions are possible. Drawing on diaries kept by soldiers of the Hungarian Second Army, Judit Pihurik examined the role of propaganda among men who fought on the Eastern Front in 1942–1943. However, she makes no mention of these writings expressing doubt about the effectiveness of the German army or acknowledging the possibility of its defeat.¹⁰⁶ (It remains an open question, however, to what extent messages such as 'comradeship-in-arms' were able to retain their plausibility.) Since soldiers who personally experienced the Second Army's collapse did not raise such doubts, it may reasonably be assumed that most moviegoers likewise did not question the newsreels' representations of German military efficiency, although they may have suspected that the reports did not convey the situation at the front in the most accurate or authentic manner.

¹⁰⁵ Kay Hoffmann, 'Propagandistic problems of German newsreels in World War II' in *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, vol. xxi, no. 2 (2001), pp 135-140.

¹⁰⁶ See Pihurik, 'Háborús propaganda', pp 99-127.

Finally, it is also necessary to consider the extent to which the messages conveyed by the newsreels reached the inhabitants of the Szekler region. Here, too, no precise data are available; various contemporary accounts, however, allow for certain inferences to be drawn in this regard. In his memoir, János Antal – who later himself served in the war – provides a description of cinema-going habits in Gyergyószentmiklós, a Szekler town with a population of roughly 10,000, and in the surrounding rural area. He recalls that it became widespread as a pastime mainly after 1940, following the return of Northern Transylvania to Hungary: ‘At that time, Gyergyószentmiklós had the only cinema in the area, where Hungarian sound films, musicals, and newsreels were shown. Attendance was high, as there were only two screenings on both Saturday and Sunday. We queued for half a day just to get tickets.’¹⁰⁷ People from his village, he continues, not only came to know the most famous Hungarian actors by name but also discussed films at length during various social gatherings – a tendency that was, in all likelihood, more generally widespread as well.

Another account that illuminates contemporary patterns of cinema attendance appeared on 29 January 1944 in *Székely Közélet*, a newspaper published in Székelyudvarhely – the town where the 27/II Battalion was stationed. The article, written by two journalists using pen names, criticised the poor quality of the films shown at the local cinema, comparing them with those screened in other towns of the Szekler region. From the perspective of the present study, the authors’ conclusion is particularly revealing: they observed that both urban and rural audiences – that is, residents of the wider Székelyudvarhely area – had been seized by a veritable ‘movie fever’, as a result of which they would watch almost anything, regardless of its quality.¹⁰⁸ A third example is provided by József Nagy, who, drawing on the diary of Ensign Ferenc Varga, examines how frequently the officer attended the cinema. Varga served with the 33rd Border Rifle Battalion, stationed in the Northern Transylvanian town of Beszterce, which had more than ten thousand inhabitants and a mixed Saxon, Hungarian, and Romanian population. Between October 1942 and June 1944, he recorded by title fifty-eight films he had seen: thirty-three Hungarian and seventeen German instructional and feature films, as well as six Italian, one Danish, and one

¹⁰⁷ Antal, *Fogságom naplója*, p. 28.

¹⁰⁸ *Székely közélet*, 29 January 1944.

Swedish feature film.¹⁰⁹ This indicates that he watched, on average, two to three films each month. Relying in part on these findings, Nagy argues that the wartime propaganda of the Axis powers profoundly influenced the daily lives of soldiers. This argument may be further supported by the fact that during each cinema screening, moviegoers – including active and prospective soldiers – were simultaneously exposed to visual representations of Miklós Horthy, the return of Northern Transylvania to Hungary, footage of the Hungarian army, and material showcasing the efficiency of the German war machine. At the same time, in the case of the Szekler community, no channels of information offering alternative perspectives on the war – such as Western radio broadcasts – are known to have been followed with comparable regularity.

3. Defeat at the Don River

While during the initial offensive against the Soviet Union Germany did not request military support from its Hungarian ally – the two-corps-strong Carpathian Group participated in Operation Barbarossa on Hungary's own initiative – by the end of 1941 the situation had changed radically. In a letter dated 29 December 1941, Hitler demanded that Horthy send troops for the planned summer offensive of 1942, later known as 'Case Blue' (Fall Blau), and on 20 January Field Marshal Wilhelm Keitel arrived in Budapest to negotiate the terms of participation. As a result, the Hungarian military leadership agreed to dispatch a 207,000-strong force – the Second Hungarian Army – to the Eastern Front, where it was placed under the command of German Army Group B.

To avoid a catastrophe similar to that experienced at the end of the First World War, when Czech and Romanian troops invaded Hungary, the Hungarian command intended to raise troops from all parts of the country rather than relying solely on the three army corps that had already been mobilised. However, the VI and IX Corps, responsible for defending the Romanian border, were not mobilised at all, and the best-trained age groups were, wherever possible, also kept away from front-line service. The movement of troops to the front began in April, and by August the Hungarian

¹⁰⁹ Nagy, *Békeévek*, p. 95.

forces had taken up positions along the River Don, south-west of Voronezh, covering a sector approximately 200 km wide.¹¹⁰

Nonetheless, the formations of the IX Corps (including the 27th Light Division) were also affected by the mobilisation to some extent. Non-Magyar nationalities, for example, were to make up 20 percent of the Second Army, and, in line with this principle, several supply and service units of the corps, manned by ethnic Romanians from Transylvania, were to be attached to the formations of the Second Army. Secondly, from 12 February 1942 all infantry brigades were redesignated as light divisions, and their modified tables of organisation and equipment included various new companies and platoons, whose personnel were to be drawn from corps that had not been mobilised.¹¹¹

In line with this, in May 1942 the 27th Light Division established an additional field artillery unit in Marosvásárhely, designated the 27/2 Light Field Artillery Battery, with a strength of seven officers and 134 men. Initially equipped with four 8 cm Model 5/8 field guns – two of which were later replaced with German anti-tank guns – the battery was assigned as the support unit of the 21st Regiment, 23rd Light Division. The 27/I Battalion (Sepsiszentgyörgy) also dispatched a mortar platoon and an anti-tank gun platoon to one of the battalions of the 18th Regiment, 12th Light Division.¹¹² Finally, individual officers could likewise be reassigned to formations bound for the Eastern Front. For example, Major Sándor Gáll – who by 1944 would rise to become a regimental commander in the 27th Light Division – was transferred to the 13th Infantry Regiment of the 19th Light Division as a battalion commander. First Lieutenant Tibor Kékedi, formerly of the 27/III Battalion, was reassigned to the 17th Regiment of the 9th Light Division.¹¹³ As for the formations to which the men of the 27th Light Division were attached: the 9th Light Division was assigned to III Corps, the 12th Light Division to IV Corps, while the 19th, 20th, and 23rd Light Divisions together formed VII Corps.

¹¹⁰ Cornelius, *Hungary in World War II*, pp 186-187.

¹¹¹ Péter Szabó, *Magyarok a Don-kanyarban. A magyar királyi 2. honvéd hadsereg története (1942-1943)* [Hungarians in the Don bend. The history of the Royal Hungarian Second Honvéd Army] (Budapest, 2019), p. 77.

¹¹² Berekméri, *Lesz még kikelet!*, p. 61.

¹¹³ Székely Nép, 15 September 1942. Berekméri, *Fegyver alatt*, p. 153.

Of the 27th Light Division's units detached from their parent formation and dispatched to the front, the largest was the 27/2 Light Field Artillery Battery, which – owing to the research of Árpád Róbert Berekméri – is also among the best documented. The battery left Marosvásárhely on 27 May 1942 to join the 23rd Light Division, which at that time had not yet set out for the Eastern theatre of war. Before examining its service, however, brief consideration should be given to the circumstances of this initial departure, which was unusually marked by two military ceremonies rather than one. The first ceremony took place on 26 May 1942, when the 27th Infantry Regiment and the 27th Artillery Battalion were presented with their regimental colours. Held in the main square of Marosvásárhely, the event was attended by Hungarian dignitaries, a representative of the German Army, and even a high-ranking Japanese officer, General Wataro Yoshimata. At its opening, the infantry regiment's companies, dressed in full dress uniform, marched onto the square and took up their positions on the side facing the town hall, while the artillery detachment advanced, accompanied by the rumble of gun wheels, to the opposite side.¹¹⁴

The local newspaper *Székely Szó*, reporting on the occasion with some exaggeration, claimed that the splendid horses, gleaming harnesses, and formidable weapons demonstrated the power embodied in the renewed Hungarian army. This was not entirely the case – the 27th Artillery Battalion, for example, was equipped exclusively with horse-drawn guns – but the spectacle was nonetheless impressive, as most military parades are, with soldiers moving in unison and in perfect order. According to the reporter, the city had not witnessed such crowds for a long time, and, even allowing for some exaggeration, attendance must have been considerable.

The actual farewell ceremony for the battery departing for the front took place a day later, again in the main square. On this occasion only the commanding general and the mayor of the town delivered speeches, briefly recalling the interwar period as a time of hardship for ethnic Hungarians but chiefly affirming their conviction that the Szekler soldiers, now restored to freedom, would fulfil the duty expected of them by every son of the homeland. The assembled crowd – in which, as the journalist noted,

¹¹⁴ *Székely Szó*, 27 May 1942.

the town's distinguished ladies were also present – showered the departing soldiers with flowers.¹¹⁵

The 27/2 Light Field Artillery Battery linked up with the 23rd Light Division – to which it was subordinated – in the vicinity of Kassa (Košice), but the entrainment of the formation's units did not commence until 24 June 1942. On 6 July the Szekler gunners arrived at a railhead 10 kilometres from Kursk and, after a 330–340-kilometre march on foot, reached Kolodezhnoe on the 23rd of the month. Their new parent formation took up positions along the Don River on the left flank of VII Corps – the southernmost corps of the Hungarian Second Army – which in the south maintained contact with Italian forces.

During this period, two noteworthy events occurred. First, a detachment that had remained in Kursk to exchange two of the battery's field guns for German anti-tank guns was caught there when a Soviet air raid struck on the night of 8 July 1942; one man was killed and three others were wounded by blast and shrapnel.¹¹⁶

A second incident merits more detailed discussion. On the night of 13 July 1942, the battery was billeted in an as-yet unidentified village. Because the locality was known to be an area of intense partisan activity, strangers in the settlement were rounded up with the help of the village elders and placed under guard. The incident was precipitated when, at some point during the evening, the non-commissioned officer serving as commander of the guard was shot by an unseen assailant. In response to the gunfire, several combat patrols were dispatched to reconnoitre the vicinity. Believing themselves to be under attack from all directions, the troops resorted to indiscriminate fire and employed hand grenades, which in turn ignited the thatched roofs of several houses. Amid the confusion, the detainees reportedly attempted to escape; the sentries opened fire, and several were killed.¹¹⁷ Although the information available on the incident is limited to what has been outlined above, its course nonetheless appears to resemble the pattern identified by John Horne and Alan Kramer in their study of the German army's actions against Belgian and French civilians in 1914. In this pattern, German soldiers entering a locality with a seemingly peaceful population suddenly

¹¹⁵ *Székely Szó*, 27 May 1942. *Székely Szó* – 'Szekler Word' – was the daily newspaper published in Marosvásárhely, while the likewise frequently cited *Székely Nép* – 'Szekler People' – in Sepsiszentgyörgy.

¹¹⁶ Berekméri, *Lesz még kikelet!*, pp 64-65.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

came under fire from unidentified attackers. As the firing was perceived to originate from every house, the villagers were cast as faceless francs-tireurs.¹¹⁸ In the case of the attack on the 27/2 Battery, civilian casualties were limited to the detainees shot while allegedly attempting to escape; yet the resemblance to this pattern is reinforced by the sources' silence regarding hostile casualties, as no extant account records enemy combatants killed in the exchange of fire.

As mentioned earlier, the battery reached the front on 23 July 1942. Upon arrival, it was divided: the anti-tank guns were detached to reinforce the 21/III Battalion, positioned opposite the Soviet bridgehead between Kolovert and Karabut, while the remainder of the battery was assigned to provide fire support for the 32/I Battalion.¹¹⁹ In the broader context, this was the period when Soviet forces launched counterattacks across the Don, establishing dangerous bridgeheads at Uryv, Korotoyak, and Stutye. The fighting between late July and September was largely aimed at eliminating these positions. For VII Corps, the most significant was the Stutye bridgehead, which was successfully contained.¹²⁰ As far as the detachments of the 27/2 Battery were concerned, on 24 July Soviet forces attacked the headquarters of the 32/I Battalion and the 1st Rifle Company at Kolodezhnoe, while at Kolovert they struck the 21/III Battalion. At the latter position, the attackers broke through to the artillery emplacements, and in the ensuing close-quarters combat the gunners of the 27/2 Battery were forced to abandon their guns and fall back. It is not entirely clear whether the two guns were blown up by their crews before being left behind or were later recovered in a counterattack; however, their entire ammunition supply had been lost.¹²¹

According to Berekméri, one of the most dangerous areas in this sector was the marshy riverbank between Kolodezhnoe and Kolovert, situated within the defensive zone of

¹¹⁸ John Horne and Alan Kramer, *German Atrocities, 1914: A History of Denial* (New Haven, 2001), p. 97.

¹¹⁹ Berekméri, *Lesz még kikelet!*, pp 64-65.

¹²⁰ Nigel Thomas and László Szabó, *The Royal Hungarian Army in World War II* (London and New York, 2012), p. 16.

¹²¹ Berekméri, Árpád Róbert. 'A marosvásárhelyi 27. székely könnyűhadosztály története megalakulásától 1944 szeptemberéig' [The History of the 27th Szekler Light Division from Its Formation to September 1944] in *Hadtörténelmi Közlemények*, vol. cxviii, no. 1–2 (2005), pp 152187.

the 23rd Light Division. Here Soviet forces carried out several attacks, mostly intended to harass the Hungarians. Of these, the most serious – probably aimed at establishing a bridgehead – took place on 16 August. After heavy artillery preparation, a Soviet battle group crossed the Don in the Kolodezhnoe area, broke through the defences of the 32/I and 32/III Battalions, and advanced as far as Saguny (the latter village being about ten kilometres west of the former). In the ensuing battle, during which the Soviet attack was ultimately repelled, the 27/2 Battery also took part. The fighting, however, proved particularly costly for the infantry.¹²²

The period from September 1942 to January 1943 is generally described as quiet, with military activity limited mainly to local raids. For the 27/2 Battery this was no different. In September the unit was employed in constructing winter positions behind the front; in October it was withdrawn from the line while its guns underwent repairs; and in November it returned to action, taking up positions some five to six kilometres east of Shirokiy, a rural settlement lying south-east of Saguny. On 4 January 1943 the battery was once more recalled, and the majority of its personnel were transferred to Budyonny for instruction on the 10 cm *Nebelwerfer* 40, a breech-loading mortar capable of firing both smoke and high-explosive fragmentation projectiles. At that time, the support batteries of the Second Army's infantry regiments were scheduled to be re-equipped with these weapons; however, the re-equipment ultimately did not take place owing to the impending Soviet offensive.¹²³

Concerning the general situation on the Eastern Front, in the autumn of 1942 the major Soviet offensives were directed primarily against the Romanian and German forces. The Red Army turned its attention to the Hungarian Second Army only after the launch of Operation *Uranus* in November 1942, which culminated in the encirclement of the German Sixth Army at Stalingrad. On 12 January 1943, the Voronezh Front opened the Ostrogozhsk–Rossosh offensive, breaking through the Hungarian lines at Uryv against IV Corps and, two days later, at Stutye against VII Corps. Fighting under severe winter conditions and with inadequate weapons against mechanised forces, Hungarian resistance proved short-lived. IV and VII Corps withdrew towards the Oskol Valley, while III Corps, cut off from the rest, continued to hold the flank of the

¹²² Berekméri, *Lesz még kikelet!*, p. 67.

¹²³ Attila Bonhardt, 'Tájékoztató Magyarország felszereltségi és katonapolitikai helyzetéről. 1942 december' [Report on Hungary's Equipment and Military-Political Situation, December 1942] in *Hadtörténelmi Közlemények*, vol. cvi, no. 2 (1993), p. 184.

German Second Army. On 24 January the German command finally ordered the withdrawal of the Hungarian forces from the front. The losses suffered by the Hungarian Second Army were staggering: approximately 64 percent of its personnel, 70 percent of its matériel, and virtually all of its heavy weapons were lost. During the retreat, many soldiers perished, as most units – or, in some cases, scattered detachments – were compelled to march vast distances on foot in the depths of the Russian winter.¹²⁴

A similar fate befell the men of the 27/2 Battery, although they were never actually committed to combat during this period. Berekméri describes the route of their withdrawal, and although he does not provide precise distances, these can be approximately reconstructed from his study. The battery's retreat began with a withdrawal from Budyonny to Novy Oskol, a distance of approximately 47–50 kilometres, in order to evade the advancing Soviet forces. From there they continued on to Belgorod, covering an additional 108 kilometres, and on 11 February 1943 they reached Vorozhba, a further 206 kilometres beyond Belgorod, bringing the total distance of their withdrawal to roughly 361–364 kilometres. The battery's remaining equipment was transported onward by rail, while the men themselves continued the march on foot, following roughly the Vorozhba–Konotop–Kyiv route and covering an additional distance of some 330–350 kilometres. From Kyiv, however, the personnel of VII Corps were also transported by rail, in all probability including the men of the 27/2 Battery, who reached Ovruch – their final destination – on 1 April.¹²⁵

In Ovruch, the members of the battery underwent further training for a short period before being dispatched to Hungary in May and, after a brief spell in quarantine, transported home. Upon their arrival in Marosvásárhely on 9 June, a crowd of approximately one thousand people awaited them, and a short official reception also took place: the soldiers were lined up in front of their carts, and during the welcoming address delivered by the head of the reception committee the atmosphere remained ceremonial. Thereafter, however, the proceedings assumed a more informal character. The officers first moved along the ranks, shaking hands with each returning soldier and conversing with them in turn, after which the general public – composed

¹²⁴ Thomas and Szabó, *The Royal Hungarian Army*, pp 17-18. Cornelius, *Hungary in World War II*, pp 222-223. Ungváry, *A magyar honvédség*, p. 195.

¹²⁵ Szabó, *Magyarok a Don-kanyarban*, p. 558.

presumably in large part of relatives – was also permitted access. The formal welcome ceremony took place the following morning at 10:00 in the town's main square, in front of the state flag, with the square decorated with flags and attended by a crowd of six to eight thousand people.¹²⁶ The artillerymen once again took up their positions beside their guns – approximately at the same location from which, a little over a year earlier, on 27 May 1942, they had originally departed. It is highly probable that the cannons of the 27/2 Battery had been lost during the retreat and that those displayed on this occasion had been brought from the barracks in order to create the desired effect.

Among those who addressed the gathering were Major General Miklós Nagyörszy (commander of the 27th Szekler Light Division from 1 February 1943), Mayor Ferenc Májay, and the battery commander, First Lieutenant Dr Zoltán Bárkányi. The speeches largely highlighted the troops' achievements, emphasising their confrontation with one of the world's largest armies under extreme weather conditions. At the same time, they drew on familiar tropes of wartime propaganda, portraying the men as fighting for the homeland and for Christianity, while consistently referring to the Soviet Union as the 'Red Beast. The speakers also employed rhetorical appeals designed to resonate with the sensitivities of the Transylvanian audience: references to the twenty-two years of Romanian rule, the uncertainty of the future, and, above all, the insistence on the necessity of continued struggle in order to preserve the existing status quo. In this vein, the mayor stressed that 'every decent Hungarian now knows that, in this world-shaking upheaval, we must persevere until our last breath and our last cartridge if we wish to preserve life – and indeed a Hungarian life on Hungarian soil.'

While the commander of the light division and the mayor of Marosvásárhely emphasised the sacrifices of the fallen, the wounded, and those returning home, the battery commander's address revolved around three main themes. First, he expressed gratitude to God for bringing them back, remarking that in the hell of combat even the most irreligious man learns to pray. Second, he thanked those at home for the support they had extended while the soldiers were at the front. Third, he stressed that the men had fulfilled their duty on the battlefield to the extent that it was humanly possible, and that this had been facilitated by the cohesion that had developed between officers

¹²⁶ *Székelly Nép*, 11 June 1943.

and enlisted men, as well as between those originating from interwar Hungary and the Szeklers.¹²⁷ Although the speeches contained the conventional tropes of wartime propaganda, they seem to have been carefully crafted to avoid themes that might provoke resentment among the soldiers. The sole exception was the mayor's address, in which he claimed that not a single cannon had been abandoned on the Russian fields. Overall, however, the rhetorical focus rested on sacrifice and steadfastness rather than on constructing a narrative of victory. The reactions of the artillerymen to these speeches remain unknown; however, Reserve Ensign Dr Zoltán Kovács of the 18/III Battalion, who took part in a similar ceremony on the main square of Tolna in southern Hungary, later offered the following recollection: 'The returning heroes were received with solemn ceremony, with speeches and bouquets of flowers. I marched the meagre remnants of the Tolna Battalion past the reviewing stand. We were welcomed as heroes, yet we stood with bowed heads [that is, sadly] before the entire community, young and old alike.'¹²⁸ The testimony of Dr Kovács is of particular significance not only because it provides insight into the state of mind of the artillerymen – whose sentiments may well have been similar – but also because, as noted earlier, the soldiers transferred from the 27/I Battalion to the Don front had fought within his unit, the 18/III Battalion, and had therefore quite literally shared his experiences.

Historians generally agree that the debacle of the Second Army at the Don, together with the German defeat at Stalingrad, in many respects marked a turning point in the course of the war. They also concur that the destruction of the Second Army – one of the worst disasters in modern Hungarian history – not only affected every part of Hungarian society but also had a sobering effect on the country and compelled its leadership to begin seeking a way out of the war.¹²⁹ Péter Szabó, perhaps the best-known researcher of the battles fought at the Don, argues, however, that Hungarian society did not grasp the tragedy in all its gravity. News of the losses did not arrive all at once but in a fragmented manner, while the wounded returning to various localities, together with the delivery of death notices, likewise localised the impact and thereby diminished the perceived scale of the catastrophe. This was perhaps even more true in

¹²⁷ *Székely Szó*, 11 June 1943.

¹²⁸ Szabó, *Magyarok a Don-kanyarban*, p. 563.

¹²⁹ See Cornelius, *Hungary in World War II*, p. 225.

the case of the Szekler region, where the situation in certain respects resembled that in other parts of Hungary. At the time of the declaration of war on the Soviet Union, there appears to have been a measure of wartime enthusiasm. By 1943, however, this had changed, as recalled by Árpád Kiss, who was conscripted that year: 'By 1943 patriotism had already waned, especially in those places from which someone had already been sent to the front and where it was not even known whether he was alive or dead.'¹³⁰ Because of the relatively small number of men sent to the front, the war does not appear to have affected the local community directly – or at least not profoundly. The 24 November 1942 issue of *Székely Nép*, for instance, reported that in Sepsiszentgyörgy a memorial plaque was unveiled in the courtyard of the 27/I Battalion's barracks to commemorate five or six fallen heroes of the war (the journalist literally presented the number of names on the plaque in this way). The event took place just a few weeks before the Soviet offensive and the destruction of the Hungarian Second Army, at a time when the number of fallen was still relatively low, and attendance at the unveiling was so sparse that the garrison commander – in a somewhat bitter tone – remarked upon the townspeople's indifference in his address.¹³¹ Surviving sources likewise suggest that in 1943 no ceremony was held in Sepsiszentgyörgy to mark the return of units that had been sent to the front.

It seems likely, however, that the defeat on the Don did not result in particularly heavy casualties among Szekler soldiers. Estimating these losses is further complicated by the fact that the exact number of men from the Szekler region who participated in the operations there is unknown. In addition to the units already mentioned from Marosvásárhely and Sepsiszentgyörgy, contemporary newspapers also refer in this connection to other Szekler towns: Csíkszereda, for example, appears to have contributed an ammunition transport unit, whose reception upon its return was reported in the 19 May 1943 issue of *Székely Nép*.¹³² Men were likewise dispatched from Gyergyószentmiklós; although the relevant article does not specify the number of conscripts, it records that forty-two young volunteers from the town also served at the front.¹³³

¹³⁰ Magyarosi (ed.), 'A határőr', p. 88.

¹³¹ *Székely Nép*, 24 November 1942.

¹³² *Székely Nép*, 19 May 1943.

¹³³ *Székely Nép*, 29 September 1943.

The fragmentary nature of the available data – which certainly does not account for all the fallen – is illustrated by the following figures. According to information provided by Árpád Róbert Berekméri, the 27/2 Battery suffered eight wounded, four killed, and one missing.¹³⁴ For Sepsiszentgyörgy, only the figures announced at the dedication of a memorial plaque are known (namely four or five fallen soldiers), while in Gyergyószentmiklós the names of four fallen and one missing were inscribed on a memorial inaugurated on 28 September 1943.¹³⁵ It may reasonably be inferred that these figures – at least in the case of Sepsiszentgyörgy or Marosvásárhely – were somewhat higher, although even so they were not very significant. As the commander of the 27/2 Battery remarked upon the unit's return, God had spared them from heavier losses, while the mayor of Marosvásárhely likewise stressed at the same ceremony that the people of the Szekler region – perhaps for the first time in their history – had been required to make fewer sacrifices of blood than the inhabitants of other parts of the country.¹³⁶

Finally, one further question remains to be addressed: whether news of the defeat and the accounts of returning soldiers had any impact on those performing military service at home. Ensign Ferenc Varga of the 33rd Border Guard Battalion wrote in his diary on 23 January 1943 that they had learned in the barracks that the Hungarian army fighting on the Don was in a difficult situation and that its guns – including some 305 mm mortars – had been lost, probably captured by the Russians.¹³⁷ To what extent the officers serving in units stationed at home were aware of the course of events remains unclear; as for the enlisted men, the available information is limited to what has already been mentioned: neither newspapers nor radios were permitted during service. Regarding the returning soldiers, it is known that the 27/2 Battery was disbanded, and it is likely that the same occurred with other units that had seen action at the front. This entailed the demobilisation of the majority of both officers and enlisted men, with the exception of the career officers. Some of the latter returned to their former commands: to mention but a few, Captain Ferenc Cserei became commanding officer of the machine-gun company at Sepsiszentgyörgy, Lieutenant Colonel Sándor Gáll took charge of the 27/III Battalion in Marosvásárhely, and First Lieutenant Tibor

¹³⁴ Berekméri, *Lesz még kikelet!*, p. 74.

¹³⁵ *Székely Nép*, 29 September 1943.

¹³⁶ *Székely Szó*, 11 June 1943.

¹³⁷ Varga, *Besztercei hegyitüzek*, p. 63.

Kékedi likewise assumed command of one of the infantry companies there.¹³⁸ Even if they recounted their experiences at the front – although very few sources attest to such cases – these narratives are unlikely to have reached a broader audience. On this basis, it may reasonably be inferred that the defeat suffered along the Don exerted a comparatively limited impact on the soldiers of the Szekler region, considerably less than might otherwise have been expected given the magnitude of the event.

4. The German Occupation and the Deployment of the 27th Light Division

The German occupation of Hungary took place on 19 March 1944. Scholarly interpretations have emphasised a variety of factors that led to this decision. Among the most frequently cited are Prime Minister Miklós Kállay's initiation of peace negotiations with the Western Allies, Regent Miklós Horthy's insistence on the release and repatriation of Hungarian troops serving in occupation duties on the Eastern Front, Hungary's unwillingness to consent to the deportation of its Jewish population, and the fact that in the early months of 1944 the Red Army had advanced to a threatening proximity to Hungary's borders. Although each of the factors listed above influenced the development of German–Hungarian relations, it is important to note that plans for the occupation had already begun to be formulated following Italy's defection in the autumn of 1943, and were implemented largely as a result of the situation on the Eastern Front – namely, the Soviet advances that brought enemy forces close to Hungary's borders. As military historian Krisztián Ungváry contends, the 'Jewish question' played no role whatsoever in the decision-making process; nonetheless, the subsequent developments ultimately had catastrophic consequences for Hungary's Jewish population.¹³⁹

The original German plan divided Hungary into three principal operational zones and, in addition to German formations, envisaged the participation of Slovak and Romanian troops – the former advancing from the northeast and the latter from the east, namely from Northern Transylvania. The German command did not anticipate significant resistance and therefore considered the isolation of Hungarian units in their barracks and their temporary disarmament to be sufficient. Ultimately, however, the inclusion

¹³⁸ For the biographies of the officers mentioned, see Berekméri, *Fegyver alatt*.

¹³⁹ Ungváry, *A magyar honvédség*, pp 229-230.

of Slovak and Romanian forces was abandoned, and the occupation was confined to the western part of the country, extending as far as the line of the Tisza River – a region that did not encompass Northern Transylvania.

Another component of the plan rested on the intention to neutralise key figures within the Hungarian leadership. Accordingly, on 15 March 1944 Hitler invited Regent Miklós Horthy – accompanied by Foreign Minister Jenő Ghyczy, Minister of Defence Lajos Csátay, and General Ferenc Szombathelyi, Chief of the General Staff – to Klessheim under the pretext of discussing the future of the Hungarian troops stationed on the Eastern Front. Their return was deliberately delayed until the occupation was already underway – despite the fact that Horthy had ultimately been persuaded to accept it. During the night of 18–19 March, General Szombathelyi issued an order prohibiting the units of the Royal Hungarian Army from offering resistance to the advancing German forces.¹⁴⁰

In connection with the German occupation, the situation of the Transylvanian IX Corps and its subordinate Szekler Border Guard Forces developed in a rather peculiar manner, as Lieutenant General Lajos Veress, the corps commander, unilaterally ordered the mobilisation of his corps. As military historian József Nagy observes, there exists an account according to which Major General István Kozma was the first to order the mobilisation of the Szekler Border Guard Forces under his command and to close the border with Romania immediately upon learning of the German occupation – an action that was subsequently endorsed by Lieutenant General Veress. (Kozma was mentioned earlier in connection with his refusal to deliver a speech at the dedication ceremony of the state flag in Sepsiszentgyörgy.) However, the official order concerning IX Corps was finally issued on 21 March 1944, stipulating that the corps was to be mobilised from midnight on 23 March. In effect, the Budapest military command thereby sanctioned Veress's earlier decision. The subsequent official explanation attributed the mobilisation to Romania's uncertain attitude toward Hungary – an argument intended to obscure its original purpose. This justification was

¹⁴⁰ Norbert Számvéber, 'Magyarország német megszállása és szovjet elfoglalása' [The German and Soviet Occupation of Hungary] in Miklós Horváth (ed.), *Magyarország hadtörténete iv: 1919-től napjainkig* [The Military History of Hungary, iv: From 1919 to the Present] (Budapest, 2018), pp 148-150.

ultimately accepted by the German authorities, particularly as it coincided with their intention to deploy additional Hungarian forces to the Eastern Front.¹⁴¹

The opinions of the various formation commanders within the corps, however, were not uniform on the matter. Around 25 March 1944, Major General István Kozma expressed reservations concerning the position adopted by the Hungarian government following the occupation. He also wondered whether it might have been better to oppose the Germans, reasoning that under such circumstances Hungary might still have concluded the war on the side of the victors, even if the Germans had suppressed the opposition. At the same time, he expressed concern that, in the event of an armed confrontation, Romania might have attacked Northern Transylvania, and that any erroneous decision could have brought about the end of his military career. Staff Colonel András Zákó, commander of the 27th Szekler Light Division, on the other hand, maintained that it would have been a mistake for Hungary to align itself with the Western Allies.¹⁴²

With regard to the lower-ranking officers and ordinary soldiers – as well as the local press and administrative authorities – the prevailing atmosphere was one of uncertainty. István Földi, himself a reserve officer and a frequent contributor to *Székely Nép* at the time, recalled having seen a fully equipped Hungarian Army platoon in Kézdivásárhely on 20 March 1944, a sight so unusual under the circumstances that it immediately drew his attention. Nevertheless, neither the radio broadcasts nor the editorial staff of *Székely Nép* in Sepsiszentgyörgy, where he went later that day, were able to provide him with any reliable information. It was only around ten o'clock in the evening, during an unusually late telephone briefing on the day's dispatches from MTI, the Hungarian News Agency, that a Budapest employee made a passing remark from which it could be inferred that German forces had entered the Hungarian capital. According to Földi's recollections, no one at the headquarters of the 27/I Battalion could be reached that day. The rapid pace at which events

¹⁴¹ Nagy, *Békeévek*, pp 195-196.

¹⁴² Nagy, *Békeévek*, p. 197.

unfolded is further illustrated by the fact that the following morning Földi himself received his call-up order, instructing him to report for duty with his unit.¹⁴³

Ferenc Bereczki, who at the time was serving with the 27/III Battalion in Marosvásárhely, recalled the events in his memoirs as follows:

Soon came 18 March 1944. It was a Sunday, and I was home on leave again. On Monday morning, 19 March, when I arrived at the railway station in Szászrégen, I saw that the police were armed with rifles. Officers were accompanied by armed soldiers as well. The same scene awaited me at the railway station in Marosvásárhely. In the barracks offices there were piles of straw mattresses on which the officers were sleeping. I thought there must be a state of emergency; the companies were standing by, ready to march at a moment's notice.¹⁴⁴

Although Bereczki is mistaken with regard to the exact date – in 1944, 19 March in fact fell on a Sunday, indicating that he must have rejoined his unit on Monday, 20 March – his recollection nevertheless captures with remarkable vividness the atmosphere surrounding the initial measures implemented by the command of the IX Corps. According to his account, for a day or two there was widespread uncertainty, as everyone could do little more than speculate about the course of events, until it eventually became known that German forces had invaded Hungary and occupied Budapest.¹⁴⁵ Imre Erdélyi – who served in the same battalion as Bereczki – described the news of the German occupation as a horrifying reality. In his memoirs, he writes that for several days the soldiers did not know what would happen – although it could already be surmised that the arrival of the Germans meant that they would be deployed to the Eastern Front.¹⁴⁶ On 22 March 1944, the 27th Szekler Light Division received its mobilisation orders – this time issued from Budapest and, indeed, for deployment to that theatre of war – although the soldiers were not yet informed of the exact location to which they would be sent. A sense of the broader situation is conveyed by a piece published in *Székely Közélet*, the weekly newspaper of Székelyudvarhely, on 6 May 1944, which reviewed the events following the German occupation. Among the changes highlighted in the article were the resignation of the Kállay government and the formation of a new administration under Prime Minister Döme Sztójay, as well as

¹⁴³ István Földi, *Székelynek születtem. Földi István visszaemlékezései* [I Was Born a Szekler: The Memoirs of István Földi] (Kézdivásárhely, 2014), pp 272-274.

¹⁴⁴ Bereczki, 'Honvéd voltam', p. 29.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Erdélyi, *Megnőttek a hegyek*, p. 53.

the introduction of a series of decrees, many of them directed against the Jewish population.¹⁴⁷

But let us return to the 27th Light Division. On 22 March, the call-up and equipping of reservists began, and alongside the existing 27th Infantry Regiment the 57th Infantry Regiment was established. In short, all the preparatory measures were set in motion that preceded the transfer of the formation to its assembly area within Hungary and, subsequently, its deployment to the front. It is likely that the responsibilities arising from these events largely preoccupied the men, and only a handful of surviving accounts shed light on their feelings concerning their impending departure for the front. Several officers of the Hungarian First Army, however, later reflected on this experience – individuals who served for varying periods in the same or adjacent sectors as the 27th Light Division on the Eastern Front. The testimony of First Lieutenant Elemér Damó suggests that, for him as an officer, the intention of going to the front stemmed from a voluntary yet socially compelled sense of duty intertwined with professional pride:

I was trying to get to the front myself, since by then most of my former classmates had already gained some frontline experience. It was also a matter of vanity for me. How could one call himself a professional soldier if he had never smelled gunpowder? I was just sitting at home while some of my classmates had already died with honour on the battlefield. It was not that I sought a heroic death, but how could I have trained recruits without having experienced combat myself?¹⁴⁸

Captain László Kékkői, serving with the 25th Infantry Division, also addressed this issue in considerable detail. In his account – in contrast to Damó's – he relates that he found himself wondering whether he would prove equal to the expectations placed upon him. Yet in his case, too, personal anxieties were intertwined with a pronounced sense of duty and professional commitment:

I am trying to observe myself. Do I feel enthusiastic? Do I crave laurels? Am I repelled? I discover none of these in myself. Rather, I feel curious – though this curiosity has already been dulled by the instinct for self-preservation that is gradually creeping in. I have heard and read much about the front. I have trained thousands of men to fight. I have prepared myself for it as well. What will this greatest test of strength look like? Will

¹⁴⁷ *Székelty Közélet*, 6 May 1944.

¹⁴⁸ Damó, *Névtelen katonák*, p. 9.

I be able to master my nerves? Will I hold my own as a commander? Will I be able to put into practice the principles I taught in peacetime? My curiosity is growing. If I were free to choose now, I would still go to the front. For me, as a professional officer, this is far more a matter of duty than it is for the reservists. I do not wish to shirk my duty – even if it should mean meeting my fate.¹⁴⁹

It seems, however, that not only professional officers were willing to go to war, but some reserve officers as well. Reserve Ensign Géza Basa (27th Reconnaissance Battalion) wrote in his diary on 19 April 1944: ‘Galicia is now unavoidable. We are setting out to defend our homeland, light-hearted and in good spirits.’¹⁵⁰ A more revealing account in this respect comes from Ensign Ferenc Harmath, one of the platoon commanders of the 57/III Battalion of the 27th Light Division. For a certain period of the war, beginning roughly with the mobilisation of the light division, Harmath kept a diary, which he wrote during rest periods, while recovering in military hospitals, and later while on sick leave. In it, he recorded the following: ‘After two and a half years of military service, which I have carried out conscientiously, it seems that the dream will come true: we are going to war.’¹⁵¹ At a later stage in his life, Harmath undertook to write his memoirs, which also briefly addressed his wartime experiences. In the course of writing them, he drew on the previously mentioned diary, not verbatim but primarily as a source. In the published version, the section dealing with the war years is introduced in an almost apologetic tone: ‘Before I begin, let me remark that at the time I was still young and enthusiastic’.¹⁵² This is particularly noteworthy, as the sentence in which he described the prospect of going to war as the fulfilment of a dream – the very one for which he offered an implicit apology in the passage quoted above – appears only in the diary and was never included in the book.

There is, however, a cadet warrant officer who in retrospect claimed to have questioned the necessity of the war, specifically in relation to the mobilisation of the 27th Light Division and its subsequent deployment to the front. József Gocz, who served with the 27th Artillery Regiment, elaborated in an account published in 2001 on the views he had held at the time. He claims to have believed that, by disregarding the advice of his senior military commanders, Hitler led the German army into a hopeless war against the Soviet Union and subsequently drew the Hungarians into it

¹⁴⁹ Kékkői, *Tűzözön*, p. 12.

¹⁵⁰ Géza Basa, ‘Napló 1944. márc. 26-tól’.

¹⁵¹ Harmath, ‘Diary’.

¹⁵² Harmath, *Az emlékek megszólalnak*, p. 37.

merely to make up the numbers, thereby rendering the deployment of the Light Division entirely pointless.¹⁵³ Given the date of publication of the account, it may well reflect a retrospective assessment rather than Gocz's contemporaneous views at the time of mobilisation.

Not all individuals, however, reacted in the same way to the prospect of deployment to the front; older men with dependants, in particular, tended to view it differently from their younger, unmarried counterparts. In his memoir, Imre Erdélyi (57/III Battalion) recounts an episode that took place sometime before his unit was shipped out. He writes that a first lieutenant delivered a speech on patriotism, enthusiasm, self-sacrifice, and similar virtues and, at one point, remarked that where they were going, they would not only be the ones doing the shooting but also the ones being shot at. The message of the speech unsettled Erdélyi; yet, seeing the complete absence of enthusiasm among the reservists, he kept his own anxieties to himself.¹⁵⁴ József Kiss (57/II Battalion) found himself in a similar situation when his unit was about to board the train at Benedekháza, where they had previously undergone training intended to strengthen cohesion and enhance cooperation. He later recalled the scene as follows: 'When I looked around the station, I saw my men in tears. At first, I couldn't understand why they were so heartbroken. But they were all fathers – men with wives and children – leaving their families behind. I was the only one who wasn't married.'¹⁵⁵

Drinking constituted another characteristic element of departure. In rural Szekler communities – and in Hungarian rural society more generally – clearly defined rituals were associated with military service. As there was typically an interval of several months between conscription and enlistment, young men wore ribbons in their hats as a mark of distinction, and prior to their departure a farewell dance was held in their honour, during which alcohol was consumed in considerable quantities. On occasion, they arrived at the barracks in groups, singing traditional folk songs associated with military life.¹⁵⁶ The situation appears to have been much the same when departing for

¹⁵³ Gocz, 'Magas észak nyírfájától', pp 110-111.

¹⁵⁴ Erdélyi, *Megnőttek a hegyek*, p. 54.

¹⁵⁵ Interview with József Kiss (Audio recording in the possession of Árpád Róbert Berekméri, Mureș County, Romania).

¹⁵⁶ Young men who had already been conscripted but had not yet been mobilised or reported to their units – effectively soldiers awaiting active service – were referred to in contemporary Hungarian as

the front. Mihály Ferencz of the 57/I Battalion from Sepsiszentgyörgy reported that the soldiers drank and sang at the station, while Lajos Fekete, who likewise departed from Sepsiszentgyörgy but served with the 27th Infantry Regiment, recalled that some were despondent while others were cheerful – yet in this instance as well a considerable amount of alcohol was consumed.¹⁵⁷

Conclusion

In conclusion, it may be stated that the occupation itself and the mobilisation of the 27th Light Division for departure to the front occurred in rapid succession – particularly when one considers that IX Corps had already initiated mobilisation on 20 March upon receiving news of the occupation, and that by 22 March an order from the Hungarian military command regarding deployment to the front had reached a formation already held in readiness. The soldiers' relatively ready acceptance of the situation was also facilitated by the fact that Horthy remained in office following the occupation, which the official communiqué issued on 22 March concerning the formation of the Sztójay government described as the result of mutual agreement. Dávid Turbucz argues that, as a result, the cult surrounding Horthy likewise endured and that the Germans sought to exploit it in order to legitimise both the occupation and the demands associated with it.¹⁵⁸

Beginning on 9 April 1944, the units of the 27th Light Division began leaving their peacetime garrisons, departing for the designated assembly area in preparation for deployment to the front. Interestingly, the customary farewell ceremony was not organised in any of the three cities – Sepsiszentgyörgy, Székelyudvarhely, or Marosvásárhely – where the battalions had been stationed, although a battery departing for the Don Front had received such a send-off in 1942. The fact that no such ceremony was held did not go unnoticed by the soldiers themselves: Ferenc Bereczki remarked that they had been almost slipped out of their garrisons.¹⁵⁹ It is likely that

regruta. See Edit Fél, 'Regruta' in Gyula Ortutay, *Magyar Néprajzi Lexikon*. Negyedik kötet. N–Szé [Hungarian Ethnographic Encyclopaedia, iv: N–Szé] (Budapest, 1981), p. 332.

¹⁵⁷ Ferencz, 'Fogalmunk sem volt', p. 174. Fekete, *Dalból van a lelkem*, p. 32.

¹⁵⁸ Turbucz, *A Horthy-kultusz*, p. 287.

¹⁵⁹ Berekméri, *Lesz még kikelet!*, p. 98. The only place where any form of parade was held was Székelyudvarhely; however, according to contemporary descriptions, it did not, strictly speaking, conform to the usual pattern of a farewell ceremony.

neither the newly installed government nor the German authorities present in Hungary wished to assume the risk of organising a public gathering in the atmosphere that had developed – or that they believed had developed – following the occupation. This decision may also have been influenced by the fact that, in early 1944, one of the central themes of official propaganda was the assertion that one of Horthy's and the Hungarian leadership's principal achievements in 1943 had been the successful repatriation of combat units from the front. *Székel Nép*, published in Sepsiszentgyörgy, likewise did not report on the departure of the local units. The issue of 16 April 1944 was the first to make any reference to the mobilisation, as it printed Miklós Horthy's order of the day, addressed to the First Army and issued the previous day. In contrast to earlier wartime propaganda, the order emphasised that the war had entered a decisive phase – above all from the perspective of Hungary's fate – and articulated a new wartime objective: the direct defence of the country. It also drew on First World War precedents, highlighting both the bravery of Hungarian units in Galicia and the trope of German–Hungarian comradeship-in-arms.¹⁶⁰ On the same day, officers of the 27th Light Division were instructed to make it clear to their men that the enemy had to be stopped in the foothills of the Carpathians – that is, on Galician territory beyond the border – because defending along the frontier running over the mountain ridge would mean that even the smallest breach could have serious consequences.¹⁶¹

Finally, it is instructive to consider how Tibor Dáné, a reserve officer in the 25th Infantry Division, regarded the occupation of Hungary, the mobilisation of Northern Transylvanian units, and the trust placed in Horthy, as recorded in his memoir. Dáné's view is of particular significance given that two of his division's three regiments – like those of the 27th Light Division – were likewise composed of soldiers from Northern Transylvania. First, he emphasises the importance of the military oath in explaining why soldiers accepted the fact of the occupation so readily: 'Since Horthy remained in place, the military oath that all soldiers had sworn to him also remained in effect. Anyone who has served in the army and can think like a soldier knows the importance

¹⁶⁰ *Székel Nép*, 16 April 1944.

¹⁶¹ Ocsosvsky, 'Katonanaplóm', p. 6.

of what I am talking about.¹⁶² Second, he notes that the reservists called up to the formation genuinely believed that, since Hungary had not sent any combat units to the front since the battle of the Don, they too would soon be allowed to return home.¹⁶³ Third, Dáné claims that soldiers of leftist political orientation – including himself – shared an essentially similar conviction. As he writes: ‘They too believed, as did we all, that only through military discipline and under the leadership of Miklós Horthy could we escape from the war, which by 1944 the Germans had already clearly lost. The vast majority of soldiers, regardless of rank, considered – indeed believed – the Regent of the country to be braver and more capable than he actually was.’¹⁶⁴ The quotation, on the one hand, vividly illustrates the mobilising power of the Horthy cult – all the more striking given that such convictions could persist even among soldiers of leftist political orientation, despite the regime’s sustained anti-Bolshevik propaganda. On the other hand, it implies the existence of an implicit minimal war aim, shaped in part by a sense of duty, in part by the leader cult, and in part by wartime propaganda: participation in the war was perceived as necessary – partly for the defence of the country as well – but only until the regent, as the messages of the cult had so often suggested, would lead the country out of what was seen as just another in a series of cataclysms that he had already overcome.

¹⁶² Dáné, *A Tatárhágó előtere*, p. 11.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

Chapter III: The Battle for Kutý, Pistyn, and Kosów

The 27th Light Division joined the Hungarian First Army's offensive on 17 April 1944 immediately after arriving at the front. This chapter examines the formation's role in the operation in question and begins with an overview of developments on the Eastern Front that led to the Hungarian Occupation Forces being employed in combat roles, the German occupation of Hungary, and ultimately the commitment of the Hungarian First Army to front-line operations. The main focus, however, is a town-by-town analysis of the fighting for Kutý, Kosów, and Pistyn, based on a wide range of sources, although the evidence is, at best, fragmentary. Particular attention is devoted to the problems associated with the employment of inexperienced troops, especially manifestations of panic, their underlying causes, and the disciplinary measures imposed in response. Finally, the chapter considers the differing perspectives of the Hungarian and German commands regarding the conduct of operations and assesses how these shaped both operational outcomes and the experiences of the soldiers involved.

For the ordinary soldier, John Keegan observed, battle is a very small-scale experience.¹ The events are examined from the perspective of those directly involved partly for this reason, and also because such small-scale events are often overlooked in larger operational or strategic narratives, even though in many respects they have implications well beyond the level of the individual participants.

1. The April 1944 Offensive of the Hungarian First Army

On 24 December 1943, the Red Army launched the Dnieper–Carpathian Strategic Offensive, also known as the Right-Bank Dnieper campaign, one of the longest and most intensive operations of the Second World War. Between January and March 1944, Army Groups South and North Ukraine suffered a series of severe operational defeats. By March, through a gap of approximately 200 kilometres that had opened between

¹ Keegan, John. *The Face of Battle* (London, 2004), p. 48.

the German First Panzer Army and the Eighth Army, Soviet armoured spearheads advanced to within 100–150 kilometres of the Carpathians.²

The Soviet offensive prompted the Hungarian military leadership to assess its implications for Hungary. In a report dated 10 January 1944, Staff Colonel Lajos Nádas, head of the Operations Division, predicted that the Red Army would reach Hungary within three months and anticipated a Romanian defection. Nevertheless, he maintained that Soviet strategic priorities lay in the Balkans and Berlin rather than in the Carpathian Basin, and that Hungary was likely to confront only secondary Soviet forces. His assessment rested on the assumption that the Soviets would avoid major operations in the Carpathians, where mechanised forces would be less effective, but it failed to take into account the fact that the Southern Carpathians lay within Romanian territory and could only be secured through an offensive in Transylvania – an operation for which the Hungarian army lacked sufficient troops.³

Another consequence of the offensive was that the Hungarian military leadership, together with Miklós Horthy, repeatedly sought in January and February 1944 to secure the redeployment of the Hungarian Occupation Forces to Hungary, but Hitler refused to accept the possibility that the Red Army would advance as far as the Carpathians.⁴ Despite the German response, from 6 January the Hungarians began to place certain formations of the First Army on a war footing, partially mobilizing them. As these formations were to be supplied through Hungary's internal transport infrastructure, most units did not mobilize their divisional trains and were therefore ill-suited for mobile operations.⁵

The success of the Soviet winter offensive during the first three months of 1944, German intelligence reports that the Hungarian government had established contacts with the Allies, and Hungarian efforts to withdraw their forces from the Eastern theatre of war ultimately prompted the German political and military leadership to decide upon the occupation of Hungary, which took place on 19 March 1944. As one consequence of the occupation, the Hungarian First Army was placed under German

² Berekméri, *Lesz még kikelet!*, p. 83.

³ Szabó and Számvéber, *A keleti hadszíntér és Magyarország 1943–1945*, pp 53–54. See also: Ungváry, *A magyar honvédség*, pp 250–251.

⁴ Cornelius, *Hungary in World War II*, p. 269.

⁵ Lakatos, *Ahogy én láttam*, p. 78.

command on 23 March 1944 and tasked with closing the front between the First Panzer Army and the Eighth Army.⁶

The Soviet offensive, however, did not spare those Hungarian forces that had previously been confined to occupation duties. From 9 January 1944, the four light divisions of the Hungarian VII Army Corps (formerly Occupation Group West) were tasked with holding an approximately 110-kilometre sector along the Dniester. However, after only two days of fighting, Red Army units crossed the river on 24 March, and, following attacks on 26 and 27 March, Soviet troops captured Kolomea, forcing the remnants of the Hungarian formations to withdraw to Mikuliczyn. On 29 March, at Horodenka near Obertyn, the 21st Light Division likewise suffered a heavy defeat.⁷

On 2 April 1944, Hitler issued a directive outlining the fundamental principles for conducting operations in the East, in which he ordered that a front be established along the Kolomea–Tarnopol–Brody–Kovel line and that the mountain passes of the Carpathians also be secured.⁸ As far as the Hungarian contribution was concerned, the Germans initially requested only a force consisting of an armoured division, two infantry divisions, and two mountain brigades. However, on 5 April, two additional formations were mobilized – the 25th Infantry Division and the 27th Light Division – and, a few days later, the occupation forces of the VII Corps were also assigned to the First Army (with the exception of the 21st Light Division). The newly mobilized forces, placed under the command of the Hungarian VI Corps and the German XI Corps, numbered approximately 168,590 troops, while the VII Corps comprised some 30,000 men.⁹

The offensive of the Hungarian First Army – despite repeated postponements caused by difficulties in mobilisation and deployment to the theatre of operations – ultimately

⁶ Krisztián Ungváry, 'The Hungarian Theatre of War', p. 854.

⁷ Ungváry, *A magyar honvédség*, p. 257. Szabó and Számvéber, *A keleti hadszíntér és Magyarország 1943–1945*, p. 54. See also: István Ravasz, *Magyarország és a Magyar Királyi Honvédség a XX. századi világháborúban 1914–1945* [Hungary and the Royal Hungarian Army in the World Wars of the 20th Century, 1914–1945] (Nagykovácsi, 2003).

⁸ Schönherr, 'The Battles for Galicia', p. 676.

⁹ Magyarosi, 'The 27th Szekler Light Division', p. 12.

commenced on 17 April 1944, even though some formations intended to participate in the operation had still not reached their assigned positions. The centre of the attacking force consisted of Hungarian units subordinated to the German XI Army Corps, while the Hungarian VII and VI Corps covered the northern and southern flanks, respectively. To the north of the Hungarian First Army, the German XLVI Panzer Corps also participated in the offensive.

The XI Corps, however, had at its disposal only the Hungarian 2nd Panzer Division and two reinforced battalions of the 2nd Mountain Brigade. From the area of Solotwina, these units launched their attack with the primary objective of capturing Nadwórna, Delatyn, and Kolomea. The bulk of the 2nd Mountain Brigade, together with the 1st Mountain Brigade and the 24th Infantry Division – the latter still en route – were to join the offensive at a later stage.

Positioned on the left flank, with its jumping-off points at Stanislaw and Bohorodczany, the VII Corps (comprising the 18th Light Division and the 16th Infantry Division) was tasked with capturing the towns of Ottynia and Obertyn. On the right flank, the 25th Infantry Division and the 27th Szekler Light Division, subordinated to the VI Corps, were ordered to capture the towns of Kutu, Pistyn, Kosów, and Luczky, all situated south of Kolomea in the Carpathian foothills, some 80–100 km from the Hungarian border. Gaining control of the towns in question was crucial for several reasons: primarily, to block access to the passes leading to Hungary; and secondarily, to force the Soviets to divert as many troops as possible from the Kolomea sector. Another important consideration was the road running through these towns: without securing it, communication between Hungarian forces would have been possible only through the mountainous terrain. However, the units assigned to the VI Corps were not fully available at the outset of the operation: elements of the 27th Light Division only began to arrive in Galicia on 21 April, while the 25th Infantry Division was not mobilized until 22 April.¹⁰

As the Hungarians initially faced only weaker Soviet forces, the offensive began relatively well.¹¹ The VII Corps, attacking on the left flank, captured the areas to the

¹⁰ Lakatos, *Ahogy én láttam*, p. 78.

¹¹ László Székely, 'Az ún. 1. magyar hadsereg hadművelete a Kárpátok előterében 1944. március végétől október 15-ig' [The Operations of the Hungarian First Army in the Foothills of the Carpathians from Late March 1944 to October 15]. (Hungarian Military History Archives, Budapest, TGy 3297).

west and south of Tlumacz on the first day and shortly thereafter established a bridgehead on the left bank of the Dniester, linking up with units of the German First Panzer Army that had taken the town. On 20 April, the corps' forces succeeded in capturing Ottynia, and on 22 April they took the settlement of Chlebiczyn Leśny, located approximately 22 kilometres north-west of Kolomea.

The formations that comprised the centre of the attacking force – the 2nd Armoured Division, organized into two combat groups, and the 1st and 2nd Mountain Brigades, tasked with capturing Kolomea – were considerably less successful. During the fighting between 19 and 23 April, Hungarian units encountered the 6th Guards Mechanized Corps of the 4th Tank Army, as well as elements of the 18th Combined Arms Army. In certain sectors, these Soviet units, relying on fortified defensive positions and supported by tanks, not only outnumbered the attackers but also broke through at the junction of the German XI and Hungarian VII Corps on 24 April, albeit only temporarily. Ultimately, the attempts to capture the area of Kolomea and the northern bank of the Prut River proved unsuccessful.

The forces comprising the VI Corps were the last to reach the operational area: by the evening of 21 April, only two battalions of the 27th Light Division and one artillery battery had arrived at their designated railheads in Galicia, and the units still had to march a further 86–90 kilometres to reach their assigned sector of operations. On 22 April, the formation was nevertheless ordered to secure the valley of the Charny Czeremosz River by capturing the towns of Kutý, Kosów, and Pistyn, and to advance elements of its force towards Serghie, located in Bukovina near the town of Putila, while its southernmost group was to establish contact with the northern flank of the German LXXVIII Corps.¹² In accordance with these orders, the 57th Regiment launched an attack on Kutý on 28 April, while the 27th Regiment, having entered Kosów and Pistyn without encountering significant resistance, made contact with Soviet forces on 29 April at Mikietynce. For the Szekler troops, these engagements marked the beginning of combat operations.

¹² See Magyarosi, 'The 27th Szekler Light Division', p. 16.

2. The Battle of Kutý

The first Hungarian forces to reach Kutý were not units of the 27th Light Division but elements of the 2nd Mountain Brigade, specifically a mountain rifle battalion temporarily stationed at Zabie and the men of the 2nd Independent Szekler Mountain Hussar Company. The latter conducted reconnaissance of the town on 20 April and – after its scouts had observed Soviet troops on both sides of a bridge over the Czeremosz – launched an attack to assess the enemy’s strength. According to József Rácz, who took part in the action, it was established that Kutý was defended by a force of approximately battalion strength; the Soviet troops with whom the Hungarians exchanged fire – probably on the outskirts of the town – fought from well-camouflaged individual rifle pits. Regarding the reconnaissance conducted by the mountain rifle battalion, the sources provide no information.¹³ What is certain, however, is that both the mountain riflemen and the hussars withdrew from the town, although, according to Árpád Róbert Berekméri, they should have secured the area, as it had been designated as a concentration zone for the 27th Light Division. Two explanations are usually offered for their withdrawal: one attributes it to poor communications and a resulting misunderstanding, while the other suggests that partisans interfered with the Hungarian communications system and transmitted false orders to the units in question.¹⁴

The reconnaissance patrols of the 27th Light Division reached the vicinity of the town about four days later, on April 24. The following day, however, the entire reconnaissance battalion entered Tudiów, a settlement located only 5 kilometres from Kutý, and on the 26th, the 57th Infantry Regiment also arrived. The attack was scheduled for the 28th and was to be carried out by the 57/I and 57/III Battalions, with artillery support provided by the batteries of 27/I Light Artillery Battalion. The bicycle company of the reconnaissance battalion was designated as a mobile reserve and

¹³ See the published version of the interview conducted by József Nagy with József Rácz: József Nagy, “‘A szegény huszárnak szomorú a sorsa’” [‘The Poor Hussar’s Fate Is a Sad One’] in *Székegyföld*, vol. xvii, no. 8 (2013), pp 136-137. Walter Sónyi, ‘A M. Kir. 2. Székely Hegyi Huszárszázad története. 1944. márc. 26.– okt. 8.’ [The History of the Royal Hungarian 2nd Szekler Mountain Hussar Company 26 March 1944–8 October] (Hungarian Military History Archives, TGy 3385)

¹⁴ Farkas, *Tatárhágó visszanéz*, pp 18-19. The second explanation, considering the rules of communication between military units (among other things, the fact that they all had to use codenames) seems rather unlikely.

placed directly under the regiment's command. Finally, the 57/II Battalion was tasked with securing the right flank of the attack at Wiznitz and Uscie Putilla.

The infantry entered the town at 5:30 a.m., following a 30-minute artillery preparation, and initially advanced with considerable vigour. The 57/III Battalion moved along the river, while the 57/I Battalion, forming the left flank of the attacking force, operated to its north. The available sources suggest that the Soviet forces initially offered only limited resistance, allowing the attacking troops to enter the town before opening fire on them. According to his memoirs, Ferenc Bereczki took part in the action alongside the adjutant of the 57/III Battalion, carrying a rifle in one hand and a briefcase in the other; he recalled observing enemy soldiers retreating at a run ahead of the advancing Hungarian forces. By about 11:00, however, the fighting had intensified, and around midday Soviet forces launched a relatively weak counterattack from the northern outskirts of the town. In response, the 57/I Battalion began to dig in, while the 57/III Battalion continued its advance and, by 13:00, had reached the bridge over the Czeremos River connecting Kutý and Wiznitz.

Ensign Ferenc Harmath, one of the platoon leaders of the 8th Company, 57/III Battalion, participated in the attack at the head of his platoon; he describes a gradual advance from house to house, while the enemy – at least from his perspective – appeared to be firing from all directions. Another sensation he records, common in combat narratives, is the perceived inaccuracy of rifle fire; even in the heat of battle, it seemed almost surprising to him when someone cried out in pain after being hit, as though he himself found it unexpected that the enemy could land a shot.¹⁵ Imre Erdélyi reports somewhat similar experiences. As a member of a light mortar section, he entered the town with the 9th Company, which was tasked with establishing a position near a mill on the Czeremos River. While advancing toward the riverbank, they came under fire from a distance; however, as the enemy remained out of sight and the shots caused no casualties, the situation appeared neither realistic nor particularly threatening. Erdélyi states that he first experienced fear only when he received the order to take up a firing position; however, the routine actions involved in setting up the light mortar quickly dispelled this unease. As he writes: 'In the next moment, I

¹⁵ Harmath, 'Diary'.

took up my entrenching tool and, with the familiar motions I had performed countless times before, dug a sunken, embanked pit for the light mortar. Meanwhile, we could see bullets tearing through the grass around us, yet no one was hit. At that moment, I could not help but wonder, with a hint of disdain: is this what war is like?’¹⁶

In the afternoon, however, the situation changed abruptly: Soviet forces launched an attack along the main road between Kosów and Kutý, striking the left flank of the 57/I Battalion and driving the unit back to the heights west of the town. As a result of their withdrawal, the attackers succeeded in encircling most of the 57/III Battalion, pushing it toward a mill – probably the one already mentioned by Erdélyi. The company tasked with taking control of Wiznitz was likewise unsuccessful: it encountered a Soviet rifle battalion reinforced with tanks – at least according to the account of Lieutenant Colonel Ferenc Farkas, commander of the VI Corps – and was forced to withdraw to the western edge of the town. During the night of 28–29 April, however, the 57/III Battalion, which had previously been trapped in the town, broke out of the encirclement and rejoined the rest of the regiment.¹⁷

As far as the course of events is concerned, the least explored developments are those related to the 57/I Battalion, whose soldiers were, after the fighting, accused of fleeing before the enemy. Some indication of their activities is provided by casualty data, which show that the battalion sustained 45 wounded, 10 killed, 1 missing, and 2 taken prisoner at Kutý. More importantly, two company commanders and two platoon leaders were also among the wounded. Reserve Ensign Károly Csaba, commanding officer of the 1st Company, was hit by a grenade fragment; Reserve Lieutenant Ferenc Polgári, commanding officer of the 2nd Company, sustained a gunshot wound to the thigh; Reserve Ensign Mózes Buzogány’s kneecap was shattered; and Reserve Ensign Lajos András Szentgyörgyi was struck in the left leg by either a bullet or shrapnel.¹⁸

It is also not without significance that the troops were not only engaged by regular Soviet forces but also by individuals disguised as civilians, as recalled by Ignác Tamás,

¹⁶ Erdélyi, *Megnőttek a hegyek*, pp 61–62.

¹⁷ Farkas, *Tatárhágó*, pp 23–24.

¹⁸ See Berekméri, *Fegyver alatt*, pp 77–80, 221, 250.

a former soldier of the 57/I Battalion, in an interview.¹⁹ In response to the situation, the battalion began to retreat without orders; according to one account, however, what effectively occurred was that panic broke out, and the men fled the battlefield, leaving behind 12 of their 24 machine guns, with a similar proportion of losses in light machine guns – approximately 24 weapons in total.²⁰ A characteristic example of the confusion surrounding the retreat is the case of József Tódor, a machine gunner of the 57/I Battalion. Tódor was fatally shot in the town by a woman – in his interview, Tamás does not indicate that she wore a uniform, although in recollections of Soviet women serving in combat roles such details are usually noted. Tódor's body – at least according to Berekméri's research – was left behind in the enemy-occupied area. By contrast, Ignác Tamás – also a machine gunner in the 57/I Battalion at the time and from the same region as Tódor – recalls that, during the retreat, they carried the body with them and buried it along a road on the western outskirts of Kutý.

Although, in relation to the 57/III Battalion, the encirclement and subsequent breakout are most frequently addressed, a closer examination of the situation of the 8th Company, in which Ferenc Harmath served, may also help to shed light on the events affecting the 57/I Battalion. According to Harmath, the company's advance came to a halt around midday in front of a church. By that time, the troops were running low on ammunition, had exhausted their supply of hand grenades, and had lost contact with the rest of the battalion. Soviet resistance, meanwhile, intensified: ten to fifteen enemy weapons opened fire whenever a Hungarian soldier attempted to advance. The enemy also recognised the Hungarians' inability to secure their flanks and began advancing from both sides, intensifying the fire directed against them. Following a short discussion among the officers, it was decided to withdraw, and Harmath's platoon was tasked with falling back first to a rearward position to cover the company's retreat. However, they had not yet reached their objective when those left behind broke into a panicked retreat, triggered by the death of the company commander, Lieutenant Zoltán Keményffy. Harmath writes that he was able to gather only about fifteen men to engage

¹⁹ Interview with Ignác Tamás of Plăieșii de Jos, Romania (In the possession of József Nagy, County Harghita, Romania). The men of the 57/III Battalion, as Ferenc Bereczki recalls in his memoir, were also fired upon by individuals disguised as civilians, with one of their machine gunners even being killed by them.

²⁰ After the war, Sándor Gáll – along with most Hungarian officers – had to undergo a verification procedure, and eventually the People's Court initiated legal proceedings against him. The details related to the battle of Kutý are drawn from Gáll's testimony given in court on 23 October 1946. Gáll's file is held at the Budapest City Archives. See: HU_BFL_XXV_1_a_2_1946_4314, p. 17.

the enemy; however, after he was wounded by a mortar fragment half an hour later and lost consciousness, his remaining men also deserted him.²¹

As for the bulk of the 57/III Battalion, its situation is generally presented by historians on the basis of a report written by the battalion commander, Major Gábor Hamza, and published in 1944, a source not entirely free from propagandistic intent. According to Hamza, the battalion took up positions in the town's mill and, while repelling successive Soviet assaults, one of its patrols reached regimental headquarters, with whose assistance an escape route was organised. Through a coordinated effort, the battalion eventually succeeded in breaking out of the encirclement on the night of 28–29 April. According to Árpád Róbert Berekméri, Hamza and his men were also able to evacuate their heavy weapons and the prisoners captured during the fighting, although the bodies of some of the fallen soldiers had to be left behind. Berekméri further states that the battalion reached the Hungarian positions on the heights west of the town in the early hours of the morning, where elements of the disorganised 57/I Battalion had also withdrawn and were engaged in combat with advancing Soviet forces.²²

Eyewitness accounts, however, provide a more nuanced perspective on the events. As can be inferred from the memoir of Imre Erdélyi, the previously cited member of a light mortar crew of the 9th Company, he had no knowledge that they were encircled by the enemy, and many of his comrades were likely in a similar situation. The company's commanding officer, however, appears to have been cognizant of the situation, as he forbade his men from firing their weapons – except in the case of a direct attack – so as not to reveal their position.²³

Around midnight, the sky above the town suddenly lit up and a massive gunfight erupted, likely marking the moment when units dispatched by the regiment launched an attack to facilitate the breakout. Erdélyi recalls that it was at this point that he first learned of the encirclement, and notes in his memoir that, upon hearing the news, the troops rushed toward the regiment in a genuine state of panic. The fleeing soldiers eventually managed to reach Tudiów; however, if Erdélyi's account is to be believed, they were in no condition to engage the enemy, as many were so exhausted that their only concern was finding a place to sleep. It seems far more likely that the regiment's

²¹ Harmath, *Az emlékek megszólalnak*, pp 47–48.

²² Berekméri, *Lesz még kikelet!*, p. 111.

²³ Erdélyi, *Megnőttek a hegyek*, p. 64.

line was in fact held, as Mihály Ferenc of the 57/I Battalion recalls, by ad hoc units composed of the battalion's supply and service personnel.²⁴

As previously mentioned, the attack aimed at capturing Kutý also had a secondary objective: Wiznitz, a town on the right bank of the Czeremos River. (Historically, the river marked the border between Galicia and Bukovina; Kutý was in the former, while Wiznitz lay in the latter.) A smaller covering force was given the objective to capture the settlement, primarily to support the main effort focused on Kutý. Military historian Árpád Róbert Berekméri asserts that the task was assigned to the 57/II Battalion, but in relation to the fighting, he refers to the 7th Company, which was a unit of the 57/III Battalion. Drawing heavily on Farkas's account, Berekméri further states that, on the day of the attack, the Hungarian units encountered a Soviet infantry battalion, reinforced by an unknown number of tanks. Faced with overwhelming force, they had no choice but to retreat to the western edge of the settlement. Other sources, however, suggest that in fact, two other units were involved in the fighting at Wiznitz: the 4th Company of the 57/II Battalion and the bicycle company of the reconnaissance battalion.

One of the most detailed accounts of the fighting in this area comes from József Kiss, a cadet warrant officer who served in the 4th Company during that time. It is important to note that Kiss's recollection comes from an oral history interview conducted with him, making it much harder to pinpoint the exact dates of certain events. Kiss claims that Captain Lajos Dala, the commanding officer of the 57/II Battalion, ordered a platoon led by Reserve Lieutenant József Zékány to advance towards the settlement, engage the enemy, and capture prisoners for interrogation in order to assess the situation and identify the Soviet units they were facing. To reach their objective, the Hungarians had to traverse some kind of slope, a hill or a mountain. In Kiss's opinion, the Russian observers must have noticed the platoon after they passed over the ridge and began their descent toward the settlement. In response, they sent a motor vehicle – possibly a tank, although the interview does not explicitly identify it as such – together with infantry armed with heavy weapons to intercept them. The ambush was

²⁴ Interview with Mihály Ferenc of Mikóújfalu, County Covasna, Romania (11 April 2006) (Audio recording in the possession of Sándor Magyarosi, Dublin, Ireland).

successful and scattered the group; the confusion that overtook the Hungarians was so great that, allegedly, one soldier, having wandered into the tall grass by the side of the road, mistakenly believed they were under a gas attack and put on his gas mask, only to be shot. Some of the men managed to escape by fleeing into the forest, while others were killed on the spot. Zékány – the platoon leader – along with a few others, circled around the Russian vehicle and took refuge with the local Ukrainian population for several days. As the first survivors from Zékány's platoon made their way back to the Hungarian lines, however, the battalion commander sent Kiss and his platoon to assess the situation. Kiss recalls the events as follows:

I set off and began climbing the slope. I knew something was off, and before reaching the top... But I didn't have a flashlight, so I had to rely on what little I could see in the forest. I spoke quietly and divided the men into two files [...] one on each side of the road, keeping a distance between them to minimize losses in case of an attack. I stopped them before [we reached the top]... I could already see the ridge ahead. The Russians had come out by evening, likely because they knew there would still be some movement – at least, they thought so, since they had already scattered a platoon. [They hid and waited.]

As I quietly directed my men to keep watch in this direction and that... a hand grenade was thrown toward my head from above. I felt it whizzing past me, the rush of air, then it landed and exploded. More explosions followed. At the sound of the blasts, my men scattered, running into the forest, heading downhill – not on the road, but into the valley, as if... 'Don't run, stop, everyone, halt!' I gave orders in vain; half of my platoon had vanished. I withdrew [with the rest]; it was around midnight. The captain was waiting for us and asked what had happened. I told him... The next morning, my men began trickling back, returning when it got light. That's how our first contact with the Russians went.²⁵

We have no further information on the 4th Company's activities, but Ensign Ocsovszky recounts that on April 28, the bicycle company, the regiment's mobile reserve, was also deployed to attack and capture Wiznitz. By that time, the men of the company, who had been engaged in almost continuous reconnaissance activities since detraining – often in pouring rain and without relief, lying on damp ground or in water-filled ditches – were fatigued to such an extent that, at a given moment, their commanding officer, Captain Brúnó Horváth was compelled to draw his pistol to make them advance.²⁶ It is unclear whether any other units were involved in the attack on Wiznitz,

²⁵ Interview with József Kiss (Audio recording in the possession of Árpád Róbert Berekméri, Mureș County, Romania).

²⁶ Ocsovszky, 'Katonanaplóm', p. 13.

and it is also uncertain if there were actually any tanks present. József Kiss's recollection does not clarify whether what he refers to was a combat vehicle or merely a lorry used for transporting troops. In this respect, other sources are likewise not entirely clear. In one of his accounts of the fighting of the 1st Mountain Brigade, Colonel Ferenc Lóskay notes that on the afternoon of 28 April Soviet tanks arrived at Ispas. There is indeed a settlement with this name in the vicinity of Wiznitz, located approximately 8 kilometres away. Nevertheless, this reference most likely pertains to a different locality bearing the same name – Ispas (Spas) – situated north of Pistyn.²⁷ What can be established with certainty, however, is that neither the 57/II Battalion's 4th Company nor the bicycle company managed to take the settlement.

The Battle of Pistyn

The Battle of Pistyn, which took place on 28 and 29 April, differed from the Battle of Kutý in several respects: it was fought by a single battalion – the 27/I – and, unlike at Kutý, the Hungarians abandoned their designated positions not only because of the troops' lack of combat experience but also due to the battalion commander's inability to make sound decisions under battlefield conditions. Based on the available sources, the exact time of day at which the Hungarian troops reached Pistyn remains unclear; it is only known that their patrols entered the town and established contact with the command of the 1st Mountain Brigade, positioned somewhere between Pistyn and Utoropy, and that the men of the units were already severely fatigued by the march by the time they reached the settlements.²⁸

When the 27/I Battalion arrived in the Pistyn area, heavy fighting was already in progress. The men of the Light Division had previously encountered exhausted and battle-worn units, but the troops they met here had only just emerged from the fighting. The sight of these retreating soldiers had a strong impact on the men of the battalion. As Sándor Gál recalls in his memoir: 'As we approached the front, we saw some Hungarian soldiers coming, covered in mud and looking hungry. One was chewing a

²⁷ Ferenc Lóskay, 'A M. Kir. Hegyidandár 1944. évi hadjárata március hó 26. november hó 10-ig' [The Campaign of The Royal Hungarian Mountain Brigade in 1944, from March 26 to November 10.] (Hungarian Military History Archives, Budapest, TGy 3309), p. 12.

²⁸ Berekméri, *Lesz még kikelet!*, p. 105. Péter, 'Így emlékszem vissza', p. 2. Makrai, László, 'Ki tudja, merre', p. 1.

piece of sour cabbage, and another a piece of dry bread. They looked as if they had just come out of prison, pale and exhausted.²⁹ However, not only retreating troops but also fighting units were on the move in the 27/I Battalion's sector: Reserve Ensign Ferenc Varga, an artillery officer of the 2nd Artillery Battalion, 1st Mountain Brigade, recalls that during the repositioning of their battery, they reached Pistyn at 1 a.m. on the night of 28 April, from where they continued toward Jablonów at dawn.³⁰ Finally, there was a real danger that Soviet armour would appear in this sector, too, as Jablonów, which had been reached by an enemy force supported by tanks, lay just over 9 kilometres from Pistyn.

In his study of the 27th Light Division, Róbert Árpád Berekméri contends that the 27/I Battalion captured the settlement on 27 April and pushed north-eastwards, somewhat beyond Mykietynce, where its advance was eventually halted by the enemy on 28 April. Two days later, however, the battalion's defence collapsed in the face of a Soviet attack – partly as a result of the attackers' alleged numerical superiority, and partly because a group of unidentified individuals in civilian clothing opened fire on the Hungarian soldiers from the rear. As a consequence of this setback, the battalion commander was relieved of his command.

The participants provide much more detailed accounts of the events, but mostly only of those smaller incidents of which they were themselves direct witnesses. However, even on this basis, neither a clear cause-and-effect relationship between certain pieces of information can be established, nor can the discrepancies between the individual accounts – often differing from one another on highly significant points – be satisfactorily resolved. Ensign Ocsovszky, a member of the reconnaissance battalion, who presumably recorded the events in his diary almost contemporaneously, writes that the 27/I Battalion near Pistyn confronted the previously mentioned Soviet battle group, which – reinforced by several tanks – had broken through the line held by the 1st and 2nd Mountain Brigades and posed a serious threat, given the Hungarians' lack of modern anti-tank weapons; however, his unit arrived in the area only after the withdrawal of the 27/I Battalion.³¹ Ensign László Makrai, the platoon leader of the 27/I Battalion's mortar platoon, writes that after leaving Pistyn they advanced as far as

²⁹ Gál, 'Visszaemlékezéseim', p. 1.

³⁰ Ferenc Varga, *Besztercei hegyitüzérek a Kárpátokban* [The Mountain Artillerymen of Beszterce in the Carpathians] (Barót, 2009), p. 132.

³¹ Ocsovszky, *Katonanaplóm*, p. 13.

another settlement – most likely Mykietynce – where they took up defensive positions. As he recalls: ‘I saw our defensive positions as very porous. On our left, there was no other unit to link up with, leaving our flank exposed, so we did not feel secure. No telephone lines were established between the battalion headquarters and the units; all communication had to be carried out by runners. This further contributed to our sense of uncertainty.’³² The village was not safe either; as he describes, at some point, they could hear that a firearm was repeatedly discharged among the houses, but it seemed so unlikely that someone would engage them from the rear that, at first, they considered it a random, though inexplicable, incident rather than a deliberate act of an enemy soldier or partisan. He further reports that reconnaissance patrols dispatched by the battalion commander made contact with the enemy and sustained casualties.

Another incident, which can be dated to 28 or 29 April, is described by József Péter. In his memoir, Péter claims that, following their arrival in the area of initial deployment, the men of the 2nd Company refused to carry out a direct order – namely, to attack an enemy force of unspecified strength – whereupon the commanding officer fired several shots in their direction in order to compel them to comply.³³ A possible explanation for the disobedience could be that the men of the 2nd Company – like Ensign Ocsovszky – were also aware that the Soviet units facing them were supported by tanks, and therefore refused to carry out an attack against them. Several sources indirectly lend support to this assumption. In his previously cited account of the fighting of the 1st Mountain Brigade, Colonel Ferenc Lóskay writes that in the late afternoon of 28 April Soviet tanks arrived in the villages of Ispas and Miszyn. Taking into account the direction of the roads in the area, as well as the fact that Lóskay refers more or less to the immediate region east of Jablonów, it appears likely that the former locality was in fact Spas – situated only about 6 km from Mykietynce³⁴ – which could easily have been reached by patrols of the 27/I Battalion.

The available sources do not clearly indicate whether the battalion engaged in combat on that day or, if so, where the engagement took place and what its nature and scale were; it can only be established that it sustained six wounded and that three men of the 1st Company were killed by mortar fire. Research conducted by Árpád Róbert

³² Makrai, ‘Ki tudja, merre’, p. 2.

³³ Péter, ‘Így emlékszem vissza’, p. 3.

³⁴ Lóskay, ‘A m. kir. 1. hegyidandár harcai’, p. 12.

Berekméri suggests that the commanding officer of the 2nd Company, Reserve Second Lieutenant Géza Bárdos, was also wounded on 28 April. However, according to the casualty lists, Bárdos was only reported as wounded on 29 April. Regarding the officer in question, József Péter states that he was shot from the rear, while Berekméri, on the other hand, asserts that the injury was caused not by gunfire, but by mortar shrapnel, and that it was so severe that Bárdos required hospitalization until 8 August 1944.³⁵ Finally, Makrai's recollection also reveals that the majority of the battalion withdrew from the positions they had occupied at the settlement in the vicinity of Pistyn, and that his mortar platoon had been inadvertently left behind. However, he does not mention any major engagement, nor can it be determined from his account whether this withdrawal took place on 28 April or a day later, as the events of 29 April – which are frequently mentioned in other accounts – are entirely absent from his memoirs.

With regard to 29 April, the majority of sources concur that by that afternoon the battalion was already in Pistyn, while the troops of the 1st Mountain Brigade took up defensive positions along the Pistyn–Utoropy–Jablonów line, with the 33rd Mountain Rifle Battalion holding the ground immediately north-west of the settlement. It was the first occasion on which a battalion of the 27th Light Division linked up with a unit of another formation; however, the troops of the mountain brigade were already considerably fatigued, as on the previous day, 28 April, they had launched a successful attack west of Pistyn in an attempt to halt Soviet forces breaking out of Kolomea, and it was only the increasing number of incoming enemy tanks that compelled their redeployment to the aforementioned line, a position less suitable for armoured operations owing to the terrain.³⁶

The fighting on 29 April in and around Pistyn can primarily be examined on the basis of the account of Ferenc Farkas, commander of VI Corps, and the diary of Reserve Ensign Ferenc Varga, serving in a battery of the 2nd Artillery Battalion, 1st Mountain

³⁵ Berekméri, *Fegyver alatt*, p. 57.

³⁶ Ferenc Lóskay, 'A m. kir. 1. hegyidandár harcai a Tatárhágó előterében, 1944 áprilisában' [The Engagements of the Royal Hungarian 1st Mountain Brigade in the Foreground of the Tatar Pass, April 1944] in *Hadak Útján*, vi, no. 66 (1954), pp 12-13.

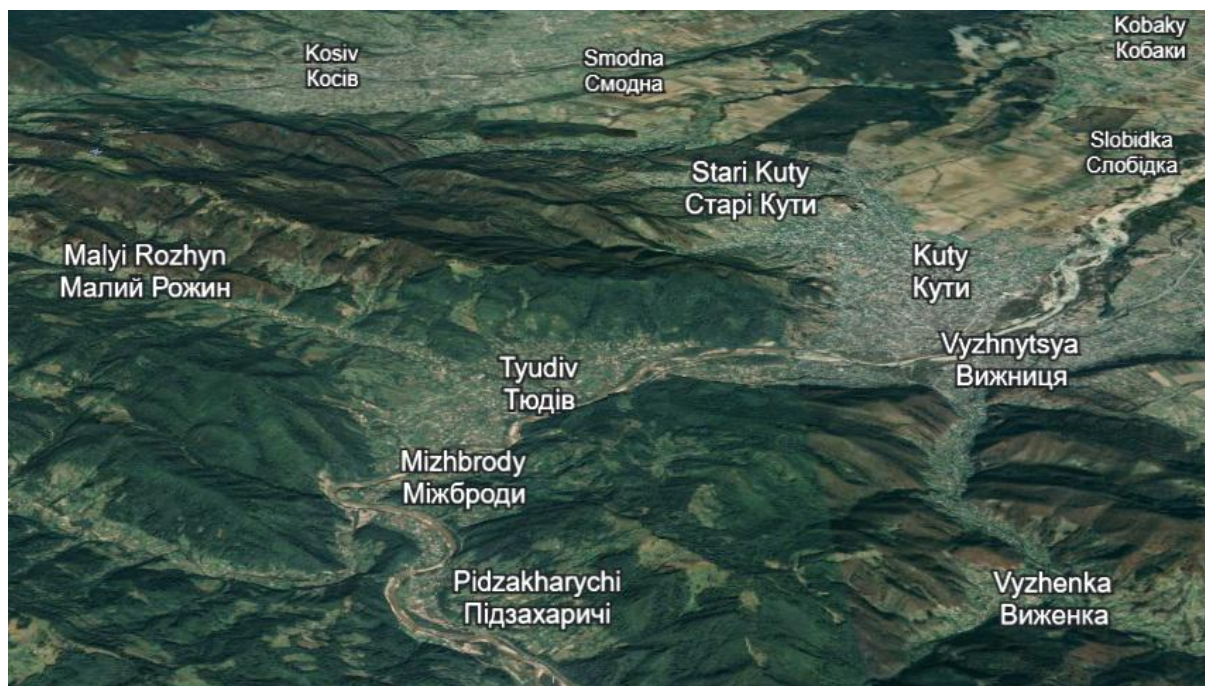


Fig. 3. Terrain conditions around Kutu on a 3D map.



Fig. 4. Mykietynce and Pistyn, as well as Kosów (Kosiv) on a 3D map.

Brigade.³⁷ Although Farkas refers to the battle only in passing – likely for reasons to be addressed later – he includes a relatively detailed sketch map from which a number of event-specific details can be inferred. This suggests that at approximately 4 p.m. the Soviet forces launched a coordinated attack with a force of two or three battalions against the 27/I Battalion in Pistyn and the 33rd Mountain Rifle Battalion to the northeast of the settlement.³⁸ Given that contemporary strength assessments followed German operational terminology, designating groupings of 201–300 men as battalion-sized formations, the attacking force can be estimated at no fewer than 400 and potentially up to 1,000 soldiers. Apart from the uncertainty of this estimate, the strength of the enemy forces that attacked the individual Hungarian units also remains unclear.

With regard to the day's fighting, Ferenc Varga's diary provides the most detailed available account of the engagements in the sector northeast of Pistyn. The exact location is not made clear in the text, but it is evident that the position held by Varga's battery could only be maintained as long as the 33rd Border Rifle Battalion was also able to hold its own lines. However, the guns had to be emplaced in open terrain, completely exposed, and the Hungarians did not have enough manpower to cover all the critical points of the defensive sector. Throughout the day, Soviet troops gradually infiltrated through the gullies that crisscrossed the area, launching their attack in the afternoon. Varga also mentions that, before the initial assault, some of the Soviet infantrymen called out to them, 'Hungarian, don't shoot, I won't shoot either.' In the fighting that ensued, the guns were required to engage the attackers with direct fire, successfully recapturing the gullies. Nonetheless, Varga described the situation as desperate: they had not received food for days, and the men, having been engaged in continuous fighting and redeployments, were reeling from exhaustion.³⁹

In the case of the attack directed against Pistyn, the course of events is not known in comparable detail. Ferenc Farkas writes that the settlement was taken only on the third attempt by the Soviets, and from the sketch map he provides it appears that the enemy attack began at 4 p.m. on 29 April. The attackers presumably pushed the Hungarian infantry back towards the south-western corner of the settlement, where both the

³⁷ Farkas, *Tatárhágó*, p. 24. Varga, *Besztercei hegyitüzek*, p. 133.

³⁸ Illésfalvi, Szabó, and Számvéber, *Erdély a hadak útján*, p. 80.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

battalion headquarters and the supporting artillery battery were located. It remains unclear whether this occurred gradually or only during a final assault; however, at around 8 p.m. the battalion's troops – together with the headquarters and the battery – came under a second attack from the forested hills to the south of the settlement, carried out by approximately 200 men dressed in civilian clothing. Although they were initially believed to be partisans, it later became evident from the prisoners' testimonies that they were regular Soviet soldiers who had disguised themselves as farmers and had infiltrated the Hungarian lines days before the battle. It appears that this marked the point at which the battalion's defence finally collapsed and the troops began to retreat.⁴⁰

A further surviving account of the battle is preserved in a memoir composed in 1993 by Sándor Gál, a soldier of the 2nd Company of the 27/I Battalion, who presents the events from the perspective of an eyewitness participant. Gál contends that the attack directed against the Hungarian positions was not, in tactical terms, especially severe; nevertheless, the troops appear to have succumbed to panic when they came under enemy fire from the rear. In response to this breakdown of order, the battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel Oszkár Nádasz, reportedly had a machine gun emplaced in the attic of a nearby house and threatened to employ it against the withdrawing soldiers. Even so, Gál does not ascribe the battalion's inability to hold Pistyn to this outbreak of panic. Instead, he maintains that the abandonment of the position resulted from a deliberate decision taken later that evening, when Lieutenant Colonel Nádasz convened the battalion's officers and, in what Gál characterises as an unusual directive, instructed them to terminate resistance and withdraw.⁴¹

As far as the withdrawal is concerned, military historian Árpád Róbert Berekméri claims that the retreating troops were attacked once more by plain-clothed Soviet soldiers and that, as a result, panic broke out, leading the infantry to abandon the 27/6 artillery battery.⁴² By contrast, Farkas's sketch map appears to indicate that the engagement consisted solely of mortar fire, which struck the troops at approximately 10 p.m. as they were crossing the valley between Pistyn and Szeszory.⁴³ Finally, Gál also describes the incident in his memoir: 'It was raining that night, and as we were

⁴⁰ See Farkas, *Tatárhágó*, p. 26.

⁴¹ Gál, 'Visszaemlékezéseim', p. 1.

⁴² Berekméri, *Lesz még kikelet!*, p. 112.

⁴³ See Farkas, *Tatárhágó*, p. 24.

retreating, partisans attacked us around midnight. We were between two mountains – nowhere to run – so everybody just threw themselves to the ground – into the mud, into puddles, wherever anyone could find cover.’⁴⁴ The day was saved by the commanding officer of the battery, who kept his cool, placed his guns in firing positions, and returned fire. Although abandoned by the infantry, he gathered thirty men from among the scattered troops and carried out a textbook delaying action, stopping at intervals to fight and slow the enemy, then continuing the retreat.⁴⁵

The situation that arose with the retreat of the 27/I Battalion was addressed by the light division’s command through an attempt to deploy the formation’s reserve. Stationed at Sokolówka and kept on standby that night, the 27th Reconnaissance Battalion, serving as the reserve, departed for Pistyn at dawn. However, Ensign Basa, in charge of the column, lost his way in the sleet and, hoping to remedy the mistake, decided to lead the men across the mountains on foot towards Szeszory. Despite the exhausting 13-hour march they completed, by the time they arrived, there was no need for them to intervene. The Soviet units that entered Szeszory had already been engaged by the 2nd and 33rd Mountain Rifle Battalions of the 1st Mountain Brigade, while the scattered units of the 27/I Battalion were withdrawn behind Szeszory and regrouped. Ultimately, a defence line was established 5 kilometres southwest of Pistyn by the 33rd Mountain Rifle Battalion and another unit of unknown strength.⁴⁶

As far as the 27/I Battalion is concerned, the available figures for 29 April indicate that it suffered 19 wounded, 12 missing, and 4 killed.⁴⁷ Lieutenant Colonel Oszkár Nádasz, the battalion commander, was relieved of his command and sent back to Hungary. As Berekméri notes, some sources state that he suffered a nervous breakdown during the battle for Pistyn, while others claim he was removed on suspicion of inciting panic.⁴⁸ Both interpretations appear to reinforce Gál’s version of events, according to which the collapse of the 27/I Battalion’s defence cannot be attributed solely to the panic that had broken out among the troops, but also to the ill-judged actions of its commander.

⁴⁴ Gál, ‘Visszaemlékezéseim’, p. 1.

⁴⁵ Ocsóvszky, ‘Katonanaplóm’, pp 15-16. Berekméri, *Lesz még kikelet!*, p. 112. See also Gál, *Visszaemlékezéseim*, p. 1.

⁴⁶ Berekméri, *Lesz még kikelet!*, p. 112.

⁴⁷ See Hungary’s Second World War II casualty database (<https://iivh-katonahoseink.militaria.hu/kereses>).

⁴⁸ Berekméri, *Fegyver alatt*, p. 201.

It is noteworthy that Ferenc Farkas's account remains silent on the failure of a fellow officer, a silence which in itself may be considered indicative.

The Battle of Kosów

Kosów is the only town for which a contemporary report has survived, yet in a certain sense the situation is scarcely clearer than in the cases of Kutý or Pistyn. The episode has been addressed only briefly in the scholarly work of Árpád Róbert Berekméri, who, drawing largely on the work of Lieutenant General Ferenc Farkas, argues that this settlement remained the longest under the control of the 27th Szekler Light Division. According to Berekméri, Soviet forces launched an attack to recapture it only on 2 May, and the numerically superior enemy drove the Hungarians out of Kosów, forcing them back beyond the neighbouring settlement of Horod. The men of the light division eventually halted their retreat along the road leading to Sokolówka, the second settlement west of the town, though heavy fighting in the area continued until late in the evening. The village of Babin, situated to the south of the road connecting Horod and Sokolówka and containing significant stockpiles of food and ammunition, was also set on fire. Berekméri attributes this to partisans, whose activity, in his view, intensified in parallel with the fighting.⁴⁹

A contemporary document concerning the battle has, however, survived, offering a different account of the events. Preserved in the Historical Archives of the Hungarian State Security, among the documents relating to Lieutenant General Ferenc Farkas that were compiled by the communist secret police, it is one of the few surviving records of the 27th Light Division produced on the battlefield in 1944. In terms of its content, it is a report which, as its title indicates, summarises the findings of an investigation launched in connection with the events at Kosów.⁵⁰

As the document states, the settlement was occupied by the 27/III Battalion after overcoming an unspecified number of enemy strongpoints on 27 April. The Hungarian troops advanced from the direction of Horod during the attack – that is, from west to east – and, after eliminating or driving off the opposing forces, proceeded as follows: two reinforced infantry companies secured the settlement across a frontage of

⁴⁹ Berekméri, *Lesz még kikelet!*, pp 113-114.

⁵⁰ Historical Archives of the Hungarian State Security, ÁBTL, 3.2.4. K-1709/1. pp 75-76.

approximately five kilometres, while the battalion's third company sealed off the valley in which Kosów was situated, on the western approaches to the settlement. In this way, the latter company was effectively positioned behind the other two, most likely on the assumption that, in the event of an attack, the more exposed companies could fall back on it. From this position, and making use of more favourable terrain, they would have been able to engage the attackers jointly.

As has already been noted, most historical accounts indicate that the Soviets retook the town only on 2 May; however, this does not seem to be the case. According to the previously mentioned report, the enemy conducted a reconnaissance in force against the Hungarian positions on 28 April before launching an attack on the town at dawn the following day. On this occasion, the sequence of events was recorded in detail: at 1 a.m., Soviet forces attacked and overran a platoon strongpoint, then entered the town and struck at the companies securing the settlement from the rear. At the same time, the battery positioned behind the third company – the one blocking the valley – also came under attack. In the close combat that ensued, the artillerymen shot dead eight individuals in civilian clothing – believed to be partisans – and captured eight automatic rifles, two submachine guns, and approximately thirty maps.

Within the settlement itself, street fighting broke out between the attacking enemy forces and the two Hungarian companies, during which the Hungarians – as in the cases of Kutý and Pistyn – also came under fire from civilian dwellings. In the confusion of the engagement, the companies broke up into smaller units that forced their way to the valley road leading out of the settlement. At 9 a.m. on 29 April, the regimental commander ordered these scattered elements to withdraw to the company holding the valley so as to avoid encirclement and annihilation. Based on the available data, the combined losses of the two companies were 21 killed and 42 wounded.

On the basis of the post-combat investigation, the report concluded that the failure to hold the settlement was due to the insufficiency of the forces committed rather than to the command of the 27th Regiment. Moreover, it maintained that, in agreement with divisional headquarters, the regiment had in fact planned to reinforce the Hungarian troops at Kosów with another battalion and two additional artillery batteries; these units, however, were ultimately reassigned to the XI German Army Corps – without

prior notification to the VI Corps or the 27th Light Division – presumably under German pressure or on the orders of the commander-in-chief of the First Army.⁵¹

Conclusions

The fighting for Kutý, Kosów, and Pistyn – and their subsequent loss – effectively marked the end of the offensive operations of the 27th Light Division. Nevertheless, efforts were made to retake the settlements in question. The command of the German army group instructed the Hungarian forces to renew attacks aimed at capturing Pistyn and Kosów; however, since no reinforcements were provided to enable them to overcome the increasingly strong Soviet resistance, these attempts had little chance of success. Over the broadly defined period of the offensive, for which data are available between 17 April and 15 May, the Light Division suffered 96 killed in action, 283 wounded, and 38 missing. Of these casualties, 5 killed, 12 wounded, and 1 missing were officers.⁵²

Notwithstanding these setbacks, some Hungarian troops came to recognise that, in certain situations, they too were capable of gaining the upper hand over their opponents. After their initial successes, Soviet units appear to have been tasked with extending their control to areas lying west of the settlements they occupied. During these attempts, however, they increasingly found themselves at a disadvantage – partly because some Hungarian formations had already entrenched themselves in favourable positions, and partly because they lacked the necessary numerical superiority to carry out these operations effectively.

Imre Erdélyi recounts that, in the days following the withdrawal from Kutý, his unit, entrenched on a hill near Tudiów, observed Soviet troops appearing on the opposite side of the low ground below them and advancing toward their position in a broad skirmish line. Although the soldiers became tense at the sight of the enemy and were inclined to open fire immediately, on the orders of Reserve Ensign Kálmán Zsakó, the leader of the group, they held their fire and allowed the attackers to approach to within approximately 500 metres before engaging them. When the machine guns opened fire, the Soviet skirmish line broke apart, and those who withdrew into the nearby forest

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Berekméri, *Lesz még kikelet!*, p. 117.

were subsequently engaged by light mortar fire. The impact of this success on the Hungarian soldiers is well illustrated by Erdélyi's recollection. Serving as a light mortar operator, he participated directly in the fighting, and his performance was explicitly acknowledged by his superior: 'I cannot adequately convey the pride and satisfaction I felt at that moment when Ensign Zsakó called out to me: "Well done, corporal!"'⁵³

With regard to the 27/I Battalion, Ensign László Makrai likewise notes similar experiences. Following the setback at Pistyn, the battalion was deployed between Sokolówka and Horod, where it was tasked with clearing a valley and the adjacent hillside already partially occupied by Soviet forces. Two rifle companies conducted a coordinated assault along the mountain ridges flanking the valley, advancing on opposite sides in a pincer movement, and achieved their objectives after encountering only limited resistance. A third company subsequently swept the valley floor, prompting enemy troops to retreat in disorder toward the town of Kosów. Makrai specifically emphasised that the Soviet soldiers left behind a mortar along with numerous rounds of ammunition, which he regarded as a sign of their hasty withdrawal.⁵⁴

In light of the events discussed, the question arises as to how these battles were perceived by those who took part in them – officers of various ranks and rank-and-file soldiers alike, even if not all members of these groups articulated their views. To illustrate the merits of small-scale combat analysis, it is useful to begin with historians' assessments, adopting a top-down approach.

From the perspective of military performance, the offensive of the Hungarian First Army is generally regarded as successful. This was due to the fact that, despite failing to achieve its primary objective – the capture of Kolomea, a key communications hub, and the surrounding area of Obertyn – the operation nevertheless succeeded in securing the gap between the German First Panzer Army and the Eighth Army, the latter deployed within Romanian territory. As far as the overall effectiveness of the Hungarian units is concerned, military historians Péter Szabó and Norbert Számvéber

⁵³ Erdélyi, *Megnőttek a hegyek*, pp 68-69.

⁵⁴ Makrai, 'Ki tudja, merre', pp 3-4.

argue that they suffered many losses and setbacks, but also fought with resilience and perseverance.⁵⁵ Krisztián Ungváry evaluates the First Army's performance in a similar vein: he likewise emphasizes the intensity of the fighting, but also notes that Major General Géza Fehér, commander of the 2nd Mountain Brigade, along with his chief of staff and infantry commander, were relieved of their duties on grounds of incompetence.⁵⁶

If the analysis focuses on the views of senior officers and on military documents concerning the 27th Light Division during the offensive, different considerations come to the fore. Among these, a particularly important issue is the formation's operational objective, regarding which – as indicated by the writings of high-ranking Hungarian officers – the divergence between German and Hungarian positions played a central role. While the German command insisted that the light division capture Kutý, Kosów, and Pistyn because of the importance of the road running through them, both the divisional commander and the VI Corps command maintained that a defensive line should instead be established along the western outskirts of these settlements by occupying positions along the Carpathian range and reinforcing the valleys. They argued that the mountainous terrain, defensible even with relatively limited forces, would prevent the enemy from deploying armoured units; that forest cover would obstruct aerial reconnaissance; and that Hungarian artillery could effectively seal off the surrounding area without exposing their own troops to the risk of enemy counterattacks.

As can be inferred from various sources, the Hungarian side's arguments were based on several considerations, most of which were also communicated to the Germans at various levels. First, the light division was committed to action before all of its units had arrived; at the onset of the attack, only four battalions were available to be deployed, a force deemed inadequate for capturing and holding the towns on the edge of the plain and the foothills.⁵⁷ Second, the soldiers faced a gruelling route from the railheads to their jump-off positions in wintry conditions, and due to the challenging terrain, maintaining a reliable supply of food and ammunition was expected to pose

⁵⁵ Szabó and Számvéber, *A keleti hadszíntér és Magyarország 1943–1945*, p. 55.

⁵⁶ Ungváry, *A magyar honvédség*, p. 263.

⁵⁷ Farkas, *Tatárhágó visszánéz*, pp 25-26.

significant difficulties.⁵⁸ The third argument, namely the troops' lack of combat experience, merits closer examination.

It is almost a commonplace that soldiers new to combat are particularly prone to panic, and it hardly needs to be emphasised that officers of the Hungarian First Army were well aware of this fact. Colonel Ferenc Lóskay, commander of the 1st Mountain Brigade, noted in a letter on the fighting in April 1944 that the units under his command were especially sensitive to partisan attacks, and that he therefore sought to define their operational objectives with this vulnerability in mind. As an illustrative example, Lóskay referred to the battle of Kraśnik – where the Austro-Hungarian Army achieved its first victory of the First World War – arguing that the reckless commitment of inexperienced troops there had come at a considerable cost.⁵⁹

The risk mentioned by Lóskay – the possibility that troops might be subjected to sudden attacks by irregular, non-uniformed fighters – was also addressed by a military publication issued in 1943, summarising experiences from the Eastern Front. The booklet in question explicitly noted that Red Army forces frequently employed units equipped mainly with submachine guns, one of whose primary tasks – in addition to securing jump-off positions and conducting reconnaissance – was to infiltrate through gaps in the front line and carry out operations in the enemy's rear during combat.⁶⁰

Another important issue – which emerged during the offensive and soon came to affect the light division as well – was addressed in a report dated 27 April 1944. According to this document, the Chief of Staff of the Hungarian First Army drew attention, on the one hand, to the tendency of units to disintegrate when their officers became casualties during combat and, on the other hand, to the loss of heavy weapons, which were often destroyed in the course of fighting or abandoned during forced withdrawals. The report was produced on the day preceding the battle of Kutý, where this phenomenon likewise occurred among the troops of the 57th Infantry Regiment.⁶¹ Finally, it should be noted

⁵⁸ Lakatos, *Ahogyan én láttam*, p. 80.

⁵⁹ Ferenc Lóskay, 'A m. kir. 1. hgy. ddr. 1944. évi hadjárata, 1944. márc. 26.–1944. nov. 10.' [The Campaign of the Hungarian Royal 1st Mountain Brigade Between 26 March 1944 and 10 November 1944] (Hungarian Military History Archives, TGY 3309).

⁶⁰ A M. Kir. Honvéd Vezérkar Főnöke [Chief of the General Staff of the Royal Hungarian Army], 'A K-i harctér terepviszonyai és az ellenség méltatása' [Terrain Features of the Eastern Front and an Appraisal of the Enemy] in *A folyó háború tapasztalatainak összefoglaló ismertetése* [A Summary of Experiences from the Ongoing War], no. 18 (Budapest, 1943), p. 10.

⁶¹ Hungarian Military History Archives, Budapest, I. 89. 304/a. doboz, M. kir. Honvéd Vezérkar főnöke 1. osztály /hadműveleti/ M napló 1944. jan.–1945. jan. 15., p. 74.

that some units – more specifically the 27/I Battalion – faced the prospect of engaging Red Army armoured forces, while the troops – or at least platoon leaders and company commanders – were well aware that their existing anti-tank weapons were inadequate to effectively counter Soviet armour.⁶²

The conclusions drawn by Lieutenant General Ferenc Farkas in the aftermath of the fighting are likewise revealing. As he notes, had the defence been organised and the battle conducted in accordance with the VI Corps' proposal from the outset, much Hungarian blood might have been spared, along with considerable unnecessary effort and mental strain.⁶³ The same attitude is evident in a dispatch in which the general commended the performance of the 27th Light Division, suggesting a deliberate recognition of the soldiers' above-average efforts:

In the recent battles, the 27th Szekler Division, in particular, played a significant role. After being detrained, the division marched through rain and snow along slippery, nearly impassable mountain roads and streambeds, often covering distances of up to 50 km per day. Organised into battalion-sized mixed groups, it rushed to secure the unprotected roads leading to Hungary and to slow the advancing enemy forces pushing into the rear of the 1st Mountain Brigade. Operating in an area largely controlled by partisans, the division engaged in numerous local confrontations, both small and large, along a 60 km front, suffering heavy casualties in the battles fought for the three towns located at the foothills of the Carpathians.⁶⁴

The dispatch was communicated to the personnel of the reconnaissance battalion on 15 May 1944, and was likely read out to soldiers of other units at the same time. Ensign Ocsovszky recorded the text in his diary almost word for word, though he added no commentary.⁶⁵ Sources suggest, however, that the military authorities adopted a markedly different attitude from that conveyed by the tone of the dispatch. At the level of battalions and companies, formal inquiries were initiated in the immediate aftermath of the fighting. One such case concerned the abandonment of machine guns during the battle of Kutý, an incident investigated by Lieutenant Colonel Sándor Gáll,

⁶² Ocsovszky, 'Katonanaplóm', pp 4-6.

⁶³ Farkas, *Tatárhágó visszánéz*, pp 25-27.

⁶⁴ Farkas, *Tatárhágó visszánéz*, pp 28-29.

⁶⁵ Ocsovszky, 'Katonanaplóm', pp 22-23.

commander of the 57th Infantry Regiment. On 28 February 1947, Gáll described the events as follows:

As I determined, the cause of this was cowardice and carelessness, which I duly reported to the divisional command. The divisional command ordered that anyone found guilty of abandoning their weapon be executed immediately. With this in mind, I investigated the case and ultimately ordered the execution of only one soldier among those found guilty, in order to set an example. I reported this to the divisional command and requested that the others not be executed, as I considered the exemplary punishment [of one soldier] to be sufficient. The divisional commander approved my decision.⁶⁶

The execution took place on 1 May, in front of soldiers assembled in the square – one side of which had been left open. The incident had a horrifying impact on those present: the fact that veterans often conflated its story with another execution suggests that the soldiers must have recounted it frequently among themselves.

Similarly, a brief remark by Ensign Ocsovszky provides insight into the soldiers' mood, suggesting a loss of confidence in their leadership. He attributes this to the fact that, prior to the battle of Kutý, the command had downplayed the strength of the Soviet forces defending the settlement, claiming that such an enemy could be overcome without the need for ammunition resupply.⁶⁷

However, far-reaching conclusions can hardly be drawn from these cases, and the sources suggest that, in the aftermath of the battle, the soldiers themselves had to grapple with a number of conflicting impressions. The execution of one of their comrades affected them negatively, and, for the reasons already discussed, they had to some extent lost confidence in their superiors. At the same time, some acknowledged that their own conduct had been inadequate, even in situations where the Soviet forces opposing them were not especially formidable. The experience of the initial engagements is perhaps best understood as a tension between several not easily reconcilable attitudes: self-criticism regarding their own performance, resentment of what they regarded as the leadership's excessive expectations and undue severity, and, on the other hand, the formal recognition of their conduct by the corps commander.

⁶⁶ For Gáll's testimony, see Budapest City Archives, HU_BFL_XXV_1_a_2_1946_4314, p. 17.

⁶⁷ Ocsovszky, 'Katonanaplóm', p. 26.

Chapter IV: The 27th Light Division in Galicia

Following the conclusion of the Hungarian First Army's offensive, the front line stabilized, and its forces began to establish defensive positions. Of particular significance was the presence of multiple defensive lines in depth behind these positions, intended to secure Hungary's northern borders and together forming a multi-layered defensive system. During this militarily relatively uneventful period, several developments of importance for the 27th Light Division took place. Its armament was supplemented from German sources, while elements of both the officer corps and the rank and file underwent further training. At the same time, routine positional warfare continued at varying levels of intensity within the formation's sector. The subsequent section explores the characteristics of this form of trench warfare as it emerged in the context of the Second World War and touches upon the experience of fear as an enduring concomitant of front-line conditions. It then turns to the concept of the primary group, assessing whether strong group cohesion could develop under conditions in which the army's mobilisation practices arguably undermined it, and also considers the broader issue of unit cohesion, proposing a new approach to its interpretation. The chapter concludes with an analysis of the battle of Delatyn and Mikuliczyn, the course of which – when compared to the initial engagements – clearly illustrates the transformations that took place among the soldiers of the 27th Light Division, while also drawing attention to a characteristic feature of contemporary Hungarian military culture – one that would manifest itself in a more extreme form in later phases of the formation's history.

1. Defence at the Foothills of the Carpathians

The offensive launched by the Hungarian First Army took place – from the perspective of the Red Army – in the final phase of the Right-Bank Dnieper campaign, which had begun on 24 December 1943. This broader operational context provided the framework within which the First Army operated until July. Owing to the heavy losses sustained during the prolonged campaign, large-scale operations in the region temporarily came to a halt; Soviet forces instead adopted a defensive posture, and for

several months a form of positional warfare reminiscent of the First World War emerged.¹

The end of the Hungarian offensive was marked by a directive issued by the army command on 7 May 1944, ordering Hungarian formations, including the 27th Light Division, to take up and prepare defensive positions. The newly formed front of Army Group North Ukraine, which included the Hungarian forces alongside the German Fourth Army and the First Panzer Army, extended over approximately 450 kilometres between Kovel and Kolomea. Taken together, these three armies fielded nine German and two Hungarian corps – some thirty-four German and five Hungarian divisions in total, including ten armoured units and two Honvéd mountain brigades. Owing to the heavy losses sustained in previous engagements, most German divisions had been reduced to regimental strength; nevertheless, the total force under Army Group North Ukraine still numbered approximately 400,000 men.²

The possibilities for cooperation between the army group and the German forces positioned to its south were to a considerable extent determined by the outcome of the offensive: although the Hungarians pushed Soviet forces back approximately 30 kilometres from their original positions, they were unable to break out into the Ukrainian plains or capture the road running along their edge. As a consequence, communications between Army Group North Ukraine and Army Group South Ukraine remained cumbersome. For mutual support, the reserves of each army group would have been required to cross the Carpathians twice, covering a distance of roughly 500 kilometres before reaching their counterparts, while behind the Soviet lines there were virtually no natural obstacles to impede the concentration of substantial forces. This situation particularly affected the Hungarian First Army, which formed the southern flank of Army Group North Ukraine, with Army Group South Ukraine positioned adjacent to it.³

The Hungarian forces established their defensive positions largely along the line reached during the offensive: their front ran in the vicinity of Tlumach, lying east of Ottynia and west of Peczenizyn and Kolomea, before continuing more or less along

¹ Ungváry, *A magyar honvédség*, p. 263.

² Klaus Schönherr, 'The Battles for Galicia and the Beskid Mountains' in Karl-Heinz Frieser (ed.), *Germany and the Second World War*, viii: *The Eastern Front 1943–1944: The War in the East and on the Neighbouring Fronts* (Oxford, 2017), 676. p.

³ Magyarosi, 'The 27th Szekler Light Division', p. 13.

the western outskirts of Pistyn, Kosów, and Kutu. The VI Corps, to which the 27th Light Division was subordinated, constituted the right – that is, the southern – flank of the First Army and was responsible for a sector extending approximately 75 kilometres. Within the VI Corps, the light division represented the southernmost element.⁴ Opposite the VI Corps, according to Lieutenant General Ferenc Farkas, the enemy lines were held by elements of the Soviet 17th Guards Corps and the 74th Army Corps, while Árpád Róbert Berekméri maintains that, following the stalling of the Hungarian offensive, the sector facing the light division was manned by soldiers of the 2nd Guards Airborne Division.⁵

Once the main Hungarian line of resistance had stabilized, efforts were undertaken to reinforce the mountain passes, the Prut River valley, and the roads leading toward Sztanislau, while construction of a second defensive line was also commenced.⁶ Designated as the Prinz Eugen Line and positioned ten to fifteen kilometres to the rear, the latter lay primarily within the sector of the VI Corps, running north–south and passing through only two settlements: Ottynia and Majdan Sredni. Construction, overseen by German authorities, was carried out by Hungarian combat engineer and labour service units, with additional combat troops not actively engaged on the front line brought in to assist. However, constraints of time, equipment, and manpower meant that several sections of this secondary line remained incomplete or were never constructed.⁷

In addition, the Hungarian First Army relied on three further defensive lines constructed for the protection of Hungary's borders. The outermost layer of this system was the Hunyadi Line, a network of fortifications designed to secure the approaches to the Eastern Beskids – a mountain range within the Outer Eastern Carpathians – and to the Maramureş Mountains at the valley entrances; the already mentioned Prinz Eugen position was effectively located within its forward zone. The Hunyadi Line, whose northern terminus lay at Turka and southern terminus at Zabie – the latter situated in the rear of the 27th Light Division – did not constitute a continuous

⁴ Farkas, *Tatárhágó visszánéz*, p. 35.

⁵ Berekméri, *Lesz még kikelet!*, p. 116.

⁶ Farkas, *Tatárhágó visszánéz*, p. 30.

⁷ Sipos and Ravasz, *Magyarország a második világháborúban*, p. 373.

defensive line. Nevertheless, its construction – along with other efforts to fortify the rear areas behind the front – resulted in the development of a number of locations into all-round defensive strongpoints, including Ottynia, Nadwórna, Delatyn, Tatarów, Zabie, Krzyworównia, and Uscie Putilla.⁸ As Ferenc Farkas writes, the civilian population was ruthlessly employed in the construction of fortifications in the Carpathian foothills.⁹

Behind the Prinz Eugen and Hunyadi lines, another defensive line – the Szent László Line – was established, running along the former Polish–Hungarian border. Considered of secondary importance, it was based primarily on trenches and fortifications constructed during the First World War and, likewise, was never developed into a continuous defensive line. Serving as a forward defence for the Árpád Line, the Szent László Line secured the passes of the Eastern Beskids and the Maramureş Mountains. Finally, the system was completed by the Árpád Line, the most elaborate of all. Designed to block the Carpathian valleys, it incorporated pillboxes, anti-tank ditches, prepared firing emplacements, as well as shelters and bunkers for infantry.¹⁰ The First Hungarian Army thus could rely on a considerably robust layered defensive system, consisting of several successive lines developed to varying degrees and anchored in the fortifications defending Hungary's borders.

As noted above, within this system the 27th Light Division was assigned responsibility for a sector along the main line of resistance exceeding 30 kilometres in width on the southern flank of the VI Corps, divided between its two infantry regiments. The 27th Regiment held the left flank, with its battalions positioned southwest of Pistyn and Kosów along the Szeszory–Manastyrsko¹¹–Horod line, while the 57th Regiment was deployed further south, occupying positions along the Horod–Kuty–Rozen valley¹²–Rivna line. The defensive positions were established in mountainous terrain covered by dense forests and broken by narrow valleys, which severely limited visibility. At

⁸ Berekméri, *Lesz még kikelet!*, p. 118. Sipos and Ravasz, *Magyarország a második világháborúban*, pp 185-186.

⁹ Farkas, *Tatárhágó visszánéz*, p. 35.

¹⁰ Sipos and Ravasz, *Magyarország a második világháborúban*, pp 28, 412.

¹¹ On the maps contained in the VI Corps combat reports, the settlement is shown south of Horod, in close proximity to it.

¹² The name most likely refers to the valley in the vicinity of Tudiów (near Kuty), within which the settlement of Malý Rozhyn is situated.

the same time, valleys containing road axes, and thus offering potential avenues for armoured attack, also had to be secured.¹³ As the strength of the light division was insufficient to establish an adequate defence organised in depth, certain sectors of its defensive frontage were taken over by German units as early as 15 May 1944.¹⁴ These German forces were eventually organized into Brigade Schlebrügge, formed on 31 May. The brigade consisted of the German 168th and 367th Infantry Battalions, the 100th Pioneer Battalion, and the reconnaissance battalions of the German 7th Panzer Division and 16th Panzer Division, as well as one Hungarian unit, the 57/II Battalion.¹⁵ With German battalions assuming responsibility for certain sectors in the area of Kutý and Kosów, the light division was consequently able to rotate frontline personnel for rest while simultaneously retaining sufficient forces to constitute local tactical reserves available for commitment as required. As will be discussed, the presence of German troops exerted a direct effect on the combat activity of the Hungarian formation by enabling the establishment of a more adequately manned defensive posture and, in addition, facilitated measures that had an indirect impact on both the formation's combat readiness and morale.

The distribution of enemy troop strength across the 27th Light Division's front – or, in a broader sense, that of the VI Corps – was estimated on the basis of hostile activity observed in each area. Based on this assumption, it was concluded that the sector east of Kutý was largely neglected, and that Kutý itself was held by relatively weak forces. Somewhat stronger units were positioned opposite the Kosów valley, while significant Soviet forces were concentrated in the Pistyn and Jablonów regions.¹⁶ As far as the artillery, armoured formations, and air forces deployed in the area were concerned, the VI Corps command, according to contemporary sources, possessed somewhat more precise information. In terms of artillery, approximately 104 pieces were identified, including about 30 anti-tank guns and 22 multiple rocket launchers, known as 'Stalin

¹³ Berekméri, *Lesz még kikelet!*, pp 121-122.

¹⁴ Ocsóvszky, *Katonanaplóm*, p. 24.

¹⁵ Berekméri, *Lesz még kikelet!*, p. 122.

¹⁶ Colonel General Ferenc Farkas de Kisbarnak, 'A Tatár-hágó visszanéz c. könyv kézírata és a szerző visszaemlékezései az 1944/45-ös év eseményeire és hadifogságára 1944 márc.–1946 jan.' [The Manuscript of *The Tatar Pass Looks Back* and the Author's Recollections of the Events of 1944–45 and His Captivity, March 1944 – January 1946] (Hungarian Military History Archives, Budapest, TGY 3297).

organs.' Of these, around 20 guns and 12 anti-tank guns were positioned near Berhometh, Bukovina,¹⁷ while the rest were primarily deployed in sectors where the light division's units first engaged the Soviet forces after their arrival at the front: around Kutý, 28 guns were reported; 20 near Kosów; and 24 more in the Pistyn and Utoropy sectors. Soviet armoured units were limited to smaller tank forces, primarily consisting of T-34 tanks. Given that the terrain along the Corps' front was not suitable for large-scale armoured operations, they were primarily deployed to support local attacks. Regarding aerial activity, the Soviet airfield closest to the VI Corps' lines was located approximately 8 kilometres southeast of Kolomea, in Kornitz, where 60 to 70 aircraft were stationed. However, there was no particularly significant aerial engagement within the corps' sector: during the month of June, some 87 overflights were recorded, of which only two involved the dropping of bombs. The remaining incidents predominantly consisted of low-altitude flights accompanied by strafing fire, and Soviet aircraft dispersed propaganda leaflets over Hungarian positions.¹⁸

Regarding the composition and combat effectiveness of Soviet troops, several contemporary assessments are also available. In his memoirs, Captain László Eszenyi, who began serving as a staff officer in the Operations Section of the First Army on 26 May 1944, notes that the army command regarded the enemy leadership as competent and considered Soviet troops to be largely battle-hardened, with morale further strengthened by previous successes.¹⁹ Lieutenant General Ferenc Farkas, on the other hand, believed that the VI Corps under his command faced units primarily made up of older conscripts, many of whom were of Ukrainian nationality and drafted under duress. According to Farkas, these troops were poorly trained and insufficiently equipped, while tensions between Russians and Ukrainians exerted a considerable influence on their combat performance, or, in his words, their behaviour on the battlefield. The belief that the Russians viewed them as mere cannon fodder resulted in a noticeable lack of enthusiasm and fighting spirit; they were passive even when manning frontline positions, carrying out their tasks only when explicitly instructed to do so. On the other hand, a smaller group within the Soviet forces distinguished themselves with their strong fighting spirit and unwavering belief in victory. Farkas

¹⁷ It is likely that this refers to Berehometh, located approximately 15 kilometres southeast of Kutý (as the crow flies), rather than to the similarly named locality situated near Chernivtsi.

¹⁸ Farkas, *Tatárhágó visszánéz*, pp 44-45.

¹⁹ Eszenyi, *Trianoni nemzedék*, p. 289.

placed the officers, NCOs, and members of the Komsomol – the Soviet Union’s communist youth organization – into this category, convinced that their outstanding combat performance was deeply linked to their political beliefs, that is, a steadfast commitment to the Soviet system and the communist party.²⁰

The command of the VI Corps, however, did not limit its analysis to enemy personnel; it also produced an assessment of enemy tactics, which was incorporated into a memorandum issued to the troops, outlining the key principles upon which Hungarian defences were to be constructed. First, the memorandum warned that the enemy often targeted sectors deemed difficult for defenders to hold, with attacks frequently occurring at the junctions between two sectors. Second, it emphasized that once the Russians breached enemy lines, they would immediately dig in and lay minefields in front of their positions, making it essential to dislodge them before they could establish a foothold. Third, it addressed a phenomenon already encountered by Hungarian forces during the offensive: prior to significant military actions, the Soviets would often infiltrate a certain number of troops through gaps in the defensive lines, aiming to launch surprise attacks from the rear, in parallel with the main effort.²¹

As previously noted, the left flank of the 27th Light Division was held by the 27th Regiment, which was positioned south-west of Pistyn and Kosów along the Szeszory–Manastyrsko–Horod line, while the 57th Regiment was deployed in the southern sector, occupying positions running from south of Horod along the Kutý–Rozen valley–Rivna line. As far as artillery support for the infantry regiments was concerned, the 27/II Light Artillery Battalion’s 6th Battery was deployed at Pistyn, while the 4th, 5th, and 7th Batteries were positioned in the vicinity of Sokolówka, south-west of Horod. The 27/I Artillery Battalion’s 1st, 2nd, and 3rd Batteries were stationed in the Rozen Valley, approximately south-west of Kutý. Also deployed at Sokolówka was the IV/1 Towed Medium Howitzer Battery, which was subordinated directly to divisional headquarters situated at Zabie Słupiejka, located between Zabie and Krzywórnica. The light division’s anti-aircraft artillery was likewise positioned in the vicinity of the latter two localities, as well as at Jasienów-Górny.²² Changes in the disposition of the

²⁰ Farkas, *Tatárhágó visszánéz*, pp 46–47.

²¹ Farkas, *Tatárhágó visszánéz*, pp 31–32.

²² Berekméri, *Lesz még kikelet!*, pp 121–122.

infantry regiments did occur during May and June, in the period of positional warfare – for example, around 1 June, when certain sectors of the front were taken over by German units; nevertheless, the individual battalions were for the most part deployed within the same general area and periodically relieved one another along the line where the light division's front had been established at the end of the offensive.

Contemporary sources also provide descriptions of the front line of the Hungarian First Army. One such account comes from Captain László Eszenyi, who participated in the army commander's inspection of the Hungarian positions. Eszenyi's observations indicate that the main defensive line consisted of strongpoints situated approximately 200–300 meters apart, in front of which diversionary trenches, barbed-wire obstacles, and minefields had been emplaced. In addition, each strongpoint was equipped with shrapnel-proof shelters or bunkers, providing protection against enemy artillery fire. As regards the Hungarian artillery, battery (and limber) positions were likewise constructed to provide all-round defence. In their layout, several considerations were taken into account: on the one hand, it was essential that artillery pieces be protected from enemy infantry in the event of a breach in the line; on the other hand, the positions were designed to enable the guns to engage Russian tanks in the event of a major breakthrough at ranges of 600–800 meters by means of direct fire.²³ Although Eszenyi does not engage with this issue, certain shortcomings in the artillery were nevertheless present: for example, the mountain troops under the command of the VI Corps were equipped exclusively with 7.5 cm mountain guns, whose limited range in some cases prevented effective fire support.²⁴

Lieutenant General Ferenc Farkas also provided a detailed account of the defensive dispositions; however, his account was explicitly confined to the VI Corps sector, a point of particular relevance given that the 27th Light Division formed part of the corps' formations. Whereas a battalion was normally expected to defend a frontage of approximately one kilometre, Farkas notes that battalions deployed in the sector in question were required to hold frontages ranging from six to eight kilometres. Consequently, each kilometre of the front was held by approximately 20–25 rifles, two

²³ Eszenyi, *Trianoni nemzedék*, pp 297–298.

²⁴ Farkas, *Tatárhágó visszánéz*, p. 36.

light machine guns, and either a light mortar or an anti-tank rifle. The situation was somewhat better in valleys traversed by roads, at critical road junctions, or at other terrain features more likely to attract enemy attacks. In these areas, defensive positions were established at intervals of 60–100 metres, and each one-kilometre sector was defended by approximately 80 rifles, five light machine guns, and three machine guns. The most effective anti-tank guns were likewise concentrated at these points.²⁵

In certain cases, detailed descriptions of individual positions are also available. Ensign László Makrai offers an account of the defensive works near Pistyn, held for a period by the 27/I Battalion. The left flank of the line, Makrai writes, ran along a slope leading toward the settlement, across a hillside overgrown with tall trees and shrubs. The line then curved into a U-shape and continued on the opposite side of the valley through similarly rugged, forested terrain, with the outermost shingle- and thatch-roofed houses of Pistyn lying within the arms of the Hungarian position. As a valley accessible from the settlement led into the rear of the left flank, its entrance was reportedly sealed off by a minefield emplaced by Hungarian combat engineers.²⁶

In his memoir, Ferenc Tövisháti, who served in a bicycle company of the 20th Border Rifle Battalion subordinate to the 27th Light Division, presents another sector near Kutty. Here, the trench system ran along the slopes of the Carpathians, overlooking a flat plain, with a village visible in the distance. The German forces who had previously occupied the position had laid a minefield not in front of the line but to its rear, within the centre of a narrow strip of woodland parallel to the trenches; passage through it was possible only via designated gaps.²⁷

Reserve Ensign József Kiss (57/II Battalion) provides an account focusing on other aspects of his sector rather than its layout. The positions and bunkers he describes, most likely located south of Kutty, appear to have been constructed during the relatively quiet period following the initial offensive and were interconnected by communication trenches. As he observes, ‘If there was any [enemy] movement, we did not move on

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Makrai, ‘Ki tudja, merre’, pp 4-5.

²⁷ Ferenc Tövisháti, ‘Személyes élményeim a II. világháború utolsó kilenc hónapjából’ [My Personal Experiences During the Last Nine Months of the Second World War] (<http://www.hatarvadasz.hu/Irodalom/index5.html>) (21 May 2016).

the surface. We were so close to the Russians that, when food was being distributed, we could hear the clinking of their mess kits.’²⁸

Finally, changing tactical circumstances occasionally necessitated the establishment of temporary defensive positions. Imre Erdélyi (57/III Battalion) recalls that, while his unit was deployed in the vicinity of Tudiów, a light machine-gun section was overrun in a Soviet raid, resulting in the loss or capture of its personnel; consequently, an entire company was ordered to occupy the crest of a hill covered with trees and bushes. An improvised defensive position was established there, consisting of individual foxholes spaced at intervals of 15–20 metres, thereby creating a relatively thinly held frontage. The hilltop commanded a deep valley extending across the company’s frontage, the opposite edge of which lay just 60 metres away.²⁹ Although such positions were maintained only for the duration required by the specific task, numerous units established only slightly more complex defensive works along the mountain ridges between the settlements of Pistyn, Kosów, and Kutý, as well as in areas situated to the south of the latter.

An understanding of the 27th Light Division’s operations during this initial phase of positional warfare necessitates a brief examination of the challenges faced by its troops under the conditions outlined above. To this end, this analysis draws on a short study published in 1943 by Gábor Éltető, who later served in the formation, and whose observations provide a valuable contemporary perspective on the characteristics of mountain warfare during the Second World War.³⁰ Although it has already been noted that mountainous conditions favoured the Hungarians, as they prevented the Soviets from fully exploiting the advantages of their armoured forces, these same conditions also significantly complicated the defenders’ task. On the one hand, gorges, mountain passes, valleys, high-mountain areas, and basins each required an appropriate tactical approach; on the other hand, restricted lines of communication complicated resupply as well as command and control. As far as the establishment of the defensive system at battalion level is concerned, it was not possible to form a continuous first line owing to the uneven terrain, extensive forest cover, and the limited visibility resulting from

²⁸ Interview with József Kiss (Audio recording in the possession of Árpád Róbert Berekméri, Mureş County, Romania).

²⁹ Erdélyi, *Megnőttek a hegyek*, p. 69.

³⁰ See Gábor Éltető, ‘Védelem hegyvidéken’ [Defence in Mountainous Terrain] in *Magyar Katonai Szemle*, vol. xiii, Second Quarter (1943), pp 44–50.

these conditions. Consequently, the doctrinal approach was to occupy and establish strongpoints at key terrain features – whether to the front or on the flanks – that dominated specific parts of the sector. This arrangement could result in what Éltető described as a bold, unconventional main line of resistance – which, it should be added, in some cases was the only option under the prevailing conditions. The underlying assumption was that the all-round defensive capability of the individual positions would allow even small units to hold out and influence the battle, even after opposing forces had advanced beyond them. Accordingly, the elements of the main line of resistance were not merely intended to check the attack, but also to channel the enemy's advance into terrain favourable to the defenders, where the tactical reserve – acting as an offensive element – would launch a counter-attack. As stated in the cited article, this action was envisaged as leading to the annihilation of the attackers. In practice, however, the primary consideration was to prevent a breach of the line, whether through the recapture of terrain seized by the adversary or through the reinforcement of units already engaged in combat. For this to function, the reserve had to be deployed in such a way that, despite its distance from the forward line, variations in elevation, and the wooded terrain, it would remain capable of timely intervention at the decisive point.³¹

Mountainous environments also had a considerable influence on the employment of weapons. Owing to the constant availability of concealment and cover, weapons with high-angle trajectories, such as mortars, assumed particular importance, as they allowed defenders to strike targets shielded by obstacles or natural features. At the same time, forested terrain meant that Hungarian positions could frequently be taken by surprise and that enemy soldiers, benefiting from abundant cover, appeared only briefly, offering fleeting targets. Under these circumstances, light machine guns – in fact, magazine-fed weapons that were closer in function to automatic rifles – as well as submachine guns and hand grenades proved particularly effective. By contrast, machine guns were best employed on high ground ideally positioned for enfilade fire, or to dominate long valleys, barren slopes, and hillsides. Through the complementary employment of these weapons, a form of interlocking fire was envisaged, to be

³¹ Although termed *mobile defence* by Éltető, the concept outlined was essentially based on the same principles as the elastic defence developed during the First World War.

supplemented by artillery fire and various obstacles, such as minefields.³² Nevertheless, individual strongpoints often remained isolated from one another, since the stretches of ground between them lay under enemy observation, making movement possible only at night. This configuration complicated command and control, necessitating a high degree of initiative on the part of junior commanders, while simultaneously imposing considerable psychological strain on the troops manning the line, whose sense of isolation was generally alleviated only by night-time activities such as food distribution and inspection rounds conducted by their officers.³³

2. Manning the Trenches

Trench warfare in the Second World War – not unlike that of the First World War – imposed a distinctive routine on the soldiers, in which each part of the day was associated with specific activities. During the day, trenches were usually quiet even when opposing forces were located in close proximity to one another. As László Makrai recalls, enemy troops in the Pistyn sector were generally resting or cleaning their weapons, apart from snipers and lookouts. The sound of artillery fire, however, formed an integral part of this environment, as vividly illustrated by Hungarian lieutenant and war correspondent András Túri Turgonyi, who visited the 57th Infantry Regiment while on the Bukovina front, and later described the experience in an article: ‘The miraculous silence of the mountains is broken by the steady fire of artillery. Even while still far from the front line, one can already hear the hissing shells and their shrieking music. As one draws closer, another sound emerges – entirely different – resembling the slow crackling of fire, amplified a millionfold: the Stalin organ.’³⁴ Nevertheless: individual sections were rarely subjected to concentrated fire; instead, only brief salvos were typically directed at them. Enemy mortars, however, represented a considerably greater threat. To minimise the risk of drawing their fire and to reduce the likelihood of multiple casualties, soldiers were instructed to maintain a distance of at least five metres between individuals when moving across relatively

³² Éltető, ‘Védelem hegyvidéken’, p. 47.

³³ János Szabó, ‘Harc tapasztalatok védelemben’ [Combat Experiences in Defence], in *Magyar Katonai Szemle*, vol. xiv, Second Quarter (1944), p. 35.

³⁴ *Székelly Nép*, 9 July 1944.

exposed terrain; in many places, however, even this proved insufficient, and movement remained virtually impossible. Soviet troops also made frequent use of the ZiS-2 anti-tank gun and the ZiS-3 field gun, which were typically withdrawn from their firing positions after only a few rounds had been discharged. Among Hungarian troops, these weapons became colloquially known as ‘chin-boom’, a reference to the fact that the explosion of the incoming shell and the report of the gun followed one another in such rapid succession that it eliminated any opportunity to seek cover (the Germans referred to them as ‘Ratsch-Bumm’, while in English, projectiles fired by guns of this type were often called ‘whizz-bangs’). In addition, Soviet infantry at times fired prolonged bursts from submachine guns towards the Hungarian lines; Imre Erdélyi records that on one occasion he witnessed a soldier rising from the Soviet trenches and emptying magazine after magazine, while loaded weapons were passed to him from the trench to enable him to maintain continuous fire. Although the experience itself was not necessarily typical, Hungarian soldiers fighting on the Eastern Front frequently noted that enemy troops – regardless of branch of service – appeared to possess virtually inexhaustible supplies of ammunition. Under these conditions, not only was the movement of troops manning the front line restricted, but in many areas field kitchens also could not be positioned in close proximity to the front line, as the smoke they produced would have made them easy targets. Consequently, they were placed farther to the rear, and the main meal was brought forward after nightfall by the pack horses of machine-gun units.³⁵

In contrast to daytime conditions, service at night was considerably more demanding, partly because a range of activities, including enemy combat operations, were conducted during this period, and partly due to the tension generated by continuous observation and anticipation of such events. During the initial phase of the shift to defensive operations, tension was further heightened by Soviet nighttime loudspeaker propaganda broadcasts, which described the layout of Hungarian positions – thereby demonstrating the enemy’s detailed knowledge of these positions – delivered surrender appeals – commonly referred to by Hungarian troops as ‘messages from Marshal Zhukov’ – and featured defectors addressing their former comrades, portraying captivity in favourable terms and emphasising grievances they purportedly shared

³⁵ See Makrai, ‘Ki tudja, merre’, p. 5.

against their officers. The spoken messages were interspersed with popular Hungarian songs, intended to evoke nostalgia, undermine morale, or simply divert the soldiers' attention. László Makrai recalls that he made several attempts to destroy one such loudspeaker by firing mortar rounds at its presumed location, and in another Hungarian sector soldiers likewise attempted to drown out the broadcasts with machine-gun fire. However, after recognising that this merely resulted in a waste of ammunition, such attempts were abandoned, especially as the broadcasts gradually became a familiar part of the front-line soundscape.³⁶

In addition to the use of loudspeaker broadcasts, another characteristic feature of the night was the intensification of enemy fire. At Pistyn, after nightfall, Soviet forces routinely sent forward a tank accompanied by several riflemen from their lines, making use of buildings on the edge of the town for cover. From these positions, they maintained fire against Hungarian lines throughout the night before withdrawing to their own positions in the hours preceding dawn, approximately 800 metres behind the buildings in question. This pattern of activity persisted until the Hungarians eventually burned down the buildings.³⁷ A similar account is available for the sector south of Kutý, depicting the hours preceding dawn; the description captures the moment at which the intensity approached its peak, with tracer rounds intermittently criss-crossing the night, submachine-gun fire becoming almost continuous, and, as mortars eventually joined in, their repeated discharges producing gunpowder smoke that provoked persistent coughing.³⁸ It can be inferred from the sources that night-time fire often followed a recurring pattern, intensifying at some point between midnight and dawn – almost resembling preparatory artillery, mortar, and automatic-weapons fire – yet frequently without any subsequent infantry attack. This was most likely intended to prevent the defenders from drawing reliable conclusions from the intensity of fire as to whether an assault was imminent.

The frequency of attacks directed against the line of the 27th Light Division can be examined primarily on the basis of surviving summaries of contemporary operational reports. On 11 May, raid-like attacks were reported in the Kosów and Pistyn sectors,

³⁶ Makrai, 'Ki tudja, merre', p. 5. Bereczki, 'Honvéd voltam', p. 43.

³⁷ Magyarosi, 'The 27th Szekler Light Division', p. 22.

³⁸ *Székely Nép*, 1 July 1944.

while 12 May saw reports of similar actions near Kosów and Kutý. Over the course of these few days, hostile activity appears to have been concentrated primarily on Kutý and its surroundings: on 13 May 1944, Soviet forces attacked positions in the Kutý and Wiznicz areas on three occasions after artillery preparation, and on the next day launched another assault – again preceded by artillery fire – against the division's positions near Wizenka, approximately 4 km south of Kutý. All of these attacks were successfully repulsed. Between 19 and 27 May – a period of approximately nine days – no infantry engagements were reported along the front of the light division. Artillery activity, however, persisted; on 24 May, for example, Hungarian artillery rendered a Soviet tank inoperable in the Kosów area. The limitations inherent in the terseness of contemporary reports are well illustrated by the fact that the recapture of an elevation – Klewa 627, located south of Pistyn and west of the road running between Pistyn and Kosów – was recorded only on 28 May; however, prior to this, no explicit entries were made regarding when the enemy had occupied the position.³⁹

As for June, additional data are also available. For example, Lieutenant General Ferenc Farkas, having examined the situation across the entire VI Corps sector, concluded that Soviet forces were considerably more active than the Hungarians, with approximately three Soviet raids occurring for every Hungarian one. On the front of the 27th Light Division, most attacks were concentrated on the left flank, namely in the Pistyn sector; larger-scale raids also occurred in the Kosów Valley – for which no numerical data are provided – and five raids were recorded in the Kutý sector. Farkas further notes that these operations were not confined solely to the valleys but also took place along the mountain ridges connecting them.⁴⁰

From the surviving data, it is also possible to draw further conclusions about the intensity of enemy activity faced by the defenders in individual sectors. In the reports, sectors are typically identified by the name of a given settlement, and areas to the south or north are likewise described in relation to that settlement. Taking Pistyn as an example, the sector to its north was held by a unit from another formation, while to the south the next settlement used in the reports to denote a sector was Kosów, located approximately eight kilometres away. It may therefore be inferred that when the reports refer to Pistyn or to areas south of Pistyn, they concern a sector with a frontage

³⁹ Tájékoztató, May 1944.

⁴⁰ Farkas, *Tatárhágó visszánéz*, p. 37.

considerably narrower than the distance between the two localities. Within this area, attacks were recorded on 6 and 9 June by enemy forces of approximately platoon strength – no more than fifty soldiers in each case – and on the latter occasion the initial assault was followed by an attack of approximately battalion strength, that is, 200–300 men. On 12 June, a further assault was launched, with Kosów and Kutý likewise coming under attack. On 15 June, an enemy unit was repelled in close-quarters combat, and on 19 June there was a night attack involving some 50–80 Soviet soldiers. This was followed on 23 June by a renewed night-time attack, and subsequently by an assault on 26 June involving approximately 120 men, supported by several tanks. To the south of the settlement, attacks also took place on 8 and 11 June, the latter likewise supported by tanks, while on 16 June an attack was launched to the south-west of the settlement. Thus, between 6 and 26 June, the defenders of the wider Pistyn sector were subjected to enemy assaults on ten out of twenty-one days.

The Kosów sector, by contrast, remained considerably quieter. Here, company-strength attacks were repelled on 1 and 12 June, while on the 16 June it was reported that enemy forces had infiltrated in groups of 50–60 men in front of the light division's positions south of Kosów. An additional attack that took place during the night of 21–22 June in the vicinity of the settlement is recorded by Ensign Ocsóvszky; whereas the diary of the Chief of the General Staff for 21 June mentions only the prevention of enemy infiltration. The situation at Kutý was similar: an assault was reported on 12 June, involving an enemy force of approximately 100–200 men, and on 19 June an attack launched by some 100–150 Soviet troops was repelled after the commitment of local reserves. The five raids mentioned by Lieutenant General Farkas for this sector are, however, not necessarily inaccurate: as noted earlier, the diary of the Chief of the General Staff also refers to Soviet assaults in cases where no specific location is indicated. It should also be noted that combat activity in the Kosów and Kutý sectors was somewhat more intense than indicated here, as this assessment does not include offensive actions launched by Hungarian forces or routine patrolling. Nevertheless, even when these are taken into consideration, it did not attain the level of intensity observed in the Pistyn sector.

In addition to quantifiable data, the surviving sources also contain information on the manner in which such attacks unfolded from the perspective of the defenders. One

such example, mentioned earlier, is the attack that took place in the Kosów Valley in the early hours of 22 June and is described in the diary of Ensign Ocsovszky. This case is atypical insofar as the Hungarian side had already been placed on alert, having been forewarned; nevertheless, it serves as a useful illustration of how Soviet forces operationalised elements of the night-time routine they had gradually established. According to Ocsovszky, enemy infantry elements infiltrated towards Hungarian positions at approximately 3 a.m. while their propaganda loudspeakers continued to broadcast, and then launched close-range hand grenade attacks, bringing the positions under submachine-gun fire. In response, Hungarian artillery laid down a defensive barrage, which was followed by an infantry counterattack. In total, approximately 150 Soviet soldiers were killed, many were wounded, and 8–10 were taken prisoner, while Hungarian losses amounted to two wounded. The presence of 20–25 German wounded further suggests that a German unit was also involved in the fighting.⁴¹

A description of another attack dating from June 1944 is provided by the 27th Light Division's own war correspondent, Ensign Antal Jakab. The account is of interest for several reasons. As noted earlier, the positions of the light division did not form a continuous line; Jakab's account, however, illustrates how a Soviet attack unfolded against a relatively small strongpoint held by two sections of the 27/III Battalion, organized around a heavy and a light machine gun, respectively. Furthermore, the text suggests that the war correspondent spoke directly with the participants (or possessed a very thorough understanding of how such an engagement would typically unfold, although certain features of the account lend greater plausibility to the former assumption). Finally, the text is noteworthy precisely because it captures numerous routine aspects of this type of combat that soldiers had by then already mastered, the systematic treatment of which is largely absent from other sources.⁴²

On this occasion, the assault likewise took place at night. Soviet infantry exploited the increasingly intense fire that had been building since midnight to approach the barbed-wire entanglements in front of the Hungarian positions and attempt to cut through them. In several respects, the defenders' response was likewise typical: an automatic weapon opened fire on the relevant sector of fire in front of the line – each sector having been pre-designated and named after the home villages of the men in order to

⁴¹ Ocsovszky, *Katonanaplóm*, p. 41.

⁴² *Székely Nép*, 19 June 1944.

facilitate fire control at night – after which the engagement escalated, with small-arms fire, mortar fire from the rear, and hand grenades also brought into action. Equally indicative of battlefield routine was the fact that, after a time, the defenders temporarily ceased fire in order to assess the situation by the light of an illuminating flare, only to discover that the enemy was also attempting to infiltrate at a second point approximately 200 metres from the initial breach attempt. Once the attackers – estimated at approximately 100–120 men – were forced into retreat, machine-gun fire was directed in such a way as to channel them toward the mines in front of the position. Finally, it should also be noted that, although Soviet troops did not reach the immediate vicinity of the Hungarian positions, the defenders nevertheless carried out their tasks with full awareness of the danger posed by enemy hand-grenade attacks and small-arms fire, taking precautions, insofar as circumstances permitted, to minimise their exposure.⁴³

However, not all assaults could be repelled without casualties, and listening-post sentries, troops manning combat outposts, and officers conducting nighttime inspections remained exposed to risk even in the absence of direct attacks, as enemy prisoner-taking parties could still approach the Hungarian lines. For example, Ignác Tamás of the 57/I Battalion was wounded by a lone Soviet soldier who, during a nighttime guard change, fired a burst from a light machine gun into the Hungarian trench. In an ironic turn of events, the assailant was later captured and, having been wounded in the process, was transported to the same hospital to which Tamás himself had been evacuated for treatment.⁴⁴ Sándor Móring, who served in the 57/II Battalion and was assigned to a particularly quiet sector of the front – where even the customary nighttime firing was absent – nevertheless reported isolated incidents, which tended to occur when sentry duty was not carried out with sufficient vigilance. As he recalls in his memoir, on one occasion a hand grenade was thrown at their position, detonating just outside the trench along its edge. On another night, a sentry fell asleep beside his machine gun, which Soviet soldiers, having crawled forward, removed and carried off. Fearing that he would be court-martialled, the sentry set off in pursuit and eventually found the weapon in a nearby valley, where it had apparently been discarded in a gully

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Interview with Ignác Tamás of Plăieșii de Jos, Romania (In the possession of József Nagy, Harghita County, Romania).

after the assailants had tired of carrying it.⁴⁵ Finally, there were also instances in which indiscriminate firing appears to have been triggered solely by the nervousness of sentries, in the absence of any actual attack. As Elemér Damó records, such episodes tended to follow a recurring pattern. A typical sequence began when a sentry, believing that he had perceived movement in the nearby bushes, fired a shot. Given the difficulty of estimating the distance of muzzle flashes at night, personnel on the opposing side frequently interpreted the shot as evidence of an advancing enemy and returned fire. Gradually, automatic weapons, mortars, and eventually artillery were brought into action, and the firing usually subsided only after the discharge of a heavy 21-centimetre gun; the explosion of its projectile, marking the abrupt termination of the engagement, was often referred to as ‘slamming the door shut’ – drawing on a familiar and emotionally charged act associated with ending a dispute. Damó, who repeatedly witnessed such incidents while operating in no man’s land, noted that the trajectories of the tracer rounds – at times fired by both Hungarian and Soviet troops – generally intersected well above ground level, suggesting that the men firing them had taken cover at the bottom of their trenches and were therefore able to fire only at an upward angle. Such incidents could recur multiple times over the course of a single night, with the battalions concerned subsequently reporting to regimental headquarters that they had been subjected to an attack.⁴⁶

3. Patrols and Raids

Trench warfare also involved activities – partly offensive in nature – that contemporary Hungarian sources generally subsumed under the umbrella term *vállalkozás* (raid), denoting almost all operations conducted beyond the Hungarian main line of resistance. As accounts by soldiers of the 27th Light Division indicate, these activities varied considerably in character. Patrols were dispatched to conduct routine reconnaissance on the enemy’s positions, strength, intentions, and possible troop movements, as well as to gather information on patterns of Soviet reconnaissance activity in no man’s land (for example, indirect indicators such as discarded food tins

⁴⁵ Sándor Móring, ‘Megszálló és hadifogoly voltam a Szovjetunióban’ [An Occupying Soldier and a Prisoner of War in the Soviet Union] (Manuscript in the possession of Árpád Róbert Berekméri, Mureş County, Romania), p. 6.

⁴⁶ Damó, *Névtelen katonák*, pp 85-86.

could suggest emerging or intensifying enemy interest in a particular area). Attempts by smaller Soviet forces to establish control over specific zones through the construction of forward positions were also monitored, and the destruction of such positions following their identification likewise fell within this broad designation. In addition, the term encompassed raids in the strict sense of the word – that is, assaults conducted with relatively small forces and limited objectives against well-defined sections of the enemy line, aimed primarily at capturing prisoners and documents and, in some cases, destroying enemy fieldworks. These actual raids were generally carefully prepared and were occasionally preceded by brief mortar or artillery fire. Finally, the broadest interpretation of the term extended to all activities – or at least those involving infantry participation – intended to harass the enemy.

A relatively small number of ego-documents are available from soldiers of the 27th Light Division who participated in such operations, including memoirs and recorded interviews; naturally, a considerably larger number exist from those who learned of the raids from those directly involved. Among the former, Ensign István Becze (57/I Battalion), for instance, was decorated for his participation in such missions by both Hungarian and German authorities, receiving, *inter alia*, the German Iron Cross (Second Class). The most detailed account, however, is provided by Imre Erdélyi of the 57/III Battalion, who offers particularly insightful reflections on experiences of this kind.⁴⁷

As the sources suggest, raiding detachments were initially organized from volunteers, often assembled on a mission-by-mission basis. Evidence regarding willingness is available in only a single instance, suggesting that younger and unmarried soldiers were more inclined to take up such roles; however, the extent to which this constituted a general pattern remains uncertain. Contemporary experience, on the other hand, points to a different consideration: where initial raiding attempts ended in failure, such operations were generally viewed with little enthusiasm, and not even the praise, rewards, decorations, and promotions that typically followed successful actions were sufficient to counterbalance this reluctance. By contrast, one or two successful raids – particularly if carried out without casualties – were often enough to boost morale among the troops: whereas at first it was often difficult to find men for such missions,

⁴⁷ Berekméri, *Fegyver alatt*, p. 61.

after a successful operation there were more volunteers than could be effectively employed.⁴⁸ Based on the case of the 27th Light Division, two further considerations emerge: the personality of the officer commanding the detachment may have influenced willingness to volunteer, while notions of masculinity and a degree of professional interest also appear to have played a role. The example of Imre Erdélyi is illustrative in this regard. He initially volunteered to uphold the honour of his section; subsequently, so as not to be thought to have been afraid on the first occasion; and, as he later admitted, he gradually developed a genuine interest in such activities.⁴⁹ It should be noted, however, that participation in raids – as will be discussed below – ranked among the most stressful and hazardous activities.

The most common type of raiding activity consisted of patrols intended to monitor no man's land, during which – given the nature of the task – the group had to reckon with the possibility of engaging the enemy. Such activities were already emphasized during peacetime training, and some active-duty soldiers were later able to recall specific instructions, including the need to maintain complete coordination in the use of hand signals between the scouts and the rest of the group and to eliminate all sources of noise prior to departure (for example, anyone who coughed could not participate, as this would reveal the group's presence), among other requirements. Nonetheless, participation in such missions followed dynamics similar to those of other combat activities: most participants acquired the experience that enabled them to perform their tasks effectively only gradually.

As Imre Erdélyi recounts, his first participation in a patrol took place in the vicinity of Wiznitz, in hilly terrain, under the command of an ensign who, like the men in his charge, had very little combat experience. The mission was only partially successful: although the ensign marked the positions of two enemy machine guns on the map, on their way back to the Hungarian lines they inadvertently came upon a foxhole occupied by several Soviet soldiers. As the initial surprise wore off and the Soviets opened fire on them, the members of the patrol broke and fled. The ensign subsequently submitted his report without mentioning the flight; as Erdélyi later reflected, had they been more experienced, they might have captured eight or ten prisoners without firing a shot.

⁴⁸ Szabó, 'Harc tapasztalatok védelemben', p. 39.

⁴⁹ Erdélyi, *Megnőttek a hegyek*, pp 78-83.

During another, similar mission, involving approximately twenty men, the patrol was led by Lieutenant Colonel Sándor Gáll, commander of the 57th Infantry Regiment. Unlike the previously mentioned ensign, Gáll possessed considerable frontline experience, having served as a young officer in the First World War and also on the Don front in 1942–43. The lieutenant colonel reportedly frequently participated in such patrols, wearing an enlisted man's tunic; several sources also suggest that he was exceptionally brave, at times to the point of recklessness. The patrol under his command encountered a situation similar to the previous case, in that the group was again subjected to sudden enemy fire, whereupon the men threw themselves to the ground and attempted to crawl out of the range of Soviet weapons. Gáll, however, remained standing, aimed his German submachine gun at his own men, and loudly threatened to shoot anyone who attempted to retreat. His conduct appears to have been decisive: the fact that he remained upright under fire and was not hit emboldened the men, and his resolute orders succeeded in reversing the course of the engagement. The detachment split into two groups and, while maintaining continuous fire and advancing with loud battle cries, pushed the enemy back toward the road running along the ridge, where a small bunker had already been constructed. After a brief firefight, the Soviet soldiers ultimately abandoned the bunker and fled, leaving one dead behind. Gáll's party destroyed the field telephone lines and seized whatever equipment they could before breaking contact. Reflecting on Gáll's conduct, Erdélyi concluded:

It was then that I understood what a commander's personal example and steadfastness truly meant. No matter how much everyone feared Lieutenant Colonel Gáll – or indeed resented him for the ruthlessness with which he dealt with cowards and, especially, those suspected of desertion – there was, beyond all that, an undeniable and extraordinary courage in him. Even so, we did our best to stay as far away from him as possible.⁵⁰

Erdélyi was later transferred to a detachment specifically created to carry out such missions, under the command of Ensign Kálmán Zsakó – an officer in whom he placed particular trust. In his memoir, he recounts numerous subsequent operations, the details of which point, on the one hand, to a sustained personal engagement with this type of activity and, on the other, to an ongoing process of experiential learning – even if, at times, this amounted to little more than the recognition that presence of mind could enable him to overcome unexpected situations.

⁵⁰ Erdélyi, *Megnőttek a hegyek*, pp 80-81.

In addition to patrol activity, raids in the strict sense of the term – that is, attacks with limited objectives – were also carried out by the 27th Light Division. Of these, the best-documented – and arguably the most significant – is the operation that took place on 12 July 1944, which is attested in several independent sources. The account offering the greatest detail comes from Ensign Antal Jakab, the war correspondent assigned to the formation; it was also published in the newspaper *Székely Nép* and is particularly noteworthy because, while not entirely free from the rhetorical formulas of contemporary propaganda, it is primarily concerned with the technical details of the operation.

As becomes clear from the text, the attack was directed against Soviet lines established on the edge of a settlement. With regard to reinforcement and defence, such locations – owing to the presence of a road passing through them – received particular attention from Soviet troops, as they did from the soldiers of the light division. In this case, the attackers anticipated encountering what they referred to as ‘earth bunkers’ – that is, positions dug into the ground, roofed with logs, covered with layers of earth, and equipped with frontal embrasures, rising only slightly above ground level.⁵¹ The bunkers in question were connected by communication trenches, and certain houses within the settlement were also incorporated into the defensive system. It may further be inferred from the account that the attackers also took into consideration the possible presence or intervention of armoured vehicles.

The men who carried out the attack – thirty-six in number – are described as originating from Háromszék County; that is, they were drawn from the 57/I Battalion, most serving in mortar units. The attacking force was organised into three assault teams: one commanded by a reserve officer candidate, identified in current research as Károly Kovács (57/I Battalion), another by an ensign referred to only as ‘S.’, and a third by Sergeant András Huszár, whom Árpád Róbert Berekméri records as serving in the 27/I Battalion, 2nd Company. Huszár’s presence, if correctly established, is somewhat unusual, as ad hoc groups of this size were normally drawn from a single battalion rather than including personnel from two different regiments. The employment of mortar troops in such a role was likewise relatively uncommon, as they generally

⁵¹ See Rottman, *Soviet Field Fortifications 1941–45* (Oxford, 2007), pp 21–23.

served as supporting weapons crews and were not necessarily exposed to enemy small-arms fire; the actual assault was typically carried out by riflemen. However, instructions issued by VI Corps on 7 July 1944 directly encouraged such arrangements.

Jakab provides a detailed account of the events preceding the attack and, to some extent, of the assault itself. As he records, the three groups had already occupied their jump-off positions around midnight in a stream bed approximately 150 metres from the Soviet lines. This was accomplished amid sustained Soviet small-arms and mortar fire directed at Hungarian trenches throughout the night, a factor that appears to have been taken into consideration during the planning of the operation. The assault, which commenced at dawn, was preceded by a five-minute artillery and mortar bombardment; communication with supporting artillery and higher command was maintained through signal flares. Following the bombardment, the first group – Ensign Kovács and his fourteen men – advanced under the covering fire of their own automatic weapons and closed in on the Soviet defensive positions. Having thrown hand grenades, they entered the enemy trench, securing the first bunker relatively quickly and subsequently clearing two additional positions that had not been identified beforehand. Thereafter, their role was limited to providing supporting fire for the remaining groups, whose actions Jakab describes in broader terms, in the style of contemporary frontline dispatches:

Houses converted into strongpoints burn with bright flames in the valley. The charging men of Ensign S. and Sergeant András Huszár, illuminated by the firelight, appear like red devils. The same scenes unfold, the same enthusiastic momentum, perhaps even more intense, as success multiplies their efforts. Additional prisoners are taken and further enemy weapons captured. In less than half an hour, nine earth bunkers are blown apart.⁵²

Jakab's account suggests that the Soviets undertook a tentative attempt to retake the lost positions: two T-34 tanks advanced in their direction before halting roughly two hundred metres short. It further indicates that the attackers were equipped with infantry anti-tank weapons, the use of which they had only recently mastered – a detail that points to training activities conducted in the rear of the First Army, to be examined in greater detail below. It should be noted that, when close combat occurred, Soviet forces rarely engaged the attackers, instead withdrawing as quickly as possible toward their rear positions. Hungarian troops, for their part, did not linger in the captured positions

⁵² *Székely Nép*, 1 July 1944.

either; after destroying telephone lines and collecting abandoned documents and weapons, they likewise withdrew rapidly, as Soviet mortars and artillery were typically pre-registered on their own positions and, once their troops had reached safety, would bring down heavy, concentrated fire on them.

However, raiding and patrolling generally entailed particularly high levels of tension and strain, as evidenced by a diary entry in which Ensign Ocsovszky describes the only such action in which he participated. The detachment he joined comprised ten men and two mortar crews under First Lieutenant István Gencsy, platoon leader of the reconnaissance battalion's anti-tank gun platoon; their objective was to eliminate a fortified position consisting of three houses encircled with barbed wire and secured with anti-personnel mines. The tactical significance of the target derived from its proximity to the weakest sector of the Hungarian line. The group followed a relatively straightforward procedure: after preparatory mortar fire, Gencsy and Ocsovszky, armed with submachine guns, provided covering fire while the section advanced and cleared the buildings using hand grenades and incendiary grenades. The assault ultimately proved less demanding than anticipated: during the clearing of the first building, one Soviet soldier surrendered, while two others hastily withdrew from the adjacent structure while firing. Ocsovszky nevertheless recorded in his diary that he did not wish to participate in similar missions in the future, even though, in retrospect, he did not regard the action as especially challenging.⁵³ The weight of this statement must be assessed in light of the ensign's prior frontline experience. During earlier engagements he operated the battalion aid station in close proximity to combat, well within the effective range of mortar and, at times, small-arms fire. His remark that a single raid had been sufficient thus constitutes an important indication of the distinctive psychological strain inherent in such operations. The dangers associated with raids

are further demonstrated by the case of Imre Erdélyi, who – as can be inferred from his memoir – became exceptionally skilled in this type of activity: during a mission conducted on 10 August 1944 – in which he took part as a member of an ad hoc-assembled group – they ran into an ambush, where Erdélyi was wounded and, as part of the group fled, he and several of his comrades were taken into Soviet captivity.⁵⁴

⁵³ Ocsovszky, 'Katonanaplóm', p. 52.

⁵⁴ Erdélyi, *Megnőttek a hegyek*, pp 101-107.

Raids and patrol operations were closely monitored by the command authorities, who – drawing on accumulated experience – also sought to regulate this aspect of their troops' activity. On 7 July 1944, Lieutenant General Ferenc Farkas issued a relatively detailed directive on the matter. Farkas considered such regulation necessary for two principal reasons. First, on the basis of available reports, Hungarian raids – while often displaying individual bravery – were largely conducted at the level of small units, were undertaken along the entire front, and lacked overall coordination or a unified operational concept. It should be noted that Farkas himself did not explicitly address this latter factor. Second, Hungarian raiding activity was assessed as being markedly limited in comparison with that of Soviet forces, a passivity believed to have a detrimental effect on troop morale – or, as Farkas himself phrased it, on the soldiers' fighting spirit. More importantly, however, insufficient activity resulted in inadequate intelligence regarding enemy strength, dispositions, and intentions. Implicit in this assessment was the recognition that Soviet forces – in contrast to their Hungarian counterparts – were able to collect intelligence and act upon it with relative freedom, largely undisturbed by effective countermeasures. Farkas also drew two further conclusions regarding the Soviets: first, that the number of raids was likely correlated with the strength of enemy forces in a given area; and second, that heightened levels of such activity did not always indicate offensive intent; in fact, Soviet forces often launched attacks in sectors that had previously been largely ignored. In raising this question.

The order of 7 July sought to remedy the imbalance identified above primarily through the intensification of patrol and raiding activity. To this end, it stipulated that each battalion in the front line was to carry out one section-strength raid per week, while each committed division or brigade was to conduct one platoon-strength raid. In addition, the corps headquarters retained the authority to order larger-scale raids at its own discretion. Finally, it was also mandated that raids be carried out by groups formed



Fig. 5. The line of the 27th Light Division in July 1944.

The map section shows the positions of the 27th Light Division in July 1944, with five battalions (27/III, 27/II, 57/I, 57/II, and 57/III) deployed in the front line, and the 27/I Battalion at Sokółka. At that time, the formation's sector was considerably narrower than in May 1944, when its positions began at Szeszory, beyond the right flank boundary, and extended as far as Rivna, located south of the southern sector boundary. The main line of resistance, indicated by the thick blue line, largely corresponds to the situation in May 1944. The map also illustrates that several battalions of the formation were deployed along the ridges separating the valleys of Pistyn, Kosów, and Kutu.

[Military History Archives, Budapest, II. 1. m. hds. pság.1944. szept. VI. Hdt. harctudósítása 1944. júl. 24. – aug 10.]

from personnel of the cavalry, artillery, engineer, signals, and supply branches. The only concession made was that each arm was expected to plan and conduct actions within the scope of its specific functions – for example, signals units were tasked with disrupting enemy communications by damaging field telephone lines, while artillery units focused on the neutralization of enemy forward observers.

This provision, although intended both to increase the overall intensity of operations and explicitly to serve as a gesture of fairness by involving rear-area units in combat activities ordinarily undertaken by front-line infantry, also appears to reflect a significant limitation in Hungarian operational thinking. In assessing Soviet practice, the Hungarian command recognized that raiding often served a clear operational purpose – namely, to fix the defenders' attention on a given sector through concentrated attacks while ultimately launching an assault in an area where, owing to the absence of prior activity, such an attack was not expected. Despite this recognition, however, no requirement emerged on the Hungarian side for raids to be integrated into the preparation and execution of larger-scale operations. The solution was therefore sought not in coordinated action, but primarily in an increase in overall activity. Another limitation of the measure was that it entailed assigning operations in no man's land to service and support personnel who, while they may have acquired basic infantry skills at some point during their military service, generally lacked the level of training and, above all, the practical experience characteristic of front-line infantrymen.

The text of the order suggests that the corps command – and Lieutenant General Ferenc Farkas in particular – was aware of the aforementioned circumstances. Accordingly, it was stipulated that deficiencies in the combat training of personnel from non-combat units assigned to participate in raids were to be remedied in the days preceding the operation. This was to be achieved by detaching the squad or platoon selected for the task to the relevant sector of the front for a period of forty-eight hours prior to the raid, in order to acquire local knowledge of the terrain and conditions.

Whether this measure was consistently implemented remains unclear. However, the recollections of Ensign István Becze suggest that, in practice, the issue was often addressed at lower levels through the establishment of the aforementioned more or less permanent raiding detachments. Becze himself, who was appointed commander of one such group, served as a signals officer and noted that his men were drawn from various

service branches.⁵⁵ As members of a more or less permanent unit, the soldiers concerned would, over time, acquire experience relevant to the conduct of such operations.

Efforts to intensify raiding and patrolling activity generated resentment among soldiers serving in the trenches, even if their attempts to mitigate the associated risks did not evolve into a complex ‘live and let live’ system of the kind identified by Tony Ashworth in the context of the First World War. Ensign József Kiss and Sándor Móring likewise note that Captain Lajos Dala, commander of 57/II Battalion was notably solicitous of his men – to such an extent that Lieutenant Colonel Sándor Gáll personally ordered the battalion to carry out a raid, accusing Dala of failing to employ his troops actively at the front.⁵⁶ Sándor Gál, serving in the 2nd Company of the 27/I Battalion, reported that, on the orders of his company commander, he was required to fire a captured Soviet light machine gun from no man’s land in the general direction of his own lines in order to create the appearance of activity. As a result, intense exchanges of small-arms, mortar, and artillery fire developed on both sides, which the Hungarian side reported as a genuine attack.⁵⁷ Thus, the company commander in question managed to preserve the appearance of activity without committing his men to the corps-mandated raids that he regarded as superfluous. At the individual level, similar practices could also be adopted to evade the risks associated with such actions. Ensign Ferenc László, for his part, believed that one of the men of the 27th Field Training Battalion had fabricated the colourful accounts of his experiences while on patrol, which he subsequently recounted in his oral reports to the battalion commander.⁵⁸

4. Addressing Deficiencies in Weaponry and Training

For military historians, it is a simple truth that effective weapons instil confidence in troops, while inferior ones undermine it, just as training programmes that develop effective combat skills tend to reduce the disruptive effects of fear reactions in

⁵⁵ Becze, ‘Hol fogtatok ennyi orosz? [Where Did You Capture So Many Russians?] in József Gocz (ed.), *3006 év hadifogságban* [3006 Years in Captivity] (Sepsiszentgyörgy, 2001), p. 194.

⁵⁶ Móring, ‘Megszálló és hadifogoly’, p. 7.

⁵⁷ Gál, ‘Visszaemlékezéseim’, p. 4.

⁵⁸ Ferenc László, ‘Egy zászlós a második világháborúban’ [An Ensign in the Second World War] (Manuscript in the possession of Árpád Róbert Berekméri, Mureş County, Romania), p. 16.

combat.⁵⁹ One of the persistent problems of the Hungarian armed forces during the Second World War was the inadequacy of their equipment; although the Hungarian First Army was better equipped in this respect than earlier Hungarian forces, it remained inferior to both the Germans and the Soviets. Nonetheless, attempts were made even at the front to mitigate these deficiencies. Another crucial issue was training, which also suffered from shortcomings – due, among other factors, to material constraints. Following the halt of the April offensive, instructional programmes were organised in the rear areas to adapt the skills of the light division's personnel to the changing demands of the war, in some cases through the introduction of new weaponry.

As previously discussed, the men of the 27th Light Division were equipped, upon deployment to the front, with 8 mm M31 and M31/A rifles and carbines as standard service weapons – essentially modernised First World War-era firearms prone to jamming. From May 1944 onward, these weapons began to be replaced within the formation by the M35 repeating rifle; however, the extent and pace of its distribution among the troops remain unclear.⁶⁰ Although the new rifle offered improved reliability through its rotating-bolt mechanism, it nevertheless remained a manually operated weapon with an internal five-round magazine, requiring the bolt to be cycled before each shot.

Submachine guns, however, were considered far more important by the soldiers, a fact demonstrated by how frequently the subject appears in interviews and memoirs. Ensign Ocsóvszky first mentioned the issue in a diary entry dated 7 April 1944, shortly before departing for the front, noting that in Beszterce some soldiers from German units withdrawing from the front were selling equipment and weapons: a German submachine gun was offered for forty pengő – the Hungarian currency at the time – while a Soviet one could be purchased for thirty pengő. Hungarian soldiers, however, were strictly forbidden from acquiring such items.⁶¹ Sándor Fülöp, who served in the 33rd Border Rifle Battalion and fought in broadly the same area as the 27th Light Division during the April offensive, emphasised the difference in effectiveness between his own rifle – a Hungarian standard service weapon – and the submachine

⁵⁹ Lynn, *The Bayonets of the Republic*, p. 29.

⁶⁰ Berekméri, *Lesz még kikelet!*, p. 89.

⁶¹ Ocsóvszky, 'Katonanaplóm', p. 2.

gun in forest combat on the basis of his early combat experiences, while Péter Ambrus, interviewed decades after the war, highlighted the morale impact – in these exact words – of the latter.⁶² A briefing issued to the troops on 5 May 1944 concerning the fighting to date also touched on the subject, emphasising that there was no cause to fear the Red Army soldiers' submachine guns; however, it remains unclear whether any specific countermeasures were recommended.⁶³

Ensign Ocsovszky explicitly documented how acutely the soldiers felt the shortage of these weapons, a deficiency they initially sought to alleviate by capturing individual pieces from the enemy. In his diary entry of 11 May, he recorded that a submachine gun seized during a counter-partisan operation went to Captain Brúnó Horváth, commanding officer of the Bicycle Company of the Reconnaissance Battalion; in a subsequent entry written a few days later, he noted that men of the light division were willing to devote extended periods to ambushing individual partisans in order to obtain their weapons capable of automatic fire. The situation improved somewhat on 15 May 1944, when the troops received an unspecified number of German submachine guns. This development, however, also generated resentment, as a portion of these weapons never reached frontline units but was instead allocated to personnel of the divisional headquarters – that is, to men perceived by those in the trenches as being in the rear.⁶⁴ The persistence of the problem is illustrated by the experience of Imre Erdélyi of the 57/III Infantry Regiment, who, despite regularly participating in patrols into no man's land and raids against enemy positions, had still not been issued a submachine gun as late as 10 August but had to borrow a Hungarian-manufactured one before taking part in a raid.⁶⁵

Another important issue affecting combat effectiveness was anti-tank defence. In response to the widespread shortage of effective anti-tank weaponry among frontline formations, the Ministry of Defence issued a directive on 28 April 1944 mandating the reorganisation of all regimental anti-tank companies at the front into heavy anti-tank companies, a measure that necessarily applied to the 27th Light Division as well. The units in question were to be equipped with German-supplied 75 mm PaK 40 anti-tank

⁶² Fülöp, *Elindultam Kolozsvárról*, p. 49. Interview with Péter Ambrus of Târgu Mureş, Romania (In the possession of Árpád Róbert Berekméri, Mureş County, Romania).

⁶³ Ocsovszky, 'Katonanaplóm', p. 19.

⁶⁴ Ocsovszky, 'Katonanaplóm', pp 22-26, 40.

⁶⁵ Erdélyi, *Megnőttek a hegyek*, p. 101.

guns, with responsibility for the provision of the requisite vehicles resting with the Ministry. Within the light division, however, the number of PaK 40 guns allocated proved sufficient to re-equip only the anti-tank company of the 27th Infantry Regiment. The first platoon of the company arrived in the operational area as early as 7 May, while the remaining two platoons were reorganised *in situ*. In contrast, the 57th Infantry Regiment retained its original armament – namely, the 37 mm German-made 36M and the 40 mm Hungarian-made 40M anti-tank guns.

Along the First Army's line – and thus likely in the valley sectors of the light division as well – anti-tank defences were organised in depth, extending from forward positions to the artillery emplacements; around Kosów (Kosiv), for example, twelve 75 mm and twenty 40 mm anti-tank guns were deployed. According to Ensign Ocsovszky's diary, the anti-tank gunners of his battalion performed to an exceptionally high standard; following an inspection on 27 May 1944, the corps commander expressed his full satisfaction with their performance.⁶⁶

On 12 May 1944, the German higher command further supplied the light division with two truckloads of man-portable anti-tank weapons. These included Panzerschrecks, reusable 88 mm anti-tank rocket launchers measuring approximately 1,638 mm in length and weighing around 9.5 kg, as well as Panzerfausts, single-shot recoilless weapons consisting of a steel tube approximately 89 cm in length with a 44 mm bore, fitted with an over-calibre shaped-charge warhead at the muzzle. The effective range of the former was approximately 137 metres, while that of the latter was limited to around 30–40 metres.⁶⁷ As Ensign Ocsovszky recorded in his diary, the destruction of an enemy tank was reportedly rewarded with 1.8 hectares of land; his entry further suggests the hazardous nature of such feats by noting that failure might instead result in a wooden cross, the customary field grave marker for fallen soldiers.

As far as the artillery was concerned, it likewise suffered from a number of deficiencies, as was the case with the other arms. The 1st and 2nd Batteries of the 27/I Artillery Battalion were equipped with 8 cm M5/8 field guns, weapons that no longer met the requirements of the Second World War. Moreover, all of the formation's artillery pieces were horse-drawn, a factor that significantly impeded their mobility,

⁶⁶ Ocsovszky, 'Katonanaplóm', p. 32. For a discussion of the Hungarian First Army's anti-tank defence, see also Szabó and Számvéber, *A keleti hadszíntér és Magyarország 1943–1945*, p. 55.

⁶⁷ Gordon L. Rottman, *World War II Infantry Anti-Tank Tactics* (Oxford, 2005), pp 52–54.

particularly in the mountainous terrain of Galicia. As noted by Árpád Róbert Berekméri, certain artillery pieces at the front were provided with German-supplied half-track vehicles for towing purposes, and the two light gun batteries of the 27/I Artillery Battalion were also intended to be re-equipped at Worochta; this, however, did not occur owing to the fighting around Delatyn and Mikuliczyn. Some artillerymen nevertheless recalled that re-equipment took place at a later stage: Lieutenant Zsigmond Kun, commanding officer of the 1st Battery of the 27th Artillery Regiment, recounted that the Hungarian guns of his battery were replaced with German 10.5 cm light howitzers, the standard field artillery piece of the Wehrmacht. Ede Poráczky similarly claimed that the light division received twelve such guns, which, according to his recollection, were issued at Tatarów sometime prior to the formation's withdrawal from Galicia.⁶⁸

Despite the aforementioned deficiencies, the artillery nevertheless enjoyed a rather favourable reputation among the troops, partly owing to the use of the fire-control instrument developed by Kálmán Ternegg, which allowed batteries to shift and concentrate fire within minutes, and partly owing to their accuracy. This perception was likewise echoed in soldiers' lore: when asked how German and Hungarian artillery would destroy a street lamp, the answer – clearly exaggerated – was that the former would use the combined fire of ten batteries to destroy the area, lamp included, whereas Hungarian gunners would fire two registration shots – one short and one long – before striking the target precisely with the third.⁶⁹

The importance of the operational effectiveness of the artillery and the confidence it inspired cannot be overstated. When conducting an assault with adequate artillery support, infantry units were able to advance with minimal concern for cover, in some cases even attacking in an upright formation, while opposing forces were largely incapable of mounting meaningful resistance; this, in turn, undoubtedly had a significant impact on morale.⁷⁰ Elemér Damó, however, also observed that in the Hungarian case precision was not merely a matter of skill, but one of necessity. During the early days of the Hungarian First Army's deployment to the front, artillery units

⁶⁸ Interview with Zsigmond Kun (in the possession of Árpád Róbert Berekméri, Târgu Mureş, Romania). Interview with Ede Poráczky (in the possession of József Nagy, Remetea, Romania).

⁶⁹ Damó, *Névtelen katonák*, p. 60.

⁷⁰ László Magyar, *Tanmese a m. kir. honvédség életéről csapattiszti szemmel 1920–1945'* [A Parable about the Life in the Royal Hungarian Army as Seen by a Company Officer, 1920–1945] (Hungarian Military History Archives, Budapest, TGy 3171), p. 94.

were still able to fire relatively freely; as time went on, however, strict limitations were introduced: light guns were restricted to a maximum of 25 shells per day, and medium artillery was allowed only five. Any firing beyond these limits required authorization from the corps artillery commander.⁷¹

As can be concluded, the armament of the 27th Light Division thus changed to some extent after it had been deployed to the front. Nevertheless, several structural shortcomings characteristic of the contemporary Hungarian Army – and not limited solely to weaponry – persisted: the infantry continued to move primarily on foot; supply relied on horse-drawn wagons with limited cargo capacity; and a portion of the artillery was still horse-drawn. Consequently, the formation was only limitedly suited to the requirements of mobile warfare, even on terrain where such operations would otherwise have been feasible.

Sources further indicate that perceptions of material insufficiency also endured. For example, in his diary, Ensign László Ocsovszky – admittedly at a moment when doubts arising from a variety of other factors also weighed on him regarding both his formation's fate and that of the country – continued, even after their redeployment to Transylvania, to question whether their anti-tank capabilities would be sufficient against Soviet armoured forces operating on terrain suitable for their employment. Nonetheless, while in Galicia, many soldiers believed that, with the weapons available to them, holding the Carpathians against the Red Army was both a feasible operational objective and a realistic war aim.

The relationship between military training and combat efficiency has long been a subject of interest for both military professionals and military historians, including in the case of Hungarian soldiers who fought in the Second World War. As noted earlier, Captain László Eszenyi, who served at the headquarters of the Hungarian First Army in 1944, identified a major deficiency in Hungarian military training in its failure to expose soldiers to exercises that realistically simulated the effects of machine-gun and artillery fire. He attributed the panic that frequently accompanied soldiers' initial combat experience – their baptism of fire – in large part to this inadequacy. Similarly,

⁷¹ Damó, *Névtelen katonák*, p. 60. See also: Fabinyi, 'A M. Kir. 13. Honvéd Gyaloghadosztály', p. 128.

military historian József Nagy has expressed doubts regarding the practical effectiveness of Hungarian troop training.⁷²

The question merits attention from several perspectives. First, it was addressed by the soldiers themselves, who – drawing on their combat experience and, in some cases, on comparisons between troops from different fronts – reflected on the issue, albeit often in the form of brief observations rather than systematic analyses. Second, research on the 27th Light Division indicates that training did not cease with mobilisation; instead, efforts to continue training were undertaken at the front as late as 1944.

In connection with the deployment of the Hungarian First Army to the front, officers with prior experience on the Eastern Front who were preparing for redeployment in 1944 observed that the troops were better trained than those who had previously served with the Second Army in 1942–43. However, it remains unclear whether this assessment reflected a comparison of pre-deployment conditions alone or a more general judgment regarding the overall quality of training among First Army personnel. A higher degree of organizational cohesion, more effective communications, and superior provision of food, ammunition, and medical services were also emphasized, and it was noted that commanders led units in a more active manner and enjoyed greater operational flexibility than those who had fought on the Don Front.⁷³

Whereas the opinion cited above related to troops prior to their deployment, in the case of the 27th Light Division an additional contemporary assessment has survived. Written by Ensign László Ocsovszky, it evaluates the performance of the division's soldiers following their initial combat engagements. One aspect of the troops' state of preparedness concerned their physical fitness, a factor of particular importance given that the Hungarian Army during the Second World War relied overwhelmingly on movement by foot. In principle, soldiers were expected to be capable of covering a daily distance of 30 kilometres and still remain fit for combat at the end of the march. In practice, however, this distance frequently reached 40–42 kilometres.⁷⁴ On the basis of their performance in April and May, Ocsovszky concluded that the Szekler soldiers

⁷² Nagy, *Békeévek*, p. 50.

⁷³ János Bene and Péter Szabó, *Huszonnégyes honvédek a Kárpátokban. A m. kir. 24 gyaloghadosztály története 1944–1945* [The Twenty-Fourth Infantrymen in the Carpathians: A History of the Royal Hungarian 24th Infantry Division, 1944–1945] (Nyíregyháza, 1997), p. 25.

⁷⁴ Damó, *Névtelen katonák*, p. 39.

demonstrated considerable resistance to fatigue and adverse weather conditions and coped with these demands remarkably well.

As far as combat performance was concerned, however, his assessment was markedly more critical. Focusing primarily on the reservists – that is, men who had completed their military service in the Romanian army and had received only a brief period of retraining in the Hungarian forces – he identified the following deficiencies:

- they did not cope well with unexpected combat situations;
- during withdrawals, they failed to provide fire support to their comrades unless explicitly ordered to do so – a shortcoming that Ocsovszky attributed to a lack of group solidarity;
- they reacted very strongly to the sound effects of firearms, particularly sustained automatic fire from submachine guns and machine guns, rather than to heavier detonations such as artillery or mortar impacts;
- they were prone to fall back easily; nevertheless, firm leadership could redirect them even under intense fire;
- rather than engaging targets in a tactically meaningful manner, they showed a tendency to fire indiscriminately in the direction of the enemy – especially when an officer was nearby – as a form of performative compliance aimed at projecting effectiveness;
- in the absence of combat or audible enemy fire for one or two days, they frequently disregarded even basic precautions, at times wandering unarmed for hours in the mountains;
- when wounded, they tended to lose morale quickly and to seek pity, in contrast to soldiers in active service who tended to embellish accounts of their wounding while downplaying the severity of the injury itself.⁷⁵

Ocsovszky attributed these shortcomings in part to the rather brief training of the reservists and in part to what he described – uncritically drawing on the already discussed negative preconception prevalent among a segment of officers from interwar Hungary – as the corrupting effects of Romanian rule. It is noteworthy, however, that

⁷⁵ Ocsovszky, 'Katonanaplóm', pp 25-26.

by the time these observations were committed to paper on 15 May 1944, a considerable number of officers from Ocsovszky's unit, the 27th Reconnaissance Battalion, had already been reassigned to an anti-tank training course.

Available sources indicate that following the First Army's transition to a defensive posture, a training system was put in place that was integrated into the broader framework of the German Army Group North Ukraine. As part of standard practice, each brigade- or division-sized formation established its own training camp. These camps – organized as training battalions – served a dual purpose: on the one hand, they were tasked with training personnel arriving with replacement units; on the other, they provided frontline soldiers with instruction in the use of newly issued weapons, including Panzerfausts, Panzerschrecks, and anti-tank guns. To improve training efficiency, Hungarian formations were paired with German units in what were termed training partnerships. The minimum authorized strength of a training battalion was set at 250 men, and such units were organized as permanent, independent formations. According to the recollections of Ferenc László – who arrived at the front with a replacement unit in June 1944 – the younger members of his unit, who were presumably active-service soldiers, were immediately assigned to frontline duties. The remaining personnel, likely reservists, were instead transferred to the training battalion.⁷⁶

At the divisional level, in addition to those detailed to the training camps, all tactical reserves were required to conduct weekly live-fire exercises under conditions intended to approximate the circumstances under which the respective reserve formations were most likely to be employed. In addition, Ensign László Ocsovszky's diary contains a brief reference to the existence of a 1,200-strong assault battalion, for whose medical support he was responsible from 16 June 1944. Beyond this brief reference, little is known about the unit. According to the diary, the battalion in question was scheduled for inspection by Field Marshal Walter Model, Commander-in-Chief of Army Group North Ukraine, on 23 June; however, this inspection did not take place. A subsequent entry dated 26 June indicates that the unit was regarded at that time as unfit for operational employment owing to insufficient training.⁷⁷ Finally, the VI Corps maintained an assault training course at Tatar Pass for young officers and junior non-

⁷⁶ László, 'Egy zászlós', 18. p.

⁷⁷ Ocsovszky, 'Katonanaplóm', pp 42-43.

commissioned officers, while at the army group level Army Group North Ukraine operated an officers' training camp in Stanislau and an anti-tank training course in Pniów.⁷⁸

In the case of the Army Group-level training establishment (Heeresgruppe Kampfschule) operating in Stanislau, relatively detailed information has survived. The assault course conducted there, for instance, lasted twenty days, and its curriculum can be reconstructed with some precision on the basis of the surviving training plan. The programme comprised highly specific tasks and progressed from elementary drills to increasingly complex exercises. First, it focused explicitly on a range of tactical procedures, beginning with basic tactical drills such as a section advance by rushes under suppressive light machine-gun fire, followed by coordinated advances by two sections on either flank under covering fire. The employment of section-sized assault forces against enemy positions – possibly machine-gun nests – with mortar support was also addressed, as were coordinated attacks in which two sections, equipped with a heavy machine gun, a light mortar, two light machine guns, and two submachine guns, advanced to close-combat range. The preparation of a detailed fire plan and effective fire control to ensure coordination were emphasised as well. Finally, exercises included the assault of two enemy machine-gun positions by two sections operating with the support of an assault gun or a tank. Some of these procedures were, of course, already familiar to the soldiers, perhaps with the exception of cooperation with armoured units; the training was primarily intended to ingrain them through systematic repetition.

The second part of the programme concentrated on preparing troops for operations conducted under artillery, mortar, or machine-gun fire. This phase likewise followed a graduated progression towards more demanding scenarios, beginning with the effective use of natural cover, such as ditches, sunken roads, and trees. Training then encompassed the crossing of undulating terrain intermittently swept by fire, involving a sudden dash forward to the valley floor followed by a cautious approach to the next crest. Additional activities included allowing vehicles to pass through a road junction under fire, as well as emerging from woodland subjected to sporadic fire. A comparable scenario addressed movement out of a village; in this case, however, rather

⁷⁸ Farkas, *Tatárhágó visszanéz*, p. 39.

than a direct exit through the built-up area, bypassing it was recommended wherever possible.

The third section focused on anti-tank combat. Like most armies fighting in the Second World War, the Hungarian Army, alongside other anti-tank measures, had already employed tank-destroyer teams prior to this period. From 1942 onward, infantry companies – as well as hussar, bicycle, and ski companies – were required to establish an eight-man tank destroyer squad composed of two three-man tank destroyer teams (designated in Hungarian as *járőr*, equivalent to the English *patrol*). Each team was equipped with anti-tank mines, incendiary bottles, and magnetic charges sufficient for the destruction of two armoured vehicles. The primary objective of these tank destroyer teams was the ambush and destruction of enemy armour, particularly in situations where organic anti-tank weapons were not immediately available and enemy armoured vehicles closed to very short range. Such actions typically unfolded as coordinated engagements in which accompanying enemy infantry were suppressed by covering elements, the tank crew was blinded with smoke, and the vehicle was subsequently immobilized by hand-delivered anti-tank mines placed directly in front of a track or by magnetic charges attached to the hull – usually from the rear. These actions were normally undertaken by tank-destroyer teams concealed in foxholes positioned along the tank's axis of advance and carried out at extremely close range from its blind zones, usually after the vehicle had passed over their positions. Once the tank had halted, the attackers were instructed to climb onto it, blind its crew by covering the vision ports and periscopes, disable its machine guns with metal bars, jam the turret ring with wedges, force open the hatches with crowbars or explosives, and finally destroy the main gun by placing demolition charges inside the barrel.⁷⁹ Certain elements of this earlier training reappeared in this context; however, instruction in the use of newly introduced portable anti-tank weapons also played a significant role. Soldiers practiced the destruction of armoured vehicles that had penetrated the main line of resistance, as well as combat against enemy infantry riding on or accompanying armoured vehicles. The exercises of the final phase were conducted at platoon and company level. At this stage, units trained in urban combat and forest warfare, the preparation of defensive plans, and night manoeuvres. Finally, although this is not

⁷⁹ Rottman, *World War II Infantry Anti-Tank Tactics*, pp 26-27. Ferenc Zentai, 'Páncélromboló kiképzés' [Anti-armour Training] in *Magyar Katonai Szemle*, vol. xiv, Second Quarter (1944), p. 82.

entirely clear from the surviving documentation, the training also appears to have included exercises in penetrating enemy lines, as well as in conducting counterattacks intended to repel such penetrations.⁸⁰

With respect to participation in the various training programmes, the available evidence is largely indirect. It nevertheless indicates that during periods when battalions were withdrawn from the front line for rest, a substantial number of their officers were detached for specialized instruction. Ocsovszky, for example, records that many of the officers of the 27th Reconnaissance Battalion were assigned to such instruction, while Péter Ambrus makes a comparable observation in relation to the 57/III Battalion.

5. Coping with Fear

During the initial engagements of the 27th Light Division, several units of the formation reacted to real or perceived threats with uncontrolled fear – a response that, in retrospect, they themselves often considered unjustified. Such reactions did not recur, or did so only very rarely, after the April–May offensive; nevertheless, fear remained a constant part of soldiers' lives throughout their time at the front – and, in a sense, a continuing concern of the military authorities. Soldiers – particularly those employed in combat roles – experienced it to varying degrees, observed its different manifestations, often attempted to conceal it, and, for lack of better means, wrote about it; the authorities, for their part, sought to prevent it from undermining combat effectiveness.

One of the fear-eliciting factors mentioned in diaries and memoirs was artillery fire, despite the fact that, in contrast to the First World War – in which it accounted for nearly 60 per cent of all wounds – combat in the sector held by the 27th Light Division does not appear to have been dominated by artillery. Elemér Damó, noting that he himself had not experienced prolonged artillery preparation – which he defined as lasting no more than thirty minutes – identified artillery fire as the source of one of two distinct forms of fear he encountered at the front. He attributed its effect both to the time delay between the firing of the guns and the arrival of the shells – a period he

⁸⁰ For the Army Group's training programme, see: Farkas, *Tatárhágó visszafoglalása*, pp 38-41.

termed the moments of terror – and to the sensory and psychological impact of the actual explosions. Even after experiencing only a brief salvo directed at them, consisting of eight to ten rounds, Damó claims that he required at least approximately five minutes to regain his emotional equilibrium.⁸¹

Ensign László Ocsovszky approached the issue from various distinct perspectives. Initially, when his experience was confined to the casualties brought to him, he adopted a detached tone, noting only that artillery strikes typically resulted in fatalities and blast injuries. By contrast, when describing his own experience of a salvo of twenty to thirty rounds – the nearest shell exploding approximately fifty metres from his position – his account closely resembled that of Damó, emphasizing both the psychological impact of confronting the sheer scale of the destruction and the pervasive uncertainty among those present as to whether another salvo would follow. He also noted, however, that when they had come to expect shelling and were able to seek shelter before the impacts, the bombardment caused no injuries.⁸²

This pattern changed on narrower sections of the front, where fighting intensified once the enemy succeeded in capturing and holding a short but tactically significant sector of the Hungarian line. Such a situation developed in the Horod area, where Soviet forces broke into Hungarian positions on 25 June 1944. According to Ocsovszky's notes, by 28 June the Hungarian side alone had allegedly fired around 1,600 artillery rounds at various targets along a relatively narrow sector. Two days later, in an entry dated 30 June, he described an intense artillery duel and noted that Hungarian guns maintained continuous fire for an hour against a height occupied by Soviet troops – a barrage that was deafening even for the friendly forces themselves.⁸³ In addition to conventional artillery, multiple rocket launchers were also employed by both sides at different stages of the engagement. The use of such firepower produced effects reminiscent of the First World War; Ocsovszky reported having to treat particularly severe and crippling wounds, while the hill itself – almost entirely devastated by artillery fire – appears in apocalyptic descriptions in several soldiers' recollections. Most of these accounts likewise recall the artillery preparation

⁸¹ Damó, *Névtelen katonák*, pp 84-85.

⁸² Ocsovszky, 'Katonanaplóm', p. 91.

⁸³ Ocsovszky, 'Katonanaplóm', pp 44-47.

preceding the recapture of the height, the acoustic effects of which were further intensified by the surrounding mountains.

Mortars, however, were employed far more frequently than conventional artillery. As noted in a defensive briefing issued by the VI Corps, Soviet troops possessed them in large numbers and were able to deliver rapid and accurate concentrations of fire.⁸⁴ During attacks, they were particularly feared because of the severe bodily damage inflicted by the shells, and also because the enemy proved highly effective in neutralizing heavy weapons – mortars and machine guns alike – by locating them by sound and then engaging them with mortar fire.⁸⁵ When manning defensive lines, mortars likewise inspired fear, as Soviet forces maintained continuous observation of Hungarian positions and responded to any detected movement with concentrated fire. In some cases, soldiers compelled to move across open terrain also had the impression that they were effectively being hunted by Soviet mortar crews, while attempting to outrun incoming rounds.⁸⁶

Experience contributed, to some extent, to overcoming fear. It was quickly learned that mortar rounds descended almost vertically and that their fragments dispersed outwards and upwards at an angle of approximately 30 degrees. Consequently, if a man lay flat on the ground and the shell exploded at a distance of more than 1–1.5 metres, he might escape with nothing more than temporary ringing in the ears. Protection could likewise be afforded by a hastily dug firing position or even by everyday objects such as a haversack – thrown in front of the body to shield the head – or an entrenching tool used for the same purpose.⁸⁷ Nevertheless, immobilisation under mortar or artillery fire undoubtedly remained among the most severe fear-inducing situations encountered by soldiers in combat, particularly as some men claimed to be able to recognise, by sound alone, the moment when mortar rounds reached the apex of their trajectory and began their descent towards them (a whistling sound indicating no immediate danger, as opposed to a rushing one, signalling an

⁸⁴ Farkas, *Tatárhágó visszánéz*, p. 32.

⁸⁵ Ocsóvszky, 'Katonanaplóm', p. 24. Erdélyi, *Megnőttek a hegyek*, p. 72.

⁸⁶ Makrai, 'Ki tudja, merre', p. 5. Ocsóvszky, 'Katonanaplóm', p. 46.

⁸⁷ Damó, *Névtelen katonák*, p. 59. The practice of throwing down one's haversack and hitting the ground in such a way as to protect one's head is mentioned in an article published in *Székely Nép*, 2 August 1944. The personal items carried in a haversack – including tinned rations, a metal mess kit, and similar objects – provided only minimal protection against shrapnel, if any.

imminent impact).⁸⁸ Discovering after a mortar salvo that elements of one's equipment – worn in such a way that they protruded above ground level on a prone soldier, such as a rolled-up greatcoat – had been badly damaged by fragments often had a profound impact as well, as it underscored the extent to which escape from injury depended on chance.

Another form of fear frequently mentioned by former soldiers, and likewise addressed by historians, was the fear arising from uncertainty: the anxiety experienced when operating in an environment in which contact with the enemy could occur at any moment. First Lieutenant Elemér Damó and Imre Erdélyi both associated this type of fear with tasks to be carried out in no man's land, as did Ensign József Kiss, who recalled in an interview that on the night before a raid his platoon was scheduled to conduct at dawn, he was unable to sleep because of the tension. The raid, however, was ultimately cancelled. First Lieutenant Damó, by contrast, frequently operated in no man's land at night to lay mines. As he wrote, such tasks often had to be carried out in wooded terrain, and in the early stages he could clearly observe fear among his men. In such situations, he noted, they kept a close eye on him and remained calm as long as he was in their midst. Over time, however, they grew accustomed to operating in the forest at night, and it was no longer necessary for him to accompany them on every occasion.⁸⁹

Imre Erdélyi, on the other hand, volunteered on several occasions for raids and was subsequently assigned to such missions when a designated group was formed at battalion level. As can be inferred from his memoir, Erdélyi's volunteering was informed by contemporary ideals of manliness and group honour: initially, he volunteered in order to preserve the standing of the group, and later to avoid the impression that he had withdrawn out of fear. Over time, this dynamic intensified further: after one occasion on which he served as the group's forward scout, the role appears to have become tacitly fixed. Although Erdélyi was deeply troubled by this new status – particularly by the fear that he might lose a leg to an unnoticed tripwire mine – he would have been ashamed to voice his concerns, especially given that the other forward scout held the role on a permanent basis and likewise made no complaint. A telling example of the cultural norms that shaped and motivated such

⁸⁸ Stouffer *et al.*, *The American Soldier*, ii, p. 83. Erdélyi, *Megnőttek a hegyek*, p. 72.

⁸⁹ Damó, *Névtelen katonák*, pp 84-85.

behaviour is provided by Erdélyi's account of two fellow soldiers who, after a mortar barrage, claimed that they had been playing cards throughout the bombardment. As Erdélyi noted, this form of bravado had been familiar to him since childhood and served, in effect, as a means of concealing one's fear. As far as his position as forward scout was concerned, Erdélyi continued to perform the role; the only way in which he sought to alleviate his anxiety was by taking care never to move beyond auditory, and above all visual, contact with the rest of the group while on missions.⁹⁰ In a certain sense, this undoubtedly extreme situation clearly illustrates the crucial part that one's immediate comrades played in managing anxiety – and thereby in fulfilling one's combat role – although this function was not confined to physical proximity alone.

One important means of coping with fear, as evidenced by soldiers' diaries and memoirs, was undoubtedly humour – a point to which Charles Bird had already drawn attention in his 1917 article addressing the psychological conditions of frontline service in the First World War. As First Lieutenant Damó observed, in the Hungarian army there was no shortage of men who assumed the role of jokesters, while Ensign Ocsovszky recorded several humorous remarks in his diary that became known beyond the confines of the narrow groups in which they were originally uttered. Imre Erdélyi's memoirs likewise provide examples of this practice and demonstrate that such interventions did not need to be elaborate in order to be effective. As Erdélyi recalls, after a mortar barrage, they had inadvertently provoked by crossing over to a neighbouring foxhole to socialize, the atmosphere was lifted when a soldier unexpectedly began imitating the sound of a cat. Others then joined in, each varying the pitch, and the gradually developing chorus of meowing – also carrying an undertone of mockery toward the enemy – ultimately caused those involved, who only seconds earlier had been terrified by the exploding mortar rounds, to break into laughter.⁹¹

Circumstances differed significantly at night, when soldiers – as Alexander Watson has emphasized in the context of the First World War – were confronted with a more primitive fear of danger-laden darkness. This period was not merely the customary time for raids and patrols; it was also typically when Soviet forces activated their propaganda loudspeakers for shorter or longer intervals, after the cessation of which

⁹⁰ Erdélyi, *Megnőttek a hegyek*, pp 73, 98-91.

⁹¹ Erdélyi, *Megnőttek a hegyek*, p. 82.

the ensuing silence could appear heavier. The greatest concern of the soldiers, however, remained the possibility that the enemy might approach their positions during their watch. Imre Erdélyi's memoirs suggest that, for this very reason, nights continued to inspire fear despite the battlefield experience they had accumulated, and, as he recalls, one could hardly avoid interpreting the rustling of nearby bushes as the movement of a body crawling toward one's position – an impression that in most cases proved to be hallucinatory. (At the same time, the danger of an enemy attack was not entirely imaginary: Soviet soldiers did at times infiltrate Hungarian positions, either as part of coordinated assaults or individually, opening fire or throwing grenades.) As already discussed, this kind of tension frequently culminated in indiscriminate firing, and soldiers at times also resorted to throwing hand grenades at perceived or imagined threats. In certain formations, this tendency escalated to such an extent that command authorities felt compelled to issue explicit orders stipulating that only firearms – and not hand grenades – were to be used against clearly identifiable targets, thereby limiting engagement to visible, that is, genuinely existing threats.

Among the various coping strategies adopted by soldiers, several were rooted in religious faith or beliefs in the supernatural. In his discussion of First World War soldiers, Alexander Watson observes that numerous magical or semi-magical practices were documented among combatants, many of whom carried protective amulets or good-luck charms, some imbued with religious significance.⁹² Comparable practices were also documented among American soldiers during the Second World War.⁹³ One such practice among soldiers of the Hungarian First Army – attested among the men of at least two units – was the fashioning of small crosses from the red insulation of field telephone wires, which were worn on the left side of the cap. According to Elemér Damó, the practice originated within his own unit in the vicinity of Kolomea and, by the time of their redeployment to the Ardzeluza area in August 1944 – that is, into the rear zone of the 27th Light Division – had become more or less universal. As Damó writes, 'This may have represented the manifestation of something profoundly ancient in human behaviour – the talisman intended to provide protection against harm. It may be interpreted as a form of negotiation with the supernatural: "See, I bear your sign; in

⁹² Watson, *Enduring the Great War*, p. 98.

⁹³ Stouffer *et al.* *The American Soldier*, ii, p. 188.

return, please protect me.”⁹⁴ In the case of the 27th Light Division, the available sources do not explicitly refer to the wearing of such crosses, although Ardzeluza lay along their supply line. Nevertheless, the practice appears to have been fairly widespread, as it was also common among soldiers of the 10th Infantry Division, placed under the command of the VI Corps only in August 1944. Ultimately, the command of the latter formation formally addressed the phenomenon in a rather drastic manner: in an order issued on 18 September 1944 – invoking the highly improbable explanation that the material used for the crosses had been obtained by cutting installed, live telephone lines – it prohibited all personnel within its sector from wearing such crosses, explicitly forbidding the use of scrap materials for this purpose as well.⁹⁵

Thus far, the discussion has focused primarily on the various dangers soldiers faced and on the means by which they attempted to mitigate them; it proved considerably more difficult, however, at least at the individual level, to counteract their cumulative effects. As János Szabó observed on the basis of his experiences on the Don Front, wartime service ground soldiers down slowly: each day brought new shortages, and through deprivation and want one gradually reached the point at which everyday obligations could be performed only with the greatest effort and – as Szabó claimed – a strong sense of duty (it cannot be ruled out, however, that the latter factor was added because Szabó was describing this condition in an article written for a military journal).⁹⁶ This phenomenon was, of course, also a fairly common feature of both world wars. As Alexander Watson notes, soldiers who were stationed for too long in isolated positions or assigned to solitary duties – and who thus lacked the certainty and sense of control provided by the company of trusted comrades – were particularly prone to some form of mental collapse.⁹⁷ In the case of the 27th Light Division, Ferenc Bereczki reports that in August 1944 the 7th Company of the 57/III Battalion occupied positions in open terrain exposed to enemy observation. As a result, the

⁹⁴ Damó, *Névtelen katonák*, p. 112.

⁹⁵ Ödön Vadász 1944, a 10. gyaloghadosztály iratai, hadosztályparancsnoksági parancsok, 22. számú hadosztályparancsnoksági pótparancs [Records of the 10th Infantry Division, Divisional Headquarters Orders, Supplementary Divisional Headquarters Order no. 22], p. 1. The Ödön Vadász Papers (In the possession of Ákos Bence Lukács).

⁹⁶ Szabó, ‘Harctapasztalatok’, p. 34.

⁹⁷ Watson, *Enduring the Great War*, pp 34-35.

soldiers were able to leave their trenches and foxholes only briefly at night, when food was also distributed. Propaganda broadcasts were constant in this sector and, according to Bereczki, had a considerable psychological impact on men isolated from their comrades. Although the company was eventually withdrawn from its position, the effects of the isolation appear to have pushed some soldiers to the limits of their endurance. A reservist named János Pataki, for example, asked Sergeant Mihály Szabó – who was supervising the laying of mines in their new sector and came from the same town as Pataki – where a gap could be found in the minefield. Szabó reportedly asked him in return whether he intended to desert. Pataki's response is not known, but following this conversation, a group of nineteen soldiers from the company, including Pataki, defected to the enemy.⁹⁸

In the view of the soldiers themselves, the fact that some were driven to their limits was also attributable to the rest and rotation system of the Hungarian army. Bereczki – with some exaggeration – claims that Hungarian soldiers, once assigned to the front line, would remain in the trenches unless redeployed to a different sector under urgent circumstances, contrasting this with the German system, in which soldiers were rotated on a 24-hour basis: platoons were divided into two, with one group manning the front line while the other rested a few kilometres behind, and only in exceptional cases would they occupy the same positions together. Although the claim that Hungarian units were not given rest at all is undoubtedly an exaggeration, it nevertheless appears that, in some cases, weeks or even months could pass before they were withdrawn from the front line.⁹⁹

Desertion to the enemy, however, involved considerable risk. Soviet forces frequently compelled those who had crossed over to address their former comrades via loudspeakers. In other cases, they were executed or sent back across the front to persuade additional soldiers to surrender. If these return missions were exposed, those involved faced the risk of capital punishment.¹⁰⁰ As far as desertion to the enemy is concerned, however, sources indicate that such cases may also have been driven by other factors and appear to have been more common among members of various ethnic minorities.

⁹⁸ Bereczki, 'Honvéd voltam', p. 43.

⁹⁹ Bereczki, 'Honvéd voltam', pp 44-45.

¹⁰⁰ Bereczki, 'Honvéd voltam', p. 43.

Another means of escaping frontline duty was self-mutilation, which could take several forms – although the extent to which these cases were motivated by fear remains debatable. Ensign Ferenc László noted, in connection with one of his men being injured in the hand in the course of the fighting around Mikuliczyn, that during mortar bombardments soldiers would reportedly raise their hands above the foxhole in the hope of a light wound that would remove them from combat. Command authorities, however, soon recognized this practice and threatened severe punishment for those who sustained such injuries. Self-inflicted gunshot wounds to the hand or foot were also regarded as a means of escape. Ensign Ocsóvszky notes in his diary that his batman shot himself in the foot during the fighting at Mikuliczyn; other sources report that, during an infirmary inspection, Lieutenant Colonel Gáll encountered a soldier with a gunshot wound to the hand. Such injuries, however, were likewise viewed with suspicion: Gáll, for example, had the wound re-examined and – following the examination – initiated court-martial proceedings against the soldier on charges of self-mutilation.

Alongside various means of escape, there emerged at the front a phenomenon associated less with fear than with the perceived inevitability of death: partly based on a belief in omens and partly on the recognizability of individuals at the limits of their psychological resilience, soldiers came to hold that signs of impending death could be discerned in those about to be killed. In certain cases, those so identified openly expressed their anxieties: as Bereczki writes, the clerk of the 9th Company, 57/III Battalion, repeatedly appealed to him to find some way of having him removed from the line, since he was convinced that he would perish at the front – a fear that ultimately proved justified.¹⁰¹ In other instances, behavioural changes proved revealing: First Lieutenant Damó recounts that one of his men, shortly before his death, began to walk about with a strange, pensive expression, wearing two crosses made from telephone-wire insulation rather than the single cross typically worn by the others. Reflecting on this, Damó wrote, ‘I later noticed this same strange look in the eyes of other men. Soon after, they died. I don’t know whether it was a premonition of death, or whether they died because they had become careless due to

¹⁰¹ Bereczki, ‘Honvéd voltam’, p. 44. Kékkői, *Tűzözön*, p. 14.

their mental state. I don't know, but the sign was unmistakable.'¹⁰² Finally, there were also situations in which those concerned were influenced by superstitions and omens in which they – and, to some extent, their fellow soldiers as well – believed. László Kékkői recounts such a case, describing how, on one occasion, the hooting of an owl affected one of his comrades so deeply – interpreting it as an ill omen – that he even attempted to drive the bird away by firing shots at it, though without success. István Hajnal, described as an exemplary soldier, continued to display no fear in combat, yet Kékkői maintained that he perceived something about him that seemed to foretell his death. Soon afterwards, Hajnal was indeed killed in action.¹⁰³

Finally, it is necessary to examine how soldiers themselves responded to those who expressed fear openly or in whom it was clearly apparent. Sources suggest that, in admitting fear, a clear distinction could be observed between career soldiers and younger conscripts serving their term of service, on the one hand, and married reservists, on the other. For the former, both reluctance to volunteer for dangerous tasks and the display of fear were closely tied to shame associated with the questioning of one's manliness, whereas this does not seem to have been the case among the latter. However, it appears that reservists were not judged particularly harshly for their attitude, despite the fact that several former soldiers noted this difference.

Distinct expectations applied to officers. As Richard Holmes has observed, they were generally expected not to display fear in front of others, particularly their subordinates, who looked to them for example and reassurance. These expectations appear to have extended beyond the control of fear alone: the loss of composure or the adoption of poor or inappropriate measures under pressure could equally undermine an officer's credibility – and, by extension, his authority – in the eyes of his men. That this dynamic was clearly acknowledged at the institutional level is suggested by the immediate reassignment of Lieutenant Colonel Nádas, the commanding officer of the 27/I Battalion, following the Pistyn debacle.¹⁰⁴

Similarly, the military also took action in other cases in which fear came into conflict with duty at the front line. For analytical clarity, this category may be understood as

¹⁰² Damó, *Névtelen katonák*, p. 113.

¹⁰³ Kékkői, *Tűzözön*, p. 104.

¹⁰⁴ Holmes, *Acts of War*, p. 206.

encompassing all acts involving some form of withdrawal from frontline duty due to risks inherent in combat – and the fear associated with them – such as misbehaviour in the face of the enemy, desertion from the lines, self-mutilation as a means of escaping frontline service, as well as various other forms of desertion, among them defection to the enemy, which may likewise be interpreted as resulting from the cumulative pressures of the combat environment. Such acts were punishable by death in most armies; however, in many cases involving transgressions of a purely military nature, this penalty was not enforced. For example, in the United States Army during the Second World War, only one individual was executed for such a crime.¹⁰⁵ The situation was markedly different in the Hungarian military. Between April and September, the 27th Light Division recorded – on the basis of current research – four executions: one man was executed for cowardice, three for desertion, and proceedings were initiated against at least one individual on charges of self-mutilation. In another formation of VI Corps, the 25th Infantry Division, eight soldiers were executed on 28 July 1944 alone, following an incident in which panic broke out among the troops.

While military authorities adopted a strict, non-permissive attitude toward such manifestations of fear, the rank and file did not respond to them in quite the same way. Executions were generally experienced as traumatic events and were remembered for a long time: in the case of a soldier sentenced to death for cowardice – having abandoned his weapon while fleeing during the battle of Kutý – they regarded the punishment as unjust, and spoke of Nádasý, who had been merely reassigned for a similar offence, with bitter irony. Soldiers likewise did not condemn individuals executed for desertion, nor did they report those who attempted to escape the front through self-mutilation. Moreover, the almost general resentment toward Lieutenant Colonel Sándor Gáll – at least during this period – stemmed in part from the way he, in their words, treated cowards and deserters. Fear, insofar as it can be discerned from their attitudes, appears to have been understood as something that posed a challenge to all those serving in combat roles, and those who failed to overcome it were regarded with sympathy or a degree of understanding – a consideration not extended to those serving in the rear zone, who did not have to face the same dangers.

¹⁰⁵ Stouffer *et al.* *The American Soldier*, ii, p. 112.

6. Primary Group and Unit Cohesion

In the Hungarian Honvéd Army, the position of the primary group developed in a rather distinctive manner. As discussed earlier, the 27th Light Division – whose table of organisation prescribed two infantry regiments – in peacetime consisted of only the 27th Infantry Regiment, a unit in which men of conscription age from the Szekler region completed their mandatory military service. Upon mobilisation, however, a second regiment was established by dividing the personnel of the original regiment and bringing the resulting units up to strength through the call-up of reservists, a process which in practice resulted in virtually all primary groups formed before mobilisation being broken up. From this perspective, the central question is how these developments affected the combat performance of the 27th Light Division, on the one hand, and whether primary group bonds were re-established under the conditions prevailing at the front, on the other. To address this issue, Omer Bartov's discussion of primary groups in the Wehrmacht, as presented in his book *Hitler's Army*, may serve as a useful point of departure. Bartov contends that the high rate of casualties among German troops on the Eastern Front, combined with the heterogeneous composition of replacement units from which losses were replenished, made it impossible to maintain or rebuild primary group ties within German formations. Furthermore, he reverses the thesis advanced by Shils and Janowitz, according to which the social organisation of the army rendered ideological commitment unnecessary, arguing instead that the role of primary groups in sustaining soldiers in combat was supplanted by shared ideological motivation.¹⁰⁶

A comprehensive evaluation of this theory – particularly the quantitative evidence regarding the losses of the German army – lies beyond the present discussion. However, a number of clarifications appear necessary. Bartov considers the formation of primary groups to be the result of deliberate efforts on the part of the military – a claim that is, in part, valid – with regional identity also playing a significant role in the process. However, as has long been recognised in psychology, no individual exists in isolation; accordingly, the recruit, having been separated from his civilian primary group and finding himself in a largely unfamiliar and often harsh military environment, is not only inclined but also feels a need to establish new interpersonal ties. In this

¹⁰⁶ Bartov, *Hitler's Army*, pp 30-33.

sense, it can be argued that the emergence of the primary group is closely linked to the individual's needs. The belongingness hypothesis, proposed by Roy F. Baumeister and Mark R. Leary, offers a useful framework for interpreting this phenomenon, as it holds that the need to belong compels individuals to establish social relationships even in the absence of specific eliciting circumstances, although external threat appears to strengthen the tendency to develop particularly strong bonds.

With regard to the military primary group, several implications of Baumeister and Leary's theory must be considered. First, they argue that relatively superficial social contacts do not, by themselves, satisfy the individual's need to belong and are therefore insufficient to mitigate the negative effects of a lack of belongingness, such as loneliness (by extension, the shared ideological motivation proposed by Bartov would be insufficient as well). Second, they argue that being part of a supportive social network alleviates psychological strain – a point likewise emphasized in relation to combat-related conditions – whereas loneliness may even constitute the most direct antecedent of psychopathology and social dysfunction in combat stress reactions. Finally, they emphasize that social relationships are, to some extent, interchangeable, which makes it possible to replace one social bond with another. The main constraint on such substitution, however, is that the formation of new relationships requires time, particularly for the gradual accumulation of intimacy and shared experiences.¹⁰⁷

Consequently, it can be argued that primary group bonds were likely to develop within heterogeneous units as well, since they were rooted not in pre-existing regional identities, but rather in the fundamental human need to belong; it may also be inferred that the formation of such bonds did not necessarily require deliberate efforts on the part of military authorities. On the other hand, given the interchangeability of individual relationships, soldiers who joined a unit at a later stage as replacements could – given sufficient time – likewise become part of the previously existing primary groups, although in this case the length of the integration period constitutes a crucial factor. It can therefore be argued that strong bonds within a primary group could be maintained even as some of its members were gradually replaced over time (provided

¹⁰⁷ Roy F. Baumeister and Mark R. Leary, 'The Need to Belong: Desire for Interpersonal Attachments as a Fundamental Human Motivation' in *Psychological Bulletin*, vol. cxvii, no. 3 (1995), pp 497-529.

that the primary group itself did not suffer losses of such magnitude as to result in its disintegration).

Returning to the case of the 27th Light Division, contemporary sources indicate that some soldiers themselves observed and remarked upon the disruptive impact that the establishment of the formation's second regiment had on primary groups formed prior to mobilisation. For example, Corporal Ferenc Bereczki writes in his memoir that mobilisation not only undermined the customary routines of army life, but also led to the dissolution of existing smaller communities whose members were dispersed among newly formed units. The fact that a significant proportion of the rank and file found themselves placed under new platoon leaders or company commanders, and were therefore required to adjust to a new set of expectations and demands, further contributed to a heightened sense of uncertainty. This situation was mitigated to some extent by the fact that the reservists were drawn from each battalion's own recruiting district, which meant that most men shared a common regional identity, and Bereczki also claims that in the weeks leading up to their departure for the front, the men gradually became more familiar with one another, which, in his view, alleviated their sense of uncertainty and contributed to a general acceptance of the situation.¹⁰⁸ This by no means implied that strong bonds had developed among the members of the newly formed small groups in so short a period of time. Imre Erdélyi recalls that in his section he was the only active-service soldier; all the others were reservists. This also meant that they were older than he was, and every one of them was a married man. In line with broader social norms, age itself carried authority: younger men were expected to show deference to older men, not only in conduct but also linguistically, through the use of polite forms of address.¹⁰⁹ According to Erdélyi, the others initially regarded him with a mixture of distrust and curiosity, while he, for his part, behaved toward them with the obligatory respect instilled in him at home. As he writes, he would have been embarrassed even to invoke his status as the deputy section leader.¹¹⁰ Ensign Ocsovszky, in a brief yet notably perceptive diary entry dated 15 May 1944 written after the formation's initial engagements, also drew attention to the phenomenon – namely, the differences between active-service soldiers and reservists with respect to

¹⁰⁸ Bereczki, 'Honvéd voltam', pp 29-30.

¹⁰⁹ Erdélyi, *Megnőttek a hegyek*, 57. Elemér Damó likewise makes reference to this phenomenon. See Damó, *Névtelen katonák*, p. 22.

¹¹⁰ Erdélyi, *Megnőttek a hegyek*, pp 57-62.

their behaviour in combat. One of the points he observed was that, during withdrawals, the latter rarely provided covering fire for their comrades unless directly ordered to do so – a tendency which Ocsovszky regarded, at least in part, as the consequence of an insufficient sense of solidarity with other members of their units.¹¹¹

Sources suggest that, under frontline conditions, primary group bonds required approximately two to three months to solidify. First Lieutenant Elemér Damó notes in his memoirs that, in his company – mobilised almost concurrently with the 27th Light Division in April 1944 – a sense of cohesion had emerged by early June.¹¹² It can be surmised that a comparable development occurred among the troops of the light division as well; without specifying a precise timeframe, Erdélyi recalls that the men assigned to his section, despite the aforementioned age difference, gradually came to regard one another first as comrades and, in due course, as friends.¹¹³

Another phenomenon relevant to understanding the frontline experience of the 27th Light Division is unit cohesion at the divisional level. The fact that a soldier's loyalty to his larger military unit is of considerable importance with regard to combat motivation is well established. The bond in question, Stephen D. Wesbrook argues, manifests itself in the soldier's attachment to an abstract entity, expressed in pride in the unit's history and a sense of responsibility to uphold its heroic tradition, and, on the other hand, in his attachment to fellow members of the larger unit. Wesbrook seeks to interpret the formation of unit cohesion through the conceptual framework developed for the primary group. Following this logic, he argues that, in the case of larger units, unit bonds do not emerge spontaneously but must be created; accordingly, the bonds in question are not grounded in values shared by individuals, but in inculcated military professional values, such as respect for authority, obedience, and discipline. As far as the shared goal is concerned, he likewise asserts that it is more complex than mere survival (although the nature of this complexity remains unspecified), further claiming that the perception of mutual interdependence requires not only exposure to combat but also extensive formal communication.¹¹⁴ Although

¹¹¹ Ocsovszky, 'Katonanaplóm', p. 25.

¹¹² Damó, *Névtelen katonák*, p. 88.

¹¹³ Erdélyi, *Megnőttek a hegyek*, p. 57.

¹¹⁴ Wesbrook, 'The Potential for Military Disintegration', pp 252-253.

this interpretation undoubtedly has its merits, the question may also be considered from several different perspectives.

In several armies – including the British and Austro-Hungarian – *esprit de corps* has traditionally been closely associated with regiments possessing extensive histories, and has found visible expression in regimental insignia worn on uniforms. In the twentieth century, however, there were numerous cases in which the division assumed comparable significance in this respect: while Leonard Smith considered divisions the basic building blocks of the First World War French army, other authors have drawn attention to the fact that such formations were the smallest military units possessing all the elements necessary to sustain themselves in the field and, at the same time, the largest to maintain a permanent establishment – that is, with a high likelihood of retaining their original infantry and artillery units throughout the war. It may be argued that permanence was of particular importance in the formation of unit bonds: although soldiers' closest personal ties were formed within their companies, major tactical objectives were generally achieved at the level of larger units; consequently, companies within a division – owing to its largely permanent establishment – often came, on the whole, to share the same experiences.¹¹⁵

Another aspect that must be considered in relation to divisions – and to which only brief reference has previously been made – is their function as administrative and logistical structures. The importance of this lies, on the one hand, in the fact that a soldier deployed to a combat zone, unlike a civilian, depends on a specific institutional structure for all the physical goods required to maintain life and bodily well-being; on the other hand, the continuous provision of these goods is ensured by the division's supply services. Put differently, while the informal bonds existing among members of the primary group provided support and facilitated survival under combat conditions, the individual's formal relationship with the division ensured material sustenance on a day-to-day basis: a soldier was entitled to food, clothing, and medical assistance, among other provisions and benefits, by virtue of being a formally registered member of a given unit. In times of war, this arrangement generally functioned as a matter of course; its importance became most apparent when a relatively larger unit – for example, a battalion – was placed under the command of another formation. In such

¹¹⁵ Smith, *Between Mutiny and Obedience*, p. 17. Ashworth, *Trench Warfare*, p. 8. Stouffer *et al.* *The American Soldier*, ii, pp 61, 138-139.

cases, the units in question were typically detached from their parent division's supply services, and until they were integrated into an alternative supply structure, their provisioning might be temporarily disrupted – a situation particularly characteristic of armies with highly rigorous administrative systems.

Regional identities may also have contributed to the development of unit cohesion. In the Hungarian Army of the Second World War, divisions were raised on a territorial basis, a factor that was of particular importance in the case of the 27th Light Division. In peacetime, the formation consisted of a single regiment – the 27th Infantry Regiment – which, due to the organization of conscription zones, comprised battalions recruited from three different counties. As a result, extensive bottom-up forms of unit cohesion could not develop during this period, although some degree of interaction between battalions occurred during various training activities. Upon the establishment of the 57th Infantry Regiment, however, the already existing battalions were split in two and brought up to full strength; as a result, the first battalion of each regiment originated from the same town, and their men shared a common local identity, thereby linking personnel across the two regiments. The same pattern applied to the battalions garrisoned in the other two towns. Furthermore, the men of the light division were bound together by both narrower and broader regional affiliations. On the one hand, the formation's men were largely recruited from among the Szeklers, whose regional identity – closely tied to the community's distinct military role throughout history – was consciously instrumentalized in shaping the unit's *esprit de corps* through the incorporation of the designation 'Szekler' into the formation's official name. On the other hand, the overwhelming majority of these soldiers – unlike their counterparts in most other Hungarian formations – had been socialized as members of the ethnic Hungarian minority in interwar Romania, thereby sharing a broader regional experience and identity. As previously noted, this background was also reflected during training in the form of a specific slur directed at them. However, the light division's battalions only came into close physical proximity with one another at the front; it was precisely under these conditions that a divisional identity developed, to which, as suggested above, local and regional identities also contributed.

Finally, it is necessary to address a further issue. Unit cohesion is most commonly examined in relation to the individual–unit relationship; however, it is equally

important to recognize its significance at the level of intergroup relations. This is particularly evident in the case of the 27th Light Division, where situations arose in which certain battalions were attached to other formations, or external units were placed under the division's command whose members did not identify with the formation. These dynamics can be interpreted through the lens of Social Identity Theory, particularly the concept of the in-group, defined as a social group with which an individual identifies and to which they experience a sense of belonging.¹¹⁶ In-groups are typically evaluated more favourably by their own members, whereas out-groups – especially when unfamiliar – are more likely to be perceived with suspicion or even hostility. Similar dynamics can be identified in the experience of units detached from their parent formation and reassigned to a different command. As will be shown in greater detail below, soldiers in such units often perceived that their new (and often temporary) command assigned them disproportionately difficult tasks to spare its own men and treated them with either indifference or palpable hostility.

7. The Battle of Delatyn and Mikuliczyn

As noted above, military operations in the division's sector during May and June – on both the Hungarian and Soviet sides – remained local in nature and limited in scope. This not only enabled the Hungarians to improve the training of their men but also allowed them to gain combat experience gradually through a succession of minor engagements. It was after this relatively quiet period that the battle of Delatyn and Mikuliczyn took place in late July and early August, during which the Hungarians had to confront a Soviet offensive. Before turning to this episode, however, brief mention must be made of a local engagement fought by several battalions of the 27th Light Division between 25 June and 11 July, during which the troops displayed a markedly different attitude from that evident in the fighting of April and May.

On 25 June, Soviet forces achieved a local breakthrough near Horod, capturing a section of the Hungarian line situated on elevated ground from which they could

¹¹⁶ For a discussion of social identity theory, see Henri Tajfel and John C. Turner, 'The Social Identity Theory of Intergroup Behavior', in Stephen Worchel and William G. Austin (eds), *Psychology of Intergroup Relations* (Chicago, 1986), pp 7-24.

observe the rear areas of the Hungarian positions. The 27th Light Division initially attempted to eliminate the penetration using local reserves, including German troops, and later with units redeployed from other sectors. The Soviets, however, defended their positions tenaciously, giving rise to unexpectedly intense fighting in the wooded terrain, in which both infantry and artillery played a significant role. Since the penetration posed no immediate danger of a broader breakthrough, and because attempts to eliminate it by committing tactical reserves in succession had resulted in considerable casualties, VI Corps called off its counter-attacks in early July and began meticulously planning the recapture of the occupied section. To this end, additional artillery was concentrated in the sector, while the 27/I Battalion, which had been selected for the task, was withdrawn from the front line in order to rehearse the assault. Ultimately, following an intensive artillery preparation, the position was retaken on 11 July within a matter of hours, employing methods that bore some resemblance to the German stormtroop tactics of the First World War.¹¹⁷ In connection with this engagement, it was already noted that the Hungarian units involved acquitted themselves exceptionally well: the platoons maintained their formation and intervals even under intense enemy fire and succeeded in neutralising enemy machine-gun nests, although the defenders' tenacity often required these to be taken at almost point-blank range.¹¹⁸ Despite their intensity, these engagements affected only a small proportion of the light division's units. The battle of Delatyn and Mikuliczyn, on the other hand, was fought as part of a larger offensive launched in late July and early August and involved a considerable number of Szekler soldiers.

The Soviet offensive that fundamentally altered the strategic situation on the Eastern Front in the summer of 1944, however, was Operation Bagration, launched by the Red Army on 22 June. Although it did not directly involve the Hungarian First Army, it nonetheless had a considerable impact on its operational situation, prompting the transfer to Army Group Centre of the German formations originally assigned to reinforce the Hungarian troops. Following the success of Bagration, on the other hand, the Red Army initiated a series of follow-up offensives across several regions. One of

¹¹⁷ Among the troops, the engagement was commonly referred to as the *Battle of Hairy Hill*. For a detailed discussion, see Magyarosi, 'The 27th Szekler Light Division', pp 26-30.

¹¹⁸ Berekméri, *Lesz még kikelet!*, p. 133.

these – the Lvov–Sandomierz Offensive – began on 13 July 1944; as part of this operation, a Soviet attack was launched in the Tarnopol–Brody region, breaking through German defences and enabling forward Soviet armoured elements to advance toward the city of Lvov. The Hungarian First Army was also affected by these developments, as two additional German formations previously attached to it were withdrawn for employment elsewhere. In addition, on 22 July, the headquarters of the German XI Corps – one of the three corps of the First Army – was likewise reassigned, along with the German units of Brigade Schlebrügge, which had until then been deployed in the sector of the 27th Light Division.¹¹⁹ A German directive, likewise dated 22 July, stipulated that the Hungarian 2nd Mountain Brigade and the 18th Reserve Division were to be transferred northwards; however, the commander of the First Army refused to authorise their redeployment.¹²⁰

Following the German troop withdrawals, the defence of the Hungarian First Army, now divided between the two remaining army corps, was reorganized. Under the new deployment, the VII Corps, composed of the 16th, 7th, and 24th Infantry Divisions, was positioned on the army's left flank, while the VI Corps, consisting of the 18th Reserve Division, the 25th Infantry Division, the 1st Mountain Brigade, and the 27th Light Division, held the right flank. The 2nd Armoured Division served as the reserve of the army, while the reserve of the VI Corps consisted of the 19th Reserve Division and the 2nd Mountain Brigade.¹²¹ As a consequence of German troop movements, the army was forced to scale back its previously developed defence in depth, particularly as the reduction in manpower left fewer troops available to form reserves.¹²²

Since it had become increasingly evident that the First Army's front line – more specifically, that of VII Corps – would likewise soon come under attack, on 19 July the corps headquarters initiated preparations for the withdrawal of its formations. This decision, however, was subsequently rescinded, a step that would later prove to be a fatal mistake. The anticipated offensive commenced on 23 July with an attack directed against the right flank of the 16th Infantry Division, where a Soviet breakthrough was achieved, which in turn forced the withdrawal of elements of the 7th Infantry Division,

¹¹⁹ Berekméri, *Lesz még kikelet!*, p. 130, Ungváry, *A magyar honvédség*, p. 278.

¹²⁰ Hungarian Military History Archives, Budapest, II. 1. hadsereg iratai. 1. fasc. A VI. hadtest harctudósítása, p. 7.

¹²¹ Szabó and Számvéber, *A keleti hadszíntér és Magyarország 1943–1945*, p. 68.

¹²² Eszenyi, *Trianoni nemzedék*, p. 303.

in contact with the 16th Infantry Division to the south. As a consequence of this withdrawal, a gap emerged in the 7th Infantry Division's front line, enabling Soviet forces to divide the division's forces into two separate groupings, thereby also dividing the defensive system of VII Corps. The northern elements of the corps – the 16th Infantry Division and parts of the 7th Infantry Division – were forced into a continuous westward withdrawal without offering significant resistance. To their north, the 20th Infantry Division, fighting under German command, likewise suffered heavy losses; as a result, the Hungarian First Army's reserve, the 2nd Armoured Division, was also committed in this sector to support the latter formation. By 26 July, VII Corps – in fact reduced to the elements that had become separated from their parent army – was placed under the command of the German First Panzer Army. At the same time, the corps' southern flank – comprising the remnants of the 7th Infantry Division and the 24th Infantry Division adjoining it to the right – together with VI Corps, was brought under unified command. As Colonel General Károly Beregfy, commander of the First Army, was relieved of command, Lieutenant General Ferenc Farkas, commander of VI Corps, temporarily assumed his duties. Finally, the First Army – similarly to the northern elements of VII Corps – was subordinated to the German First Panzer Army, redesignated as Army Detachment Raus.

As far as Soviet forces were concerned, following the breakthrough of the 7th Infantry Division's line, they pressed their attack in a south-westerly direction, with the objective of outflanking the northernmost formations of VI Corps and thereby preventing the still intact troops on its right flank – including the 27th Light Division – from withdrawing in the direction of Delatyn and the Tatar Pass.¹²³

Having outlined the initial phase of the offensive, it is necessary to consider its immediate consequences for the troops. Following the breakthrough, elements of the 7th Infantry Division were already in a state of disarray by 24 July, retreating in a demoralised condition into the sector of VI Corps – a development attributable in part to fear of Soviet tanks and submachine-gun fire, and partly to unfamiliarity with newly issued German weapons and deficiencies in ammunition supply. The resulting panic subsequently spread to the formations of the 24th Infantry Division, notwithstanding the fact that the latter had until then maintained their positions with considerable

¹²³ Szabó and Számvéber, *A keleti hadszíntér és Magyarország 1943–1945*, p. 69.

determination. The situation was stabilised through the personal intervention of Lieutenant General Ferenc Farkas, who ordered the 18th Reserve Division to establish a defensive position around Delatyn and directed the intercepted units of the 24th Infantry Division to the same area.

Partly owing to the steadfastness of these forces, and partly to the actions of the 25th Infantry Division, which repeatedly prevented advancing Soviet forces from outflanking the Delatyn defensive positions, it became possible for a large number of artillery and logistical units to withdraw to the rear.¹²⁴ The sole line of communication along which the aforementioned units were compelled to conduct their withdrawal toward Hungary ran from Delatyn via the Tatar Pass to Körösmező, following the valley of the Prut River through a narrow, gorge-like corridor characterised by highly restrictive terrain. On its eastern side rose a steep, rocky escarpment, while on the opposite side precipices several hundred metres deep occurred in places. Settlements were sparse, and opportunities for halting, regrouping, or redeploying retreating units were extremely limited. According to data from VI Corps, on 25 and 26 July a total of 17,167 personnel, 8,295 horses, 2,740 wagons, 1,406 motor vehicles, 311 bicycles, eight field bakeries, 78 artillery pieces, nine assault guns, and one railway gun were moving along the Delatyn–Tatar Pass section of this road as part of the withdrawal. Under normal conditions, this would have corresponded to a column approximately 191 kilometres in length, moving at an average speed of four kilometres per hour. In reality, however, traffic along the route frequently formed triple columns, with wagon trains, infantry, and motor vehicles advancing in parallel rows. The movement was marked by confusion, disorder, shouting, and enormous clouds of dust, amid which officers attempted to restore order, often with weapons in hand.¹²⁵ For many soldiers of the Hungarian First Army, this constituted one of the defining experiences of the late-July fighting.¹²⁶

As regards the 27th Light Division, the offensive forced it to withdraw only a short distance from its original positions to a second defensive line constructed in its rear, extending south of Podzaharycz through Rozen Wielki, then south of Sokolówka to a point south of Prokurawa, west of Akreszory, and west of Berezów. However, the

¹²⁴ Ungváry, *A magyar honvédség*, p. 279. Eszenyi, *Trianoni nemzedék*, p. 315.

¹²⁵ Farkas, *Tatárhágó visszanéz*, pp 78-79.

¹²⁶ Eszenyi, *Trianoni nemzedék*, p. 315.

formation's medical column, as well as its supply train and logistics column, were redeployed to settlements in Hungary near the border.¹²⁷ Although traffic in this sector proceeded in a comparatively more orderly manner than along the road from Delatyn toward the Tatar Pass, the overall situation – aside from the degree of confusion – was broadly similar. As Ensign Ocsóvszky recorded in his diary entries of 26–27 July, a vast mass of retreating units was moving toward its new positions, with two or three columns of vehicles advancing simultaneously. He also briefly addressed the psychological impact of these events, observing that no one understood why the 27th Light Division's well-defended positions had been abandoned without a fight.¹²⁸

Since, during the offensive, the attacking forces came closest to the Tatar Pass and thus to the possibility of a breakthrough into the Carpathians, the Soviet command authorities assessed that this area presented the most favourable opportunity for achieving a breakthrough and therefore concentrated their efforts there. The troops of VI Corps, however, managed to hold Delatyn until 28 July, when the units engaged in the defence of the settlement withdrew in good order; thereafter, a relatively coherent defensive front was established in the vicinity of Mikuliczyn, held by the 25th Infantry Division, the 2nd Mountain Brigade, the 18th Reserve Division and elements of several other formations. However, during this period – in contrast to the preceding defensive phase – individual units did not invariably operate under their parent formations but were frequently assigned, in accordance with operational requirements, to ad hoc battle groups, typically named after their commanding officers. In the case of the 27th Light Division, this meant that it did not engage in combat as a formation, since the Soviet forces facing it had been withdrawn from its sector for employment along the main axis of attack; nevertheless, several of its subordinate units were temporarily redeployed to sectors where active fighting was in progress. Among these were the 27th Reconnaissance Battalion, the 27/II Battalion (from 2 August), the 27th Field Training Battalion (from 5 August), the 57/II Battalion (from 8 August), as well as several companies of the 20th and 31st Border Rifle Battalions, which had

¹²⁷ Berekméri, *Lesz még kikelet!*, p. 159. In the Hungarian Army, medical services at divisional level were performed by so-called 'columns' – that is, units structured according to a prescribed organisational framework. The term likely originated in the Austro-Hungarian Army during the First World War, where the designation *Kolonne* was used. Each division or brigade was assigned one medical column and one casualty transport column.

¹²⁸ Ocsóvszky, *Katonanaplóm*, p. 63.

previously been temporarily subordinated to the light division.¹²⁹ These units were deployed primarily to the wider Mikuliczyn area, where they were frequently employed as constituent elements of the aforementioned ad hoc battle groups.

Between 27 July and 10 August, the Soviet 8th and 317th Rifle Divisions, together with the 2nd Guards Airborne Division, launched four consecutive attacks aimed at breaking through the Hungarian defences and penetrating into Hungarian territory.¹³⁰ In Hungarian historiography, these events have generally been examined on the basis of several principal sources, including the surviving operational reports of VI Corps and the 2nd Mountain Brigade, both preserved together with their cartographic appendices, and the frequently cited volume *Tatárhágó visszanéz*, authored by Lieutenant General Ferenc Farkas, together with its manuscript version held in the Hungarian Military History Archives, which contains a somewhat more detailed and precise collection of sketch maps than the published edition.¹³¹ According to these sources, the first attack – directed against the Rokieta Ridge northeast of Mikuliczyn – unfolded primarily on 28 July 1944. Although the 25th Infantry Division, deployed in this sector, was outflanked on both sides and elements of the attacking forces succeeded in reaching the ridge's crest, the assault was ultimately repulsed, despite the outbreak of panic among parts of the defending troops.¹³²

The second attack, likewise launched northeast of Mikuliczyn, was directed on 30 July against the Jaworowa height, situated further north of the Rokieta ridge. In the course of this attack, the enemy advanced as far as the northern edge of Mikuliczyn and succeeded in cutting the road leading toward Jamna, the two settlements lying approximately six kilometres apart. Simultaneously, however, some five kilometres west of Mikuliczyn, an enemy force numbering roughly 600 men infiltrated through the mountains into the rear of the 18th Reserve Division, which was holding positions north of Jaremcze (the latter settlement lies along the aforementioned road between

¹²⁹ Berekméri, *Lesz még kikelet!*, pp 159-166.

¹³⁰ Ungváry, *A magyar honvédség*, p. 284.

¹³¹ For the operational report of the VI Corps, see Hungarian Military History Archives, Budapest, II. M. Kir. 1. Honvéd Hadseregparancsnokság, 1944, A m. kir. VI. hadtest harctudósítása (Delatyn–Mikuliczyn, július 24-augusztus 10.); Kisbarnaki Farkas Ferenc vezérezredes: *A Tatár-hágó visszanéz* c. könyv kézírata és a szerző visszaemlékezései az 1944/45-ös év eseményeire és hadifogságára 1944 márc.–1946 jan. [Farkas, Ferenc Kisbarnaki Colonel General: Manuscript of *The Tatar Pass Looks Back* and the author's recollections of the events of 1944–45 and his captivity as a prisoner of war] (Hungarian Military History Archives, Budapest, TGy 3784).

¹³² Ungváry, *A magyar honvédség*, pp 285-286.

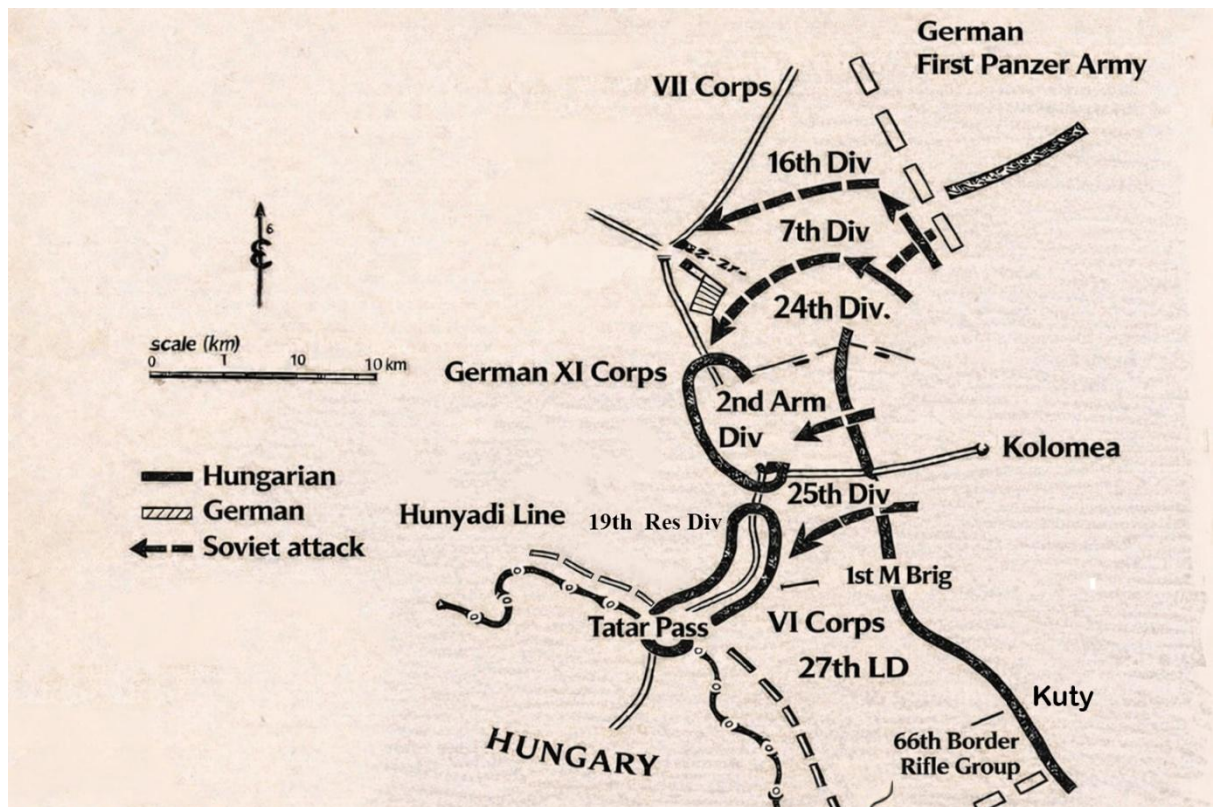


Fig. 6. The situation of the Hungarian First Army on 23 July as shown on a map translated by the author (see source below).

[János, Csima *Adalékok a Horthy-hadsereg szervezetének és háborús tevékenységének tanulmányozásához (1938–1945)* (Budapest, 1961)]

Mikuliczyn and Delatyn, approximately eleven kilometres from Mikuliczyn). Although the road was subsequently reopened, the withdrawal of the 18th Reserve Division created a gap in the line, thereby opening the way for the enemy from the direction of the Jaworowa height. As a consequence, Soviet forces succeeded in occupying Pyszny Height in the immediate vicinity of Mikuliczyn, located north of the settlement and east of Jamna. Although the position changed hands repeatedly, by the evening of 31 July it remained under Soviet control, together with the neighbouring Skyza elevation. These developments placed the defence of Mikuliczyn in a highly precarious position, while temporarily cutting off the 18th Reserve Division from the remainder of the corps. In an effort to stabilise the situation and push back the Soviet forces, the Hungarian command dispatched additional reinforcements to the sector, including elements of the 27th Light Division: the 27th Reconnaissance Battalion, engaged since 28 July in securing the Polonica valley east of Tatarów, had its bicycle and cavalry companies detached and placed under the command of the 25th Infantry Division, and the 27/II Battalion was likewise directed to the area.¹³³

The third attack was launched on 1 August against the troops of the 18th Reserve Division defending the Makowicza Heights north of Jamna and Mikuliczyn. Although Hungarian forces under Colonel Ferenc Deák (the so-called Group Deák, including the bicycle company of the 27th Reconnaissance Battalion) achieved some success during the day, recapturing Pyszny and the Skyza Heights, Soviet forces seized the Makowicza Heights held by the 18th Reserve Division and rolled up the formation's western flank. The defenders of the heights had been forced back by 11:30 a.m. to the section of the main road between Pyszny and Jamna, and the remainder of the 18th Reserve Division was compelled to withdraw between Jamna and Jaremcze to the southern bank of the Prut (which in this sector flowed from east to west). As a consequence, the northernmost Hungarian-held strongpoint between Mikuliczyn and Delatyn, at Dora, had to be abandoned, while the strongpoint at Jaremcze became isolated. It subsequently became evident that the 18th Reserve Division, instead of executing an orderly withdrawal, had in fact disintegrated, with its subordinate units slipping beyond the control of the divisional commander.

¹³³ A m. kir. VI. hadtest harctudósítása, p. 28-29.

This breakdown eliminated any possibility of countering Soviet forces approaching Mikuliczyn from the north and facilitated the advance of enemy troops along the western flank of the settlement toward the Tatar Pass. In response, VI Corps ordered the 27th Light Division's 27/II Battalion and the 25th Mountain Rifle Battalion into the area: the former occupied Bukowna Height in the north-western sector of Mikuliczyn, while the latter took up positions on Kruhly Jawornik Height, situated somewhat farther to the south.¹³⁴

On 4 August, a fourth attack was launched against the Hungarian units deployed in the aforementioned sector, and by 5–6 August the fighting had spread to Group Papp, to which the 27/II Battalion had been attached. The unit succeeded in holding Bukowna Height, but it was forced to refuse its left flank toward Height 875 in the direction of the settlement. To its south, the 25th Mountain Rifle Battalion was positioned on Swinianka (Height 1121), as well as on Kruhly Jawornik, but the two units failed to establish contact. Group Rummy likewise occupied the latter height and the Jawornik ridge, running roughly east–west; the positions of these forces, together with the two previously mentioned Hungarian battalions deployed along a north–south axis, formed an approximately right-angled line.

From 4 a.m. onward, the left flank of the 27/II Battalion, as well as the 1st Mountain Rifle Battalion positioned at the left extreme of the line, came under sustained attack, as a result of which Soviet forces advanced to within three kilometres of the centre of Mikuliczyn and to approximately twelve kilometres from the Tatar Pass. Although the settlement itself had still not been captured, Jawornik Gorgan came under Soviet control, thereby threatening the encirclement of the Hungarian lines and enabling enemy forces to bring the road leading south from Mikuliczyn – toward Tatarów – under mortar fire.

On 6 August, renewed attacks were launched against the Pyszny and Skyza Heights in the northern part of the settlement, where a group under the command of Colonel Alajos Pápay was in defensive positions. Soviet troops continued their attacks in the western sector as well: the 27/II Battalion was ultimately compelled to abandon Bukowna Height and retreat somewhat farther south, subsequently taking up defensive

¹³⁴ A m. kir. VI. hadtest harctudósítása, pp 32–36.

positions on Dilok Heights. Heavy fighting also took place in the Jawornik sector, where the 27th Field Training Battalion had by that time been committed.

During the course of the day, the possibility of withdrawal was also considered; however, VI Corps headquarters resolved instead to commit the German 4th Mountain Division, which had only just arrived in the Corps area. Accordingly, changes were introduced in both the command structure and the allocation of sectors among the formations concerned. The troops holding Rokieta Height remained under the command of the 25th Infantry Division; the forces defending both banks of the Prut River – that is, the northern and western sectors of Mikuliczyn, including Kruhly Jawornik Height, nearest to the settlement – were subordinated to the commander of the 2nd Mountain Brigade. The remaining sections of the Jawornik ridge were assigned to the German 4th Mountain Division. During the day, the 1st Mountain Rifle Battalion and the German 4th Reconnaissance Battalion also engaged in heavy fighting for the capture of Jawornik Gorgan, which was ultimately taken – except for the summit – by the German unit. The steady arrival of additional units, among them the 57/II Battalion of the 27th Light Division, gradually brought Hungarian (and German) forces into numerical superiority along the broader Jawornik sector; by 7 August, in the Jawornik area there were a Hungarian mountain rifle battalion and a border rifle battalion, as well as two German battalions and a German reconnaissance battalion. In the early hours of the day, the 27/II Battalion and the 27th Field Training Battalion recaptured Bukowna 819, encountering only limited opposition, suggesting a weakening of Soviet resistances, and observations from the troops in the Jawornik area further indicated that Soviet forces had begun withdrawing from the northern slope of the ridge. Although this development did not reflect a general cessation of combat activity – in the afternoon, Soviet forces renewed their offensive against Pyszny height and temporarily secured it – the operational situation had nevertheless largely stabilized despite these localized engagements. On 8 August, Hungarian formations reinforced by German troops launched a counterattack, which succeeded in pushing back Soviet forces; by 10 August, they had once again assumed defensive positions along the Hunyadi Line.

As reflected in the available reports, the battle around Mikuliczyn appears to have reached a critical phase during the third attack in the first days of August, when a Soviet assault against the Makowicza Heights led to the disintegration of the

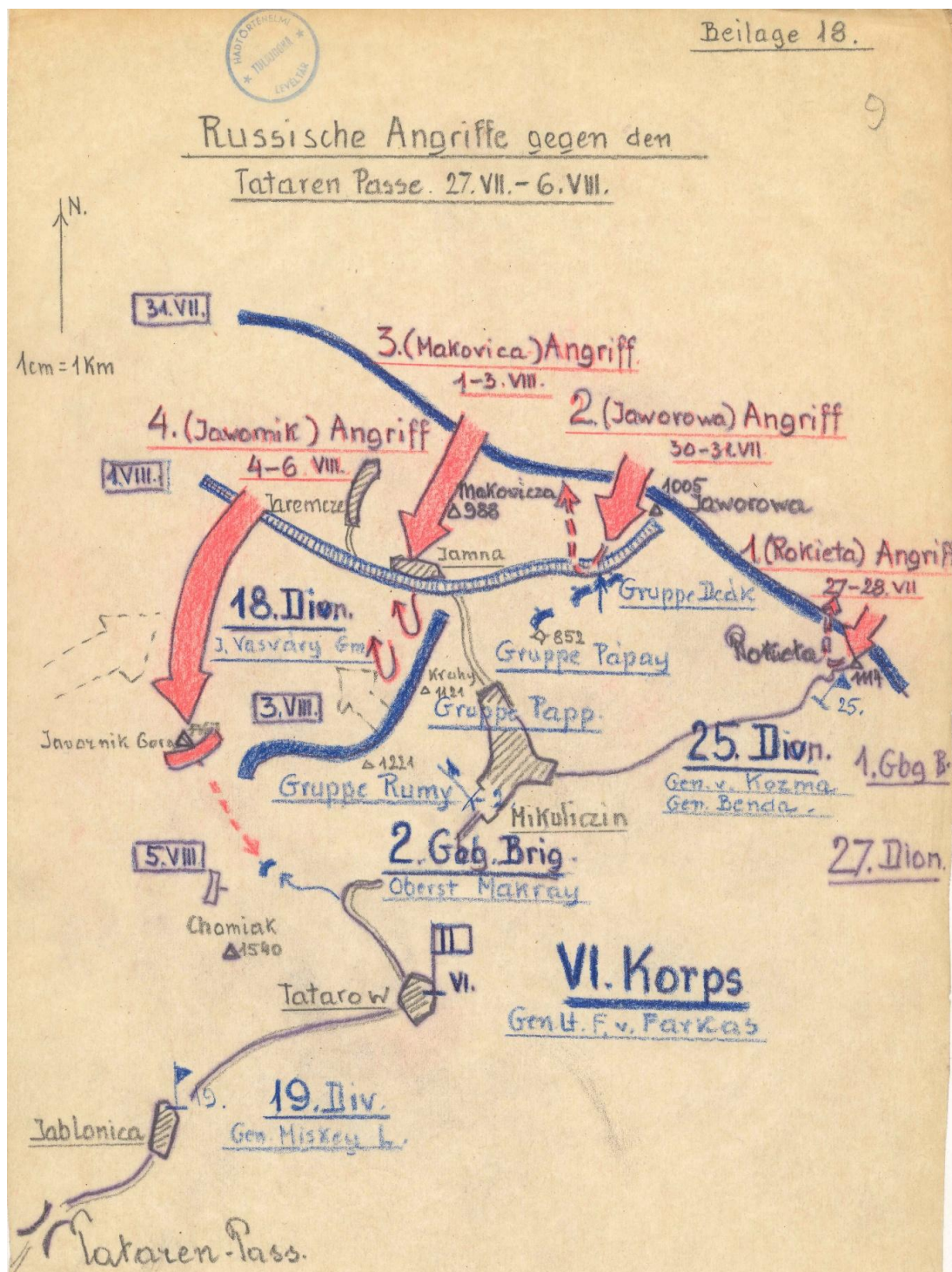


Fig. 7. The four Soviet attacks launched during the fighting around Mikuliczyn.

[Military History Archives, TGy 3784]

18th Reserve Division. A more subjective perspective on the events – aside from the records of VI Corps – is provided by Ensign László Ocsóvszky, not least because he experienced events from outside the immediate combat zone. Stationed in the Polonica Valley east of Tatarów with the headquarters of the 27th Reconnaissance Battalion, he recorded in his daily entries a marked deterioration of the situation on 2 August, when the first retreating units and walking wounded began to reach the troops stationed there. This development points to the onset of a broader breakdown in the forward defensive system. By 4 August, the composition of the wounded had become increasingly heterogeneous, including personnel from an expanding range of units, likely reflecting the intensification of fighting on the western side of Mikuliczyn. Only around 6 August did the situation begin to stabilise to some extent – a development that may be linked to the gradual arrival of additional Hungarian and German units in the area.¹³⁵

The soldiers of the units committed to combat had a far more limited understanding of the overall situation, as they were for the most part engaged in the capture or defence of individual heights. Another defining characteristic of the battle was precisely this fragmentation imposed by the terrain, which resulted in numerous small-scale engagements. Soviet forces advanced gradually, either by infiltration or by capturing individual heights, and, according to the sources, particularly intense fighting developed over specific positions, involving primarily infantry forces on both sides. On 5 August, Ocsóvszky noted in his diary, in a general observation on the conduct of the battle as a whole, that the enemy was attacking in previously unseen strength, employing hundreds of mortars and launching repeated assaults – ten to fifteen times daily – against individual commanding positions. In doing so, it appeared to suffer considerably heavier losses than the Hungarian troops, yet consistently achieved its objectives.¹³⁶ In an interview conducted in September 1944 following his decoration, Warrant Officer Class II Mihály Ujvári likewise reported on the determination of Soviet troops. Serving with the 27/II Battalion, he recalled that his detachment had been deployed to Bukowna Height on 2 August and became engaged in combat at dawn, when a Soviet assault penetrated the positions adjoining the left flank of their line and subsequently began to roll up the defence toward their sector. Alerted by the

¹³⁵ Ocsóvszky, 'Katonanaplóm', pp 68-75.

¹³⁶ Ocsóvszky, 'Katonanaplóm', p. 72.

noise of the fighting, Ujvári and his men had sufficient time to bring six machine guns to bear on the advancing forces. The automatic weapons fire caused the attackers to halt; however, it did not compel them to withdraw, as they appeared determined to hold the newly captured ground at all costs. At the same time, the Hungarians could not permit the enemy to consolidate its position, as this would have provided a potential jumping-off point for further attacks. Consequently, with the support of three machine guns, they launched a close-quarters counterattack employing submachine guns and hand grenades. As Ujvári recalled in the interview, the Soviet soldiers resisted with such tenacity that they ceased firing only when the advancing Hungarian troops were, in Ujvári's words, practically treading on them. The engagement resulted in substantial casualties among the Soviet unit, with numerous dead and wounded.¹³⁷ Intercepted radio conversations, transmitted in the clear by forward Soviet reconnaissance elements to their rear command posts, also indicated substantial resistance on the part of the Hungarians. The transmissions further suggested that Soviet troops frequently perceived themselves as encircled and were experiencing poor supply conditions, while forward reconnaissance groups in particular struggled with shortages of provisions.¹³⁸ The intensity of the fighting was also confirmed by other accounts: Ensign Géza Basa, who was operating as a cavalry reconnaissance officer in the northeastern part of the settlement, and Ensign József Kiss, who arrived in the area with one of the last units of the 27th Light Division dispatched there – the 57/II Battalion – both mention the excessively large number of fallen soldiers.

In connection with the battle, it is also necessary to consider instances of panic – recurring in nature – as well as cases of soldiers attempting to avoid combat. One explanation for the panic is to be found in the previously discussed antecedents of the fighting around Mikuliczyn, and Lieutenant General Ferenc Farkas, in his report on the VI Corps, also addresses the issue. On the one hand, he notes that the 18th Reserve Division and the 25th Infantry Division were placed under the corps' command approximately one and a half days before the fighting, while the 7th Infantry Division and the 24th Infantry Division came under its command during the battle; moreover, these formations had suffered heavy losses and had been forced to withdraw in earlier

¹³⁷ Roland Maruzs and János Szentváry-Lukács, *Hajlíthatatlanok. Magyar Arany Vitézségi Éremmel kitüntetett katonáink, 1939–1945* [The Unyielding. Our Soldiers Awarded the Hungarian Gold Medal for Bravery, 1939 – 1945] (Budapest, 2022), pp 112-113.

¹³⁸ A m. kir. VI. hadtest harctudósítása, p. 38.

fighting; as a result, their combat units were often reconstituted from their remaining personnel and equipment – as Farkas puts it, from the remnants of formations that had lost cohesion and morale, had been shaken in their self-confidence, and were, in many cases, retreating in panic.¹³⁹

In this regard, it is worth considering a concrete example, namely that of Major General István Kozma and the 25th Infantry Division under his command (as noted above, Kozma had previously served as commander of the 27th Light Division). On 26 June, the 25th Infantry Division was forced to carry out a daylight withdrawal while in contact with Soviet forces. This not only resulted in heavy casualties but also caused many of its units to break up and become dispersed. Although the division succeeded in establishing a new defensive line on the Rokieta Heights, this was achieved by gathering scattered retreating soldiers, organising them into improvised groups, and assigning each group to defend a designated sector under the command of whichever officers were available. The situation was further aggravated by the loss of communication equipment during the withdrawal, leaving the divisional commander able to issue orders only in person and orally. Faced with these difficulties, Kozma informed Lieutenant General Farkas, commander of VI Corps, of his division's situation on 27 June and requested permission to withdraw it to the Mikuliczyn area under cover of darkness in order to reorganise and regroup before returning to the front. Farkas, however, rejected the proposal, maintaining that such a withdrawal would result in the disintegration of the front line in the Prut Valley. Kozma, for his part, insisted that, while he would make every effort to hold the Rokieta position, he could not assume responsibility for the steadfastness of his division under the prevailing conditions. His statement was subsequently incorporated into the corps report completed in September.¹⁴⁰ The available evidence suggests that the commander of the 25th Infantry Division had assessed the situation accurately. The formation eventually came under enemy attack on 28 June, and, as Kozma had anticipated, the troops proved unable to hold their ground. At approximately 11 a.m., panic broke out among the men and soon turned into a disorderly flight. Kozma was able to restore order only by taking up arms himself and calling upon members of his staff to follow his example and join the fighting; even then, he was compelled to shoot

¹³⁹ A m. kir. VI. hadtest harctudósítása, p. 54.

¹⁴⁰ A m. kir. VI. hadtest harctudósítása, p. 21.

one of the fleeing soldiers in an effort to halt the retreat. In the end, the division managed to hold Rokieta Heights.

The problem, however, was not limited to those who fled during the fighting. The men assigned to the improvised groups, who had neither pre-existing ties to one another nor to the officers placed in command of them, abandoned the front line at the first opportunity and attempted to make their way to the relative safety of the rear areas. According to the report of the 19th Reserve Division, from whose ranks the blocking detachments stationed behind the combat units were drawn, 350 such stragglers from the 25th Infantry Division were escorted back to their formation on 27 June, the day before the engagement discussed above, and a further 191 on 28 June, when the fighting took place – a total of 541 men within two days.¹⁴¹

Comparable developments could be identified in a number of other formations. By 8 August, Ensign Ocsovszky reported that the number of unarmed soldiers who claimed that their units had been dispersed by enemy action and who had found their way into the valley occupied by the reconnaissance battalion, well behind the front line, had risen to approximately 1,600. The vast majority of them belonged to four regiments. It soon became clear that many of these purportedly scattered units had, in all likelihood, fled from the front line, as the overwhelming majority of their personnel reassembled within one or two days. On 12 August, the ensign returned to the subject, this time noting that most troops fought only reluctantly and that, at the first sign of enemy fire, they dispersed, threw away their rifles and equipment, abandoned their heavy weapons, and made no attempt to report to the nearest command post, choosing instead to wander about for days in order to avoid being recommitted to the fighting. Among those assembled in the Polonica Valley, various rumours began to circulate, largely fuelled by the hope of escaping further service at the front. These included claims that members of shattered units would be sent home – an expectation that was not entirely without foundation – or that Soviet troops, whose grievances were supposedly directed solely against the Germans, would not harm Hungarian soldiers. Their behaviour, however, stood in sharp contrast to that of soldiers whose units had genuinely been shattered in heavy fighting. During the same period, Ocsovszky visited the collection point established for the latter, most of whom belonged to the 18th Reserve Division,

¹⁴¹ A m. kir. VI. hadtest harctudósítása, p. 25.

and found them utterly exhausted, both physically and mentally, and manifestly unfit for further service at the front.¹⁴² Although these soldiers were indeed returned to Hungary for recuperation, similar expectations on the part of the others ultimately proved unfounded. The corps command, as noted above, deployed blocking detachments behind the frontline troops and placed them under the command of an officer renowned for his severity. These units were responsible for apprehending stragglers and returning them to the front line, while certain officers were brought before courts-martial and several enlisted men were executed for cowardice in an effort to deter similar behaviour among the troops.¹⁴³

It must be added that those units in which combat avoidance was high generally also suffered heavy losses: the already mentioned 25th Infantry Division, for example, by the end of the fighting had lost 27 officers and 2,167 enlisted men, including those killed, wounded, missing, or taken prisoner. Heavy casualties alone, however, cannot fully account for this phenomenon. Combat avoidance was likely related to earlier engagements marked by adverse experiences, often involving enemy breakthroughs or previous episodes of panic. The experience of the 1st and 2nd Mountain Brigades, which were deployed only in the area around Mikuliczyn, lends further support to this interpretation. Although these formations likewise suffered considerable losses, no significant instances of panic or deliberate attempts to avoid combat were recorded.¹⁴⁴ As Ocsovszky observed, responsibility for these losses rested in part with the commanders themselves. According to his diary entry of 8 August, newly arrived reinforcements unfamiliar with the terrain were committed piecemeal and with inadequate fire support. Only after considerable losses had been sustained were properly planned, artillery-supported counter-attacks organised, producing more favourable results at a significantly lower cost in casualties.¹⁴⁵

In light of the foregoing, it is legitimate to ask how the soldiers of the 27th Light Division performed during these engagements. The impossibility of rotating frontline

¹⁴² Ocsovszky, 'Katonanaplóm', pp 76-78.

¹⁴³ A m. kir. VI. hadtest harctudósítása, pp 54-55.

¹⁴⁴ Róbert Árpád Berekméri, *A Delatyn–Mikuliczyn-i ütközet (1944. július 24.–augusztus 10.)* [The Battle of Delatyn–Mikuliczyn (24 July–10 August 1944)] (MA thesis, Babeş-Bolyai University, Kolozsvár, 2013), p. 61.

¹⁴⁵ Ocsovszky, 'Katonanaplóm', pp 79-80.

units placed a considerable burden on the men. The bicycle company of the 27th Reconnaissance Battalion, for example, remained continuously engaged for twelve days; when its members finally returned to their unit – mud-covered and unshaven – they were so exhausted that they reportedly fell asleep on their feet, and the men of the division's other battalions were probably in little better condition.¹⁴⁶ In contrast to both the division's initial engagements in Galicia and the experiences of other formations deployed around Mikuliczyn, no significant instances of panic were observed among the soldiers of the 27th Light Division, even under the most demanding circumstances. This was most likely attributable to a broader process of adaptation evident across several formations of the First Army, as the troops became hardened by combat experience and increasingly proficient in forest warfare.¹⁴⁷

A second aspect concerns the manner in which units of the formation were employed. With the exception of a few artillery batteries, this was the first occasion on which five battalions of the 27th Light Division were detached from their parent formation and assigned to various ad hoc battle groups. Ensign Ferenc László's memoirs point, albeit indirectly, to the significance of soldiers' attachment to their larger units, the importance of which became apparent to him only after that bond had been temporarily severed by the transfer. Serving with the 27th Field Training Battalion, he reported with his unit to Group Rummy on 6 August and later recalled that, once placed under an unfamiliar command, he and his men felt that they could expect little leniency. In his memoir, he remarked with some bitterness: 'Let the borrowed battalion perish, and spare one's own unit – this must have been Colonel Rummy's way of thinking.'¹⁴⁸ He also described a seemingly minor incident that, despite its apparent insignificance, deeply affected the soldiers of his unit. Together with seventeen of his men, he was assigned to guard the rucksacks of his battalion while it was committed to combat. However, on the orders of the group commander, he was also sent to the front, forcing him to abandon the task. As a result, the battalion's belongings – left unguarded – were looted by other units. Although the incident may appear insignificant, for the soldiers involved it entailed the loss of virtually all their personal possessions: basic items such as spare underwear and extra towels – among the few sources of physical comfort

¹⁴⁶ Ocsóvszky, 'Katonanaplóm', p. 78.

¹⁴⁷ Observation made by Major László Huszár, Hungarian First Army, 24th Infantry Division, September 1944, concerning his own formation. See Bene and Szabó, *Huszonnégyes honvédek*, p. 89.

¹⁴⁸ László, 'Egy zászlós', pp 23-24.

available at the front – as well as family photographs, which served as vital emotional links to home and civilian life. The reassignment also disrupted the battalion's supply arrangements, with those engaged in combat receiving no food for several days. Taken together, these observations point to a specific dimension of unit cohesion: when operating outside the organisational framework of their parent division, soldiers experienced a heightened sense of vulnerability to arbitrary – and often disadvantageous – decisions imposed by external command.

Finally, it is necessary to return to a phenomenon discussed earlier. Much as during the Hungarian First Army's initial engagements, problems once again emerged among the troops, including the abandonment of frontline positions and widespread straggling, and the command again resorted to coercive measures in an attempt to address them. Although the soldiers of the 27th Light Division were largely unaffected on this occasion, and the acute manpower shortages facing VI Corps partly explain such measures, several points nevertheless deserve attention. First, the combat experience acquired since April was not always sufficient to prevent men from abandoning their positions, particularly in formations whose lines had previously been broken by enemy attacks. Secondly, for the command, coercion remained an instrument to which it repeatedly returned in times of crisis, suggesting that such methods were regarded as both a necessary and a legitimate means of restoring order whenever conventional mechanisms of cohesion and discipline proved inadequate.

Conclusion

Hungarian troops, reinforced by the German 4th Mountain Division, reached the Prut River on 9 August, forcing Soviet forces to retreat. By 10–11 August, elements of the 27th Light Division had reached the line assigned to them after the battle of Mikuliczyn, which largely corresponded to their previously held positions. The next significant development affecting the men of the formation did not occur on the front of the First Army. On 23 August 1944, Romania abandoned the Axis and joined the Allied powers; only three days later, on 26 August, units of the Soviet 2nd Ukrainian Front crossed the Hungarian border and entered the Szekler region. Although the most common reactions to the news were predominantly personal in nature, the sources indicate that the event also affected morale for at least one additional reason: it led

soldiers to reassess Germany's – and, implicitly, Hungary's – chances of bringing the war to an end under favourable conditions. In this respect, the most vulnerable group was that of the officers, due to the simple fact that they were more likely to have access to current news than the rank-and-file. In some cases, new pieces of information were discussed taking into consideration the larger context; an example for such an analysis can be found in Ensign Ocsovszky's 30 August diary entry. On the one hand, Ocsovszky listed the Allies' victories, namely the occupation of the cities of Nice in France, Urbino in Italy, and Ploiești in Romania, mentioning that with the exception of the Warsaw front the Germans and their allies were in a constant withdrawal. On the other hand, he also reflected on the situation of Germany's allies, which, in his view, were facing serious internal difficulties. Finally, he contrasted all these pieces of information with the army's official standpoint regarding the given situation: 'they keep saying that we have to stand by our German allies not only because of the Hungarian gallantry and the fact that we gave our word, but also because it is a matter of common sense. If Germany wins the war, we will get everything what was worth fighting for. If we turn on the Germans, we will perish: one just has to consider the fate of Italy and Romania.'¹⁴⁹ As the entry suggests, the ensign could not reach an unequivocal conclusion in relation to the outcome of the war; he was convinced, however, that the conflict would come to an end in a matter of weeks or months due to the decisive and definitive collapse of one of the parties involved. Although the sources rarely discuss the convictions of officers in such detail, the available evidence suggests that the developments in question had a significant impact on them. It is even more difficult to ascertain the views of the rank and file on such matters. What can be established, however, is that information circulating among officers frequently reached the enlisted men as well. As Márton Ábrahám records in his diary, news of the Allied landings in Normandy and Italy, as well as the fall of Rome, spread through informal channels. The credibility of such reports was often reinforced by claims that they originated from an officer's orderly.¹⁵⁰

Romania's realignment also triggered a formal initiative at divisional level: Major General András Zákó, commanding officer of the 27th Light Division, made repeated efforts to secure the release of his troops and their redeployment to Transylvania. In

¹⁴⁹ Ocsovszky, 'Katonanaplóm', p. 93.

¹⁵⁰ Márton Ábrahám, 'Naplótöredékek' [Fragments of a diary] (Hungarian Military History Archives, Budapest, TGY, 3616.), p. 18.

the initial phase of the negotiations, it appeared that the German side was unwilling to grant such permission, not least because it would have entailed the tactical withdrawal of the entire right flank of the First Hungarian Army; accordingly, the German military command rejected the request on several occasions. Sources related to the command of Army Group South Ukraine suggest, however, that the Germans were not opposed to the redeployment as such; rather, the protracted nature of the negotiations stemmed from their insistence that the division be placed under direct German command. An agreement was finally reached on 6 September: the light division was permitted to redeploy on condition that it be subordinated to the German Eighth Army.¹⁵¹

The withdrawal was to proceed along two separate routes: the motorized elements of the division were to follow the road through the settlements of Zabie, Worochta, and Körösmező, while the infantry and all horse-drawn vehicles were to cross the Carpathians via a campaign road constructed by the troops of August von Mackensen during the First World War. The motorized column – since most vehicles were located in the rear areas of the front – departed at 8 p.m. on 9 September and, as Ensign Ocsovszky recalls, its movement was covered by two infantry companies and a hussar company. In addition, three sapper platoons and a combat engineer company were left behind to destroy bridges and block sections of the road in the wake of the retreat.¹⁵² The situation of the frontline troops, however, was somewhat different. As Ensign Makrai recounts, the bulk of the 27/I Battalion withdrew during the night of 9–10 September, leaving behind a force consisting of a rifle company, three machine guns, two mortar crews, and a sapper detachment to cover the withdrawal.¹⁵³ The sappers had the additional task of preparing demolitions to delay the enemy's advance. In some areas, local inhabitants reached agreements with Hungarian troops to refrain from destroying infrastructure; this, however, was not always the case. A single sapper platoon alone is known to have demolished as many as eighteen bridges during the withdrawal.¹⁵⁴ The Galicia campaign of the 27th Light Division came to a close.

¹⁵¹ Berekméri, *Lesz még kikelet!*, pp 177, 179–180.

¹⁵² Ocsovszky, 'Katonanaplóm', p. 102.

¹⁵³ Makrai, 'Ki tudja, merre', pp 12–13.

¹⁵⁴ Ocsovszky, 'Katonanaplóm', p. 104.

The fact of returning to Hungary temporarily overshadowed earlier concerns among many of the men. Several units also marked the moment through gestures of a symbolic nature. The troops of the 57th Regiment crossed the border in the early morning hours of 13 September without pausing. At 8:30 a.m., however, during the subsequent halt, the men were assembled and addressed by a captain. As Ferenc Berecki noted in his memoir, the captain's speech was short, but uplifting, and it focused on the fact that they stood on Hungarian soil again.¹⁵⁵ For others, this was a time for reflection. Ensign Ocsovszky recalls: 'We had left Hungary at Woronienka, and we returned at the same point. We spent 140 days beyond our borders. It was said that everyone was satisfied with the performance of the Szekler Division. We witnessed both terrible and horrific events, as well as moments that were pleasant and interesting. Now we are about to enter Hungarian territory and face a new enemy. Even those who had previously fought with reluctance were now filled with enthusiasm.'¹⁵⁶ The troops also underwent some of the routines traditionally associated with formations returning from the front. At Petrova, a bath train was made available on 17 September, allowing the men to wash, undergo delousing, and mend their uniforms. Provision was likewise made for their spiritual and recreational needs: they attended a field mass, while on 23 September they staged an amateur theatrical performance featuring satirical sketches as well as musical and dance numbers.¹⁵⁷

Several conclusions may be drawn from the formation's experience in Galicia. One of these relates to what Omer Bartov has termed the 'demodernization of warfare', which, in his interpretation, encompassed not merely a return to trench warfare, but a broader deterioration in the material and organisational conditions of combat, characterised by poor supply, inadequate clothing, and deficient shelter and hygienic conditions.¹⁵⁸ In the case of the Hungarian First Army, however, this pattern manifested itself only partially. While the troops were indeed compelled to adopt tactics reminiscent of the First World War and frequently faced manpower shortages, their relative proximity to Hungary ensured a comparatively stable level of supply. Furthermore, except during the initial phase of their deployment, favourable weather conditions helped to alleviate

¹⁵⁵ Bereczki, 'Honvéd voltam', p. 46.

¹⁵⁶ Ocsovszky, 'Katonanaplóm', p. 102.

¹⁵⁷ Bereczki, 'Honvéd voltam', p. 46.

¹⁵⁸ See Bartov, *Hitler's Army*, p. 16-17.

the hardships of life at the front. In terms of equipment, it would not be an exaggeration to state that ‘demodernisation’ in fact operated in favour of the Hungarian forces: by limiting the technological advantages of the Soviet Army, it served to equalise the balance of forces, thereby mitigating the disadvantages of the comparatively less well-equipped Hungarian units. At the same time, the trench warfare conditions provided an opportunity to compensate for deficiencies in training, partly through participation in the German training system under Army Group North Ukraine. Moreover, the troops also benefited from the accumulation of combat experience, which, in this sense, amounted to a degree of professionalisation.

The proximity of Hungary likewise had a beneficial effect on both morale and combat effectiveness, a conclusion supported by contemporary observations. On the one hand, the light division – and indeed the First Army as a whole – was able to rely on a multi-layered defensive system which, although only partially developed in its individual components, nonetheless contributed to a heightened sense of confidence among the troops, some even regarding it as virtually impregnable. On the other hand, in this context the defence of the homeland – and the legitimacy of the war – was no longer merely a matter of propaganda. Contemporary observations lend support to this interpretation. Captain Eszenyi, drawing on his experiences during an inspection of the First Army, noted the resolute fighting spirit that appeared to emanate from every officer and enlisted man he addressed. Similarly, First Lieutenant Damó observed that, in the foothills of the Carpathians, the soldiers fought far more tenaciously – indeed, at times heroically – than during their earlier deployment in the Soviet Union.¹⁵⁹

As regards cohesion, the following point merits particular attention. Although the Hungarian Army’s mobilisation system tended to work against primary group bonds – by breaking up established small-unit ties – such bonds were, under battlefield conditions, reconstituted. A similar process can be identified in relation to unit cohesion, understood here as the attachment of soldiers to their larger units. In peacetime, the Hungarian military leadership sought to foster cohesion not on the basis of the traditional regimental system, but within a broader national framework; at the front, however, cohesion tended to develop at the divisional level, certain aspects of which will be discussed in the following chapter.

¹⁵⁹ Eszenyi, *Trianoni nemzedék*, p. 299. Damó, *Névtelen katonák*, p. 80.

Finally, it must be noted that the relationship between the rank and file, their immediate superiors, and the higher military leadership became more clearly defined, and, as part of this process, it became apparent that shortcomings in armament, manpower, or command were on occasion addressed through coercive measures.

Chapter V: From Transylvania to the Tisza River

The 27th Light Division was redeployed to Northern Transylvania in mid-September 1944, by which time much of the Szekler region had already been occupied by enemy forces. Operationally, this move placed it under German command, which had no intention of preserving its integrity as a fighting formation; instead, individual battalions were detached from divisional command and assigned to various battle groups. Another important consequence of the redeployment was that the soldiers witnessed their own home region becoming a battlefield, a development that placed particular strain on the bonds linking them to their military groups. Accordingly, the chapter begins by examining this aspect before turning to the experience of combat through the cases of the 27th Reconnaissance Battalion and the 27/I Battalion.

The second section likewise addresses two closely intertwined developments – on the one hand, the withdrawal of Hungarian and German forces from Transylvania; on the other, Miklós Horthy's attempt to withdraw Hungary from the war – and focuses in particular on the impact of the crisis of the national socio-political system on troop motivation, while also asking how the dynamics of group cohesion shaped soldiers' behaviour under these new circumstances. Finally, a third section examines the new front established along the line of the Tisza River and the fighting that took place there, as well as the ways in which the military, in the absence of legitimacy, sought to fall back on coercion.

1. The 27th Light Division in Transylvania

The deployment of the 27th Light Division in Transylvania was fundamentally shaped by Romania's withdrawal from the war, which brought military operations onto Hungarian soil. One immediate consequence of the Romanian defection was the catastrophic defeat of Army Group South Ukraine, commanded by Colonel General Hans Friessner and comprising the German Sixth and Eighth Armies. In the case of the Sixth Army, virtually all major formations consequently ceased to exist as coherent units. The remaining elements of the Eighth Army withdrew towards Hungary, while the Hungarian military leadership likewise sought to organise the defence of the

several-hundred-kilometre-wide gap that had emerged along the Eastern Carpathians, which in this sector also formed the eastern boundary of the Szekler region.¹ The formations deployed into the Carpathians included the Szekler territorial forces: the 9th Border Rifle Brigade took up positions in the Felsővisó and Borgó Pass area, while the Szekler Border Guard Forces extended their positions southwards from this sector as far as the Ojtoz Pass.² The defenders faced the Soviet 40th Army, the 7th Guards Army, and Gorshkov's Cavalry–Mechanised Group, which made sustained efforts to break through the mountain passes.

Since the Szekler region formed a salient along the Carpathian arc in south-eastern Transylvania, the section of the front stretching from the south-eastern tip of Hungary to the Iron Gate, following the mountain range that marked Transylvania's southern border, remained largely unprotected. In order to establish contact with German forces operating in the south-eastern theatre, the German command was compelled to secure this sector and deny the enemy access to the passes of the Southern Carpathians. As these passes lay within Romanian territory, this objective could only be achieved by capturing them through military operations.

The offensive designed to achieve this objective was to be undertaken by the newly established Hungarian Second Army – constituted on 30 August, placed under the command of Colonel General Lajos Veress, and subordinated to Army Group South Ukraine. Its formations – including units redeployed from Galicia – were to be concentrated in the Kolozsvár area. An analogous task was assigned to the German (SS) Gruppe Siebenbürgen (Transylvania Group), which was assembling in the Marosvásárhely area under the command of SS-Obergruppenführer Artur Phleps and comprised the 8th SS Cavalry Division *Florian Geyer* and the 75th Infantry Division.

According to the German offensive plan, which was presented to the command of the Second Army on 2 September 1944, the Hungarian forces were to advance through Torda and Gyulafehérvár, disperse the opposing Romanian forces, seize the Vöröstorony Pass before the arrival of Soviet troops, and secure the mountain routes leading westwards – that is, towards the territory of interwar Hungary. In more realistic

¹ For the consequences of the Iași–Kishinev Operation and Romania's defection, see Klaus Schönherr, 'The Withdrawal Battles in Romania and Transylvania in the Summer and Autumn of 1944' in Karl-Heinz Frieser (ed.), *Germany and the Second World War*, viii: *The Eastern Front 1943–1944: The War in the East and on the Neighbouring Fronts* (Oxford, 2017), p. 816.

² Illésfalvi, Szabó, and Számvéber, *Erdély a hadak útján*, pp 58–59.

terms, however, Colonel General Veress defined the immediate objective of the offensive as the straightening of the border salient between Kolozsvár and Marosvásárhely through a limited attack, thereby preventing enemy forces attacking from the Romanian-controlled part of Transylvania from cutting off the Szekler region – and, with it, the Hungarian and German forces holding positions along the Eastern Carpathians.

The offensive was launched on 5 September from south of Kolozsvár, and although the only opposing force in the region – the Romanian 4th Army – slightly outnumbered the Hungarian forces (113,759 men to approximately 90,000), the attackers advanced some 50 kilometres into southern Transylvania during the first two days, reached the line of the River Maros, and at several points succeeded in crossing it. By this time, Red Army units had entered Transylvania through the Eastern Carpathians but were halted along the edge of the Szekler region. In the case of Háromszék, the southernmost Szekler county and the one closest to the mountain passes under Romanian control, Soviet forces advancing through the Predeal Pass and concentrating in the Brassó area posed a threat to the German and Hungarian units deployed along the Ozsdola–Bereck–Lemhény–Torja–Kászonújfalu line, which roughly covered the approaches to the Ojtoz Pass from the rear. The extent of the threat is well illustrated by the fact that Bereck – one of the localities along the German–Hungarian line – lay only 80 kilometres from Brassó, which Soviet forces could reach after crossing the nearest mountain pass in Romanian territory, with no significant natural obstacles between the two settlements. Since Brassó, situated at the Transylvanian exit of the pass, also remained under Romanian control, Red Army formations crossing the Carpathians could assemble there without interference.

The initial success of the Hungarian Second Army, however, prompted the Soviet command to revise its operational plans. The Soviet 6th Tank Army, which had been advancing towards the Iron Gate south of Transylvania, was ordered to halt, turn north, and enter the province. By 8 September 1944, Soviet mobile forces had already crossed the Vöröstorony and Vulkán passes and reached Nagyszeben. This not only meant that any attempt to seal off the southern approaches to Transylvania came too late, but also placed Soviet forces in a position to cut off the German and Hungarian troops still fighting in the Eastern Carpathians. To avoid this, the German command resolved to withdraw all forces to a shortened defensive line. In consequence, the offensive of the

Hungarian Second Army was terminated on 8 September 1944, and its units took up defensive positions along a line anchored on the Maros and Aranyos rivers. As far as the forces still fighting in the Eastern Carpathians were concerned, they were ordered on 10 September to evacuate the Szekler strip and withdraw to the Maros River line, a movement that was completed by 15 September.³ These developments were of particular significance for the personnel of the 27th Light Division: first, a large part of the Szekler region – and with it approximately two thirds of the division's recruitment area, where the soldiers' families also lived – came under enemy control. Second, the withdrawal resulted in the establishment of a new defensive line along which the formation's units were subsequently deployed.

In the Soviet offensive unfolding in Transylvania, the 6th Tank Army – which was awarded Guards status on 12 September – and the 27th Army were tasked with capturing Kolozsvár by 15 September, while the 53rd Army was to advance to the Brád–Lugos line by 19 September. The principal objective of the Soviet command was to break through the enemy lines and advance on Nyíregyháza, where the forces of the 2nd Ukrainian Front were to link up with those of the 4th Ukrainian Front, provided that the latter succeeded in forcing the Dukla Pass on the Polish–Slovak border.⁴

Kolozsvár, the immediate objective of Soviet operations, was precisely the locality that Army Group South Ukraine was most determined to hold. The main force along the approximately 25-kilometre-long defensive position consisted of two Hungarian divisions – the 25th Infantry Division and the 2nd Armoured Division. From 13 September onwards, strong Soviet and Romanian forces launched continuous attacks against these positions, gradually closing in on the town of Torda, after which the battle was ultimately named. However, a counter-attack mounted by the German 23rd Armoured Division on 25 September prevented an imminent breakthrough and temporarily stabilised the situation.⁵

While the Battle of Torda was under way in central Transylvania, the 27th Light Division was deployed on the left flank of Army Group South Ukraine, alongside

³ Ziemke, *From Stalingrad to Berlin*, p. 445.

⁴ Karl-Heinz Frieser (ed.), *Germany and the Second World War*, viii: *The Eastern Front 1943–1944: The War in the East and on the Neighbouring Fronts* (Oxford, 2017), p. 868.

⁵ Berekméri, *Lesz még kikelet!*, p. 214.

Hungarian and German units withdrawn from the Szekler region. As noted above, the withdrawal from the area in question had been completed by 15 September, after which a new defensive line was established running through Marosvásárhely, Szászrégen, and Palotailva, and extending northwards to the Vatra Dornei bridgehead. The sector between and Nyárádremete, situated on the left bank of the Nyárád River, was held by the German 8th SS Cavalry Division *Florian Geyer* and the 46th Infantry Division. North of these formations, the line was occupied by units of the Hungarian 2nd Field Replacement Division. Further north, elements of the German 3rd Mountain Division established positions on the western slopes of the Görgényi Mountains, while the sector of the German 8th Jäger Division lay in the Kelemen Mountains and on both sides of the Păltiniș Pass. The defensive system also incorporated an element of the Árpád Line, namely the fortifications at Palotailva, and, in accordance with explicit orders issued by Hitler, a bridgehead was maintained in the Vatra Dornei area in order to secure the local manganese ore deposits.⁶

As far as the 27th Light Division was concerned, the formation crossed into Hungary around 13 September, and the transfer of its personnel to a new assembly area in the region of Beszterce and Szászlekenye commenced on the same day. Some units and equipment were transported by rail or bus; however, after 24 September, when no further trains could be allocated for this purpose, the remaining troops were ordered to cover the distance on foot.

As part of this redeployment, the division was placed under the command of the German Eighth Army, and it soon became apparent that the German command deliberately chose not to preserve its organisational integrity. Instead, detachments of varying strength were separated from divisional headquarters and dispersed along a front extending from the Máramaros region to the valley of the Maros River. At the request of the German XVII Corps, one detachment was dispatched to Borsa, near the Prislop Pass, between the Máramaros and Radnai Mountains. Another group, consisting of the 27/II, 27/III, 57/I, and 57/III Battalions, took up positions at the Borgó Pass, in a sector loosely defined by the villages of Marosborgó, Borgóprund, Óradna,

⁶ István Ravasz, 'Az erdélyi hadműveletek 1944 késő nyarán-kora őszén. IV. rész. A Székelyföld kiürítése' [The Military Operations in Transylvania in Late Summer and Early Autumn 1944. Part IV: The Evacuation of the Szekler Land] in *Hadtörténelmi Közlemények*, vol. cxii, no. 3 (1999), p. 553.

and Újradna. Although these four battalions – together with divisional headquarters – were nominally deployed within the same area, the 57/I Battalion in fact advanced as far as Vatra Dornei, where it occupied a sector south of the town on the southern flank of the German 8th Jäger Division. The remaining units were likewise not deployed along a continuous line. Divisional headquarters was established at Borgóprund – situated on the road linking Bistrița and Vatra Dornei – while the 57/III Battalion, deployed east of Borgótiha, also held positions along this axis. The rest of the formation, however, was concentrated around Óradna and Újradna, along a separate line of communication connecting Năsăud and Cârlibaba. Additional units – including the division's reconnaissance battalion – were assigned to the sector of the Hungarian 2nd Field Replacement Division, while the 27/I Battalion, initially deployed to Izaszacsal near Borsa, was subsequently transferred to the Szászrégen area and placed under the command of the German 46th Infantry Division.

Soldiers and Civilians

In their analysis of the relationship between group cohesion and combat motivation, Edward Shils and Morris Janowitz interpreted soldiers' attachment to their units through Charles Horton Cooley's theory of primary groups, in which the family occupies a central position as the most important primary group. They further argued that cohesion within military primary groups may be weakened in situations where loyalties to these two spheres come into conflict, particularly when the safety of soldiers' civilian primary groups is seriously threatened.⁷ In this respect, the soldiers of the 27th Light Division were no exception. Consequently, it is worth examining how the transformation of their home region into a theatre of war shaped the formation's subsequent trajectory. This also requires an examination of the circumstances in which the soldiers found themselves and of how these experiences informed their attitudes and decisions.

Romania's defection – of which the troops had been informed from 24 August onward – generated a sense of bitterness among the men, particularly in light of the considerable uncertainty surrounding the fate of the northern Transylvanian territories annexed to Hungary in 1940. This sentiment was only briefly mitigated by reports of

⁷ Shils and Janowitz, 'Cohesion and Disintegration', pp 289-290.

the offensive to occupy southern Transylvania, communicated to the troops by the command of the light division at some point between 5 and 8 September. The announcements – although they amounted to little more than largely unfounded propagandistic statements emphasizing territorial gains, the defeat of enemy battalions, and the outstanding combat performance of the militia-like Szekler Border Guard battalions – briefly contributed to an improvement in morale. As Ensign László Ocsóvszky noted in his diary on 8 September, with reference also to international news that focused almost exclusively on German setbacks: ‘We were in need of good news after so much confusion, betrayal, and retreat.’⁸

The period that followed was characterized by a sense of relief at the prospect of returning home, coupled with a renewed sense of uncertainty. This sentiment was largely caused by the fact that troops disengaging from the enemy and returning to Hungary through the mountains were in no position to receive news, while postal services from the Szekler region had also ceased to function, leaving them cut off from correspondence with their families. Upon arrival in Transylvania, however, it became clear that most of the Szekler region had by that time already been occupied by the Red Army. József Péter, who served in the 27/I Battalion and whose unit had been ordered to proceed on foot toward Izaszacsal, located at the exit of the Borgó Pass between the Radna and Máramaros Mountains, described this confrontation with reality as follows in his recollections: ‘It was a comforting feeling to read on the roadside signs how many kilometres remained to Sepsiszentgyörgy. Yet as the kilometres grew fewer, so too did our hope that we would ever be able to return home.’⁹ By 15 September, this state of affairs had become apparent to most of the troops. Mihály Ferencz, serving with the 57/I Battalion, recorded only two facts in his diary entry for that day: their arrival in Vatra Dornei and, in his own words, that the enemy was already in the Szekler region. Similarly, Ensign László Ocsóvszky noted that radio broadcasts on the same day announced the planned evacuation of Háromszék County – the home region of the 27/I and 57/I Battalions – while a subsequent broadcast on 16 September reported that Soviet and Romanian forces had crossed the Aranyos River and were advancing toward Torda.¹⁰ For some, however, such a turn of events was

⁸ Ocsóvszky, ‘Katonanaplóm’, p. 101. See also Mirk, ‘Napló’, 5 September 1944; Bereczki, ‘Honvéd voltam’, p. 45.

⁹ Péter, ‘Így emlékszem vissza’, pp 11-12.

¹⁰ Ocsóvszky, ‘Katonanaplóm’, pp 104-105.

almost inconceivable. According to Ensign Ferenc László, news of the evacuation reached them only by chance: Captain Ferenc Cserei, commanding officer of the 27th Field Training Battalion, happened to hear a radio broadcast while passing through a village. Since official propaganda had led them to believe that German and Hungarian forces would never abandon the Szekler strip, this information profoundly unsettled the captain – even though he himself was not from Transylvania – as it revealed the extent to which official assurances had been unreliable.¹¹ Marosvásárhely was the sole remaining garrison town of the 27th Light Division that had not yet fallen into enemy hands. Nevertheless, the evacuation of the city had already commenced in response to the rapidly advancing front.

The units returning to Transylvania were also compelled to confront the consequences of the province's transformation into an active theatre of war. Among these developments, it is necessary to mention, first, the evacuation of the province's German-speaking population; second, the withdrawal of the Hungarian civil administration from the endangered Szekler region, accompanied by the partial evacuation of the civilian population; and, finally, the effects arising from the transformation of the province into a theatre of military operations.

With regard to the Transylvanian Germans (commonly referred to as Saxons), the first communities to be affected were those in the Brassó region, which bordered the Szekler area but lay within the Romanian-administered part of the province. Their departure was precipitated by Romania's alignment with the Allied powers and its declaration of war on Germany on 25 August 1944, followed by a series of restrictive measures imposed upon the Transylvanian German population by the Romanian authorities. As a result, German refugees passed through Sepsiszentgyörgy and moved toward Marosvásárhely, with the intention of settling in the areas surrounding Szászrégen and Beszterce. Upon reaching Szászrégen on 11 September, however, they found that the evacuation of the local German population in that area had also begun. This was subsequently followed by the evacuation of Germans from the Beszterce area between 15 and 20 September. In this instance, the refugees were directed toward the

¹¹ Ferenc László, 'Egy zászlós', p. 19.

Szatmár region.¹² Similarly, the evacuation of the counties of Háromszék, Csík, and Maros-Torda – which, together with Udvarhely County, largely constituted the Szekler region – was ordered in late August and early September. The Hungarian military structures, as well as the civil administration, were withdrawn from all threatened areas, and a substantial proportion of the civilian population also departed the region – partly voluntarily, but also under pressure exerted by Hungarian field gendarmes and German military personnel. The scale of these population movements is illustrated by the fact that in December 1944, only approximately 60,000 of Csík County's prewar population of 140,000 remained at their places of residence.¹³ The soldiers of the 27th Reconnaissance Battalion were among the first units to be confronted with these developments. While en route by rail to their new destination, the troops noted no fewer than twenty trains designated as special evacuation transports on 17 September, and rail traffic showed no signs of abating the following day.¹⁴ State and military institutions were being evacuated, with the latter transferred to locations in western Hungary, close to the Austrian border. The Hungarian army also began relocating civilian refugees from the immediate rear areas of the front by rail; however, their numbers were so large that the operation required approximately three weeks to complete.¹⁵

The rail transport of the Reconnaissance Battalion was further marked by encounters with hostile air activity. To be sure, bombing operations against Kolozsvár and Nagyvárad (Oradea) – two cities in the broader region of Transylvania – had already taken place as early as 2 June 1944, and news of these attacks had reached the 27th Light Division as well, generating particular concern among those originating from Kolozsvár or with family connections there. On this occasion, however, the soldiers personally experienced air-raid warnings and, in the case of the bombing of Szatmárnémeti, were close enough to hear the detonations and saw the sky lit up with the flashes from the explosions. The events observed appear to have had a discernible impact on them. On 17 September, Ensign Ocsovszky committed his impressions to

¹² Loránt Tilkovszky, *Ez volt a Volksbund A német népcsoport-politika és Magyarország 1938–1945* [This Was the Volksbund: German Minority Policy in Hungary, 1938–1945] (Budapest, 1981), p. 331.

¹³ Sándor Oláh, 'A „kis magyar világ”, 1940–1944' [The 'Little Hungarian World,' 1940–1944] in Nándor Bárdi and Judit Pál (eds), *Székelyföld története*, iii [The History of Szeklerland, iii] (Székelyudvarhely, 2016), p. 438.

¹⁴ Ocsovszky, 'Katonanaplóm', p. 106.

¹⁵ Ravasz, 'Az erdélyi hadműveletek', p. 553.

writing in a diary entry; it is not unreasonable to suggest that his words reflected the sentiments of many among his comrades:

One thing is certain: no one knows what the general situation is or where it is leading. It appears that we are slowly backing out of our own country through what are described as “clever, disengaging manoeuvres.” What will happen, what is happening to those at home, and how much retreat and territorial loss can the moral strength of the Hungarian masses endure?¹⁶

As already noted, one of the peacetime garrison towns of the 27th Light Division, Marosvásárhely, had not yet been occupied by enemy forces in mid-September 1944. Following the arrival of individual units at their designated locations, several personnel originating from the city were granted short periods of leave in order to visit their families. Among them were Sergeant János Mirk, Lieutenant Dániel Aszalós, Reserve Lieutenant Lajos Nagy, and First Lieutenant János Menyhért. Aszalós, Nagy, and Menyhért served with the 27/II Artillery Battalion, which was stationed at Marosvécs, approximately sixty kilometres from Marosvásárhely; given the relatively short distance, they undertook the journey by motorcycle. In a retrospective interview conducted several decades later, Aszalós recalled that, at the time of their journey, advancing Soviet forces already had certain sections of the road under observation and that the railway line had been systematically destroyed at intervals of approximately ten metres.¹⁷

Sergeant Mirk, by contrast, was assigned to the divisional headquarters at Beszterce. As his wife gave birth during this period, he was granted leave on two occasions and travelled to Marosvásárhely between 23 and 27 September. While Aszalós’s later recollections remain relatively general, Mirk’s contemporaneous diary provides a more detailed account of conditions within the city. On the one hand, Mirk summarized information he had heard on his first arrival. The evacuation of the families of military personnel, he learned, had been announced on 4 September; his wife was permitted to remain behind only because complications during childbirth were anticipated. Just a few days later, on 9 September, the town was struck by a Romanian aerial attack, during which the aircraft also bombed and strafed columns of Saxon refugees passing through the surrounding area. Civil servants, as well as

¹⁶ Ocsovszky, ‘Katonanaplóm’, p. 105.

¹⁷ Interview with Dániel Aszalós (audio recording in the possession of Árpád Róbert Berekméri, Mureș County, Romania).

members of the police and the gendarmerie, were withdrawn on 14 September, and the hospitals were likewise evacuated. In the latter case, the measure encompassed not only patients but also medical equipment, dressings, and pharmaceutical supplies. As the local authorities departed, looting allegedly began: German soldiers broke into shops, and cases of sexual violence and killings occurred.

The subsequent part of the account, on the other hand, is based on Mirk's own personal experiences. On 23 September, he writes, when he entered the settlement, artillery shells could be heard overhead, and the remaining population had already taken refuge in cellars. By 26 September, the fighting had come to affect the city even more directly. According to Mirk, a Tiger tank engaged Soviet forces near the house where he spent the night, prompting a mortar bombardment in response, the shrapnel from which also struck his building. Finally, on 27 September, German units began demolishing industrial facilities, water and electricity infrastructure, other public utilities, and the railway. The local newspaper *Székely Szó*, in what proved to be its final issue, published an appeal urging residents to leave and warning that those who intended to remain would have to face hostile occupation. Mirk took leave of his wife and his four-day-old son at five o'clock in the afternoon and returned to Beszterce later the same day. As he noted in his diary, on 28 September the Light Division's chief field chaplain made a final attempt to bring medical supplies to Marosvásárhely to alleviate the situation following the evacuation. The vehicle assigned to the mission, however, could no longer enter the city.¹⁸

Several claims against the Germans mentioned by Mirk in relation to Marosvásárhely – such as alleged looting or what locals described as acts of wanton destruction – also appear in other sources. Units of the 27th Light Division often passed through, and at times rested or were billeted in, Saxon villages whose inhabitants had largely sought sanctuary elsewhere, leaving behind both their homes and livestock. At the same time, in many instances only the residents of ethnic German villages fled, while Hungarians or Romanians remained, hoping that their belongings and lives would be spared by the soldiers. In many cases, this assumption proved to be mistaken. In practice, soldiers – including Hungarians – were almost constantly in search of fresh provisions: unoccupied homes became easy targets, and supplies were occasionally stolen or

¹⁸ Mirk, 'Napló', daily entries covering the period from 23 to 28 September 1944.

simply taken from civilians, particularly when they were unwilling to sell their produce or offer a meal. Various sources suggest, however, that locals viewed Hungarian combat units as a form of authority to which they could turn with their grievances in cases where they felt they had been wronged. After the Reconnaissance Battalion reached its destination at Alsórépa on 21 September, local inhabitants – who, for the first time in the course of the battalion’s operations, were Hungarian nationals like the soldiers themselves – voiced strong complaints about looting committed by German troops to their detriment.¹⁹ Lajos Fekete, who served with the headquarters of the 27th Infantry Regiment, also records a similar incident that appears to have taken place at roughly the same time – that is, in late September or early October. In his memoirs, he writes that while stationed in Borgóbeszterce, an ethnic Romanian woman approached the headquarters with her two children to seek assistance after German soldiers had confiscated her cow. A herd of approximately twenty-five to thirty head of cattle was indeed found in a nearby courtyard, apparently requisitioned by a German unit. Fekete approached the sentry, gesturing toward the children in an attempt to persuade him that the cow should be returned to its owner, and then asked the woman which animal was hers. She pointed to one cow, which, when she began to call it, came out of the herd. Following Fekete’s intervention, the woman was allowed to reclaim her cow.²⁰

The fact that the phenomenon was not confined to a small number of trivial cases is demonstrated by Johannes Friessner’s decision, as commanding general of Army Group South, to address the issue directly in his dispatch of 3 October. ‘Cases of looting became menacingly frequent,’ the dispatch reads. ‘Stealing poultry and furniture, especially behind the lines – “saving” such items under one’s jacket – testifies to the low morale of the troops involved and also reflects poorly on their superiors.’ To serve as a deterrent and to forestall such incidents in the future, those caught red-handed were threatened with court-martial.²¹

However, the gravest damage stemmed not from looting or military requisitions, but from the deliberate destruction of infrastructure. In keeping with standard military practice during a retreat – a practice also followed by the 27th Light Division – the Germans sought to deny the enemy the use of roads, bridges, and other key

¹⁹ Ocsovszky, ‘Katonanaplóm’, p. 107.

²⁰ Lajos Fekete, ‘Dalból van a lelkem’ [My Soul Is Made of Music] (Brassó, 2008), p. 41.

²¹ Illésfalvi, Szabó, and Számvéber, *Erdély a hadak útján*, pp 139-140.

installations. In Transylvania, in this respect, they appear either to have taken such measures too far or to have entirely disregarded the fact that they were operating in an allied country. Friessner's previously cited dispatch, which also addressed these matters, explicitly noted that German formations, despite instructions to the contrary, frequently engaged in acts of meaningless destruction. Determined to put an end to such harmful practices, the general pointed out that the burning or demolition of civilian houses was not only entirely pointless but also constituted a waste of explosives that could have been employed against legitimate military targets, such as electric works, power plants, dams, and bridges – in short, infrastructure of potential military value to the enemy. To prevent wanton destruction, Friessner suggested that Hungarian civilian officials or military personnel be involved in both the planning and execution of demolition operations. It should be noted, however, that even demolitions deemed necessary deprived local communities of key infrastructure – including bridges and railway facilities – as well as basic services, and that in settlements directly affected by the fighting civilians continued to suffer severe damage to their housing.²²

As can be inferred from their recollections or diaries, seeing the effects of the war in their own homeland had a deep impact on the soldiers, even if not all of them were able to articulate this as concisely as First Lieutenant Elemér Damó:

The theatre of fighting shifted onto Hungarian territory, with all the consequences this entailed. From that point on, every enemy projectile exploded on Hungarian soil, every mine was laid there. Hungary's arable lands were cut up by defensive positions and torn apart by tanks. Hungarian houses – and even entire villages – were burned down; the provisions of the local population were consumed by the troops; villages were evacuated, and from the emptied houses soldiers on both sides carried off goods to make their trenches more comfortable. Hungary's roads and bridges had to be blown up, its timber yards set on fire, in order to hinder the enemy's advance.²³

An even greater source of anxiety for the soldiers was the fate of relatives who had remained in enemy-controlled territory, with whom virtually all communication had been severed, and whose circumstances they – not without reason – imagined on the basis of what they themselves had witnessed. This rupture in itself placed a considerable psychological burden on them, often driving them toward speculation or to give credence to alarming rumours. József Péter notes, for example, that he had been

²² Ibid.

²³ Damó, *Névtelen katonák*, p. 140.

told his wife was seriously wounded when Russian forces entered his home town of Sepsiszentgyörgy, and that for a long time he did not know whether she had survived. Although she in fact came to no harm during the occupation of the town, Péter only learned the truth upon his return home in 1945.²⁴

The disruption of ties with home may have rendered the bonds of the soldiers' primary military group all the more significant. At the same time, however, the fact that the state had, in effect, withdrawn almost entirely from the region exacerbated tensions between the troops' loyalty to their civilian primary groups and their allegiance to the prevailing sociopolitical order. Simply put, the same bonds that helped soldiers endure the horrors of battle could also help them mitigate the risks of leaving the ranks by cooperating with one another.

The 27th Reconnaissance Battalion

The 27th Reconnaissance Battalion was among the units that, following the return to Transylvania, were engaged in combat for the longest period, and whose history – thanks to the diary of Ensign László Ocsóvszky – is known in the greatest detail. The battalion reached the sector of the 2nd Field Replacement Division on 21 September 1944; owing to difficulties with rail transport, the transfer from Felsővisó to Alsórépa took nearly a week, despite the road distance between the two localities being approximately 134 kilometres. Four batteries of the 27th Light Artillery Regiment were also deployed in the sector of the field replacement division, where Soviet and Romanian forces made sustained efforts to break through the Hungarian–German lines towards Szászrégen. Upon arrival, the batteries took up positions in the Idecspaták–Marosvécs–Holtmaros area. Deployed slightly to the north-east, the 27th Reconnaissance Battalion positioned its anti-tank platoon – equipped with four anti-tank guns – south of Disznajó, while establishing its headquarters at Déda.

Finally, a group of approximately 200 men, consisting of the bicycle company, the mortar platoon, and the sapper platoon, was subordinated to the 65th Border Rifle Group under the command of Colonel Zoltán Miskey (commonly designated as the

²⁴ Péter, 'Így emlékszem vissza', pp 29-30.

Miskey Group after its commander).²⁵ This force was tasked with manning the defensive positions at Palotailva, a settlement located in the gorge of the Maros River between the Kelemen and Görgényi Mountains. While the Hungarian line in the area incorporated a fortified Árpád Line position at Palotailva, blocking the Maros River valley and consisting primarily of concrete bunkers and field fortifications, the reconnaissance battalion detachment was positioned southwest of the settlement, on the western heights overlooking the Szalárd Stream valley.²⁶

The units of the 27th Light Division were engaged in combat almost immediately upon their arrival. On 22 September, the Soviet 6th Guards Rifle Division and the Romanian 103rd Mountain Division launched an attack against the positions of the 2nd Field Replacement Division in the direction of Görgényüvegcsűr and Kásva, within the sector to which four batteries of the 27th Light Artillery Regiment had been assigned to provide artillery support. On 23 September, the Miskey Group likewise came under attack; moreover, an enemy force 50–100 strong succeeded in dispersing a reinforced platoon of the reconnaissance battalion positioned in the Priszlop Clearing. The position was subsequently retaken by a counter-attack; however, the manner in which this action was organised illustrates the complexity of the situation faced by Hungarian units placed under German command. The counter-attacking force, led by Colonel Miskey, consisted of the mortar section of the 27th Reconnaissance Battalion, half of the Hungarian 21/5 Fortress Company and a company of the German 138th Mountain Infantry Regiment. The assault took place during the night of 23 September, coinciding with the redesignation of Army Group South Ukraine (to which the 27th Light Division was subordinated) as Army Group South.²⁷

From the perspective of the units of the reconnaissance battalion involved, the most significant change compared to their earlier employment was that they were no longer committed as part of their parent formation, but rather as elements of an ad hoc battle group. Beyond the general tendency of military units to perform less effectively when subordinated to unfamiliar formations – a situation often accompanied by perceptions of insufficient support – two additional factors warrant consideration. The other

²⁵ In the Royal Hungarian Army, combat engineer (utász) units were organisationally distinct from sapper (árkász) units. Although sappers performed tasks comparable to those of combat engineers, their responsibilities were generally more limited in scope, including the construction of defensive positions and trench systems, and they were typically organised in smaller units.

²⁶ *Berekméri, Lesz még kikelet!*, p. 200.

²⁷ *Berekméri, Lesz még kikelet!*, p. 201.

Hungarian component of the detachment, the 21/5 Fortress Company, had no connection to the reconnaissance battalion that might have fostered inter-unit loyalty and possessed comparatively limited combat experience, having entered combat only after enemy forces reached the Hungarian border in the wake of Romania's defection in August 1944. As for the German component, the reconnaissance battalion's relationship with it was informed by both the experiences of the 27th Light Division upon returning to Transylvania and earlier encounters with German forces in Galicia, characterised by an asymmetry in favour of the latter.

These difficulties were further compounded by developments along the front of the 2nd Field Replacement Division. On 24 September, the right flank of the Soviet and Romanian forces pushed forward to the railway station at Déda, where the advance was halted by hastily assembled ad hoc units, while on the left flank the attackers also succeeded in breaching the Hungarian line. A counter-attack mounted by the 68th Border Rifle Battalion subsequently sealed the breach in the Görgényüvegcsűr–Idecspatak sector, but only at the cost of heavy losses, amounting to approximately two thirds of the battalion's strength. A significant proportion of these casualties resulted from friendly artillery fire, including fire from batteries of the 27th Light Artillery Regiment. At the same time, another development occurred that would subsequently affect the situation of the units of the 27th Light Division engaged in this sector: the German leadership approved the evacuation of the Vatra Dornei bridgehead, following which the German 3rd Mountain Division was released and redeployed to reinforce the defences of the Maros valley.²⁸

Owing to the enemy advance in the sector of the 2nd Field Replacement Division, the situation of the Miskey Group became increasingly precarious: Soviet forces advancing towards Déda cut its supply lines and isolated it from its means of transportation. As a consequence, the bulk of the formation withdrew approximately 13 kilometres to Ratosnya. A new combat group, comprising the reconnaissance battalion, the remnants of the 21/5 Fortress Company, and a German mountain infantry company, was formed under Lieutenant Colonel György Eördögh, the battalion commander, and deployed to the Görgényüvegcsűr sector of the front, where it was ordered to seize and hold Hill 1258 until further instructions.

²⁸ Illésfalvi, Szabó, and Számvéber, *Erdély a hadak útján*, pp 119-121.

According to Ensign Ocsovszky, two assault detachments were formed for the operation – one consisting entirely of Hungarian troops and the other of the previously mentioned German mountain infantry company – and were ordered to approach the objective from different directions in order to launch a coordinated attack. During its advance toward the objective, the Hungarian detachment had to overcome a Soviet combat outpost, sustaining losses of four killed and eleven wounded. With no medical or service units attached, the dead were buried on site, while the wounded had to be taken along, three of them being carried forward on stretchers. Nonetheless, the detachment succeeded in reaching the designated jump-off positions largely on schedule.

The attack commenced at 13:40 with a preparatory bombardment delivered by eight mortars, while eight Hungarian and eight German machine guns were deployed to interdict the likely Soviet withdrawal routes. According to the plan, the infantry assault was to be carried out by the Bicycle Company and the German company, with the Fortress Company designated as the reserve. When contacted by radio, however, the German commanding officer – a captain – reported that his men would be unable to participate in the assault, offering instead to provide suppressing fire with their mortars and machine guns. He justified his decision on the grounds that enemy forces were observed to his company's right and that launching an attack would have required him and his men to cross open ground. When he was eventually ordered to take part regardless, he refused – despite the fact that the order likely originated from Lieutenant Colonel Eördögh, who not only outranked him but also exercised overall command authority over the group. In the end, the assault was carried out solely by the Bicycle Company. Ensign Ocsovszky, who also participated in the attack, offers a detailed account of the events, except for moments when his attention was diverted by the need to attend to the wounded:

This was the first time I had ever witnessed such an action – or, indeed, taken part in one. After intense mortar fire, amid frantic cries of 'hajrá,' hand grenades are thrown, and then – exploiting the noise and smoke of the explosions – they [that is, the Hungarians] rush forward some 30–40 metres. Meanwhile, cries can be heard here and there: 'I'm hit! Medics!'

There are only the two of us – myself and my colleague from the mountain unit (Ensign Elekes) – and we can barely keep up with the pace. [...] Meanwhile, the Russians attempt a counter-thrust – shouting 'huri, huri',

they advance towards us while firing continuously. [...] Our men, enthusiastic when the Russians start to retreat, rush forward again, yelling out battle cries. By 16:00, the assault is over. Hill 1258 is taken as ordered.²⁹

Casualties amounted to seven killed and twenty-seven wounded during the attack; an additional seventeen soldiers, deployed further forward and likely cut off by Soviet forces, were reported missing in action. The hill was taken over by the men of the 21/5 Fortress Company, relieving the troops who had participated in the assault. After nightfall, however, a feigned attack staged by Soviet forces – they shouted battle cries and fired their weapons without making an actual advance – caused panic among the men of the fortress company, who abandoned their positions and fled. Since no actual attack had taken place, the German company assumed responsibility for the sector, only to lose the hill during a Soviet assault launched the following morning. The way Ocsovszky assessed the cost of the fighting in his diary is revealing, suggesting how the men of the reconnaissance battalion may have viewed the fairness with which the burdens of combat were distributed among the various elements of the combat group. According to the figures he provided, taken together the Bicycle Company lost eleven killed, thirty-eight wounded, and seventeen missing during the advance and the assault. Of the 265 men of the Fortress Company who panicked, only sixty-six could be reassembled the following day. The German company suffered no casualties.

On 27 September, Ocsovszky reported another failure, which he likewise attributed to the conduct of the German troops. The newly established defensive line of the Eördögh Group, manned by personnel from the three units mentioned earlier, came under attack following a brief period of mortar preparation. The enemy launched an assault with superior forces, during which some Soviet soldiers climbed tall trees and fired their submachine guns into what they identified as dead ground on the hillside. Nonetheless, the defenders were able to hold their positions for some time until, unexpectedly, the men of the German company abruptly abandoned their positions and fled to the rear. Discipline subsequently collapsed, and the Hungarian troops also fell back. It was during this phase of the withdrawal that the enemy was able to exploit the situation fully, inflicting heavy casualties among the retreating Hungarian soldiers. The German troops once again suffered no losses; moreover, Ocsovszky noted that once beyond

²⁹ Ocsovszky, 'Katonanaplóm', p. 113.

effective firing range, they regrouped in a notably orderly manner, leading him to the conclusion that their withdrawal was the result of a deliberate decision rather than a spontaneous reaction.³⁰ At 16:00, the Eördögh Group launched one final, futile attempt to seize Hill 1258, but was eventually forced to establish a defensive line along the ridgeline in front of it.

As noted earlier, the German 3rd Mountain Division, withdrawn from the Vatra Dornei bridgehead, was redeployed to the Maros Valley. With these reinforcements, German and Hungarian forces were able to cut off the Soviet units that had advanced furthest beyond their lines. The German–Hungarian counterattack, launched south of Palotailva on 28 September, trapped a Soviet force of approximately two regiments (800–900 men). The isolated Red Army troops were ordered to break through to the south, toward Hill 1258, which was occupied on 29 September by a newly arrived battalion of the German 144th Mountain Regiment, while the Eördögh Group held positions on Hill 1248.

From 28 September onward, Russian infantry groups attacked both the headquarters and the combat elements of the Eördögh Group from virtually every direction. According to Ocsovszky, headquarters personnel repelled two attacks on that day alone, while two further breakout attempts were directed against them during the night. On 29 September, a Hungarian group evacuating the wounded also came under attack – twice within the space of an hour – but, against all odds, managed to reach the battalion’s medical column without sustaining any casualties. The members of a seven-man reconnaissance patrol dispatched the previous night were less fortunate: after being captured by Russian forces, five were summarily executed, while the remaining two survived only by managing to break free and fend off their captors.

As noted above, on 29 September the Eördögh Group took over another sector, namely Hill 1248; however, the attacks continued there as well. At 21:00 and again at 01:30, Hungarian troops were required to repel two further assault attempts. By 30 September, however, most of the encircled Russian forces had been annihilated or captured, or had managed to cross the front line and escape from the pocket. Although by this point the men of the Eördögh Group had been informed that a German company

³⁰ Ocsovszky, ‘Katonanaplóm’, pp 115–116.

was on its way to relieve them, they later learned that they were not being withdrawn for rest but merely redeployed to another sector of the front.

Exposure to continuous combat, the cold, rainy weather of the final days, and the dashed hope of relief and rotation took a heavy toll on the men. As revealed by his diary entries, Ensign Ocsovszky reached a psychological low point on 1 October, a condition further exacerbated by news received that day indicating that the Soviet army had occupied his family's place of residence. (Ocsovszky was not a native of Transylvania). In his diary entry for that day, he also offered a succinct and striking summary of the situation of his unit, in addition to describing his state of mind:

The entire battalion consists of 150 men; of course, most of these are not combat troops, and with us is the completely disintegrated 25/1 Fortress Company – numbering about 140 men. One after another, we are occupying new heights and repelling attacks. [...] They take no account of our small numbers; we are assigned sectors comparable to those of a German battalion, which has five times as many men and ten times the firepower. I am very, very tired. My nerves are failing me. More than once, I have felt fear as well – something that until now had been unknown to me.³¹

In the following days, conditions for the men of the Reconnaissance Battalion improved to some extent: those not originating from the occupied territories received mail again after a month-long interruption; the unit was relocated to positions with pre-constructed bunkers – where, as Ocsovszky noted, he was finally able to obtain a proper night's rest – and the men were afforded opportunities for basic hygiene. The diary entries, however, continued to be marked by a pronounced ironic tone, readily understandable in light of the events described:

I feel I have much to write about, although nothing really happened: a man was hit by an artillery shell; a dugout caught fire; I dressed the wounds of three, four, or ten men; we waited for food, for the post, and for ammunition resupply; inspected the sector with our lieutenant colonel; and threw myself to the ground at least fifty times because of mortar fire. Next to me, a soldier was killed by a mortar shell, yet I am still alive. Thus, such trifles make up our cheerful, peaceful day.³²

³¹ Ocsovszky, 'Katonanaplóm', p. 121.

³² Ocsovszky, 'Katonanaplóm', p. 124.

On 5 October, the Reconnaissance Battalion was informed of an imminent withdrawal of the front line; however, a day later Ocsovszky was wounded by artillery fire while evacuating casualties to the rear.

The 27/I Battalion

With the exception of the 27th Reconnaissance Battalion and the artillerymen of the 27th Light Artillery Regiment – both of which had been engaged in combat since 24 September – the next unit of the 27th Light Division to be committed to action was the 27/I Battalion. As discussed earlier, the battalion was dispatched to Izaszacsal near Borsa for what was intended to be a week-long period of rest. This respite proved short-lived, however, as the unit was ordered after only a few days to march southward toward Szászrégen in response to the evolving operational situation.

From mid-September onward, Soviet forces shifted the focus of their operations westward and redeployed substantial formations from the area under discussion. As a result, German and Hungarian forces were able to prevent Soviet–Romanian assaults from achieving a major breakthrough; nevertheless, the remaining Soviet units steadily intensified their attacks, repeatedly compelling both Hungarian replacement divisions and German units to abandon limited sections of their positions and establishing small bridgeheads in various sectors. By 22 September, the situation of the defence east of Szászrégen had become precarious along an almost 20-kilometre stretch of the front, and on 27 September, the line between Marosvásárhely and Szászrégen was deemed untenable. Consequently, most positions between the confluence of the Nyárad and Maros rivers and the fortifications of Palotailva were abandoned, and German–Hungarian forces were withdrawn behind the Maros River. The city of Marosvásárhely was also evacuated; however, a bridgehead was retained on the eastern bank of the river at Szászrégen, extending along a line formed by the villages of Petele, Alsóböklény, and Görgénysóakna. The German 46th Infantry Division held this sector, while the Hungarian 2nd Field Replacement Division and the German 3rd Mountain Division remained in position to its north and were likewise not withdrawn behind the river.³³

³³ Ravasz, 'Az erdélyi hadműveletek', p. 565.

The urgent commitment of the 27/I Battalion was prompted by a breakthrough achieved by the Soviet 72nd Guards Rifle Division and the Romanian 103rd Mountain Division on the right flank of the German-held bridgehead in the Szászrégen sector.

Although the experience of the 27th Reconnaissance Battalion might suggest that German forces were not contributing proportionately to the fighting, this assessment does not hold universally: between 11 and 23 September, the German formations deployed along this stretch of the front suffered heavy losses, and acute manpower shortages forced severely understrength units to defend disproportionately long sections of the line. On 23 September, for example, the 46th Division defended a 14-kilometre front with only about 570 men, yet managed to repel an enemy attack supported by some 32 tanks and armoured vehicles. The formation ultimately received some reinforcements – in the form of a battalion of the German 3rd Mountain Division – but constant fighting imposed a significant strain on the German soldiers.³⁴

The 27/I Battalion was committed to this sector as part of the efforts to stabilise the front. The troops initially set out on foot towards Szászrégen, but owing to the gravity of the situation, German trucks were dispatched on 1 October to intercept the column and convey its men directly to the front line – or, more precisely, to Beresztelke, where they were ordered to contain a Soviet–Romanian breakthrough. However, only the combat troops were taken forward; all supply units were left behind, placing the battalion in complete dependence on German logistical support. The infantry companies and machine-gun platoons were required to occupy their positions immediately upon arrival, as exhausted German troops were already leaving the line; according to Ensign Makkai, the situation had deteriorated to such an extent that officers drew their pistols in an attempt to stop the retreat.³⁵

The men of the 27/I Battalion, with their positions situated among German units, found themselves in the middle of an ongoing battle. In the afternoon of 3 October, the almost constant mortar and artillery activity on the western flank of the 46th Division intensified steadily, culminating in a preparatory bombardment followed by a customary infantry attack. Battalion- and regiment-sized enemy formations concentrated their efforts against positions around Magyarfülpös and Beresztelke. As

³⁴ Illésfalvi, Szabó, and Számvéber, *Erdély a hadak útján*, pp 126-129.

³⁵ Makrai, 'Ki tudja, merre', p. 14.

Róbert Árpád Berekméri claims, most German units managed to hold their ground; nonetheless, the attackers eventually forced open a corridor in the German–Hungarian defences and reached a forest southeast of Kisfülpös, approximately 4 kilometres north of Beresztelke. In the fighting that followed, smaller Hungarian units were frequently isolated and encircled by Soviet forces. Although some managed to break out, the 27/I Battalion suffered losses of 123 men within two days, most of whom were taken prisoner.³⁶ The gap was sealed on 4 October; however, two days later, on 6 October, a new attack succeeded in breaking through the battalion's line in multiple places, once again encircling some Hungarian units, while the remainder of the battalion withdrew and took up new positions on a chain of hills approximately 1 kilometre northwest of Beresztelke. The Maros line was finally abandoned on 8 October, and the battalion began its withdrawal toward Beszterce; two days later, on 10 October, it was already evacuating Teke, a village some 26 kilometres northwest of Beresztelke.

As is evident from the events discussed above, the actual fighting in this sector took place between 3 and 6 October; however, relatively little is known about how these engagements were experienced by the troops themselves. In his memoirs, Sándor Gál, a soldier of the 27/I Battalion's 2nd Company, notes that after taking up their positions along the line, they became engaged in heavy fighting, during which it initially appeared that the defenders held the advantage over the attackers. According to Gál, the situation changed only later, when the German units to which the Hungarian troops had been attached abandoned the line and withdrew – allegedly without informing their Hungarian counterparts.³⁷ Ensign István Szabó, who likewise served as a platoon leader in the 2nd Company, makes no mention of this circumstance; he does, however, state that Soviet forces – in this particular case identified as Ukrainian units – succeeded in encircling approximately three-quarters of the 27/I Battalion. In the course of these events, Szabó himself was taken prisoner on 6 October in the vicinity of Magyarfülpös. Ensign Gyula Csutak, another platoon leader of the 27/I Battalion whose company assignment remains unknown, was also captured in the Magyarfülpös–Beresztelke area on the same day.³⁸

³⁶ Berekméri, *Lesz még kikelet!*, pp 209–212.

³⁷ Gál, 'Visszaemlékezéseim', p. 3.

³⁸ Berekméri, *Fegyver alatt*, p. 242.

The case of Ensign Béla Szabó, as described in the memoirs of László Makrai, likewise appears to corroborate accounts of the battalion's encirclement (it should be noted that the similarity of his surname to that of the previously mentioned infantry ensign is coincidental). Szabó, a platoon leader in the battalion's machine-gun company, had one of his machine guns positioned on a brush-covered hillside to the left of Beresztelke at the time the unit was deployed to this sector of the line. Makrai states only that the machine-gun detachment was captured at a later stage by Soviet troops; he makes no mention of any fighting preceding the capture.³⁹ What is noteworthy in the case of Béla Szabó is that the ensign ultimately did not become a prisoner of war. Although captured together with his machine-gun crew, he took advantage of a momentary lapse in his captors' vigilance and escaped into the surrounding scrub. Soviet soldiers opened fire on him; nonetheless, he managed to escape and subsequently rejoined his unit.

The case of Sándor Gál, mentioned earlier, likewise merits consideration. Gál's account suggests that they were holding positions as part of a force below company strength, most likely a platoon or an even smaller element, and that they realised during the evening that they had been left behind. On the basis of events that transpired in the area and the subsequent movements of the battalion, this most likely occurred on either 6 or 7 October. After assessing the situation, the group decided to attempt to rejoin their company and set out – avoiding the road – toward the village of Teke, where they believed the withdrawing units were headed. According to Gál's account, at around eight o'clock the following morning they were apprehended by military police and escorted before the lieutenant colonel of an unfamiliar unit, who initially threatened them with summary execution but subsequently assigned them to the defensive line of his own formation. The group spent another night in the newly assigned position, consisting of foxholes; however, until the evening of the following day – when Gál finally informed the officer responsible for them that they had received no provisions whatsoever – they were left without rations or other support. Ultimately, the unit to which Gál's group had been involuntarily subordinated also withdrew, leaving them behind once more; nevertheless, they again decided to follow the retreating forces and

³⁹ Makrai, 'Ki tudja, merre', p. 16.

eventually succeeded in rejoining the 2nd Company of the 27/I Battalion, almost by chance.⁴⁰

Finally, with regard to the 27/I Battalion, reference should also be made to another episode recounted by Ensign Makrai, this time involving the mortar platoon under his command. Makrai and his men were stationed between Beresztelke and Teke after the battalion had already fallen back towards the latter village. They remained there for approximately one day and one night, during which Soviet troops repeatedly appeared on the hills opposite them but withdrew whenever the mortars engaged them. According to Makrai, when the order to withdraw was issued, the platoon was instructed to evacuate its position at five o'clock the following morning. In practice, however, German troops had already begun demolishing the hairpin bends on the road near Teke by around four o'clock. Since the mortars were transported on two-wheeled, horse-drawn carts, the road demolitions – intended precisely to slow or prevent movement along the route – inevitably created serious difficulties for Makrai's platoon during its withdrawal, particularly as the men were operating under considerable time pressure and had to get through before Soviet forces closed in. As Makrai writes:

The horses had to be unharnessed and led across one at a time, while the carts likewise had to be taken over individually. We could only proceed with great difficulty alongside the blast craters. By ten o'clock in the morning, we were still there, fearing that the Russians might catch up with us.⁴¹

Ultimately, the platoon succeeded and, somewhere beyond Teke, also managed to catch up with the 27/I Battalion.

Other Units and the Reorganisation of the 27th Light Division

Alongside the 27th Reconnaissance Battalion and the 27/I Battalion, batteries of the 27th Light Artillery Regiment were also deployed along the Maros line under the command of the 2nd Field Replacement Division, taking up positions in the Idecspatak–Marosvécs–Holtmaros area. Artillery units – given the nature of the arm in question – are typically located well behind the front line and are therefore less

⁴⁰ Gál, 'Visszaemlékezéseim', p. 4.

⁴¹ Makrai, 'Ki tudja, merre', p. 17.

exposed to direct attack. On 30 September, however, as Red Army troops penetrated deep into the Hungarian and German lines, three artillery batteries came under mortar fire from the rear, necessitating the intervention of a fourth battery to cover their withdrawal across the Maros River. A similar situation arose on 3 October, when two batteries were attacked while engaged in repelling an assault aimed at cutting the railway between Holtmaros and Marosvécs. Ultimately, the gun crews were forced to operate their weapons while simultaneously fending off attacks by enemy infantry.

In contrast to the situation in the sectors of the German 46th Division and the Hungarian 2nd Replacement Division, the front line in the Radnai Mountains and the Vatra Dornei region remained relatively quiet. It was not until 5–6 October that the first serious attacks were launched against the 57/III and 27/II Battalions, and even these attacks were repelled with relative ease by the defenders.

Parallel to the fighting conducted in mid-September and early October, another process was initiated at Beszterce that affected both the two existing infantry regiments and the organisational structure of the light division. On the one hand, as the infantry regiments could no longer draw replacements from their traditional recruitment districts, they had to be supplemented with personnel from depleted and fragmented formations, as well as with conscripted members of the Levente youth organisation from other regions. In addition to reinforcing the two existing regiments, the Hungarian High Command decided to convert the 27th Light Division into a full infantry division by assigning a third regiment to it.⁴² Designated the 70th Infantry Regiment, this formation was likewise created from the remnants of several border guard and border rifle battalions. The 70/I Battalion was formed from the 17th and 19th Border Guard Battalions, as well as from the division's own training battalion. The 70/II Battalion was established in the Oláhlápos region from elements of the 21/6 Fortress Company, merged with the 33/1 and 33/4 Fortress Companies. Finally, the remainder of the 21/6 Fortress Company and the 27th Border Guard Battalion were combined to form the 70/III Battalion.⁴³ The reorganisation had several consequences. First, although the light division was expanded by the addition of a third regiment –

⁴² For the sake of analytical clarity, the formation reorganised into a three-regiment infantry division will continue to be referred to as a 'light division', except in titles and figure captions. This avoids confusion that might otherwise arise from the use of two different designations when referring forward or backward in the analysis.

⁴³ Berekméri, *Lesz még kikelet!*, pp 212–213.

thereby formally attaining the structure of a full infantry division – the newly formed battalions were never brought up to full strength. Second, the new regiment was composed of officers and men who had not previously served either with one another or with the units of the light division, and whose wartime experience derived either from the First World War or from the fighting that reached Transylvania following Romania's defection in August 1944. Consequently, they had not shared in the formation's earlier experiences in Galicia. From this followed a third implication: although certain sections or platoons within the 70th Infantry Regiment may have comprised men who had previously served together and were thus bound by relatively strong interpersonal ties, a broader identification with the light division could not develop due to the limited time available, nor were they ever exposed to the formation's coercive mechanisms of discipline and control. In other words, although both the reinforcements and the creation of the new regiment were intended to strengthen the 27th Light Division, the newly incorporated units often either lacked small-group cohesion altogether or, where such cohesion did exist, possessed no corresponding bonds with the division itself.

Conclusion

The 27th Light Division's role in Transylvania may be approached through two distinct dimensions: a personal and a military one. As far as the personal dimension is concerned, it is rooted in the individual's civilian primary group ties, yet it extends well beyond these to include the broader socio-cultural environment in which the individual is embedded. In this context, returning soldiers were confronted with a range of factors that shaped their relationship to their military primary group, their unit, and ultimately to the national socio-political system. Following their return, the soldiers came to realize that Hungarian and German troops had evacuated their homeland, resulting in a complete rupture of contact with their families. Only a few fortunate individuals constituted an exception, having managed to visit their homes before their places of residence were occupied – among them those soldiers who reached Marosvásárhely. Even they, however, encountered a town that bore the characteristics of an immediate frontline zone: marked by instability, military presence, and the constant anticipation of approaching combat. The detrimental effects of these developments were further compounded by a range of additional factors, most

notably the withdrawal of Hungarian state administration and military authorities, alongside the evacuation of the Saxon population. The sense of unease evoked by the deserted Saxon villages is reflected in numerous memoirs. Finally, these impressions were further intensified by the evident astonishment elicited by the conduct of German troops, who appeared to regard Transylvania less as allied territory than as land occupied from an enemy.

With regard to military operations, the fighting in Transylvania – in which the troops of the 27th Light Division were engaged from approximately mid-September until 8 October 1944, when orders were issued for their withdrawal from the province – exhibited several distinctive characteristics. On the one hand, the light division itself was separated from the Hungarian army and placed under German command. This shift had a direct impact on its employment: instead of being committed as a cohesive formation, the division was fragmented, with its units separated from their original command structure and deployed piecemeal, subordinated to various formations, or at times utilized as ad hoc reserves or stopgap units. One of the most notable arrangements in this respect was that of the 27th Reconnaissance Battalion, which came to form part of a Hungarian-led battle group placed under German command, while at the same time exercising command over both German and Hungarian units. Regardless of the specific command arrangements, however, the battalions of the light division consistently experienced at least one of the following conditions: inadequate rations, assignments exceeding their strength, or unfavourable treatment relative to their German counterparts. In certain instances, the latter extended to their exposure to disproportionately high levels of risk – at times approaching the level of sacrifice – in order to reduce German losses or to facilitate their withdrawal.

In addition, the Transylvanian period also saw the introduction of a new replacement system, alongside the structural reorganization of the formation. Both involved the amalgamation of fragmented units into existing formations, a practice that effectively became the standard operating procedure for compensating for the division's manpower losses. This method, however, proved to have serious shortcomings: structural elements constituted from the remnants of multiple depleted units lacked both attachment to the larger formation and cohesion at the small-group level. Finally, in the new environment the conditions of combat themselves changed: soldiers were confronted not only with the reduced effectiveness of their weapons in comparison

with those of the enemy, but also with a growing erosion of their belief that the objective for which they were fighting was attainable.

2. The Withdrawal from Transylvania

The subsequent phase in the history of the 27th Light Division – encompassing the withdrawal from Northern Transylvania and the fighting along the Tisza line – was shaped by three closely interconnected developments: first, the Soviet attempt to encircle the German and Hungarian forces still engaged in Transylvania; second, the German high command's intention to withdraw these forces behind the Tisza River; and third, Miklós Horthy's attempt on 15 October 1944 to withdraw Hungary from the war.

To understand these developments, it is necessary to consider Soviet operational plans. On 15 September, the 2nd Ukrainian Front was ordered to concentrate its main effort northwest of Kolozsvár, seize Máramarossziget, Szatmárnémeti, Nagyvárad, Arad, and Temesvár, and subsequently advance to the Tisza River, which it was expected to reach between 7 and 10 October. However, the operational conditions in this new theatre of war differed substantially from those that had characterised the Torda sector and the Maros line. After Romania's defection, the gap between the forces of Army Group F in Yugoslavia and the Hungarian Second Army was to be closed by Hungarian forces deployed along the Szeged–Nagyvárad line. These forces, redesignated as the Hungarian Third Army on 20 September, launched an offensive on 13 September and succeeded in establishing contact with German units. Yet on 19 September, the 2nd Ukrainian Front launched a counterattack along the Temesvár–Arad road towards Lippa. Although the operation did not develop into a full-scale offensive and the fighting was largely confined to the area encompassing Elek, Makó, Nagyszalonta, and Nagyvárad, the Hungarian military leadership recognised that, in the absence of substantial reinforcements, the Hungarian Third Army would be unable to hold its positions against sustained Soviet pressure, thereby leaving the approaches to Budapest effectively unprotected.⁴⁴ Colonel General Johannes Friessner, commander of Army Group South Ukraine (redesignated Army Group South on 24 September), arrived at a similar conclusion. He believed that the next Soviet offensive

⁴⁴ Ungváry, *A magyar honvédség*, pp 236–237.

would be launched across the Szeged–Nagyvárad line, either directly toward Budapest or northward along the Tisza River in order to link up with the Fourth Ukrainian Front advancing through the Beskids. Friessner likewise concluded that, without substantial reinforcements, he would be unable to halt a major Soviet offensive. Consequently, on 28 September the OKH began concentrating a larger force – four armoured divisions and one armoured infantry division – in the Debrecen area. These formations were to be battle-ready by 10 October and, according to orders issued on 30 September, were intended to destroy Soviet units that had already penetrated the Hungarian Plain before advancing southeast to seize the Carpathian passes.⁴⁵

German plans were soon overtaken by events. On 6 October, the 4th Ukrainian Front seized the Dukla Pass, while Soviet forces advancing from Transylvania simultaneously launched a major offensive along a 160-kilometre-wide front toward the Debrecen–Nyíregyháza–Csap axis. On the opening day of the latter offensive, the 53rd Army and Cavalry–Mechanized Group Pliyev achieved a breakthrough approximately 40 kilometres deep along a 100-kilometre front. By 8 October, Pliyev’s forces had advanced roughly 90–100 kilometres, reached the areas of Karcag and Hajdúszoboszló, and crossed the Tisza River both north and south of Szentes.⁴⁶ This new turn of events placed the command of Army Group South in an extremely precarious situation, as Soviet forces threatened to envelop the formations still engaged in Transylvania. It therefore prompted Colonel General Friessner to order the Hungarian Second Army and the German Eighth Army (redesignated Army Detachment Wöhler on 3 October) to abandon the Maros line and withdraw toward the Tisza River.⁴⁷ At the same time, the German 1st Panzer Division attacked westward, severed Pliyev’s supply lines, and on the morning of 10 October linked up with the German 13th Panzer Division, advancing eastward, thereby encircling Pliyev’s 6th Guards Cavalry Corps. In the days that followed, both sides made substantial efforts to commit additional divisions to the fighting. Nonetheless, the bulk of Pliyev’s forces, operating in conjunction with the 33rd Rifle Corps and supported by elements of Cavalry–Mechanized Group Gorshkov, succeeded in capturing

⁴⁵ Frieser, *Germany and the Second World War*, pp 833-834.

⁴⁶ Ungváry, *A magyar honvédség*, p. 332.

⁴⁷ Ziemke, *From Stalingrad to Berlin*, p. 452.

Nagyvárad on 12 October. Following the fall of the town, Army Group South concentrated its efforts primarily on delaying Soviet forces long enough to permit the withdrawal of Army Detachment Wöhler behind the Tisza River. Meanwhile, Marshal Malinovskiy ordered Pliyev to continue his advance toward Debrecen–Nyíregyháza–Csap, while Gorshkov's group was tasked with cutting off the retreat of Wöhler's withdrawing German and Hungarian forces.

Another significant development during this period occurred on 15 October, when Miklós Horthy, Hungary's head of state, announced in a national radio broadcast that Hungary had signed an armistice with the Soviet Union. By that time, Hungary's armed forces were divided among three separate armies, deployed on widely separated fronts. The First Army, manning the Árpád Line, was defending the country's northeastern borders in the Carpathians; the Third Army was engaged against Soviet forces in the region between the Tisza and Danube rivers; and the Second Army was in full retreat from the areas around Kolozsvár and Nagyvárad. Horthy's proclamation and the subsequent orders issued by the Arrow Cross leadership installed after his removal, which directed the troops to continue fighting, created confusion within the ranks and had a detrimental long-term effect on morale.

Nevertheless, these political developments did not significantly disrupt day-to-day military operations. As far as Soviet forces were concerned, contact with the previously encircled 6th Guards Cavalry Corps was re-established on 16 October, and two days later, on 18 October, the corps was ordered to renew its attack on Debrecen in coordination with Gorshkov's group. On 19 October, German forces launched a counterattack from Szolnok toward the town; however, despite initial success, Debrecen fell the following day. On 21 October, Soviet forces also captured Nyíregyháza, thereby severing Army Detachment Wöhler's principal line of communications. As a result, the only remaining route of withdrawal from Transylvania was via Csap, located approximately 60 kilometres northeast of Nyíregyháza.⁴⁸

Army Group South responded by launching a counterstroke, with the German 23rd Panzer Division attacking from the west and the retreating forces of Army Detachment Wöhler striking from the east. The two spearheads linked up on 23 October, encircling

⁴⁸ Számvéber, 'Magyarország német megszállása és szovjet elfoglalása', pp 191-192.

substantial Soviet forces, and on 26 October German troops reoccupied Nyíregyháza. In an effort to relieve the encircled formations, the Soviets launched a counterattack with the 27th Army; however, German units deployed south of the encirclement held their positions. Finally, on 29 October, Pliyev's troops broke out of the encirclement, albeit at the cost of abandoning most of their vehicles, tanks, and heavy weapons. Meanwhile, the German and Hungarian formations retreating from Northern Transylvania crossed the Tisza and established a new defensive line along its western bank. The Battle of Debrecen, also known as the Armoured Battle of the Hungarian Plain, ended on 31 October, when German troops evacuated their bridgeheads at Polgár and Tiszalök.⁴⁹

The 27th Infantry Division's Withdrawal

The German and Hungarian forces engaged in Northern Transylvania were ordered to withdraw on 8 October. However, the disengagement of frontline units from combat operations proved to be a more protracted process, as it also entailed their withdrawal from ad hoc command arrangements and their concentration in designated assembly areas before the retreat could commence. The 27/I Battalion was released from the command of the German 46th Infantry Division on 10 October, while the other battalions, deployed at the Borgó Pass and in the Radnai Mountains, likewise abandoned their positions and began their withdrawal toward the Beszterce region. To facilitate the withdrawal, a bridgehead was established and maintained along the Nagydemeter–Pinták–Aldorf–Vinda line. The troops retreating from the south, that is, from Szászrégen and the vicinity of the town, had their assembly area in the region of the villages of Harina, Szászlekenye and Kerlés, situated at 16, 23 and 22 km southwest of Beszterce, respectively. The forces assembling in this area – primarily units of the Hungarian 2nd Replacement Division and the 27/I Battalion – were assigned the task of securing the southern flank of the bridgehead, more specifically of preventing the Soviet 7th Guards Army, advancing from the south, from outflanking the position and encircling it from the rear. On 11 and 12 October, Soviet forces launched coordinated

⁴⁹ Klaus Schönherr, 'The Withdrawal Battles in Romania and Transylvania in the Summer and Autumn of 1944' in Karl-Heinz Frieser (ed.), *Germany and the Second World War*, viii: *The Eastern Front 1943–1944: The War in the East and on the Neighbouring Fronts* (Oxford, 2017), p. 842. Számvéber, 'Magyarország német megszállása és szovjet elfoglalása', p. 192.

assaults against the bridgehead in the wider Vinda area, while simultaneously undertaking sustained efforts to penetrate the Hungarian forces responsible for securing its southern approaches.

By this stage, the initial enthusiasm experienced by Szekler soldiers upon their return to Transylvania appears to have largely dissipated, with numerous memoirs attesting to the deteriorating state of Hungarian morale. József Péter's account on the events is quite outspoken in this respect. Péter had served with the 27/I Battalion's supply elements, which were left behind and continued their southward march on foot when its combat troops were transported by the Germans to Szászrégen. The two components of the battalion were reunited south of Beszterce only after the withdrawal of German and Hungarian forces from the Szászrégen sector. Péter recalls that the condition of the decimated combat troops had a profound impact on the soldiers who had not taken part in the fighting:

Near Oláhlápos and Harina we found what remained of our battered battalion. Only a handful of men were left from the 1st Company. We never again managed to establish a continuous front; everything was confusion and chaos. There had never been much fighting spirit among us – we could not understand why we had to fight and fall like sheaves of wheat for German interests. From that moment on, however, everyone was thinking about desertion; some succeeded, others did not.⁵⁰

Other accounts similarly attest to the low morale of the troops. As Ensign Ferenc László recounts, the 70/I Battalion, before reaching the settlement of Vinda, was ordered to halt, while the commanding officer, accompanied by several staff members, proceeded ahead through the forests toward the village with the intention of reconnoitring the area. As it transpired, the 27/III Battalion had already entered the settlement. Upon encountering their counterparts from a sister regiment in a village tavern, the officers of the 70/I joined them, an episode indicative of increasingly relaxed discipline within both formations. The resulting lack of vigilance, however, proved costly: they became aware of a Soviet force approaching the village only when Russian troops – primarily riflemen advancing from the east – had come within small-arms range and opened fire. Despite being taken by surprise, the battalions managed to withdraw from Vinda, but their ammunition and supply train, along with their field

⁵⁰ Péter, 'Így emlékszem vissza', p. 12.

kitchens, fell into enemy hands temporarily.⁵¹ Eventually, a detachment led by Captain István Góg managed to recover all the vehicles and weapons lost in the attack. The captain, then commander of 27/III Battalion's machine-gun company, was awarded the Knight's Cross of the Hungarian Order of Merit with Swords for this action.⁵² While his conduct was undoubtedly outstanding, it is nevertheless important to note that it amounted to rectifying a lapse in discipline and security that had led to the loss in the first place. One further factor must be taken into consideration in connection with this episode: whereas the 70/I Battalion was a newly formed unit lacking the experience of formations that had served on the Eastern Front – which partly explains its conduct – the same cannot be said of the 27/III Battalion. The example of the latter suggests that, under the combined influence of the previously discussed conditions and command arrangements, together with the circumstances of the withdrawal, the first signs of disintegration had already appeared within the 27th Light Division. Finally, it should also be noted that the units of the Szekler formation were ordered to disengage from the enemy and evacuate the Beszterce bridgehead in the early hours of 13 October. A mere two days later, Horthy issued his proclamation calling for an armistice, which intensified the process of disintegration to an unprecedented degree.

Horthy's Armistice Attempt

The circumstances under which the armistice was announced are well known: a proclamation signed by Miklós Horthy was broadcast on state radio at 1 p.m. on 15 October, followed by a second reading at approximately 1:30. The text addressed at least three key issues that resonated within the army and significantly influenced morale. First, it drew a clear distinction between Hungary's and Germany's war aims, asserting that Hungary's primary foreign policy objective had been the peaceful revision of the Treaty of Trianon. A deliberate separation was thus made between the causes of Hungary's entry into the war and its post-1920 territorial claims, with the former carefully distinguished from the latter. According to this argument, Hungary's participation in the conflict stemmed less from a desire to recover lost territories than

⁵¹ László, 'Egy zászlós', pp 21-23.

⁵² Berekméri, *Fegyver alatt*, pp 119-120.

from its unfavourable geopolitical position and the pressure exerted by Germany.⁵³ Secondly, the proclamation explicitly acknowledged – for the first time – that Germany had lost the war, arguing that this recognition had led Horthy to place the country's interests above all else and to prevent further losses of life and territory. Thirdly – and this was the most developed part of the argument – Horthy asserted that Germany had in fact broken the alliance well before the proclamation. What followed was an enumeration of the adverse consequences of this alliance: the Regent accused his former ally of repeatedly pressing for the deployment of additional Hungarian military formations beyond the country's borders; he referred to the German occupation of Hungary and to arrests carried out by German authorities on Hungarian soil; and he also mentioned the inhumane manner in which the Gestapo had addressed the 'Jewish question'. Finally, he claimed that, as the war approached Hungary's borders, the Germans not only failed to provide the promised military assistance, but – as he phrased it – 'during their retreat they turned the country's sovereign territory into a theatre of looting and destruction'. With regard to future action, the proclamation stated that Hungary's leadership was about to conclude an armistice with its former enemies and to cease all hostilities against them. It also instructed the troops to obey their commanders, who, as the proclamation emphasised, had received their orders from the Regent himself.⁵⁴

The available sources not only make it possible to assess the impact of the speech on the junior officers and the rank-and-file, but also provide relatively detailed information concerning Colonel András Zákó, commander of the 27th Light Division, and his views on the attempt to withdraw from the war. This is of particular significance, as it offers insight into a mindset that was likely shared by several senior officers within the formation. Colonel Zákó had served as commander of the 27th Szekler Light Division since 1 October 1943, and, in certain respects, his career resembled that of Lieutenant Colonel Sándor Gáll, commander of the 57th Infantry Regiment: like Gáll, he was born in Transylvania and, during the First World War, served in the 24th Honvéd Infantry Regiment, a unit composed largely of Szeklers

⁵³ Hitler, although some of his generals considered Hungary's collaboration desirable, did not request Hungary's participation in Germany's war against the Soviet Union. See Cornelius, *Hungary in World War II*, pp 147-148.

⁵⁴ 'Regent Horthy's Radio Proclamation: October 1944' available at <http://www.hungarianhistory.com/lib/montgo/montgo20.htm> (25 June 2024)

(later, he joined the assault battalion of the division within which the regiment was incorporated). A useful source for understanding his attitude toward the events of 15 October 1944 is his book *Őszi harcok 1944* (Autumn Battles, 1944), written after the Second World War and dealing with the fighting in Transylvania and Hungary.⁵⁵ Although the work focuses primarily on a chronological account of the war and draws on documents whose provenance and location the author does not specify, the section concerning the events of 15 October is based on Zákó's own personal experience.

In the short chapter devoted to Horthy's attempt to withdraw Hungary from the war, the colonel recounts that, as early as September 1944, he had heard rumours suggesting that Hungary would soon follow Romania's example. These were soon countered by an announcement from Colonel General János Vörös, Chief of the Hungarian General Staff, who allegedly reassured the troops that, during his visit to the German headquarters on 11 September, he had been informed about the imminent deployment of new and revolutionary German weapons. As can be inferred from the chapter, Zákó was firmly convinced that the potential of these weapons to reverse the course of the war rendered any rumours of a possible armistice entirely implausible.

The issue was raised again at the end of September, when Zákó visited Colonel General Lajos Veress, commander of the Hungarian Second Army. Veress allegedly told him in confidence that Hungary was preparing to leave the war but intended to emulate the Finnish model rather than the Romanian one. According to this plan, Hungarian troops were to withdraw without engaging German forces, thereby freeing the main lines of communication for the Red Army's advance while remaining in a state of combat readiness. Zákó regarded this idea as unrealistic. In line with this conviction, he mentioned the conversation only to Major General Ferenc Kozma, his chief of staff, instructing him to arrest anyone who might attempt to transmit such orders to the 27th Light Division, unless they arrived through the proper chain of command.

As far as Horthy's address of 15 October 1944 is concerned, Zákó writes that most frontline units had their radios tuned to the national station at the time of the broadcast. However, this was not necessarily the case – nor was his assessment of the situation entirely accurate. He also maintains that the news of the armistice caused considerable consternation among both senior officers and rank-and-file soldiers – partly because

⁵⁵ Zákó, *Őszi harcok 1944*.

they did not wish to turn against their German comrades, and partly because they feared that allowing the enemy to advance into the heart of their homeland would condemn tens of thousands of those same comrades to death. However, the proclamation contained no direct orders for the army, apart from the instruction to obey one's superiors. In practice, since the Hungarian forces had been subordinated to German command by the Regent himself, this could be interpreted as a call for continued obedience to German authority. To avoid confusion, Zákó concludes, most Hungarian commanders – himself included – reassured their German counterparts that they were prepared to disregard the address announcing the armistice and would continue fighting alongside their allies.⁵⁶

Besides Zákó's account, however, another testimony has survived that sheds a different light on the reactions of the officers of the 27th Light Division and their commander during the events of 15 October. In his memoirs, Sergeant János Mirk recalls that the colonel instructed him to type an order summoning the division's officers to a conference at 8 p.m., where Zákó outlined the newly emerging political situation, declaring that the Regent's proclamation would not be accepted. He emphasised that all were to take note that the 27th Szekler Light Division would continue to fight alongside the Germans, even if other units were to defect to the enemy. According to Mirk, the officers leaving the meeting exhibited a general sense of dejection, and some openly discussed that several high-ranking officers – including the commander of the Hungarian First Army, Béla Miklós – had gone over to the Soviets.⁵⁷

As far as the troops of the 27th Light Division were concerned, news of Horthy's actions reached them through a variety of channels. The 70/I Battalion, for example, was on the move. As Ensign Ferenc László recounts in his memoir, by 15 October they had been marching for five days with only two hours of sleep each night and were completely exhausted. Morale, already low, was further undermined by a seemingly insignificant incident arising from an innocent joke, which nonetheless caused Captain Ferenc Cserei, the newly appointed commander of the 70/I Infantry Battalion, to lose his temper and slap one of his men several times across the face. This was the atmosphere when Ensign László was sent ahead to headquarters for instructions. After

⁵⁶ Zákó, *Őszi harcok*, pp 67-68.

⁵⁷ Mirk, 'Visszaemlékezés', p. 138.

receiving his orders, he decided to sit by the roadside and wait for the column to catch up. In his memoir, he describes the arrival of the battalion as follows:

I can hear from afar that the men are singing, but I cannot imagine why – for days no one has felt like singing. As they come closer, I notice that, besides singing, they are also throwing their hats into the air, shouting from a distance that the war is over. A warrant officer from Signals drives past in a vehicle and tells them that Horthy has ordered the cessation of all hostilities.⁵⁸

Mihály Ferencz, serving with the 57/I Battalion, experienced the effects of the proclamation in a somewhat similar way:

On 15 October we arrived at a village. But to start from the beginning: when we arrived in Galicia, the headquarters of the battalion was quartered in an abandoned house in Zabie. At some point, one of the soldiers came up from the cellar holding a quarter-litre bottle. He said: ‘Captain, what is this?’ We saw some writing on it; it read *Lacrima Christi*. It was Italian wine, at least two cases of it. ‘Son, bring them up,’ said the captain. Marci Stekbauer was his batman, from Bikszád. ‘Marci, put it somewhere safe, and we’ll have it when the war ends.’ [...]

Then it got to the point where Miklós Horthy announced the ceasefire. We were lying down, already asleep. The captain came over and started shaking my leg. ‘Come on, son, wake up [...] the war is over, let’s drink that wine.’ And that’s what we did. They brought in the wine, poured it into glasses, we drank it, and everybody went to sleep thinking that the war was over and that we were finally going home.⁵⁹

As both László’s and Ferencz’s accounts demonstrate, the troops rarely experienced the moral dilemma faced by high-ranking officers: for them, Horthy’s proclamation simply meant that the war was over. As will be discussed, however, the relief they felt proved to be short-lived – moreover, some units did not even have the opportunity to enjoy it. When the proclamation was broadcast, László Péter of the 27/I Battalion recalls, they were crossing the town of Nagybánya, where the locals opened their windows and turned up their radios so that the soldiers could listen. The fact that Péter refers to the address as Horthy’s orders regarding the armistice suggests that the men of the 27/I Battalion interpreted the announcement in much the same way as their counterparts in the 70/I and 57/I Battalions. Péter and his comrades, however, were in

⁵⁸ László, ‘Egy zászlós’, p. 25.

⁵⁹ Interview with Mihály Ferenc of Mikóújfalu, Romania (11 April 2006) (Audio recording in the possession of Sándor Magyarosi, Dublin, Ireland).

no position to harbour any illusions: ‘Unfortunately, the officers took the view that the army had to obey the General Staff and not Horthy – so we had to go on and suffer.’⁶⁰

In some cases, the circumstances of the withdrawal also influenced how the proclamation was received. On the day preceding 15 October, the 67th Border Rifle Battalion, reinforced by an artillery battery from the 27th Division, was serving as the rearguard for the 9th Border Rifle Brigade.⁶¹ Captain Gábor Éltető, the commanding officer of the battalion, relates that they broke contact with the enemy at around 11 p.m. on 14 October and marched to Felsővisó, a town they reached at about 8 a.m. the following day. Although there were no enemy attacks during the night, the withdrawal was not without its dramatic moments. By dawn, the battalion reached the village of Majszin, which was already in flames. As Éltető writes, the settlement consisted of a single street built along the road running through the mountains, and it seemed as though all the houses had caught fire simultaneously. The men were ordered to go around, but the captain decided to drive straight through the blaze. ‘It was a horrendous feeling to experience the demise of a village, he writes, while surrounded by flames, feeling the heat, and watching the houses burn with crackling noises. I felt I would catch fire myself – but fortunately, I made it through.’⁶²

In the morning, Éltető and his men reached Felsővisó, where they were relieved of their rearguard duties and reassigned to the third echelon of the withdrawing forces. After a short respite, the men formed up again at 12:30 p.m., and, while waiting for the order to move out, the muffled sound of a radio broadcast could be heard from one of the nearby houses. Éltető claims that one could clearly recognise Horthy’s voice, although the words themselves were indistinct. The battalion had already set off when an officer emerged from the house in question and informed them that, although he had not heard the entire announcement, he had gathered enough to understand that it concerned an armistice and the end of the war. ‘We left in excitement, Éltető recalls, everybody has heard something about the proclamation, but not enough to be certain about anything. Being exhausted, however, we did not dwell on it for long. Instead, we [marched and] kept waiting on orders, knowing they would eventually tell us what

⁶⁰ Péter, ‘Így emlékszem vissza’, p. 13.

⁶¹ The battalion was integrated into the 27th Division during December 1944.

⁶² Gábor Éltető, ‘Hadinapló’ [War Diary] (Hungarian Military History Archives, Budapest, TGY, 3282), p. 17.

happened.’⁶³ They reached the village of Petrova at 9 p.m., where the battalion was first subordinated to the German 38th Jäger Regiment, then released again at 12:30 a.m. (as will be discussed, the Germans planned to deploy them as soon as they reached the village). After a short rest, the retreat resumed with the usual inconveniences. The 67th Battalion formed up at 5 a.m., but it took another two hours before they could set out, and the situation did not improve as the day went on: movement was slow, with frequent halts caused by recurring traffic jams. The unit was still on the move when they finally received the official notification about Horthy’s proclamation, or, more precisely, about the fact that Horthy retracted the armistice and abdicated, appointing Szálasi as his successor. ‘We knew only that there was something we didn’t know, Égető writes. Something must have happened in Budapest, but we had no idea as to what it could be. No one believed that the proclamation, its recantation and the transition of power went on as smoothly as the notification implied it. What could have happened, what could the situation be up there? What was true from what they told us here?’⁶⁴

Such misgivings did not characterize Éltető’s men alone, and since the radio did not offer any details – except for announcing Szálasi’s coming to power –, rumours started to spread. As Ensign Ferenc László writes, the men of the 70/I Battalion were told that Horthy and Szálasi had reached some sort of agreement and were ruling jointly. It was not until 21 October that they learned this had not been the case. Only then did they encounter a civilian who provided them with newspapers. It was sufficient to look at the headlines for one to realize that Szálasi was fully in charge, László recalls. The civilian, seeing that he could trust them, eventually confessed that he was military as well, but deserted his unit and was bound for home. He also mentioned that the new regime appointed Arrow Cross members armed with submachine guns to control commanders of the military units. These young men, he claimed, spread terror and behaved like they were the masters of life and death.⁶⁵

As it can be seen, the message of Horthy’s proclamation was interpreted by the rank-and-file in a very straightforward manner: for them, it meant that the war was over,

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ László, ‘Egy zászlós’, p. 28.

and military historians also agree that the regent's failed attempt to exit the war was the single most important event that triggered the disintegration of the army. In the space of a few weeks, Krisztián Ungváry claims, more than 20,000 soldiers stopped fighting – or, removed themselves from combat one way or the other – although the number of the units to go over to the Russians remained rather insignificant. After Szálasi came to power, some contended that the causes of the army's moral crisis were closely connected to Horthy's regime and its social inequalities, and, according to Ungváry, this diagnosis was not far off the mark: the impoverished masses, he writes, could scarcely be expected to sacrifice their lives for a regime that did little more than exploit them – or, at least, so both the Communists and the Arrow Cross maintained.⁶⁶ This argument, however, is somewhat problematic, primarily because the rank-and-file's attitude towards the regime would have affected military efficiency long before October 1944 – and, to some extent, it did – yet no historical account describes anything remotely comparable to what followed Horthy's abdication. To be sure, mass desertions in certain units in Northern Transylvania seem to have begun as early as early September, but these incidents were confined to particular formations and stemmed from factors other than dissatisfaction with the regime itself.

In the case of the 27th Light Division, the first factor contributing to the subsequent crisis can most likely be linked to the deliberate disruption of unit cohesion. The fragmentation of the division and the dispersal of its constituent elements into operational contexts in which, according to their own sense of proportionality, they perceived themselves to be unfairly exploited contributed to the increasing fragility of obedience. A second factor – which, in effect, operated in parallel with the first – may be linked to the Soviet occupation of the Szekler region and the abandonment of Northern Transylvania. As Edward Shils and Morris Janowitz have argued, situations involving severe threats to the safety of the civilian primary group tend to generate tensions within soldiers' loyalties – tensions further intensified by the disruption of communication with the occupied territories. It should be noted, however, that the evacuation of the region by both civilian and military authorities not only weakened the soldiers' sense of allegiance to the state, but also undermined the perceived legitimacy of the war aims. Finally, the removal of Horthy created a vacuum of

⁶⁶ Ungváry, *A magyar honvédség*, p. 351

legitimacy that accelerated the erosion of morale and cohesion and ultimately rendered the process irreversible.

Cases of Desertion

Horthy's proclamation exerted a profoundly detrimental effect on the morale of Hungarian troops. In his memoirs, Lieutenant General László Hollósy-Kuthy, commander the 25th Infantry Division remarks that it effectively 'knocked the weapon from the soldiers' hands before the ceasefire had been formally concluded.⁶⁷ Hans Friessner likewise records that, from 15 October onwards, reports from all sectors of the front indicated that Hungarian units were increasingly exhibiting signs of disintegration.⁶⁸ This development affected the personnel of the 27th Light Division as well. It should be added, however, that the effect was not produced solely by the proclamation, but also, in part, by the events that followed – including Horthy's removal from power. As noted earlier, in wartime a charismatic leader's assertion of the war's necessity can substitute for a universally accepted war aim. Horthy's cult of leadership, together with the shift in war propaganda toward portraying Hungary as fighting an unwanted war, provided precisely the kind of minimal war aim with which even the least ideologically committed soldiers could identify. The Regent's failed attempt and subsequent removal rendered this moot: the leader who had sought to withdraw from the war had fallen, and participation in the conflict lost its meaning.

Another issue that merits consideration in the context of Horthy's removal is the question of the military oath: since the troops had sworn their oath to the Regent as Supreme Warlord, his removal created a temporary vacuum of legitimacy, as Szálasi exercised authority for a time without having received their oath of allegiance. Under the conditions of retreat, with unit cohesion increasingly undermined, concern for families at home, the perception of command as an alien – if not outright hostile – authority, the pull of the familiar sociocultural environment, and the collapse of the

⁶⁷ László Hollósy-Kuthy, *Élményeim a második világháború alatt 1939–1945* [My Experiences During World War II, 1939–1945] (Székesfehérvár, 1992), pp 72–73.

⁶⁸ Hans Friessner, *Árulások, veszített csaták* [Betrayals and Lost Battles] (Budapest, 1992), pp 152–153. The volume is a Hungarian translation of the author's German-language book *Verratene Schlachten*.

legitimacy of the demands placed upon them, any remaining bonds between the rank and file and the army were stretched to their limits.

Despite these circumstances, large-scale defection of Hungarian soldiers to the enemy did not occur. Krisztián Ungváry accounts for this phenomenon by emphasizing Hungarian soldiers' awareness that they could not expect lenient treatment if captured by the Red Army. As he argues, numerous eyewitness testimonies attest to instances in which Soviet troops killed prisoners of war. Such acts, in many cases, cannot be explained solely by the exigencies of combat; rather, they frequently appear to have resulted from the conduct of brutalized – and at times inebriated – soldiers operating within a context in which effective disciplinary control by officers was often limited or inconsistently enforced. Ungváry further contends that leadership by example constituted a significant factor shaping the behaviour of Hungarian troops. Given that Hungarian officers did not defect to the Soviet side in substantial numbers, rank-and-file soldiers likewise lacked both a practical precedent and an implicit sanction for defection. This absence of officer-level defection contributed to the overall reluctance of the rank and file to surrender or defect.⁶⁹

A different dynamic prevailed in cases where desertion held out the prospect of avoiding captivity altogether, a pattern that can also be observed in the case of the 27th Light Division. Between 16 and 19 October, 74 soldiers from the 27/II Battalion – part of the 9th Border Guard Division's column moving from Máramaros towards Avasújfalu – went missing near Szaplonca.⁷⁰ In his diary entry of 22 October, Sergeant János Mirk recorded that, upon reaching their designated destination for the day, Fehérgyarmat, it was discovered that twenty-two soldiers from the divisional staff had deserted en route.⁷¹ Lieutenant Colonel György Eördögh, commander of the 27th Reconnaissance Battalion, reported that, since most of his troops were from Szabolcs and Szatmár counties, the battalion's strength had been reduced to less than half by the time they had passed through the mentioned region and reached the Tisza River.⁷² There is not enough data to precisely determine the extent to which desertions or losses

⁶⁹ Ungváry, *A magyar honvédség*, p. 339.

⁷⁰ Berekméri, *Lesz még kikelet!*, p. 220.

⁷¹ Mirk, 'Napló', diary entry for 22 October 1944.

⁷² Berekméri, *Lesz még kikelet!*, p. 225.

during rearguard actions contributed to the decrease in the strength of individual units; However, the figures above clearly suggest that a significant number of men chose to abandon their ranks. According to oral history sources, one common pattern was for those intending to desert to conceal the items they wished to take with them in a shared cache during rest stops along the retreat and then, shortly before the unit was due to move on, go into hiding, thereby preventing any organised search for them. In smaller groups, deserters often relied on the assistance of local inhabitants, who provided shelter and civilian clothing, enabling them to avoid detection.⁷³ A familiar socio-cultural environment, in conjunction with the presence of one's comrades, appears to have fostered the expectation that advancing Soviet forces could be evaded and that individuals might ultimately return home.

Interestingly, the crossing of national borders may also be identified as a significant determinant of desertion, likely because it simultaneously marked – at least in part – the boundary of a familiar socio-cultural environment. This is illustrated by the case of Ensign Péter Ambrus, a machine-gun platoon leader in the 27/III Battalion; it should, however, be noted that in his case loyalty to his unit outweighed the temptation to desert, even while operating in familiar territory. As he recounted in an interview, Ambrus and some of his comrades had discussed desertion on several occasions. Initially, they agreed to remain with their unit until it reached the interwar border – that is, the line separating Transylvania from Hungary proper. However, once they arrived there, one of the soldiers suggested that they stay with the battalion for as long as it continued to exist. By early November, when they were defending the Tisza line, Ambrus' platoon had been reduced to just two machine gun crews. After losing one of the crews to Russian snipers, on 11 November, he ordered the remaining crew to fall in with the baggage train. Around this time, the battalion effectively ceased to exist. Ambrus's primary intention had been to avoid coming under German command, and so he set out toward the rear, accompanied by another officer – Captain Góg, who shared his aversion to being subordinated to the Germans – and the latter's ammunition sergeant. As they moved away from the front line, however, they encountered a German officer who ordered them to return. Ambrus seemingly complied, but at one

⁷³ Interview with Andor Albert of Olasztelek, Romania (31 December 2014).

point he set out towards the Soviet lines with the intention of surrendering. Before he could do so, however, he came under mortar fire, was wounded, and had to be taken to a Hungarian dressing station. After recovering, he was reassigned to a different unit stationed in western Hungary, where he eventually deserted in March, when the unit was due to be evacuated to Austria – that is, when he once again faced the prospect of crossing a border and leaving Hungary behind.

The psychological impact of crossing national borders is also evidenced by Sergeant János Mirk's diary entry from 19 December 1944, written before the 27th Light Division's withdrawal to Slovakia. The entry goes as follows:

The Szekler soldier, having left Transylvania, crossed the Tisza line, and endured three months of constant retreat, now faces another emotional struggle near the northern border of the country. Within days, he may be forced to leave his homeland. With no other option for further retreat, the only path lies through Slovakia. [...] The crossing of the border is likely to result in a sharp increase in the number of desertions. The soldiers openly declared at the beginning of the retreat that they would not cross into Germany, nor would they shed their blood for German interests.⁷⁴

While there is no evidence to support Mirk's claim that desertions increased during the retreat to Slovakia, his account is valuable because it suggests that soldiers often viewed the prospect of crossing a national border as an important factor in reassessing their commitment to their units and to military service more generally.

Although such incidents remained exceptional during the period in question, the 27th Light Division witnessed one case during the retreat in which the officers and enlisted men of a single unit – the 70/I Battalion – jointly decided to cease fighting and defect to the enemy. As mentioned earlier, the battalion in question was formed only in October 1944, largely composed of troops who had not participated in the battles in Galicia, and was barely able to muster enough personnel to qualify as a full battalion. Nevertheless, during the retreat, they were frequently tasked with holding defensive positions in order to delay the advancing Soviet forces, which were often no more than an hour and a half behind them.

⁷⁴ Mirk, 'Napló', diary entry for 19 December 1944.

Additionally, in this particular case, the battalion's ad hoc character gave rise to internal tensions, most notably in the relationship between the battalion commander, Captain Ferenc Cserei, and one of the company commanders, First Lieutenant László Novák. Born in 1912, Cserei accumulated extensive military and frontline experience throughout the Second World War. From 1940, he held the position of commanding officer of the machine gun company within the 27/I Infantry Battalion. In 1942, he was deployed to the Eastern Front, where, during the retreat of the Second Army, he was wounded on 3 February 1943 while leading a ski company attached to the Hungarian VII Corps. After recovering, Cserei returned to the 27/I Infantry Battalion and later took on the role of instructor with the 33rd Border Rifle Battalion. On 26 May 1944, he was once again sent to the front, this time in Galicia, where he was assigned to various units of the 27th Light Division. On 8 October 1944, he was appointed as the commanding officer of the newly established 70/I Infantry Battalion.⁷⁵

By contrast, Novák did not fight in Galicia. Previously, he had been the commanding officer of the 2nd Company of the 19th Szekler Border Guard Battalion (recruited from the Marosvásárhely region) and saw combat only after 23 August 1944, when the Red Army reached Hungary's border in Transylvania. However, Novák, born in 1899 and thirteen years older than Cserei, was also a veteran of the First World War. As László Ferenc notes, the valuable experience he gained during that time became a significant asset, which he used for the benefit of the entire battalion.

One such clash between the two men occurred on 16 October, when a proclamation signed by Colonel Gáll arrived from divisional headquarters. The document denounced Horthy as a traitor and a scoundrel, announced that Szálasi had assumed power, and insisted that the fighting must continue. Cserey convened a meeting of the officers and proposed that the proclamation be read aloud to the troops, but Novák, as László recalls, opposed the idea with remarkable courage. When Cserey turned to the others for support, they all sided with Novák, and the proclamation was never read. A few days later, on 19 October, tensions flared up again. Cserey ordered that a soldier be punished, but Novák openly refused to carry out the instruction. Rather than enforcing the punishment, Cserey declared that one of them – either Novák or himself – could no longer remain in the battalion. According to László, he intended Novák to

⁷⁵ Berekméri, *Fegyver alatt*, pp 81-82.

be the one removed, and the remark was, in effect, a threat of court-martial. However, this never materialized. On 20 October, Cserei was wounded, and after his departure, command of the battalion was taken over by Novák. Throughout the day, it became increasingly apparent that communication with the regiment's headquarters had been severed – the headquarters had likely withdrawn, and the field telephone lines had been dismantled. Reconnaissance patrols reported that no additional units were present on the flanks of the battalion. Furthermore, one of the company commanders informed that his unit had been urged to surrender by Soviet forces, with the soldiers seemingly inclined to comply. Subsequently, all telephone communication was lost with the company in question, and the reconnaissance patrols, upon reaching their last known position, found only abandoned rifles, with the bolts removed.

The following day, it became apparent that the main Hungarian forces had withdrawn a day earlier and that the 70/I Battalion had likely been left behind. Once this became clear, Novák ordered his battalion to pull back. During the march, however, the unit encountered a civilian who informed the officers that, following Horthy's proclamation, Szálasi and the Arrow Cross had taken power. In light of this revelation, an officers' meeting was convened, during which the decision was made to refuse service under the Arrow Cross regime. Consequently, the officers determined that rejoining the other retreating units was no longer a viable option. The soldiers unanimously concurred with the decision to surrender.⁷⁶

The surrender of the 70/I Battalion can be attributed to several factors. First, the unit was formed through the integration of soldiers from diverse backgrounds, including personnel from a border guard unit whose experiences and internal cohesion differed markedly from those of troops who had fought together and developed strong bonds – including attachments to their unit – during the battles in Galicia. Given the circumstances, there was simply no time for these mixed groups to develop a strong sense of unity. Secondly, the personality of First Lieutenant Novák also played a significant role in the surrender. Novák, a reserve officer, had served with a militia-like border guard unit and was therefore less deeply embedded in the military hierarchy compared to younger reserve officers who had served in the regular army. Consequently, Novák was far less influenced by the ideals and ethos of the military,

⁷⁶ László, 'Egy zászlós', pp 25-28.

and in this sense, his decisions were guided by more humanistic principles than those of his younger counterparts. Thirdly, Novák likely possessed a strong personality, which is evident in his ability to assert his will in conflicts with Cserei, despite the hierarchical structure clearly favouring Cserei in these situations. This dynamic was further exacerbated by the fact that, due to the retreat, Cserei often had to rely solely on his own resources in these conflicts – the divisional command, due to the given situation, was unable to intervene in the matter. Furthermore, the fact that Cserei had been wounded and removed from the battalion left him with no opportunity to take official action against Novák's insubordination, while his departure effectively placed control over the rank and file in the hands of the very officer with whom he had been in conflict. All these circumstances, together with the fact that the unit had become detached from the retreating Hungarian forces and that rejoining them would have required a strenuous effort from already exhausted men, contributed to the decision to surrender, although the final decision ultimately rested with the officers. Although the collective defection of the 70/I Battalion remained an isolated case, many soldiers of the 27th Infantry Regiment abandoned the fight between 15 October and 1 November, substantially weakening the regiment's strength and combat readiness.

Finally, it is worth examining several cases in which either the binding force of the oath or other factors proved stronger than the tensions affecting different forms of military group loyalty. One of the soldiers of the 27th Light Division who discusses this issue in considerable detail in his memoir is János Mirk. As noted above, Mirk was twice granted leave in September 1944 to visit his wife and newborn son in Marosvásárhely. According to his account, on 26 September an acquaintance, through his wife, offered to hide him and provide him with civilian clothes if he chose not to return to his unit. Mirk gives three reasons for rejecting the offer. First, he believed that German and Hungarian forces would regroup and regain their combat effectiveness. If they succeeded in retaking the town, those who had deserted would face execution, a risk he was unwilling to run. Second, he also considered the possibility that, if the town were not retaken, it would come under Romanian control. In that case, he did not know what would become of him or whether he might be treated as a spy. Third, he was unwilling to break his military oath, even though he knew that

difficult days, months, and perhaps years lay ahead of him.⁷⁷ What is particularly interesting about Mirk's case is that, although he did not desert himself, he does not condemn those who did, but instead writes about them with sympathy and understanding.

Another such case is that of László Makrai, who, following the fighting around Szászrégen, was transferred from 27/I Battalion to the 70th Infantry Regiment, where he commanded a small detachment consisting of two machine guns and two mortars. As can be inferred from his account, the events he describes occurred at roughly the same time as the isolation of the bulk of the 70/I Battalion from the retreating Hungarian and German forces and the subsequent decision of its officers to surrender. Although the memoir does not make it clear whether his detachment actually belonged to that specific battalion, Makrai recalls that his men had been assigned to a position in extremely difficult mountainous terrain during this period. After climbing two steep slopes, they finally reached their assigned position, only to be ordered shortly afterwards to rejoin the main unit. The return journey proved as arduous as the ascent, compounded by the necessity of crossing the slopes at night without making any noise owing to the enemy's proximity. At dawn the following day, they reached the seemingly endless column of retreating German and Hungarian forces, where they encountered the remnants of their battalion: ten or fifteen men under the command of a lieutenant, who informed them that the rest of the men had abandoned the unit during the retreat. As the unit to which he had been attached had by then effectively ceased to exist, Makrai requested a written movement order from the lieutenant and subsequently set out to rejoin his former unit, the 27/I Battalion, which he succeeded in locating around 27 October.⁷⁸

To understand what Makrai had to undertake in order to achieve this, it is worth briefly reviewing the circumstances of his withdrawal. First, smaller retreating units were checked by field gendarmes, and the officer in command of each detachment had to present a valid written movement order and specify the exact location of the unit he intended to rejoin. In the absence of such documentation, he could easily have been regarded as a deserter – an accusation that would have carried severe consequences. Second, the movement of Makrai's group was complicated by the presence of mortars,

⁷⁷ Mirk, 'Visszaemlékezés', p. 133.

⁷⁸ Makrai, 'Ki tudja, merre', p. 20.

machine guns, and their accompanying ammunition, part of which was transported on packhorses or horse-drawn carts. This meant that the ensign also had to ensure the provisioning of both his men and the animals, despite the fact that he could no longer rely on the supply units of his own battalion. Third, owing to the advance of Soviet spearheads, which had already occupied several settlements along the withdrawal route, Makrai was forced to make a detour to the north. Fourth, under these circumstances, he also had to maintain the discipline of his men – at one point they passed by an alcohol distillery which, amid the general chaos of the retreat, had been looted by soldiers.

It can reasonably be assumed that his success in leading the group to safety owed much to his combat experience – he had served with the 27th Light Division since its mobilisation and throughout the Galician campaign – as well as to the cohesion of his detachment, which had likely developed through their shared wartime experience. Another factor influencing his decision to remain with his unit rather than desert was that he was not a native of Transylvania but of the very region towards which he was now retreating. During the withdrawal he did indeed visit his family: on 27 October he first went to Miskolc, but he did not desert on this occasion either, although in the familiar surroundings of the city this would presumably not have been impossible. He justified this decision with reference to the danger that members of the Arrow Cross Party posed to escaped soldiers and subsequently rejoined his battalion, with which he witnessed the end of the war on Austrian territory. This latter fact is also of significance, since, had Makrai decided to continue fighting, it would have been far less difficult for him to join another unit than to catch up with his own. In this respect, his attitude was somewhat similar to that of Ensign Péter Ambrus, who, although he had considered the possibility of desertion, decided that as long as the battalion to which he belonged continued to exist, he would not abandon it – a stance that likewise reflected the strength of group cohesion.

Makrai also included a postscript to his memoir, in which he put forward two further reasons for not abandoning his unit.

Returning to Makrai, he also included a postscript to his memoir in which he offered further reasons for remaining with his unit. One of these was his conviction that they had fought against the Soviet Empire, which he characterised as the disgrace of the twentieth century. Judit Pihurik, who has examined the ego-documents of soldiers of

the Hungarian Second Army, concluded that their image of the Soviet Union was shaped by several factors: the accounts of the earlier generation who had fought or been taken prisoner on the Russian front during the First World War, wartime propaganda, and their own personal experiences.⁷⁹ In Makrai's case, this image was further nuanced by his experiences during the fighting in Hungary – he also reports that his unit, the 27/I Battalion, passed through a settlement that had previously been temporarily occupied by soldiers of the Red Army, where numerous cases of rape had occurred.⁸⁰ For completeness' sake, however, it should be noted that although he makes no explicit reference to the anti-Soviet propaganda of either the Germans or the Hungarians, he does not explicitly question its claims either.

In the same postscript, Makrai argues that, as a Hungarian officer serving alongside his Szekler comrades, he had been fighting in defence of his homeland. Finally, he quotes the following passage, which he believes to be from the text of the military oath: 'He who makes a pact with or joins the enemy breaks his oath; let him be condemned by the contempt of the Hungarian people, and the full severity of the law be brought down upon him.'⁸¹ Although these lines do not appear in either of the military oaths in force during the Second World War (those sworn to Horthy and later to Szálasi) they nevertheless offer valuable insight into the motivations of officers who, while not supporters of the Szálasi regime, remained with their units until the very end.

Renewing the Withdrawal

Although the focus thus far has been primarily on desertion, all these developments took place during the German and Hungarian retreat from Northern Transylvania, a process that likewise merits closer attention. On 17 October, as part of this withdrawal, elements of the 27th Light Division occupied defensive positions south of Nagybánya, near Szakállasdombó and Tőkésbánya, two settlements lying roughly eight kilometres apart along a north–south axis. During the day, however, these positions were abandoned as the Hungarian forces continued their retreat towards the northwest through Nagybánya. By the time the division's units reached the town, it was already under artillery fire, and the 57/I Battalion had to engage infiltrating Soviet troops in

⁷⁹ Pihurik, 'Háborús propaganda', p. 126.

⁸⁰ Makrai, 'Ki tudja, merre', p. 20.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

order to secure a route for the retreating elements of the formation. Later that night (that is, during the night of 17–18 October), Nagybánya fell to Soviet and Romanian forces.⁸² On 20 October, the 70/I Battalion, whose surrender has already been mentioned, was still acting as the formation's rearguard at Nagysikárló, approximately fifteen kilometres northwest of Nagybánya. Captain Cserei was also wounded that day in an attack by a Soviet reconnaissance patrol, after which Lieutenant Novák assumed command.⁸³ As can be seen, both the desertion of various groups and the defection of the 70/I Battalion occurred during a period in which the rearguard elements of the light division repeatedly clashed with Soviet forces closely pursuing the retreating German and Hungarian formations.

In the course of the retreat, however, the division had to contend not only with deserters and the advancing Soviet forces, but occasionally also with its German allies. According to Lieutenant Dániel Aszalós, whose recollections were recorded by military historian Árpád Róbert Berekméri, one encounter between the 27th Artillery Regiment and German troops that culminated in an exchange of fire occurred at Szárazberek, a village near Szatmárnémeti, most likely on 19 October. The Hungarian gunners arrived in the village and began to take up billets. Shortly afterwards, two German tanks accompanied by a detachment of motorised infantry appeared. The Germans demanded that the Hungarians vacate their quarters, even though the entire regiment had already been accommodated there; shortly afterwards, German troops began looting the villagers, taking livestock such as chickens and piglets, which led to a confrontation with the local Hungarian population. The Hungarian soldiers, drawn by the disturbance, likely intervened on the villagers' side, and the situation subsequently escalated into an armed clash. The Hungarians, who outnumbered the Germans, ultimately compelled them to reboard their vehicles and withdraw from the village. During the exchange of fire, one Hungarian ensign was killed, while another ensign and two soldiers were wounded.⁸⁴

A few days later, another disagreement arose between one of the battalions of the 27th Light Division and the Germans. A report dated 23 October reveals that Major Imre Petneházy, commander of the 27/I Battalion, was instructed to take control of a hill or

⁸² Berekméri, *Lesz még kikelet!*, p. 222; Illésfalvi, Szabó, and Számvéber, *Erdély a hadak útján*, p. 161.

⁸³ Berekméri, *Lesz még kikelet!*, p. 224.

⁸⁴ Interview with Dániel Aszalós (audio recording in the possession of Árpád Róbert Berekméri, Mureș County, Romania).

some form of high ground. The original German text does not make it clear whether this referred to capturing the position in combat or merely taking possession of it; however, Petneházy refused to execute the order and instructed his battalion to withdraw to a nearby village for rest. According to the report, court-martial proceedings were initiated against him, which suggests that he may already have been threatened with such consequences at the time of his refusal. The fact that he nevertheless accepted responsibility for leading his battalion to rest suggests that he regarded the order as particularly unjust – most probably because his men were exhausted and he considered that they should not be required to perform rearguard duties merely to facilitate the Germans' unhindered withdrawal.⁸⁵

Mention should also be made of another factor that influenced the division's retreat. As discussed in the general overview of the withdrawal from Northern Transylvania, this period coincided with a Soviet offensive aimed at encircling the German and Hungarian forces of Army Detachment Wöhler. Debrecen, for instance, fell to Soviet forces on 20 October, while Nyíregyháza – which lay along the planned route of withdrawal – was captured the following day. The German command sought to clear the route by launching simultaneous attacks against the Soviet forces from both the west and the east. Army Detachment Wöhler, to which the 27th Light Division was subordinated, mounted the offensive from the east. While some units of the division participated in the recapture of villages previously occupied by Soviet forces, the 57th Infantry Regiment, having withdrawn along a route that bypassed the Soviet positions.⁸⁶

Finally, we must briefly return to the rearguard fighting, in which elements of the light division were frequently engaged and whose nature is vividly illustrated by Captain Gábor Éltető's memoir. Such actions took their toll on the troops: upon breaking contact with the enemy, covering patrols – by the very nature of their task – often failed to catch up with the main body of the units or were captured in the course of their duties. Sudden night withdrawals from defensive positions likewise entailed the risk of soldiers becoming separated or lost. Wounds sustained under such circumstances

⁸⁵ A German-language report preserved in the archives under the title 'The Germans Call for the Strengthening of the 27th Division's Fighting Spirit'. Hungarian Military History Archives, Budapest, I. fondfőcsoport, M. kir. Honvéd Vezérkar főnöke iratai, VKF iratok, 1944-1945. 1. oszt., 1863/Föv. hdm. 1944. okt. 24. A németek kérik a 27. hadosztály harci szellemének megerősítését, Ia Nr. 2865/44. geh.

⁸⁶ Berekméri, *Lesz még kikelet!*, p. 224.

were usually fatal. In addition, the exhausting nature of rearguard fighting tempted those who could no longer endure its hardships to remain behind in Hungarian-inhabited villages, while many Transylvanians, as discussed above, chose to break ranks in the hope of returning to their native villages after the loss of their homeland. All of this, Éltető writes, was compounded by the inferiority and inadequacy of Hungarian weaponry compared with that of the enemy and, in the case of his own unit, by the lack of communications equipment. According to the captain, the strength of his battalion – excluding the heavy weapons company – had been reduced to that of a single company during the retreat.⁸⁷ By the time the units of the 27th Light Division reached the Tisza River, a similar situation had developed among them.

Defence on the Tisza River

On the night of 28 October, the bulk of the 27th Light Division crossed the river at Tiszalök. Elements of the 27th Reconnaissance Battalion and the 70th Infantry Regiment, still engaged in clearing the last pockets of Soviet resistance near Devecser and Kótaj, followed on 30 October, crossing at Tiszadada, about 11 kilometres west of the previous crossing point.⁸⁸ To understand the division's activity in detail during this period, it is important to consider the broader operational context. On 29 October 1944, the left flank of the 2nd Ukrainian Front launched an offensive aimed at the rapid capture of Budapest from a bridgehead between the Danube and Tisza rivers, while the Front's right flank remained positioned behind the Tisza along the Vitka–Újfehértó–Polgár–Tiszafüred sector. The right flank's objective was to engage the German Army Group South's forces across a wide front, fracturing the enemy's defences, limiting their manoeuvrability, and driving them out of northern Hungary.⁸⁹ The defensive positions along the western bank of the Tisza were held by Army Group Wöhler, comprising the German 8th and Hungarian 2nd Armies. In practice, however, the Hungarian units were also directly subordinated to German command, as General Friessner removed the Second Army headquarters from the army group's structure and

⁸⁷ Éltető, 'Hadinapló', p. 30.

⁸⁸ Berekméri, *Lesz még kikelet!*, p. 227.

⁸⁹ Sándor Tóth, 'A 2. Ukrán Front jobbszárnyának felszabadító harcai Észak-Magyarországon (1944. november 7 – december 31.)' [The Campaign of the 2nd Ukrainian Front's Right Flank for the Liberation of Northern Hungary (7 November–31 December 1944)] in *Hadtörténelmi Közlemények*, vol. xxii, no. 1 (1975), p. 46.

reassigned it elsewhere. The 27th Light Division, together with the 9th Border Rifle Division, was part of the IX Corps, responsible for a sector stretching between Tiszanána and Tiszakeszi, approximately 43 kilometres apart as the crow flies. The sector was made up of a two-line defensive belt, 6 to 7 kilometres deep, extending across partly marshy terrain interwoven with canals and streams. The light division was set to assume control of the sector's left flank, covering roughly 25 kilometres between Tiszabábolna and Tiszakeszi, where it relieved the units of the 9th Field Reserve Division on the night of 2-3 November. To the corps' left stood the German 3rd Mountain Division, while on the right were the Hungarian 25th and German 76th Infantry Divisions. Consequently, the 27th Light Division's closest neighbour – alongside the 9th Border Rifle Division – was the German 3rd Mountain Division. Facing the Szekler formation across the Tisza River, units of the 27th Army of the 2nd Ukrainian Front were positioning themselves. These included the 35th Guards Rifle Corps, the 33rd and 104th Rifle Corps – with a total of seven rifle divisions and two airborne divisions – a tank brigade, an independent tank regiment, and two self-propelled artillery regiments. On 7 November, the Soviet formations were ordered to cross the Tisza and seize the Emőd–Mezőkövesd sector. From there, the attack was to be pressed in the direction of Miskolc.⁹⁰

As far as the strength of the 27th Light Division is concerned, by 25 October it consisted of 1,200 combat troops, 18 heavy anti-tank guns, and 29 field guns. By early November, its composition had changed somewhat, as the 70/I Battalion – previously captured by Soviet forces at Nagysikarló – was reformed through the integration of the 7th Independent Battalion (1,275 men), which had previously been part of the 7th Reserve Division, disbanded following the fighting in Transylvania.⁹¹ The severity of the manpower shortage is clearly illustrated by the fact that when Captain László Magyar's 7th Independent Battalion came under the command of the 27th Division, Major Ferenc Kozma, the division's chief of staff, ordered him to release four of his platoons to reinforce other units, arguing that each regiment in the division had fewer combat troops than Magyar's battalion.⁹²

⁹⁰ Berekméri, *Lesz még kikelet!*, p. 229. See also Tóth, 'A 2. Ukrán Front', p. 47.

⁹¹ Berekméri, *Lesz még kikelet!*, p. 230.

⁹² Magyar, 'Tanmese', p. 101.

Our understanding of the deployment of the 27th Light Division's units along their sector near the Tisza River is based primarily on an account by one of the formation's artillery officers, reproduced in Ferenc Adonyi's 1954 volume. The author, identified only by the initials L. G. – most likely László Gábossy, commander of the 27/II Artillery Battalion – noted that the division's approximately 25-kilometre defensive sector was divided into two sections: a 20-kilometre sector in the north and a 5-kilometre sector in the south. He also reported that, although the division's command expected a major Soviet crossing in the southern sector, the actual crossing occurred near what he identified as the centre of the northern defensive zone – around Ároktő – during the early hours of 6 November 1944.⁹³

Although direct information on the deployment of individual units within the division's sector has yet to be uncovered, a somewhat clearer and more detailed picture can be drawn from various sources and the existing literature. While it is generally accepted that the division's sector stretched between Tiszabábolna and Tiszakeszi, its northeastern edge actually extended as far as Tiszapalkonya – about 12 kilometers from Tiszakeszi as the crow flies, and nearly twice that distance by road. The village was intended to be taken by the 70/I Battalion, commanded by László Magyar, but as will be discussed later, the attempt failed due to the delayed arrival of the Hungarian troops. The area between Tiszakeszi and Ároktő – approximately an 8-kilometre stretch – was held by the 4th and 6th Companies of the 70/II Battalion, along with units from the 70/III Battalion – or more precisely, these are the units cited in various sources concerning the defence of the sector in question. Although the precise locations of these units' positions remain unclear, the 4th Company is known to have been responsible for defending approximately 4 kilometres of this sector with minimal personnel and inadequate armament.

Elements of the 57/III Battalion were stationed in Ároktő as well. There is no available information on the presence of military units along the approximately 8-kilometre stretch between Ároktő and Tiszadorogma, but the 27/I Battalion is known to have been stationed in or near the latter village. Sources also indicate that both the 27th and 57th Infantry Regiments engaged smaller Soviet forces that had managed to cross the river along the roughly 4-kilometre section between the two villages. Finally, at

⁹³ L. G. 'A székely tüzérek harcaiból', p. 222.

Tiszavalk – about 8.5 kilometres from Tiszabábolna – the 57/I Battalion formed the southern end of the division's sector.⁹⁴

Based on Berekméri's research, units of the 27th Light Division took over defensive positions along the Tisza River during the night of 2 to 3 November, relieving elements of the 9th Reserve Field Division. However, the handover did not proceed smoothly everywhere. In the sector the 27/I Battalion was set to occupy, Ensign Makrai recounts that the outgoing unit's officers attempted to transfer the line using only maps, only to be taken aback when their counterparts from the incoming battalion insisted on inspecting the forward positions in person to verify their exact location.⁹⁵

The situation was even more critical in the northernmost part of the division's sector, where the newly formed 70/III Battalion, led by Captain László Magyar, ultimately failed to assume its assigned position. The exact timing of this attempt is unclear. Berekméri's history of the division suggests the incident took place on 4 November, but elsewhere he notes that Magyar only assumed command of the 70/I Battalion from 5 November. The circumstances of the incident are known from Captain Magyar's account, though the exact date remains unspecified. After sending the four platoons requested by the 27th Division to Mezőcsát, Magyar writes that the rest of the unit attempted to take up their assigned sector at a village – unnamed but likely Tiszapalkonya – around dawn. Upon reaching their destination, Magyar left the battalion behind and entered the settlement with only a few men to make contact with the 27th Light Division's unit assigned to monitor enemy activity along the river. As he recounts, the main street of the village was deserted, but there was noticeable movement in the side streets. The morning was foggy, and at that point Magyar and his men still believed they were seeing the movement of friendly Hungarian troops – an assumption reinforced by the fact that the river-monitoring unit, with whom they managed to establish contact, reported nothing suspicious.

However, one of Magyar's men approached a side street closely enough to overhear the soldiers there whispering in Russian. Meanwhile, visibility began to improve – it was now possible to see as far as 3-4 metres – and the outlines of more and more

⁹⁴ See Berekméri, *Lesz még kikelet!*, pp 230-232. L. G. 'A székely tüzérek harcaiból', p. 22.

⁹⁵ Makrai, 'Ki tudja, merre', p. 22.

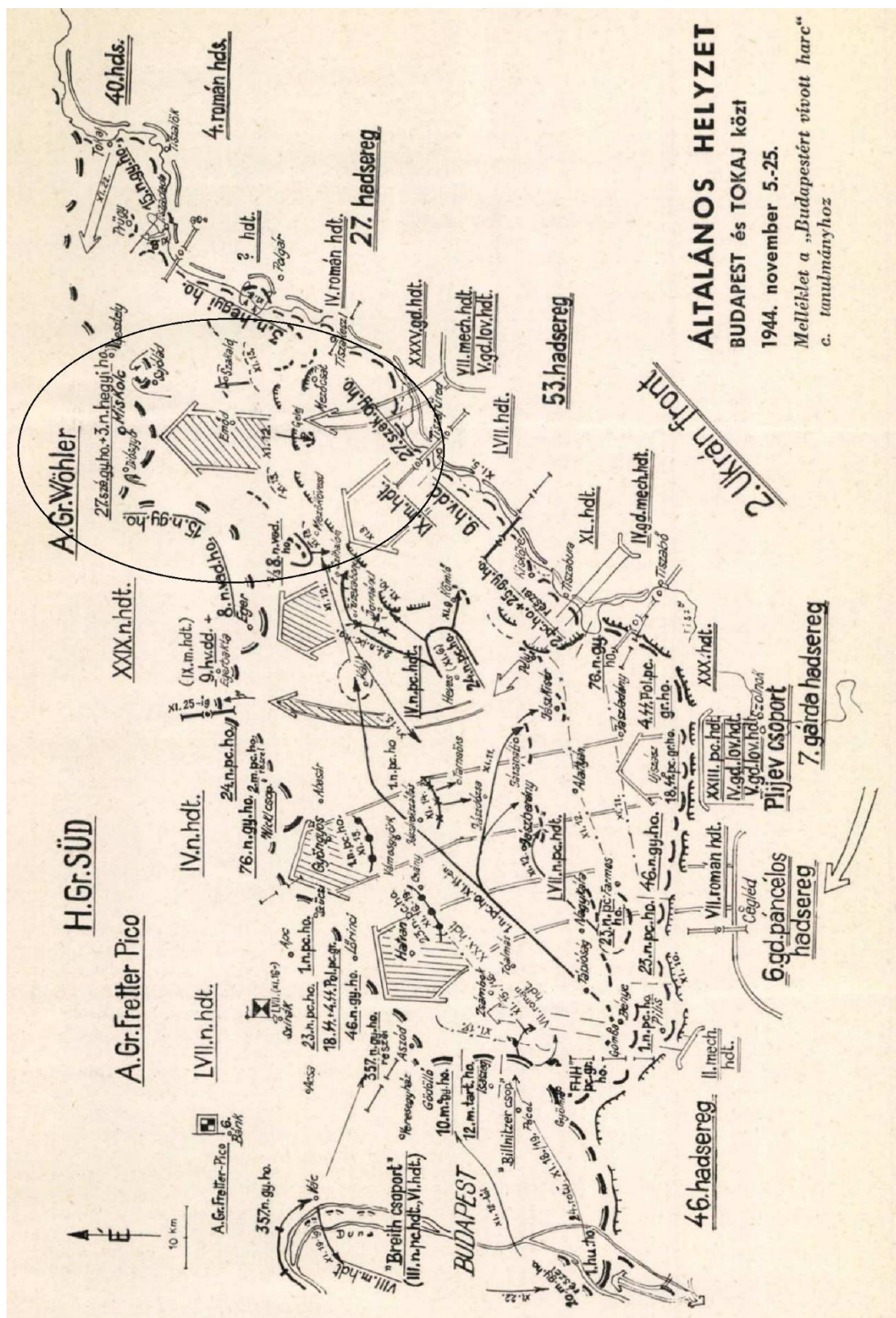


Fig. 9. Operations of the 27th Infantry Division along the Tisza River, 5–23 November.

[*Hadak Útján*, xvii, no. 192 (1965), p. 9.]

soldiers began to emerge as they peeked out from the courtyards. It soon became clear that during the previous night, the Soviets had not only crossed the river but had already begun establishing a bridgehead. By the time this was realised, one of the companies of the 70/III battalion – having misunderstood its orders – had already started moving toward the river through an empty side street. Magyar managed to reach them just in time, but the company commander could scarcely believe that he had nearly walked into an ambush. While they were trying to convince him of the danger, valuable time was lost. Magyar describes what happened next as follows:

Unfortunately, the fog lifted just as dawn broke. The tense, uncertain standoff was suddenly replaced by a fierce, close-quarters firefight. Two of our anti-tank guns and a machine gun – firing from constantly shifting positions at a range of 30-40 metres – enabled a swift withdrawal. Our men trapped in the narrow streets threw hand grenades behind them as they retreated, with the same objective in mind. It's almost hard to believe how remarkably low the number of casualties was on both sides – perhaps because of the sudden panic and the wild, unaimed shooting [it triggered]. I saw five Soviet soldiers go down wounded, while we suffered only two light injuries. [...] We had no choice but to break out of the encirclement by running across an open, marshy field under heavy mortar fire, skirting the village in the direction of Sajószöged [located approximately 8 km northwest of Tiszapalkonya]. They fired at us like hunters shooting at rabbits in a driven hunt. Fortunately, the wet, marshy terrain absorbed most of the impact – shells merely sent up columns of water, and only those that happened to hit a dry patch produced any real fragmentation effect.⁹⁶

The battalion had to cover roughly three kilometres at a run, Magyar continues, during which the Soviet infantry – somewhat inexplicably at the time – hardly pursued them. When they finally reached the wooded, brush-covered area, it became clear why: at the far end of the marsh, four medium German tanks lay concealed in camouflage, ready to intervene on the Hungarians' behalf – something Magyar assumes the Soviet reconnaissance was also aware of.

Although the 70/I Battalion successfully escaped the ambush and was rejoined by the four previously detached platoons, their retreat into the sector of the German 3rd Mountain Division – positioned on the left flank of the 27th Light Division – effectively severed them from their parent formation. Reinforced by a German assault unit of 14 men, five light machine guns, and a BMW motorcycle with a sidecar, the

⁹⁶ Magyar, 'Tanmese', pp 101-103.

battalion was attached to the 3rd Mountain Division and fought under German command for a certain period of time. Their supply train, however, remained with the original formation, which the battalion's combat elements only rejoined during a later phase of the retreat.⁹⁷ It is important to note that the subordination of Hungarian units to German formations, as in the case of the 70/I Battalion, was by no means exceptional, although the reasons behind such decisions could vary. On 27 October 1944, the commander-in-chief of Army Group South issued an order to General Wöhler, instructing him to immediately remove any Hungarian commanders deemed politically unreliable and replace them with younger officers loyal to the Germans, and stipulating that any Hungarian units found underperforming in combat were to be subordinated to German formations.⁹⁸

As for the fighting along the Tisza River, the previously cited lieutenant colonel of the 27/II Artillery Battalion, L. G., believed that the 27th Light Division misjudged the situation by concentrating its forces in the southern part of the line – specifically around Tiszadorogma and Tiszabábolna. This view is supported by the fact that the Soviets ultimately crossed the river northeast of this sector, at Ároktő, on 5 November. However, several other factors must also be taken into account – most notably, that a Soviet bridgehead had already been established in the Tiszadorogma–Tiszabábolna area before the division took over the line, and neither the preceding Hungarian units nor the Germans managed to eliminate it. Consequently, between 3 and 6 November, Hungarian efforts focused on containing the existing bridgehead and preventing further Soviet crossings, while the Soviets worked to expand their positions and establish new ones on the bank held by the Hungarians.

Some sources suggest that Soviet forces, aided by effective reconnaissance, had a detailed understanding of the 27th Light Division's deployment. To divert attention from the planned crossing at Ároktő, they intensified operations along the Tiszadorogma–Tiszabábolna stretch, while, as these sources claim, they scaled back

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Pál Darnóy, 'A Budapestért vívott harc. Hadtörténelmi részletek a magyar térségben lefolyt küzdelem döntő szakaszáról 1944/45 (14. folytatás)' [The Battle for Budapest: Military-Historical Accounts of the Decisive Phase of the Fighting in the Hungarian Theatre, 1944–1945 (Part 14)] in *Hadak Útján*, vol. xv, no. 170 (1963), p. 10.

the shelling on the Ároktő front.⁹⁹ However, other sources indicate that enemy artillery had been active at Ároktő throughout, noting that the intensity of the fire indeed increased significantly from 4 November onward.¹⁰⁰

There is likewise some disagreement in the sources concerning the Soviet bridgehead between Tiszabábolna and Tiszadorogma: while military historiography typically credits the 35th Guards Rifle Corps with establishing it on 3 November, Ensign Makrai, as mentioned earlier, maintains that it was already in place before his unit assumed positions along the river. (However, it should be noted that Makrai's recollections are not always entirely reliable when it comes to the specific details of certain events.) In any case, the first clashes occurred in this very sector, where the Soviets' attempts to break out from the bridgehead were delayed by the fire of the 27/5 artillery battery and its reconnaissance patrol, which successfully repelled several close assaults on 3 November. The following morning, units from the 27th and 57th Infantry Regiments were also committed in an attempt to drive the Soviets back across the river; however, despite repeated attacks launched at considerable cost, reports indicate that only partial success was achieved, and the bridgehead remained under Soviet control.¹⁰¹

Certain details of the battle are also documented from the perspective of the soldiers of the 57/III Battalion. As Ferenc Bereczki notes, the group selected for the task was dispatched from Ároktő at 23:00 on 3 November, with the briefing that only a small number of Russian soldiers had crossed the river between Tiszadorogma and Tiszabábolna, and that their mission was simply to drive them back.¹⁰² József Tömöri, one of the platoon leaders who participated in the engagement, also recounted the events at a hearing in the autumn of 1946. According to his testimony, about two companies were involved in the assault, which met far stronger resistance than anticipated and ultimately stalled due to heavy casualties. Tömöri also claimed that they were pinned down for three days, starving and dehydrated, just a grenade's throw away from the Russians, as the regimental commander refused to order a retreat. However, there are some inconsistencies in Tömöri's accounts, as in two separate

⁹⁹ István Molnár, *Ároktő község 25 éve 1944–1969. No. 1 of Mezőcsáti Helytörténeti Füzetek* [The 25 Years of Ároktő Village: 1944–1969] (Mezőcsát, 1970), p. 13.

¹⁰⁰ Bereczki, 'Honvéd voltam', p. 52.

¹⁰¹ Berekméri, *Lesz még kikelet!*, p. 230.

¹⁰² Bereczki, 'Honvéd voltam', p. 51.

statements he linked the same event – which is not discussed here – to two different locations.¹⁰³

Another important aspect of the incident is noted by the previously referenced Bereczki, who states that Lieutenant Antal Somkúti, Lieutenant Antal Seszták, and Ensign István Kozák were among those who perished in the fighting on 4 November, along with László Győri, the clerk of the 9th Company, who had volunteered to join the attackers. The loss of Somkúti, Antal, and Seszták likely dealt a devastating blow to the morale of the 57/III Battalion: as can be inferred from Bereczki's memoir, all three were highly respected for their battle-hardened experience, having participated in numerous successful raids in Galicia.¹⁰⁴

The Soviet forces made another attempt to expand their bridgehead on 6 November, resulting in intense clashes at Tiszadorogma. During these engagements, the 27/I and 27/7 artillery batteries, stationed near Tiszavalk, were also involved in the fighting. As Berekméri describes, in the fierce close combat, individual acts of heroism also emerged. Upon realizing that a unit from the 27/II Battalion was on the verge of being cut off and encircled by Soviet forces, Corporal János Koplányi abandoned his entrenched machine gun position, confronted the enemy head-on, and neutralized part of the attacking forces. He then led a counterattack with his section, routing the remaining Soviet troops and enabling the Hungarian unit to withdraw safely.¹⁰⁵ While Koplányi's actions undoubtedly serve as a significant example of the critical role that individual or small-unit cooperation can play in such engagements, these limited actions were only sufficient to minimize the Hungarians' losses and could influence the outcome of the fighting around the bridgehead only temporarily.

On 4 November, the fighting also extended to the positions of the 70th Regiment. Near Tiszakeszi, units of the 70th Infantry Regiment faced multiple attacks, and even the regiment's reserve company was deployed to repel Soviet troops that had broken through the defensive line. However, intense mortar and machine-gun fire eventually

¹⁰³ The details related to the attack are drawn from Tömöri's testimony given in court on 9 October 1946. Gáll's file is held at the Budapest City Archives. See: HU_BFL_XXV_1_a_2_1946_4314, pp 15, 33.

¹⁰⁴ Bereczki, 'Honvéd voltam', pp 51-53.

¹⁰⁵ Berekméri, *Lesz még kikelet!*, p. 233.

sparked panic among the Hungarian forces, causing some units to abandon their positions and retreat in disorder toward Mezőcsát and Mezőkövesd. As Berekméri writes, only one section stood firm and held out until the very end, providing crucial cover for the withdrawal of their comrades.¹⁰⁶ On the same day, enemy fire at Ároktő began to intensify, and over the following two days – 5 and 6 November – it steadily increased, as noted by Ferenc Bereczki.¹⁰⁷ Soviet infantry units seem to have reached the Hungarian-held bank near the village on 5 November, but were pushed back to the eastern side of the river.

A far more serious situation developed on 5 November for the 27th Light Division's southern neighbours, where a Soviet attack launched from the Tiszafüred bridgehead broke through the river defences over a 15-kilometre stretch. A counterattack, involving not only the 9th Field Replacement Division but also a battalion from the 27th Light Division (the 57/I Battalion, defending near Tiszavalk), failed to yield significant results. Consequently, the southern flank of the IX Corps was left vulnerable to encirclement.¹⁰⁸

On 6 November, the Hungarians were no longer able to hold the Soviets at bay at Ároktő either. Under a heavy artillery barrage that began in the early hours, enemy units crossed the still-flooded river in rubber boats and small rowboats, landing in a dense thicket, likely to the south of the settlement. The soldiers of the 70th Infantry Regiment once again proved completely unreliable, with resistance coming only from the artillery. From 08:00 to 10:00, the staff of the 27/II Artillery Battalion was engaged in close combat with Soviet troops at Ároktő. Corporal Bereczki describes the fall of the village as follows:

We were still in the eastern part of the village when Soviet soldiers broke in and reached the Reformed Church. By then, we had relocated to the western side. Amid growing anxiety, the sound of machine-gun bursts became increasingly loud. They were also attacking with mortars from the left bank of the Tisza. Seeing how things were unfolding, I ordered those attached to the battalion to head for Mezőcsát immediately. Under mortar fire, we fled the village on wagons, galloping through knee-deep mud.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁶ Berekméri, *Lesz még kikelet!*, pp 230-231.

¹⁰⁷ Bereczki, 'Honvéd voltam', p. 52.

¹⁰⁸ Berekméri, *Lesz még kikelet!*, p. 231.

¹⁰⁹ Bereczki, 'Honvéd voltam', p. 52.

The 4th and 5th batteries held off the advancing enemy forces in close combat at the fork of the Ároktő–Mezőcsát road until 15:00, when several German tanks finally arrived to cover their withdrawal. By the time they pulled out, approximately 300 shell craters had been counted around their positions.¹¹⁰

According to Berekméri, the divisional command directed its only reserve, the 27th Reconnaissance Battalion, towards Ároktő, while a combat group assembled by the 70th Infantry Regiment in Mezőkeresztes was sent to the Ágoston Farmstead, in the direction of Mezőcsát. However, the Soviets successfully repelled the counterattack aimed at recapturing Ároktő, forcing the Reconnaissance Battalion, along with the 27th Tank Destroyer Company, to retreat to the outskirts of Mezőcsát, a town located approximately 10 kilometres north of the village. The new defensive line was established 2 kilometres south of Mezőcsát. The day's fighting ultimately resulted in the Soviets reinforcing the bridgehead they had secured at Ároktő and extending it toward Tiszakeszi. They also completed a pile bridge – initially started by the Germans but left unfinished due to flooding – which significantly accelerated the movement of troops, vehicles, and tanks across the river.¹¹¹

The situation of the combat group formed from the men of the 70th Infantry Regiment is somewhat more complicated. Berekméri, examining their activities based on a letter written by Lieutenant Zoltán Paxy, suggests that the 35-strong group departed from Mezőkövesd on 6 November and took up positions at the Ágoston farmstead, which he assumes was located south of Mezőcsát.¹¹² One key discrepancy is that, although Mezőkövesd and Mezőcsát are approximately 30 kilometres apart, the letter claims that the group covered this distance on foot in just a couple of hours. Additionally, Paxy mentions that they laid down a telephone line to maintain contact with the command post via field telephone, which seems highly improbable over such a span. Finally, an analysis of the maps from the 1941 Military Survey of Hungary reveals that the Ágoston Farmstead, along with the Klementina Farmstead located 3 kilometres to the south (also mentioned in the letter), is not situated south of Mezőcsát, as Berekméri suggested, but rather near Mezőkövesd, to the northeast of the settlement.

¹¹⁰ L. G., 'Székely tüzérek harcaiból', p. 223.

¹¹¹ Molnár, *Ároktő község*, pp 14-15.

¹¹² Berekméri, *Lesz még kikelet!*, p. 233.

Paxy, however, was indeed at Ároktő, but earlier than some sources indicate. He commanded a group of 27 men from the 4th Company, 70/II Battalion, tasked with defending a four-kilometre stretch of the line somewhere between the aforementioned settlement and Tiszakeszi. On the group's left flank, where there were no adjacent units, Soviet forces began infiltrating across the river. Paxy, along with his batman and a few grooms, made an attempt to repel them, but he was severely lacking in manpower, weapons, and ammunition for such an effort. When it became clear that a Hungarian company – likely also from the 70/II Battalion – had abandoned its positions at Tiszakeszi without orders, Paxy's group was also recalled. He claims that this happened on 3 November, but from the letter in which he describes the events, it can be inferred that it actually took place later, likely on 5 or 6 November. Another peculiar aspect of the episode is that, instead of taking the road to Mezőkövesd, the group decided to cut across country, crossing several ponds along the way. However, the letter does not clarify whether this route was chosen to bypass Soviet forces, which may have controlled the roads essential for the retreat.¹¹³

Having established the location and timing of Paxy's group's engagement, it is essential to refocus on the broader context of the Soviet advance. On 6 November, not only did the 27th Light Division's sector witness an increasing number of enemy units crossing the Tisza, but forward elements of the Soviet 27th and 53rd Armies similarly advanced along the entire front. The following day saw the launch of their offensive against the Hungarian IX Corps. By the evening of 7 November, the two Soviet armies had secured an 80-kilometre stretch of the right riverbank, deepening their bridgehead by 8 to 17 kilometres. The 27th Army, targeting the positions of the Hungarian 27th Light Division, advanced towards Mezőkövesd, while the 53rd Army pressed forward towards Füzesabony. Confronted by understrength Hungarian forces, the Soviet progression was rapid: by 8 November, they had reached the Igrici–Mezőnagymihály–Szentistván–Egerlövő–Besenyőtelek–Kömlő–Tarnaszentmiklós line. By 10 November, the 27th Army's front extended along the Tiszapalkonya–Nemesbikk–Hejőbába–Hejőszalonta South–Erőd–Vatta–Tard–Mezőkövesd South line.¹¹⁴

¹¹³ Zoltán Paxy's letter to military historian Péter Illésfalvi (Letter in the possession of Péter Illésfalvi, Budapest, Hungary).

¹¹⁴ Tóth, 'A 2. Ukrán Front', pp 47-48.

Several sources document the fighting that began on 7 November, particularly concerning the 27th Light Division. As János Mirk noted in his diary, the division's troops were heavily engaged with Soviet forces near Tiszabábolna, Tiszadorogma, and Mezőcsát. Mirk also highlights two critical aspects of the battle: the persistent fog, which favoured the attackers, and the overwhelming enemy superiority, which made halting their advance impossible.¹¹⁵ We must also consider the severe manpower shortage in the Hungarian units, which led to the main line of resistance being formed by platoon- or even squad-sized positions, spaced 100 to 200 meters apart (often referred to somewhat cynically by soldiers as a veil-like defence). The depth of this defence did not rely on troops but on prepared (and often empty) positions, designed as fallback points for units pushed back from the main line. In order to have a force available for critical situations, each regiment attempted to scrape together some reserves, though these units were mostly composed of support personnel. Behind the front lines, combat discipline units were positioned with nearly unlimited authority to use force, tasked with preventing soldiers from abandoning their positions or retreating from combat.¹¹⁶ Lastly, it is also worth mentioning the terrain, which soldiers often pointed out for its numerous ponds and exceptionally thick mud.

The events at Tiszadorogma are described by two eyewitnesses: Ensign Makrai, the platoon leader of a mortar platoon in the 27/I Battalion, and János Karácsony, who, despite lacking combat experience, was also deployed that day. As previously mentioned, the battalion had established defences along the Tisza embankment. On the morning of 7 November, Makrai recounts, the attack of the Soviet forces began with preparatory mortar fire. Soon after, the infantry stormed the embankment, where close combat ensued. The 27/I Battalion gradually fell back to the 'Fehérló' tavern, about 6-7 kilometres northwest of Tiszadorogma, except for a rifle unit that became trapped in the gravel pits to the right of the village. The mortarmen were ordered to assist in their retreat by providing fire support. Makrai, along with Lieutenant László Kuskó,

¹¹⁵ Mirk, 'Napló', diary entry for 7 November 1944.

¹¹⁶ Damó, *Névtelen katonák*, pp 186-187.

platoon leader of the 27/II Battalion mortar platoon, climbed a haystack for a better view of the battlefield before opening fire. After assessing the situation, Kuskó refused to carry out the mission, reasoning that the enemy was too close and that they would soon need to begin their own retreat. By then, the officers of the battalion had mounted their horses and quickly disappeared, closely followed by the riflemen.

Since Kuskó wasn't entirely wrong, Makrai ordered three of his platoon's mortar crews to join the others, while he stayed with the last crew. They commenced firing at the enemy forces advancing from the direction of Tiszadorogma and Ároktő, holding their position until one of the attacking flanks approached within 400 meters of the tavern. At that point, Makrai ordered the crew to cease fire and initiate their retreat. Prior to departing, he sent a soldier to Ensign Gyula Klein, a medical officer stationed at the tavern with the battalion's aid stations, to inform him that an immediate withdrawal was necessary, as the Russian forces were nearing. Klein, however, refused to move.

Makrai describes their retreat as follows:

The carts [on which the mortars were usually transported] had already retreated approximately 300 meters, and the two soldiers carrying the 25 kg baseplate and the 28 kg bipod mount were moving at a steady pace. However, the man carrying the 31 kg mortar tube became winded from the weight, and the signalmán took over. But he too quickly grew fatigued from running with the load. I then took the tube myself, but I too could not continue running for long, so I decided to drop it to the ground and leave it behind. By this point, we were under small arms fire [as the enemy had closed in].¹¹⁷

As mentioned earlier, János Karácsony, who had previously performed administrative duties, was also given command of a platoon and deployed to the Tisza River. The fact that he only acquired a rifle on this occasion is a clear example of his combat experience – or rather, the lack thereof. As he recounted in an interview, he and his men positioned themselves in a pumpkin field without digging in – the ground was too marshy – on terrain with poor visibility, especially when lying low. For a while, nothing happened in their immediate surroundings, but then one of his men spotted a nearby Hungarian unit retreating in a panic, hurriedly discarding parts of their equipment to move faster. Despite what they saw, Karácsony did not dare order his men to fall back, even though the soldiers from the other unit soon vanished from sight,

¹¹⁷ Makrai, 'Ki tudja, merre', pp 22-23.

likely indicating that they had managed to escape. By the time they ultimately decided to pull back and head toward the Fehérló tavern, the area was crawling with Soviet soldiers, most of whom were extremely drunk. According to Karácsony, about forty Hungarian soldiers were taken prisoner there, including a medical officer – most likely the same Ensign Gyula Klein whom Makrai's group had left behind somewhat earlier.¹¹⁸

Berekméri states that on this day, a group led by Colonel Sándor Gáll launched a counterattack from Négyes to slow the rapid advance of the Soviet troops and assist in the withdrawal of Hungarian forces. Tiszavalk, Tiszabábolna, and Tiszadorogma lie southeast of the village (at distances of 3, 8, and 13 kilometres, respectively), while Poroszló is situated 10 kilometres to the southwest. However, Berekméri does not specify the direction of the attack, only noting that artillery support was provided by the 27th Light Division's batteries positioned at Tiszavalk. It is reasonable to assume that the assault was directed southeast, given that the division's troops had been primarily engaged in that region. This is further supported by the reported success of the operation, which temporarily pushed the Soviets back to the Tisza River. However, not all units engaged in the region were able to withdraw: 80 soldiers from the 27/II Battalion, along with the majority of the 57/7 Rifle Company, were captured by the Soviets.¹¹⁹

As mentioned earlier, this section had originally been defended by the men of the 70th Infantry Regiment at Ároktő and Tiszakeszi, with the former about 10.9 kilometers and the latter 7.4 kilometers to the south of Mezőcsát. However, some units abandoned their positions without a fight, including the 70/III Battalion, which had been disbanded by its commanding officer, Captain Kornél Janzer. The exact date of Janzer's action is not clearly specified in the literature, but it is known that the Soviet troops who crossed the river at Ároktő quickly gained ground in the area. According to historical accounts, they primarily encountered the artillery assigned to the sector,

¹¹⁸ Although two eyewitness accounts claim that a medical officer, a reserve ensign who served in the 27/I Battalion, and whom Makrai even identifies by name, was captured at the Fehérló tavern, Berekméri asserts that Klein was only taken prisoner by the Russians in April 1945 in Austria. See Berekméri, *Fegyver alatt*, pp 161-162. Interview with János Karácsony (audio recording in the possession of Levente Benkő, Cluj County, Romania).

¹¹⁹ Berekméri, *Lesz még kikelet!*, p. 238.

along with the 27th Reconnaissance Battalion, which had been sent to the area as the division's reserve.

Two different accounts of these battles have survived: one from József Lisovszki, who had enlisted only a few days earlier and was 18 years old at the time, and the other from the previously mentioned artillery officer, L. G. As we will see, these accounts were written from two entirely different perspectives and describe events that, in the strictest sense, cannot be arranged chronologically. Nevertheless, they offer valuable insight into the nature of the fighting and contribute to a better understanding of the sequence of events that unfolded in this sector.

Before we turn to these accounts, it's worth briefly looking at how József Lisovszki ended up in the 27th Light Division. On 26 October 1944, in Nyírbogdány, he and several of his peers volunteered to join. This decision was likely influenced by the Soviet and Romanian occupation of the village from 22 to 26 October. When the Hungarian forces – specifically, the 70th Regiment – briefly retook the settlement, many young men opted to enlist rather than face capture and deportation by the enemy. The regiment's commander also ordered that older reservists, men aged 45 to 55, who had previously received their summons but were unable to report to their respective units due to the Soviet occupation, were now required to enlist.

According to Lisovszki, the regiment, which had been retreating from Nyírbogdány towards the Tisza line, reached Mezőcsát on 1 November after crossing the river. Upon arrival, the older men were quickly outfitted with military uniforms, equipped, and sent to take position along the Tisza line. Young recruits, on the other hand, underwent a basic medical examination; those deemed unfit were sent home, while the rest attended a half-day briefing on military ranks and regulations. Lisovszki doesn't recall the exact dates for some of these events, but he notes that by the time of the briefing, wounded soldiers from the Tisza front had already started to be brought back to the village.

The day after the briefing – likely the second or third day of the fighting – the recruits were sent into action with minimal preparation, having only been briefly shown how to use hand grenades. Positioned on either side of the road leading to Gelej, at the edge of the Mezőcsát, they were instructed not to fire without a command, as their own forces were still ahead of them. Given the dense fog that morning, it is likely these

events took place on 6 or 7 November. Lisovszki describes what happened next as follows:

We lay in our firing positions, ready to shoot, but we could see no one in front of us. Then, the roar of engines and shouting grew louder. Human figures began to materialize in the endless white expanse, drawing closer. They were soldiers – Hungarian troops – and an armoured vehicle.

‘Don’t fire, they’re ours!’ the commander warned urgently. We remained low in our positions, and then, out of the fog, another armoured vehicle appeared.

‘Forward! Fire!’ came the order. We fired into the thick fog, into the unknown, not knowing who or what we were shooting at. The weapons roared, bullets whistled [...].

‘Fall back! Fall back, we’re being overwhelmed!’ the new order rang through the line.

Our company scattered in the dense fog, many of us unsure of our whereabouts. Meanwhile, soldiers began to emerge from the surrounding streets and fields, exhausted and caked in mud. They had been caught up in street fighting since the previous evening. We waited for them to move past us.

‘Forward, fire at any moving targets!’ came the next fire order. Now, only the enemy remained ahead of us. We no longer knew which order to follow. We fired into the thick fog again, but once more, we couldn’t see any figures.¹²⁰

Although it is undeniable that the deployment of the new recruits was a rather arbitrary and questionable decision, several key conclusions can still be drawn from Lisovszki’s account, which, despite appearing chaotic on the surface, offers significant insights. First, it seems that the recruits – lacking not only experience but any tactical training whatsoever – were not assigned to the front lines but instead given a secondary defence role, meant to support those fighting ahead of them. Additionally, it is clear that, in contrast to them, their immediate superiors were experienced soldiers who had a deeper understanding of the situation and appeared to have a clearer sense of direction in their actions. Had this not been the case, the shooting in the fog could have had catastrophic consequences for the Hungarian soldiers fighting ahead.

A similar conclusion can be drawn from another incident recounted by Lisovszki, which also took place on the same day in Gelej, located 10 kilometres west of Mezőcsát. The recruits were assigned to advance toward one of the village’s outermost

¹²⁰ Mihály Mikolai Bertics, *Harcok és arcok* [Fights and Faces] (Vásárosnamény, 2007), p. 206.

houses, where a cannon had been positioned. About two kilometres away, a farm was visible, and it was crucial to determine whether its occupants were allies or enemies. The plan devised for this purpose and explained to the recruits was as follows: a sergeant, accompanied by three soldiers, was to advance and reconnoitre the area. Meanwhile, a lance corporal, with three additional men, was tasked with approaching the farm from the north, while two others were assigned to advance from the south, also instructed to inspect a nearby sheep pen for signs of enemy presence. The recruits were to remain behind under the command of a captain, who ordered them to form a skirmish line and secure the positions of the three forward teams. A runner was also designated to maintain communication with the artillery unit and, if needed, request fire support. Lisovszki offers a particularly vivid account of the events that ensued:

Then, it began. The three scouts cautiously advanced a few hundred meters, while we lay in wait behind them, ready to act at a moment's notice. As they drew closer, the noose tightened. Once within firing range, a hail of gunfire greeted them. The scouts returned fire, but we couldn't engage – doing so would have trapped them in the crossfire. Meanwhile, the runner had already set off toward the artillery. Moments later, the sharp whistle of an incoming shell sliced through the air.

In an instant, the gunners took control. Several shells struck the farm directly, igniting the thatched roof and sending towering flames into the sky. The question of who was on the farm was quickly answered. We began our withdrawal, but could only crawl, as enemy fire continued to pour down from the now-burning 'hornet's nest.'¹²¹

The recruits were relieved for the night and did not re-enter combat until the following day, which, like the previous one, began with fog. During the day, the Hungarian units were pushed out of the village. This time, the attack was preceded by artillery bombardment, and the assault itself involved a significantly larger number of Soviet infantry than before. The Hungarian unit Lisovszki fought with – of which he only knew the regiment it was attached to, but not its designation or number – was withdrawn towards Mezőkeresztes.

The already cited artillery officer, L. G., also offers a brief account of the fighting that took place on 7 November in Mezőcsát. His report, combined with Berekméri's research, reveals that the reconnaissance battalion became deeply engaged in intense street fighting within the town, to the extent that enemy forces managed to breach the firing positions of the 27/4 and 27/5 artillery batteries that were providing support to

¹²¹ Mikolai, *Harcok és arcok*, pp 209-210.

the battalion. At this stage, the gunners were engaging the enemy with direct fire, while the commander of the 27/2 battery, reinforced by the machine gun sections from the other batteries, effectively fought the advancing Russian infantry in close combat. The procedure was the same as the day before: the gunners held their ground until the Germans sent a few armoured vehicles – this time two Tiger tanks – after them, under whose protection they could break away from the enemy and withdraw toward Mezőkövesd. As L. G. recounts, the gunners' efforts over the two-day period – during which they suffered only one casualty – were considered commendable, even by the Germans. This recognition was likely due to the valuable time they bought for higher command, enabling them to quickly assemble ad hoc units and reinforce the Kálkápola–Mezőkövesd railway line, thus halting the Soviet advance toward Eger.¹²² The signal section assigned to the 70th Infantry Regiment, which had maintained communication between the regiment's command and the fighting units for several days, also managed to fight its way out of encirclement in close combat. According to Berekméri's research, the German 15th Infantry Division briefly recaptured Gelej, which had previously fallen to Soviet forces, but was unable to provide meaningful support to the forces fighting at Mezőcsát. Meanwhile, on the night of 7 November, Hungarian forces attempted to break through to the units trapped in the town. Soviet troops, planning to trap the members of the rescue team, allowed them to pass through their lines. However, a three-man field gendarme patrol from the reconnaissance battalion recognized the situation and engaged the enemy forces, managing to free around 20 men from the encirclement.¹²³

The fate of the 27th Reconnaissance Battalion, on the other hand, took a different turn. As the Russians reached the Gelej–Mezőcsát road, they effectively cut off the battalion from the rest of the division, forcing it to retreat northward toward Igrici, where it was placed under the command of a neighbouring German formation, the 3rd Mountain Division. Géza Basa, an ensign in the reconnaissance battalion's Hussar company, recounts the events that followed in his diary, almost in shorthand: 'Four days of intense fighting, with the Russians closing in around us. Devastating fire. Only 35 men from the company manage to escape toward Hejőbába.'¹²⁴ In the fighting in the Mezőcsát area, the battalion suffered approximately 100 casualties. By the time it was

¹²² L. G., 'Székely tüzérek harcaiból', p. 223.

¹²³ Berekméri, *Lesz még kikelet!*, pp 234-236.

¹²⁴ Basa, 'Napló', diary entry for 6 November 1944.

withdrawn from combat, only 50 personnel remained, including the 35 Hussars mentioned by Basa.¹²⁵

The situation that had unfolded in the sector of the 27th Light Division's southern neighbours, combined with the Soviet breakthrough towards Gelej–Mezőkeresztes, placed the forces operating in the Tiszavalk, Tiszabábolna, and Tiszadorogma area at serious risk of encirclement. This led the divisional command to begin withdrawing its troops to Mezőkövesd. However, some units were either forced to retreat or were pushed back to Poroszló, a village about 14 kilometres southwest of Tiszavalk, in the sector of the division's southern neighbour, the 9th Border Rifle Division. Among these units was the 57/I Battalion, along with an anti-tank gun crew that included Vince Tuzson. One account of the breakout from Poroszló comes from Tuzson, while another is provided by Captain Gábor Éltető, who was the commander of the 28/III Battalion of the 9th Border Rifle Division at the time. Tuzson dates the attempt to 7 November, whereas Éltető places it a day later. However, based on the available sources, it remains unclear whether these are two distinct events or the same one.¹²⁶

Tuzson recalls that when his anti-tank gun crew arrived at Poroszló, the village was overflowing with soldiers, many of whom had bloodstained bandages covering their heads or limbs, while more units kept arriving. At one point, a colonel addressed the troops, acknowledging that the units assembled in the village had been encircled. He further emphasized that one arm of the pincer lay 8 kilometres to the west, and that the only viable course of action was to break out of the encirclement and continue fighting rather than await the Russians and surrender. It is worth noting that, in addition to assuring the troops that despair was unnecessary, the colonel also mentioned that the new German weapon would arrive soon, and with it, victory would be within their grasp.

According to Tuzson, the breakout attempt unfolded as follows: the infantry was deployed, advancing in battle formation across the fields along the road, while, on the road itself, covered wagons, various artillery pieces, and other equipment moved forward with agonising slowness in four columns. The infantry quickly clashed with

¹²⁵ Berekméri, *Lesz még kikelet!*, p. 235.

¹²⁶ See Vince Tuzson, 'Emlékeim a háborúról. Farkaslaka, 2007. január 30.' [My Recollections of the War. Farkaslaka, 30 January 2007] (Manuscript in the possession of Árpád Róbert Berekméri, Mureș County, Romania), p. 13. Éltető, 'Hadinapló', p. 45.

the enemy, whose artillery and mortars began to target the road. In retaliation, the artillery of the retreating forces fired back. However, just then, eight fighter planes appeared from the east. Tuzson describes their repeated attacks on the column as follows:

We scattered like chickens – some into the ditch by the road, others hid under the guns. Bombs rained down on us, and the fighters' machine guns opened up mercilessly, with screams coming from every direction. The planes swooped overhead, and I shook off the dirt and a large stone; it hurt, but thankfully, no blood was spilled – yet. I had to get back to the ditch; once again, they were overhead, and the situation was dire. Somehow, we survived that too, but I knew I had to leave before they came back again. I crawled out of the ditch and made a run for a nearby cornfield, but the planes were still up there. I kept running when suddenly two bursts of gunfire slammed into the muddy earth on either side of me, but I didn't stop. From the ditch, someone shouted, 'Damn soldier, lie down!' There were puddles, but I had no choice but to throw myself into them. Then I got up and ran again toward the cornfield. The planes were still circling, so [I did not reach it]; I ducked my head down between the legs of a dead horse. Finally, I made it into the corn, and the danger passed. There, I managed to survive a few more attacks, and eventually, they stopped coming.¹²⁷

Only three members of the anti-tank gun crew made it out unharmed; four were killed, and one was shot in the stomach. The Botond all-terrain truck, used to tow the anti-tank gun, was also destroyed in the airstrike. According to Tuzson's recollections, this was the last time he saw his commanding officer, who ordered him to set the truck on fire and destroy the gun. Tuzson instructed his comrades to take the wounded to a nearby farm while he himself carried out the ensign's orders. By the time he arrived at the farm, at least 300 weary and disheartened soldiers had gathered there, some of them already removing the rank insignia stars from their collars. They decided to wait for the approaching Soviet troops who were now very close, and surrender.¹²⁸

As opposed to Tuzson, Captain Gábor Éltető claims that his battalion was ordered to evacuate Poroszló on 8 November and advance towards Füzesabony, which was located approximately 24.5 kilometres away. According to the orders, departure was scheduled for 06:00, with the following march order: 57/I Battalion, the 28th Border Rifle Regiment Headquarters, the 28/III Battalion (commanded by Éltető himself), the 28/I Battalion, and finally, the rear guard under Major Kovács, whose identity and

¹²⁷ Tuzson, 'Emlékeim a háborúról', p. 13.

¹²⁸ Tuzson, 'Emlékeim a háborúról', pp 13-14.

background are not clarified in the account. It is important to note that most units were operating well below their nominal combat strength. Éltető's battalion, for instance, consisted of only 65 combat troops – armed with 4 mortars, 1 machine gun, 5 light machine guns, 7 submachine guns, and 35 rifles – far weaker than a typical company.

Departure did not occur on time: the 28/III Battalion only left the village sometime after 07:30. However, just as the column began to move, the officers received word that the leading 57/I Battalion had encountered enemy units around 08:00 near the Laskó stream and – supported by three assault guns – had launched an attack to clear the road. At 09:00, as the column was finally in motion and had left Poroszló, it came under air attack by Soviet aircraft. In five successive waves, 4–5 'Rata' fighters – probably Polikarpov I-16s – dropped bombs along the road and then strafed it with machine-gun fire, also pursuing those who scattered to the left and right of the road. To escape the low-flying aircraft, the battalion took cover near a farmstead to the right of the road, using the shelter of houses and haystacks to stay out of sight as the air raid continued until around 11:00.

Once the air attack subsided and the column resumed its march, Éltető moved ahead to the bridge over the Laskó stream to get his bearings. There, the cause of the delay quickly became clear: the 57/I Battalion's advance company came into contact with the enemy near a farmstead beyond the Laskó Stream, whereupon its commander deployed the company for an assault. However, as the men came under heavy fire, either before or during the assault, they threw down their weapons and surrendered. The rest of the battalion also attempted to advance, but the collapse of the lead company caused the attack to falter. The fact that the earlier air raid had already shaken morale also contributed to the failure.

To resolve the situation, the regimental commander ordered Éltető to reinforce the stalled attack with his own unit and to launch a renewed assault. Accordingly, as soon as the 28/III Battalion reached the Laskó stream, Éltető had them deploy for attack without delay. The mortars were tasked with suppressing enemy positions near the previously mentioned farmstead, while two machine guns crossed the stream, took up firing positions, and prepared to support and follow the battalion's advance along the road. However, the attack never materialized: at 12:00, just as the assault was about to begin, the battalion came under another air raid. Consequently, the regimental commander decided to bypass the enemy – whose main forces were believed to be

concentrated in Besenyőtelek – by manoeuvring along the Laskó stream toward Mezőtárkány, and the attack was called off.

Instead, the 28/III Battalion, accompanied by the two remaining assault guns (the third rendered inoperable due to a barrel explosion), advanced along the southern bank of the Laskó stream, between the watercourse and the embankment, while the supply column's vehicles moved along the dirt road leading to Mezőtárkány. Upon reaching the Varjasi farm area, Éltető received a radio order from the regimental commander to take up defensive positions along the stream's embankment. The battalion immediately transitioned to defence, anchoring its right flank near the Varjasi farmsteads and bending its left flank back toward Sályi Hill. With no reserves available, the available troops were deployed in a single line. After the 28/I Battalion arrived, it took position along the dirt road from the Laskó stream toward Sályi Hill, which placed the bent-back section of the 28/III Battalion's left flank behind the main line, making its men the reserve. This defensive setup was completed by approximately 17:00. About three hours later, around 20:00, the 57/I Battalion arrived and also joined the reserve. Exhausted and poorly fed during the fighting, the soldiers were so drained that they fell asleep as soon as they reached their firing positions.

The events that followed reveal just how much exhaustion affected the soldiers' combat effectiveness. As Éltető recalls, he spent the evening patrolling the line until 22:00, doing his best to keep the sentries awake. At one point, he was called into the radio operators' tent to await further orders but was soon summoned back to the front when voices and movement were detected across the stream. Earlier reports had indicated a German battalion was positioned near Mezőtárkány, so he initially thought they might be the ones approaching. However, it quickly became obvious the voices were speaking Russian. Éltető first roused those manning the line and ordered them to open fire. He then awakened some men from the reserve – who were also asleep – and directed them to advance to the embankment and – with a rallying cry of 'hajrá' – throw hand grenades over it. The enemy also opened fire, and the soldiers on the right flank – roused from sleep by the chaos of the fighting – panicked and fled. Éltető quickly sent a machine gun and a light machine gun crew to hold back the enemy while he woke enough men from the 57/I Battalion to fill the gap. Upon reaching the village, the troops were allowed to rest while the officers awaited further instructions. By the time the orders finally arrived around 00:01, the regimental commander was so

exhausted that he fell asleep while reading them aloud, causing the paper to slip from his hands.¹²⁹

The last major battle involving the 27th Light Division occurred at Mezőkövesd between November 9 and 12, against the Soviet 27th Army's 35th Rifle Corps, which included the 93rd Guards Rifle Division, the 3rd Guards Airborne Division, and the 3rd Romanian Mountain Division. The town was defended by both Hungarian and German forces. The most comprehensive account of the fighting in the area comes from Zoltán Papp, who, in 1976, documented the events that unfolded in and around the town during the Second World War, largely relying on Soviet sources. As outlined in his work, the 35th Rifle Corps advanced towards Mezőkövesd from the south, approaching from the directions of Szentistván and Egerlövő. After approximately two and a half days of intense combat, the Soviet forces successfully captured the town.¹³⁰

The available sources indicate that the 27th and 57th Infantry Regiments of the 27th Light Division attempted to establish a continuous defensive line on the outskirts of Mezőkövesd on 9 November.¹³¹ According to Sándor Móring, a soldier in the 57/II Battalion, the troops were marching towards the town in close formation during the morning when they encountered Colonel Sándor Gáll, the commander of the 57th Infantry Regiment. Gáll was reportedly quite agitated and angrily ordered the men to take up defensive positions immediately, stressing that they were not to retreat by even a single metre.

As Móring recalls, the soldiers were divided into two groups, each consisting of 60 men armed with rifles, four machine guns, four mortars, and two hand-drawn anti-tank guns. These groups were positioned on either side of the road. Based on a report from November 23, which indicated the battalion had 140 rifles at its disposal, it can be inferred that the 120 riflemen, 8 machine guns, 8 mortars, and 4 reportedly outdated

¹²⁹ Éltető, 'Hadinapló', pp 45-46.

¹³⁰ Zoltán Papp, 'Mezőkövesd története 1918-tól 1945-ig' [The History of Mezőkövesd from 1918 to 1945] in Zoltán Sárközi and István Sándor (eds), *Mezőkövesd város monográfiája* [Monograph of the City of Mezőkövesd] (Mezőkövesd, 1976), p. 202.

¹³¹ Berekméri, *Lesz még kikelet!*, p. 240.

anti-tank guns comprised, if not the entirety, then certainly the majority of the battalion's available combat strength.¹³²

According to László Makrai's recollections, after retreating from the Tisza River, the 27/I Battalion first took up a defensive position near Szentistván, a village located 10 kilometres southeast of Mezőkövesd. However, the battalion's right flank was attacked, forcing the unit to fall back toward Mezőkövesd, where it set up a new defensive line south of the town.¹³³ During this time, as the 57th and 27th Infantry Regiments' flanks did not make contact, the divisional command decided to close the gap between the two units by deploying a company of gendarmes, all aged over 50. This company likely positioned itself along the road between Szentistván and Mezőkövesd.¹³⁴

Both Móring and Markrai agree that the Soviet forces' attack began on the afternoon of 9 November. However, while Móring was captured that same day – bringing his account to a close, at least the part concerning the fighting – Markrai also describes the developments of the following days, though, as with earlier parts of his memoirs, he doesn't provide clear dates for these events. Therefore, Móring's account will be reviewed first.

The positions of the 57/II Battalion have already been outlined; it is worth adding, however, that the weather on 9 November was overcast, with light rain, and the soldiers, in an effort to make their foxholes more comfortable, lined them with corn stalks they found in the field, bundled together into sheaves. As Móring recalls, he was so exhausted that he fell asleep and did not wake, even when distant gunfire was heard. When he finally opened his eyes, he saw that a large group of advancing Soviet soldiers, firing as they approached, was now only 100 metres from their positions. On the opposite side of the road, Hungarian soldiers, sheltered behind an embankment, were able to retreat, but this was not an option on their side. None of those trapped there fired a shot at the enemy, although Móring maintains that the infantry assault

¹³² Móring, 'Megszálló és hadifogoly', p. 9.

¹³³ Makrai, 'Ki tudja, merre', pp 22-23.

¹³⁴ See the letter from Major Ferenc Kozma, Chief of Staff of the 27th Infantry Division. Published in *Hadak Útján*, vol. lii, no 469 (2000), pp 9-10. Kozma mentions that the gendarmes have positioned themselves on the railway embankment between Szentistván and Mezőkövesd, but there is no railway crossing through Szentistván.

could have been easily repelled. Their inaction was probably rooted in the considerations outlined by Móring in his memoir. In his view, while the ongoing infantry attack did not appear particularly threatening, a tank assault would quickly overwhelm their line. By that stage, most soldiers regarded further resistance – and indeed their continued participation in the war – as futile, which ultimately led them to allow themselves to be taken prisoner.¹³⁵

Makrai, on the other hand, reports that his platoon – and likely the 27/I Battalion – first took up defensive positions south of Szentistván, then south of Mezőkövesd. Eventually, they were pushed back and sought cover along the railway embankment running through the southern part of the town. Like Móring, he also recalls an encounter with Colonel Sándor Gáll. With only six mortar shells left per tube, Makrai withdrew to resupply. It was during this withdrawal that he was confronted by Gáll, who accused him of retreating without orders and threatened to shoot him on the spot. Eventually, the situation was resolved when Makrai set up the mortars on-site and fired the last shells onto the area in front of the railway embankment.¹³⁶

As Zoltán Papp, whose work has already been cited, notes in relation to the fighting for the town, artillery and rifle fire – followed by Soviet rocket barrages – were especially intense on 9 and 10 November. The Soviet main forces first struck the enemy's flanks, severing the railway line both to the west and east of Mezőkövesd. One of their formations, advancing along the eastern edge of the town, reached the road leading to Bogács, a village about 10 kilometres to the north. By the morning of 11 November, Papp claims, they had completed the encirclement, though the Hungarian and German forces were still able to retreat toward Eger.¹³⁷

Other sources also indicate that on 11 November, the Soviet infantry broke into the town, sparking fierce street fighting with the German forces. By the afternoon, the Hungarian-German units were gradually pushed back to the western part of the settlement. The scale of the engagement is further underscored by the fact that the

¹³⁵ Móring, 'Megszálló és hadifogoly', p. 9.

¹³⁶ Makrai, 'Ki tudja, merre', pp 23-24.

¹³⁷ Papp, 'Mezőkövesd története', p. 203.

Soviet forces reached the batteries of the 27/II and 27/III artillery regiments, which could only be withdrawn to rear positions after intense close-quarters combat.

According to Sándor Gál, a soldier from the 27/I Battalion, the outcome of the battle was largely determined by the Soviet rocket artillery. By the evening, the defenders had been driven out of the town, retreating to the northwest. During this retreat, the German forces, as noted by Makrai, halted the Hungarian units to allow their troops to withdraw first along the road, where significant chaos prevailed. The 27/I Battalion subsequently established a defensive position between Mezőkövesd and Andornaktálya, a village situated approximately 10 kilometres to the northwest.¹³⁸

After the battle of Mezőkövesd, the 27th Light Division retreated to the Karola Line, built along the southern slopes of the Mátra, Bükk, and Zemplén mountain ranges, securing northern Hungary. The formation positioned itself south of the Bükk Mountains, along the line running south of Eger, through Andornaktálya, Ostoros, Gömbösfalva, and Tard. (Eger is located to the northwest of Mezőkövesd, about 22 kilometres away.) On 12 November, the reinforced 70th Infantry Regiment fought south of Tard, at the Klementina farmstead, while to the west, in the vicinity of Andornaktálya, the 57/III Battalion and the 27th Tank Destroyer Company engaged in heavy fighting with Soviet forces. The defence in this latter area was mainly concentrated at the Galassy farm, located along the road between Mezőkövesd and Andornaktálya. On 14 November, the exhausted troops of the 57/III Battalion were relieved by units from the 27th Infantry Regiment. However, when faced with the first relatively serious Soviet assault, the latter abandoned their positions, either retreating or surrendering. The breakthrough of the front line was successfully prevented by redeploying the relieved units, but the defensive line had to be pulled back.¹³⁹

Starting on 12 November, the units of the 27th Light Division were gradually withdrawn from the front line and relocated to the rear, north of Egerbakta, for reorganization. Meanwhile, some of the remaining combat-ready elements were placed under the command of the German 8th Jäger Division, which also took over the formation's defensive line. The light division's strength was first recorded on 18

¹³⁸ Makrai, 'Ki tudja, merre', p. 25.

¹³⁹ Berekméri, *Lesz még kikelet!*, pp 243-244.

November 1944. Berekméri offers a detailed analysis of the data, so only a selection of these figures will be addressed here: According to the report, the 27th Infantry Regiment had 44 officers and 952 personnel, the 57th Infantry Regiment had 77 officers and 1,549 personnel, and the 70th Infantry Regiment had 19 officers and 556 personnel. At that time, the following units were still operating within the structure of their respective German formations:

German 8th Jäger Division

57/III Battalion: about 500 men

Elements of the 70th Infantry Regiment: approximately 100 men

Tank Destroyer Company (nine guns)

Independent Anti-Aircraft Battery (six guns)

27th Field Artillery Regiment

I Battalion (1st, 2nd, 3rd, and 7th batteries)

II Battalion (4th, 9th, and 89/1st batteries)

German 3rd Mountain Division

70/I Battalion

On 23 November, a more detailed report was compiled, which also provided information on the unit's armament. For instance, the 27/I Battalion, mentioned in relation to the Mezőkövesd battles, consisted of 19 officers and 291 personnel, and they were armed with 169 rifles, 25 pistols, and 17 submachine guns. By this time, the division – perhaps with the exception of its artillery, where the losses were significantly lower – was no longer capable of performing substantial operational tasks.¹⁴⁰

Reverting to Coercion

As mentioned earlier, Following Horthy's removal from power and Szálasi's subsequent takeover, the number of desertions increased significantly. All this, however, did not remain without consequences. First, orders were issued stipulating that all military deserters were to be executed. The other consequence – already

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., pp 246-247.

discussed above – was that military units whose numbers had been reduced during the retreat were assigned tasks they were simply incapable of carrying out. This was particularly characteristic of the fighting along the Tisza River. Officers who declined to continue the fight, as well as the remnants of shattered units that withdrew from the front line on the grounds of severe losses, were likewise liable to reprisals.

The available sources and scholarship document in considerable detail the executions of deserters, whose bodies were subsequently displayed along the roads as a deterrent, with signs attached to them bearing inscriptions referring to desertion, cowardice, or treason. According to one testimony, the earliest such case reported by members of the 27th Light Division occurred as early as 16 October, during the retreat from Northern Transylvania: two soldiers were executed in Nagybánya. In relation to this incident, however, the only established fact is that the 57th Infantry Regiment, acting as the rearguard, passed through the town the following day.¹⁴¹ Several other executions, however, can be unequivocally attributed to Lieutenant Colonel Zoltán Rózsa, commander of the 70th Infantry Regiment. On 24 October, he ordered the execution of two captured deserters in Mátészalka, while on 26 October, in the recently recaptured village of Nyírbogdány, he had two more soldiers and three labour servicemen shot. Rózsa is also known to have ordered further executions in November.¹⁴²

Another consequence of the desertions, as previously mentioned, was the reduction in manpower, which in turn resulted in certain units being assigned tasks that were impossible to accomplish. The sources indicate that at least one officer openly defied such an order: Kornél Janzer, commander of the 70/III Battalion stationed on the Tisza Line between Tiszakeszi and Ároktő, chose not to engage in battle and instead decided to disband his battalion. Janzer, a professional soldier, had extensive combat experience. Between September and December 1941, he served on the Eastern Front as an officer of the 1st Mountain Brigade, participating in the operations of the Rapid Corps. From August 1944 onward, he took part in the heavy defensive battles in Northern Transylvania as the commanding officer of the 21/6 Fortress Company (65th

¹⁴¹ Deposition of Árpád Koncz. See Budapest City Archives, HU_BFL_XXV_1_a_2_1946_4314_00027.

¹⁴² Berekméri, *Lesz még kikelet!*, p. 228.

Border Rifle Group), overseeing the fortified positions of the Árpád Line at Palotailva and Szalárd.¹⁴³

The 70/III Battalion, which he later disbanded in November, had been formed in early October 1944 by incorporating elements of his former unit – the 21/6 Fortress Company – as well as the 27th Szekler Border Guard Battalion. It was an understrength unit from the start, never reaching its full complement; as Ferenc László remarked, it barely met the criteria to be considered a battalion. Nonetheless, in early November, it was ordered to take over the defence of the Tisza River section between Tiszakeszi and Ároktő. As previously mentioned, sources suggest that the 70/II Battalion – at least two of its companies – were also dispatched to this area. It seems likely that these poorly equipped units, whose personnel had not yet fully integrated, were required to defend a considerably larger sector than they were capable of holding. Lieutenant Zoltán Paxy, for example, who led one of the two companies of the 70/II Battalion, was responsible for a 4-kilometer stretch with only 21 men under his command and no heavy weapons.¹⁴⁴

Few details remain about the exact events. Paxy only mentions that he and his men had to retreat from the Tisza Line because another company – not a battalion – had abandoned its positions without orders. It is highly probable that Janzer was confronted with the following dilemma: given the small number of men under his command and the inadequacy of their weaponry, effective engagement was impossible, and any attempt to do so would have meant an unnecessary risk to his men's lives. His decision, however, did not remain without consequence: on 23 November 1944, a court-martial was convened in his case, resulting in a sentence of five years in prison, three years of dismissal from office, and a demotion. The reasoning behind the verdict is not known, but the trial itself seems to have sparked another instance of resistance. This is implied by the dismissal of Dr Frigyes Horpácsy, the Chief Military Judge of the 27th Light Division, on 10 March 1945, for issuing a ruling in Janzer's case that did not meet the division commander's expectations, who was likely seeking a much harsher punishment.¹⁴⁵ However, the various punitive measures failed to achieve the desired effect. As Sándor Mórning recounts in his memoirs, the exhausted and malnourished

¹⁴³ Berekméri, *Fegyver alatt*, p. 144.

¹⁴⁴ Zoltán Paxy's letter to military historian Péter Illésfalvi (Letter in the possession of Péter Illésfalvi, Budapest, Hungary).

¹⁴⁵ Berekméri, *Fegyver alatt*, p. 135.

soldiers, initially fighting along the Tisza River and later around Mezőkövesd, began to feel that any further sacrifice was in vain, as the war seemed already lost, regardless of their efforts. The situation became so desperate that they chose to await the Soviet forces and surrender, fully aware of the potential risks and dangers this decision posed to them.¹⁴⁶

The sources provide a more detailed account of another case; a unit of which only some twenty-odd men had survived following a clash around 4 November reported back to the headquarters of the 57th Infantry Regiment, where, as a reprisal, the regimental commander, Colonel Sándor Gáll, ordered the execution of two soldiers from among the group.¹⁴⁷ Several accounts of the story have survived – including the 1947 testimony of József Tömöri, a platoon leader in the 9th Company of the 57/III Battalion, given at a People's Tribunal trial; the statement of Colonel Gáll, commander of the 57th Infantry Regiment, in response to the charges brought against him; and an independent account by Ferenc Berecki, who also served in the 57/III Battalion. According to Tömöri, on 1 November 1944, Gáll launched an assault on the Russian bridgehead between Tiszadorogma and Tiszabábolna with two companies. The attack faltered due to heavy losses, yet the colonel refused to allow a retreat. As Tömöri recounted, the men were forced to lie in place for three days and three nights without food or water, within hand-grenade range of the Russians. On 4 November, Gáll ordered the 9th Company to advance in closed formation to the Vajda Farm and secure the area, while the other two companies remained in their previous positions near Ároktő. The farm – whose correct name was *Hajda* – was located west of Ároktő and north of Tiszadorogma, according to Hungarian military maps compiled as part of the 1941 national cartographic campaign. (The confusion between the two names is understandable, as they are phonetically quite similar in Hungarian.)

The events that followed are described in broadly similar terms by both Tömöri and Berecki. The Hungarian contingent set out under poor visibility, as dense fog blanketed the area. One of the battalion's mounted dispatch riders was sent ahead to

¹⁴⁶ Moring, 'Megszálló és hadifogoly', pp 9-10.

¹⁴⁷ The testimonies of József Tömöri and Sándor Gáll are both preserved in the file relating to the People's Tribunal proceedings against Sándor Gáll. The following account – in addition to the recollections of Ferenc Berecki – has been reconstructed primarily on the basis of the information found in this material. See Budapest City Archives, HU_BFL_XXV_1_a_2_1946_4314_00000.

reconnoitre, but he was captured by the enemy, who then placed a Soviet soldier in his saddle. The latter, barely discernible in the fog, approached the Hungarians, pointed out the route they were to take, and then disappeared into the mist once more. The members of the Hungarian group, believing they were seeing one of their own men, followed him and unwittingly walked into a trap. Amid the ensuing chaos, some surrendered, others fled in panic, yet even under such dire circumstances a few managed to take up firing positions and return fire. While the Soviets were occupied with those who had surrendered, the remainder of the company managed to escape.

Bereczki records that the battalion adjutant, Ensign Béla Nyíri – who had taken part in the fighting as a platoon leader – caught up with the retreating battalion headquarters in Mezőkövesd at 14:00 on 8 November, accompanied by his 13 remaining men.¹⁴⁸ Tömöri, himself a platoon leader, stated that of the three companies – those remaining at Ároktő facing the Russian bridgehead, as well as his own company, which Gáll had sent to the Hajda Farm – only 27 men survived. As they considered themselves no longer fit for combat, they left the battlefield and reported to the battalion commander, Major Gábor Hamza, explaining the circumstances. Hamza himself then directed them where to retreat – or, in Tömöri's words, where to escape.

Although the remnants of the shattered unit made their way back to headquarters, the incident nevertheless had consequences. The events related to this are known primarily from the account of Ferenc Bereczki – who, although present in the village, was not a direct witness – as well as from the justification provided in the People's Tribunal's verdict. Once the regimental command arrived in the village, Colonel Gáll assembled the soldiers and reprimanded the 27 men – including the four or five officers among them – whom he accused of fleeing from the numerically superior Soviet forces. The essence of his speech was that even a group of this size should have been capable of holding back an entire Soviet regiment. He then singled out two privates and ordered Staff Sergeant József Tömöri – their immediate superior – to confiscate all their belongings except for their identification papers and to have them executed. Tömöri, noting that none of the officers present raised any objection, likewise chose not to protest. He selected four men to carry out the execution. Ferenc Bereczki records in

¹⁴⁸ Although Bereczki's memoir states that the 7th Company took part in the attack, for the identification of the unit we have relied primarily on Tömöri's testimony, which was given only three or four years after the events and indicates that it was the 9th Company that was involved. For Bereczki's version, see: Bereczki, 'Honvéd voltam', pp 53-54.

his memoir that the two condemned soldiers suddenly bolted, apparently acting on instinct, and were ultimately shot as they tried to flee. Their bodies were then tied to a telephone pole, to which a sign bearing the inscription ‘This is what happens to those who flee from combat’ was attached.¹⁴⁹

The reasoning set out in the previously cited People’s Tribunal verdict indicates that Gáll had initiated disciplinary proceedings against the officers in the group; however, only proceedings against Béla Nyíri are mentioned during the trial. In his testimony of 16 October 1946, the former regimental commander acknowledged having initiated the proceedings, but claimed that Nyíri had abandoned his unit out of cowardice. In the same testimony, he also stated the following regarding the executions: ‘I would like to note that I endeavoured to carry out the orders and instructions I received to the fullest extent, and that I also ordered the executions to be carried out in accordance with those orders.’

In a testimony given just ten days later, Gáll returned once again to the case of Nyíri. By this time, he claimed that the ensign who had abandoned the fight had been apprehended by a military police company, and that he had initiated proceedings against Nyíri solely in order to save him from more severe consequences. Gáll stated that in the report he submitted, he had described Nyíri as one of the regiment’s most conscientious and courageous officers. Interestingly, however, he did not attempt to offer any justifiable explanation for Nyíri’s abandonment of the fight – for example, that he had done so to prevent his men from being taken prisoner – in any of his testimonies. Instead, he claimed that a momentary nervous breakdown had caused Nyíri’s actions, which he nevertheless continued to characterize as an act of cowardice.

In relation to the executions, Gáll also claimed that the two soldiers executed as a deterrent had been selected by the military police. What is striking, however, is that neither Ferenc Bereczki – who reported on the events – makes any mention of the presence of military police, nor does Tömöri, who had been personally involved in the executions and testified during the trial. In fact, Tömöri stated that the colonel not only did not read the identities of the two condemned soldiers from a list, but did not even know their names – he ordered their execution simply by pointing at them.

¹⁴⁹ Idid.

Rather than achieving their intended effect, the reprisals produced the opposite result. By November 1944, Krisztián Ungváry notes, many units existed only as cadres, hiding their troops from the Germans and avoiding meaningful engagement in the fighting. Despite their significant numbers, repeated efforts by Army Group South to mobilize them were unsuccessful. Naturally, this required the tacit approval of unit commanders: if the officers avoided fighting, the unit would not engage either.¹⁵⁰ Documenting such covert resistance is difficult, but evidence suggests similar occurrences within the 27th Light Division, or at least within the 27th Infantry Regiment. Reflecting on his unit's time near Mezőkövesd and the outskirts of Eger, József Péter writes:

I was stationed at Egerbakta, in a mill, where I supplied food to a hundred to a hundred and fifty men on the front line, while the number of those hiding in the rear grew to over three hundred. Requesting food for five hundred men was awkward, especially when only about two hundred were actually on the front line. By that point, even officers' and non-commissioned officers' families had joined us – and by the end, they almost outnumbered the soldiers.¹⁵¹

In contrast to the personnel of various support units, who carried out their duties behind the front lines, the infantry found itself in a far more difficult situation, as it was primarily they who were subjected to control in the rear areas or during withdrawals. As seen from the foregoing, this often meant that those units unable to avoid being thrown into combat frequently waited for the enemy to reach them or, during their own offensives, discarded their weapons and surrendered. These actions, together with the enormous losses suffered, eventually compelled the high command to withdraw the remnants of the 27th Light Division from the front line.

When examined from September 1944 onwards, the history of the division may be understood as one of disintegration – one that nonetheless followed a discernible dynamic. Most of the relationships that sustained soldiers in battle eroded within a relatively short period, while, in parallel, the formation's units were repeatedly overstrained or effectively abandoned as German forces withdrew without prior

¹⁵⁰ Ungváry, *A magyar honvédség*, p. 357.

¹⁵¹ Péter, 'Így emlékszem vissza', p. 15.

notification, leaving them exposed to the Soviet advance. Relations with the Germans initially deteriorated, and during the retreat this tension escalated to the point of insubordination or – in one instance – open conflict. However, when the collapse occurred – which can be clearly dated to 15 October – it unfolded with remarkable speed, taking place in the span of barely two weeks. The soldiers who fought in Transylvania could still be recognised by an observer as a military unit in combat; along the Tisza, this was hardly the case. The losses incurred during the fighting in Transylvania and the subsequent retreat, as well as desertions, significantly depleted the ranks.

Those who deserted tended to do so predominantly in groups. Belonging to a group – at that time – still entailed agency: the capacity to make decisions not only about desertion, but also about whether one opted for the seemingly less risky course of surrender into captivity or for the more hazardous path of attempting to return home through Soviet lines. In the case of troops fighting along the Tisza, however, this dynamic changed significantly. As illustrated by the case of Ensign Péter Ambrus, in certain instances even battalion-sized units suffered such heavy losses among their combat personnel that they effectively ceased to exist. Another factor contributing to the disintegration was the military's recourse to coercion as a means of sustaining some degree of combat effectiveness. While the case discussed earlier might suggest that executions, though becoming more frequent, remained confined to the actions of individual officers, they in fact increasingly constituted an institutionalized practice. Combat discipline units were established – each formation, including the 27th Light Division, was assigned one such company – whose deployment was regulated by a decree issued on 9 November 1944. According to a German source, their task was to prevent panic and to halt and reorganize retreating units.¹⁵² In his memoirs, Elemér Damó addresses this phenomenon in more blunt terms, observing that they formed a chain behind the front-line troops and compelled stragglers to return to the zone of combat, effectively driving them back into the inferno of explosions.¹⁵³ On 28 November, a further decree concerning combat discipline personnel was issued, specifying the circumstances under which they were authorized – and those under which they were obliged – to carry out summary executions. The shooting of those

¹⁵² Sándor Szakály, *A magyar tábori csendőrség* [The Hungarian Field Gendarmerie] (Budapest, 1990), pp 67-71.

¹⁵³ Damó, *Névtelen katonák*, pp 186-197.

who abandoned combat, as well as of anyone entering into any form of collaboration or understanding with the enemy, was prescribed as an obligation.¹⁵⁴ Ordering a withdrawal when a unit was no longer fit for combat – in itself a sound tactical decision – could be treated as cowardice and punished accordingly, as was indeed the case. Consequently, the men of the light division turned to something they had previously tried to avoid: surrendering to Soviet troops. Some discarded their weapons during attacks, while others allowed themselves to be taken prisoner. The accumulated losses eventually rendered the 27th Light Division unfit for combat. Although this was not recognised immediately, the higher command ultimately reached the same conclusion and withdrew the division from the front. In a sense, this marked the end of the formation that had left its barracks in the spring of 1944 to go to war, and whose wartime experience has been the subject of this thesis.

Although it is not of particular relevance to the present analysis, the history of the 27th Light Division did not, of course, end at this point. As an increasing portion of Hungary fell under Soviet occupation, the formation was partially replenished and re-equipped to a limited extent, and efforts were made to return it to frontline service. In effect, however, it had become a different formation, although some support elements that had seen less combat still retained most of their original personnel. Its remaining troops ultimately withdrew into Austria, where they surrendered to American forces. There, in the days following 9 May 1945, the division's final ceremony took place: as a Szekler soldier who joined the formation during the retreat, recalls in his memoir, before handing over their weapons to the Americans, First Lieutenant Eőri of the 27th Artillery Regiment ordered his bugler to sound assembly. Given that the war had already ended, such a gesture was rather unusual, yet the gunners instinctively formed ranks. Other Hungarian soldiers – and even some American troops – gathered to watch the scene unfold. The artillerymen came to attention and presented arms. Lieutenant Eőri then addressed them briefly, expressing his gratitude for the loyalty and endurance they had shown throughout the long retreat. At his command, the men stacked their rifles in neat pyramids. Eőri then ordered them to kneel in prayer, and the

¹⁵⁴ Szakály, *A magyar tábori csendőrség*, pp 83-84.

bugler sounded the appropriate call, a solemn signal comparable to ‘Taps’, the bugle call traditionally played at military funerals and memorial services in the United States.

As the last notes faded, the lieutenant gave his final command: ‘Dismissed!’ The eyewitness quoted above writes that American soldiers photographed the entire ceremony, which was, in effect, the last recorded formal act of the 27th Light Division – by then redesignated as an infantry division. Not long afterwards, in a more mundane postscript, an American tank rolled over and crushed the carefully stacked rifles. In many respects, this marked the end of the formation itself, although further hardships still awaited its soldiers: many were deported to the Soviet Union as prisoners of war, and those who survived did not return home until 1947 and 1948.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵⁵ Jenő Blénessy, *A Mikó-vártól Darnicáig* [From the Mikó Castle to Darnica] (Csíkszereda, 2006), p. 69.

Conclusion

The central question of this thesis is why the soldiers of the 27th Light Division accepted the hardships of military service and subsequently the dangers inherent in combat, why they continued to fight, and under what circumstances they ultimately chose to cease fighting. As the literature review in the opening chapter demonstrates, this subject has generated an extensive body of scholarship. (Yet, in relation to certain questions – for instance, the relationship between the individual soldier and the larger military formation to which he belonged – the existing literature does not necessarily offer satisfactory explanations.) The case of the 27th Light Division, however, also raises a number of additional questions: how did its soldiers fight, how did they perceive the military effectiveness of their own formation and of the Hungarian Army as a whole, and what factors shaped these perceptions and experiences? This is particularly important because, in addition to regarding the authority that sends them to war as legitimate and accepting their country's war aims, citizen-soldiers also judge, on the basis of front-line conditions and the activities in which they are engaged, whether success appears attainable – or, put differently, whether the sacrifices made by themselves and their comrades have any meaning or purpose.

First, it is necessary to consider the condition of the Hungarian Army, whose development was fundamentally shaped by the country's defeat in the First World War. The Treaty of Trianon limited the country's armed forces to 35,000 men, permitted only voluntary military service, and prohibited the maintenance of aircraft, heavy artillery, tanks, and General Staff training. Compliance with these restrictions was ensured through strict international supervision, which was somewhat relaxed after 1927 but remained in force through occasional inspections until 1938, when the restrictions were formally lifted. Although Hungary's military and political leadership made considerable efforts to circumvent them, by that time the Royal Hungarian Army was still incapable of successfully confronting the armed forces of even a single neighbouring state.¹ The various military development programmes subsequently

¹ Ungváry, *A magyar honvédség*, p. 13.

improved the situation to some extent; nevertheless, throughout the war the level of mechanisation of the army remained extremely low, the overwhelming majority of the artillery remained horse-drawn, the air force operated largely obsolete equipment, and significant shortcomings persisted in military training. Nevertheless, the military profession continued to enjoy considerable prestige, perhaps as an inheritance from the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. In the case of the 27th Light Division, a number of additional difficulties also arose from the fact that its recruitment area had been reincorporated into Hungary only in September 1940, necessitating the construction of an entire military infrastructure virtually from scratch. As these issues have already been discussed in the introductory chapters of this thesis, it suffices to note here that the division's development and military effectiveness were shaped, at least in part, by these constraints.

Second, it is necessary to consider the period in which the 27th Light Division was deployed – under German pressure – to the Eastern Front. To understand the broader context within which the formation operated, it is worth briefly examining how historians have periodised the war in this theatre. David M. Glantz and Jonathan M. House divide the conflict into three distinct periods. During the First Period (June 1941 – November 1942), the Red Army squandered its considerable numerical superiority because it lacked the ability to deploy and manoeuvre its forces effectively. During the Second Period (November 1942 – December 1943), neither Germany nor the Soviet Union possessed a decisive numerical superiority, but the Soviets gradually developed the manoeuvre and deception skills necessary to achieve a favourable concentration of forces at decisive points. By the Third Period (January 1944 – May 1945), the Red Army had attained both numerical superiority and the operational expertise required to destroy German forces, although manpower shortages necessitated a continued emphasis on sophisticated manoeuvre operations. While large-scale frontal assaults still occurred, the true stars of this period, as Glantz and House put it, were the tank armies and cavalry-mechanised groups, that is, the Red Army's mobile forces.² An obvious question, therefore, is how the 27th Light Division, which lacked the degree of mechanisation, weaponry, and training required to conduct mobile warfare against

² David M. Glantz and Jonathan M. House, *When Titans Clashed: How the Red Army Stopped Hitler* (Lawrence, 1995), pp 180-183.

the Soviets, nevertheless managed to maintain its position on the front between April and early September without suffering a major defeat. The present thesis is, in part, an attempt to contribute to the existing scholarship by examining this question.

The historiography generally emphasises that the campaigns of late 1943 through May 1945 were almost continuous operations, interrupted only by brief pauses during which the Soviet war machine prepared for another major offensive. The forms of combat characteristic of these operational pauses have attracted comparatively little scholarly interest, historians having focused instead on preparations for major operations.³ The 27th Light Division's deployment to the front largely fell within one such pause, although it encompassed both a Hungarian offensive at its outset and a Soviet offensive towards its end. The use of the term *pause* is somewhat misleading, since war is not, of course, solely a matter of offensive operations and territorial advances. Even during such periods, both sides continued to engage in various forms of military activity. A useful classification of these different combat conditions was proposed by Samuel A. Stouffer and his collaborators, whose description of the *holding action* corresponds closely to the experience of the 27th Light Division. During intervals between major offensives, the primary task was to hold a stable front, which, although more clearly defined than in other battle situations, still consisted of an area of strongpoints and outposts rather than a visible line. Living conditions during such periods could sometimes be relatively favourable, as soldiers had time to improve their dugouts and luxuries such as hot food could occasionally be brought up from the rear, although this naturally depended on the circumstances prevailing in individual sectors. Small-arms fire was generally limited and artillery exchanges infrequent, allowing troops to rest during the daytime. At night, however, conditions remained demanding, as patrol activity intensified and outposts and defensive positions had to be carefully manned against infiltration. Nevertheless, boredom, frequent night patrols, harassing artillery and mortar fire, and the cumulative effects of difficult living conditions meant that even this comparatively static form of warfare offered little genuine relief to front-line

³ The already cited work by Glantz and House provides a good illustration of this tendency, as does their observation concerning the almost continuous nature of Soviet offensives. See Glantz and House, *When Titans Clashed*, p. 179.

soldiers.⁴ The so-called first war of the 27th Light Division was, to a considerable extent, characterised by this type of combat.

In many respects, the formation's experience during this period was shaped by its place within an alliance system and, more specifically, by its subordination to Army Group North Ukraine. This was reflected in numerous aspects of everyday military practice. To alleviate manpower shortages, smaller German units assumed responsibility for certain sections of the front held by the Hungarian First Army, including parts of the 27th Light Division's sector (while their withdrawal and redeployment elsewhere might have once again resulted in manpower shortages and the operational difficulties associated with them). The German ally also contributed to improving the armament of Hungarian troops and played an important role in their training, both through the establishment of so-called partnership arrangements between Hungarian and German formations and through training courses organised by the army group, which were attended by a proportion of Hungarian soldiers. Although the present thesis approaches these developments from a Hungarian perspective, it also offers some insight into the ways in which the German Army utilised the period between two major offensives on the Eastern Front, even in the summer of 1944, to enhance the effectiveness of both its own forces and those of its allies through training.

Third, the examination of this period made it possible to explore the internal dynamics of a formation operating in a particular theatre of war. One aspect of this concerned small-group cohesion and the bonds that tied soldiers to their larger units. As noted above, in peacetime the 27th Light Division consisted of only a single regiment; its second regiment was created only upon mobilisation by dividing the original regiment and bringing both resulting parts up to full strength through the call-up of reservists. This process inevitably disrupted previously established small-group ties. Moreover, as a newly created formation, the 27th Light Division could not rely on a carefully cultivated *esprit de corps* of the kind found in long-established regimental systems, such as those of the British Army or, before the First World War, the Austro-Hungarian Army. The analysis therefore examined how, under such circumstances, small-group

⁴ Stouffer et al., *The American Soldier*, ii, pp 68-69.

cohesion and larger unit bonds developed within a wartime formation serving on the front, drawing in part on insights from social psychology. Another set of questions concerned the acquisition of combat experience through the continuous small-scale engagements that characterised everyday life at the front and, in parallel, the ever-present fears associated with such activities. The analysis of these issues made it possible to examine the development of a particular form of military effectiveness and, at the same time, the strains inherent in front-line service, their consequences for individual soldiers – including various forms of combat avoidance – and the ways in which military organisations responded to such behaviour, whether through tolerance or punishment.

The impact of the factors and processes discussed above became particularly evident during the battle of Delatyn and Mikuliczyn, in which units of the 27th Light Division, as part of the Hungarian VI Corps, confronted a Soviet offensive. The ability of the formation – and, indeed, of Hungarian troops more generally – to repel the assault may be attributed to a particular form of effectiveness, best described as situational combat effectiveness, the maintenance of which also required recourse to coercive measures. This effectiveness was shaped not only by the timing of the light division's deployment to the Eastern Front but also by the geographical conditions under which it fought, as the terrain limited the Red Army's ability to exploit its mastery of mobile warfare and its superiority in armaments. At the same time, this very battle was characterised both by the effectiveness displayed by certain units and by the confusion and disorganisation associated with retreat following an enemy breakthrough, a situation that Stouffer and his collaborators regarded as among the most difficult situations a soldier could face.⁵ The latter was the consequence of the fact that, during its initial phase, the Soviet offensive split the lines held by the VII Corps, another formation of the Hungarian First Army. The breakthrough itself, the continued prevalence of combat avoidance, the readiness of the VI Corps command to resort to coercive measures in times of crisis, and the fact that manpower shortages could be addressed only with German assistance all suggest that, even in successful defensive operations, certain limitations rooted largely in the interwar development of the Hungarian Army had still not been overcome.

⁵ Stouffer et al., *The American Soldier*, ii, p. 68.

Whereas numerous circumstances worked in favour of the 27th Light Division during its ‘first war’ – although these could offset certain shortcomings only temporarily – the opposite was true during the formation’s ‘second war’, that is, the fighting in Northern Transylvania and later in interwar Hungary along the Tisza front. From an operational and tactical point of view, this period saw fighting that can be described as defending a position against heavy enemy attack, a form of combat that could involve some of the most intensive fighting, during which troops, often operating at the limits of human endurance, could have little prospect of respite for prolonged periods.⁶ Even if the collapse of the front as a whole was averted through the withdrawal of German and Hungarian forces in this particular case, the enemy nevertheless succeeded in breaking through the defensive positions of individual units of the 27th Light Division, inflicting heavy losses, most notably in the form of prisoners taken. In essence, the analysis of this period traced the interplay of the various factors that, through their cumulative effect, ultimately resulted in the disintegration of the 27th Light Division. The underlying crisis was, as discussed above, triggered by Romania’s defection from the Axis, which transformed Hungary – and, within it, Northern Transylvania in particular – into an active theatre of war. Although this development did not, in itself, inevitably lead to disintegration, it undoubtedly produced a dual effect. During the initial stage, the prospect of defending their homeland rather than fighting on foreign soil appears to have had a positive impact on the morale of the Szekler soldiers. At the same time, however, the fact that their civilian primary groups – their families – had come under enemy control created a tension between familial ties and the considerations that had previously given legitimacy to their military service and sustained their willingness to endure the hardships of the front, thereby placing in conflict two loyalties that had hitherto been characterised by a state of negotiated coexistence.⁷

With regard to the German alliance, it was likewise its detrimental aspects that came to the fore during this period. As discussed earlier, the redeployment of the formation

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ The notion of negotiated coexistence is justified for two reasons. First, even the individual’s temporary separation from his civilian environment – his family, friends, and local community – inevitably entailed a degree of tension. Second, military institutions themselves recognised that difficulties affecting a soldier’s civilian primary group could have a profound impact on morale, motivation, and combat effectiveness, although the absence of such ties or of meaningful contact with the world beyond the front could produce similarly adverse effects.

to Northern Transylvania was permitted only on the condition that it be placed directly under German command.⁸ This, in turn, resulted in certain units being separated from their parent formation and employed either under German formations or as part of ad hoc battle groups composed of both Hungarian and German troops. The soldiers' response to this development can best be understood in terms of larger-unit – in this case, divisional – bonds. As noted earlier, the men of transferred units often perceived themselves as having been placed in a hostile environment, where they were expected to shoulder a disproportionately large burden in comparison with the other units within their new command. In the case of the 27th Light Division over the period in question, however, this was probably more than a matter of perception. Contemporary evidence suggests that, in some cases, German units sought to spare their own personnel at the expense of their Hungarian counterparts, who frequently felt that they were expected to bear the brunt of the fighting, while several Hungarian veterans recalled instances in which German troops withdrew without informing the neighbouring Hungarian units, thereby exposing them to the advancing Soviet forces. The soldiers were likewise resentful of the German troops' conduct during the withdrawal from Northern Transylvania, believing that they treated the region not as the territory of an ally but as part of a hostile country, as demonstrated by the extensive destruction and widespread looting that accompanied their retreat. The extent of this sentiment is illustrated by the fact that reports of it reached the German command itself, which attempted to address the issue. During the withdrawal, however, these tensions intensified to such an extent that they gave rise to occasional acts of insubordination and, in one instance, even to an open armed clash between the two sides.

Finally, two additional crises compounded those already discussed. First, not only the Hungarian and German armies but also the Hungarian state effectively withdrew from Northern Transylvania. Second, on 15 October, Miklós Horthy – the charismatic head of state whose person had, to some extent, lent legitimacy to Hungary's earlier war aims – renounced the alliance with Germany and attempted to withdraw the country from the war, a move that ultimately resulted in his removal from power. Taken together, these developments gave rise to mass desertions, which weakened the 27th Light Division to the point where it could no longer perform its military functions

⁸ One possible explanation for this decision is that it was intended to prevent the Hungarian military leadership – and, by extension, the Hungarian government – from exercising control over an additional formation-strength force.

effectively. At this stage, the alliance system once again assumed a decisive role. In cooperation with the newly established Arrow Cross regime, the German command ensured that formations suffering from severe manpower shortages remained in combat even after their military effectiveness had largely been exhausted. Another important aspect of this thesis is its treatment of this period, with particular emphasis on the coercive measures implemented by the military authorities and the narrow range of options through which soldiers could exercise their agency.

The research undertaken in the course of this study also raised a number of questions that, although important for developing a more comprehensive understanding of the history of the 27th Light Division, have not been addressed here. The first of these concerns the Holocaust in Northern Transylvania or, more precisely, the various anti-Jewish measures implemented during the period under examination. It is clear that the soldiers of the 27th Light Division came into contact with the consequences of these policies in a variety of ways: they were undoubtedly exposed to anti-Jewish propaganda and probably possessed at least some knowledge of the rounding up and deportation of the Jewish population in 1944, although the latter largely coincided with the mobilisation and deployment of the formation. However, the most direct manifestation of these measures encountered by the men of the 27th Light Division was the labour service system, under which Jewish men were conscripted into labour service companies that, like regular military formations, were deployed to the front. Two such field labour companies, the 108/8th and the 110/7th, were attached to the 27th Light Division. While the labour service system has been extensively discussed in the historiography, a thorough investigation of the experiences of the labour service companies within the 27th Light Division would necessitate further research.⁹

Another issue not addressed here, though inseparable from the experience of the Eastern Front, concerns the formation's relationship with the civilian population in the areas of Galicia in which it operated, as well as its conduct towards partisan forces,

⁹ Randolph L. Braham, *Genocide and Retribution: The Holocaust in Hungarian-Ruled Northern Transylvania* (Boston, The Hague, Dordrecht, Lancaster, 1983). Robert Rozett, *Conscripted Slaves: Hungarian Jewish Forced Laborers on the Eastern Front During the Second World War* (Jerusalem, 2013).

since measures directed against the latter invariably affected the former. In this regard, the works of Krisztián Ungváry and Ákos Fóris deserve particular attention.¹⁰ Ungváry has devoted a monograph to the activities of the Royal Hungarian Army's occupation forces operating in the Soviet Union, which are known to have been involved in atrocities against the local population. The conclusions drawn from this literature, however, are not necessarily applicable to the conditions prevailing in the rear areas of the Hungarian First Army for several reasons. First, the available sources suggest that the German military authorities adopted a markedly different attitude towards the Ukrainian population of Galicia from that which they displayed towards the Russian population in other occupied territories. Second, the Hungarian First Army, which exercised administrative authority in the region in conjunction with the relevant German army group, appears to have concluded an agreement with the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) which, in addition to averting hostilities between the two sides, also encompassed provisions concerning the equitable treatment of the civilian population. Although Ákos Fóris devotes some attention to this question, a comprehensive treatment of it in relation to the 27th Light Division remains to be undertaken.

Beyond the issues discussed above, there remain several questions that would not necessarily require additional investigation but would certainly benefit from a different reading of the sources already examined. The first of these concerns the officers of the 27th Light Division, in relation to whom two distinct lines of inquiry may be identified. One of these relates to junior officers, particularly platoon leaders and company commanders, who served as an important link between the military institution and the soldiers' primary groups and whose role was therefore crucial to the functioning of these primary groups in combat. Since many of the surviving sources are connected with members of this group, this line of inquiry appears particularly promising. The other concerns senior officers, whose conduct on the front line raises a number of questions, not least with regard to the use of coercion. In their case, issues such as the legacy of Austro-Hungarian military traditions, attitudes towards ordinary soldiers,

¹⁰ Krisztián Ungváry, *Magyar megszálló csapatok a Szovjetunióban, 1941-1944* [Hungarian Occupation Forces in the Soviet Union 1941-1942] (Budapest, 2015). Fóris Ákos, 'A magyar megszálló politika a szovjet területeken 1941–1944' [Hungarian Occupation Policy in the Occupied Soviet Territories 1941–1944] (PhD thesis, Eötvös Loránd Tudományegyetem, Budapest, 2021)

and their relationship with their junior counterparts discussed above would all warrant closer examination.¹¹

Another, far more elusive, subject concerns the experience and self-perception of combat soldiers themselves. Stouffer and his collaborators had already recognised that only a relatively small proportion of the personnel of any army served in combat roles and thus took part in actual fighting. Their analysis, among other things, focused on the distinctive sense of pride associated with being a combat soldier, as well as on the resentment often directed towards rear-echelon personnel.¹² Joanna Bourke, by contrast, examined the relationship to killing of those serving in such roles and the ways in which they made sense of violence in wartime.¹³ Although Bourke's interpretation has been challenged by a number of scholars, it nevertheless points to the existence of a distinctive culture among combat soldiers, shaped by particular beliefs, attitudes towards death, and a range of other factors, including relationships with both junior and senior officers.¹⁴ A more nuanced understanding of this issue would likewise require additional scholarly effort.

Finally, there remain at least two further areas of inquiry that could complement our understanding of the history of the 27th Light Division. The first concerns captivity in the Soviet Union, where former soldiers were interned in labour camps, often under extremely harsh conditions, and from which many were repatriated only in 1947 or 1948. A number of veterans devoted considerable attention to these experiences in their memoirs. The second relates to the post-war fate of officers who had served in the Second World War. In both Hungary and Romania, many remained under the surveillance of the communist political police for years after the conflict; some were subjected to harassment, while, in more extreme cases, others were imprisoned. To date, this question has been examined only in the Hungarian context, most notably by

¹¹ For a discussion of the Austro-Hungarian officer corps, see István Deák, *Beyond Nationalism: A Social and Political History of the Habsburg Officer Corps, 1848–1918* (Oxford, 1990). Graydon A. Tunstall, *The Austro-Hungarian Army and the First World War* (New York, 2021).

¹² Stouffer et al. *The American Soldier*, ii, pp 133–134.

¹³ Joanna Bourke, *An Intimate History of Killing: Face-to-Face Killing in Twentieth-Century Warfare* (New York, 1999).

¹⁴ For a critical discussion of Bourke's thesis, see: Benjamin Ziemann, *Violence and the German Soldier in the Great War: Killing, Dying, Surviving* (London, 2017).

János Rainer M., whereas the situation in Romania still awaits systematic investigation.¹⁵

¹⁵ Rainer M. János, *Századosok* [Captains] (Budapest, 2018).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

PRIMARY SOURCES

Archival Sources

Combat Report of the Royal Hungarian VI Corps, Delatyn–Mikuliczyn, 24 July–10 August) (Hungarian Military History Archives, II. 1452. M. KIR. 1. HONV. HADS., 1944, A m. kir. VI. hadtest harctudósítása (Delatyn–Mikuliczyn, július 24. – augusztus 10.).

Combat Report of the Royal Hungarian 2nd Mountain Brigade on the Fighting of July–August 1944 (Hungarian Military History Archives, II. 1656. M. KIR. 2. HONVÉD HEGYIDANDÁR, 1944, Harctudósítás az 1944. július–augusztusi harcokról).

Experiences and impressions of the regiments of the 38th Royal Hungarian Division on 15 June 1918 (Hungarian Military History Archives, Budapest, II. 598. M. KIR. 21. Honvéd Gyalogezred-parancsnokság, Hadműveleti iratok, sz. n. 1918 jan.–okt.).

Farkas, Ferenc (Historical Archives of the Hungarian State Security).

Gáll, Sándor Case Files (Budapest City Archives,
HU_BFL_XXV_1_a_2_1946_4314, p. 17.).

Gáll, Sándor, Personal files (Hungarian Military History Archives, Budapest, II).

Farkas, Ferenc Colonel General: The Author's Additions to the Book 'The Tatar Pass Looks Back', 1943. 09 – 1944. 10. 15. (Hungarian Military History Archives, VII. TGy 3778, Farkas Ferenc vezérezredes: A szerző kiegészítései a Tatár-hágó visszanéz c. könyvéhez 1943.09.–1944.10.15.).

Farkas, Ferenc Kisbarnaki Colonel General: Manuscript of *The Tatar Pass Looks Back* and the author's recollections of the events of 1944–45 and his captivity as a prisoner of war (Hungarian Military History Archives, VII. TGy 3784, Kisbarnaki Farkas Ferenc vezérezredes: A Tatár-hágó visszanéz c. könyv kézírata és a szerző visszaemlékezései az 1944/45-ös év eseményeire és hadifogságára 1944 márc.–1946 jan.).

Papers of the Chief of the General Staff of the Royal Hungarian Honvéd Army, from 9 April to 31 August 1944. Reports on the daily situation (Hungarian Military History Archives, Budapest, Hungary, I. M. kir. Honvéd Vezérkar főnöke iratai, VKF iratok, 1944–1945, 281 d).

The Ödön Vadász Papers: The Company Diary and Appendices Kept by First Lieutenant Ödön Vadász, Commanding Officer of the 6th Honvéd Infantry Regiment's Heavy Anti-Tank Gun Company, August–December 1944 (A m. kir. „Nagy Lajos király” 6. honvéd gyalogezred ezredközvetlen nehéz páncéltörő ágyús századának parancsnoka, századnapló és annak mellékletei, 1944. augusztus–1944. december). (Papers in the possession of Ákos Bence Lukács, Budapest, Hungary).

Historical Accounts Written by Former Second World War Officers

Adonyi, Ferenc. *A magyar katona a második világháborúban 1941–1945* [The Hungarian Soldier in the Second World War 1941–1945] (Klagenfurt, 1954).

Darnóy, Pál. 'A Budapestért vívott harc. Hadtörténelmi részletek a magyar térségben lefolyt küzdelem döntő szakaszáról 1944/45 (14. folytatás)' [The Battle for Budapest: Military-Historical Aspects of the Decisive Phase of the Fighting in Hungary, 1944–45 (Part 14)] in *Hadak Útján*, xv, no. 170 (1963), pp 8–11.

Fabinyi, József. 'A M. Kir. 13. Honvéd Gyaloghadosztály története az anyagi vezérkari tiszt szemszögéből 1943–1944' [The History of the Royal Hungarian 13th Infantry Division from the Perspective of the Logistics Staff Officer, 1943–1944] in *Hadtörténelmi Közlemények*, vol. civ, no. 2 (1991), pp 123–156.

Farkas, Ferenc. *Tatárhágó visszanéz* [The Tatar Pass Looks Back] (Buenos Aires, 1953).

G. L. 'A székely tüzérek harcaiból' [From the Combat Experiences of the Szekler Artillerymen] in Ferenc Adonyi, *A magyar katona a második világháborúban 1941–1945* [The Hungarian Soldier in the Second World War 1941–1945] (Klagenfurt, 1954), pp 221-223.

Jolsvai, Viktor. 'A Magyar Királyi 1. Honvéd Hadsereg története' [The History of the Royal Hungarian First Army] in Veress, Lajos (ed.). *Magyarország honvédelme a II. világháború előtt és alatt (1920–1945)*. II. kötet [Hungary's Defence before and during the Second World War (1920–1945), vol. II] (München, 1974), pp 179-275.

Jolsvai, Viktor. 'Az 1. Magyar Honvéd Hadsereg története' [The History of the Hungarian First Honvéd Army] (Hungarian Military History Archives, TGy 3480).

Lóskay, Ferenc. 'A m. kir. 1. hgy. ddr. 1944. évi hadjárata, 1944. márc. 26-1944. nov. 10.' [The Campaign of the Hungarian Royal 1st Mountain Brigade Between 26 March 1944 and 10 November 1944] (Hungarian Military History Archives, TGy 3309).

Lóskay, Ferenc. 'A m. kir. 1. hegyidandár harcai a Tatárhágó előterében, 1944 áprilisában' [The Engagements of the Royal Hungarian 1st Mountain Brigade in the Foreground of the Tatar Pass, April 1944] in *Hadak Útján*, vi, no. 66 (1954), pp 10-13.

Siegler, Egon. 'Harcok a Rokietán 1944 július – augusztus' [Fighting at Rokiet, July–August 1944] in *Hadtörténelmi Közlemények*, vol. cxxii, no. 3 (1999), pp 630-643.

Sónyi, Walter. 'A M. Kir. 2. Székely Hegyi Huszárszázad története. 1944. márc. 26.–okt. 8.' [The History of the Royal Hungarian 2nd Szekler Mountain Hussar Company, 26 March 1944–8 October] (Hungarian Military History Archives, TGy 3385).

Székely, László. 'Az ún. 1. magyar hadsereg hadművelete a Kárpátok előterében 1944. március végétől október 15-ig' [The Operations of the Hungarian First Army in the Foothills of the Carpathians from Late March 1944 to October 15]. (Hungarian Military History Archives, TGy 3297).

Veress, Lajos (ed.). *Magyarország honvédelme a II. világháború előtt és alatt (1920–1945)*. II. kötet [Hungary's Defence before and during the Second World War (1920–1945), vol. II] (München, 1974).

Zákó, András Reszneki. *Őszi harcok 1944* [Autumn Battles, 1944] (Budapest, 1991).

Newspapers and contemporary periodicals

Csíki lapok

Magyar Film

Magyar Katonai Szemle

Nemzeti Sport

Reggeli Újság

Székely Közélet

Székely Nép

Székely Szó

Diaries Written by Soldiers of the 27th Light Division

Ábrahám, Márton, 'Naplótöredékek' [Fragments of a Diary] (Hungarian Military History Archives, TGy, 3616).¹⁶

¹⁶ Although Ábrahám Márton did not serve directly in the 27th Light Division, his unit operated under the formation's command.

Basa, Géza. 'Napló 1944. márc. 26-tól' [Diary from 26 March 1944] (Manuscript in possession of Árpád Róbert Berekméri, County Mureș, Romania).

Ferencz, Mihály. Untitled Wartime Diary (Manuscript in the possession of Zoltán Ferencz, Covasna County, Romania).

Harmath, Ferenc. Diary (Manuscript in the possession of Ferenc Harmath, Mureș County, Romania).

Mirk, János. 'Napló 1944. április hótól 1945. szeptember hó 12-ig' [Diary from April 1944 to 12 September 1945] (Manuscript in the possession of Szidónia Mirk, Harghita County, Romania).

Ocsovszky, László. 'Katonanaplóm' [My War Diary] (Manuscript in the possession of Árpád Róbert Berekméri, Mureș County, Romania).

Memoirs written by soldiers of the 27th Light Division

Becze, István. 'Hol fogtatok ennyi orosz?' [Where Did You Capture So Many Russians?] in József Gocz (ed.). *3006 év hadifogságban* [3006 Years in Captivity] (Sepsiszentgyörgy, 2001), pp 192-216.

Berecki, Ferenc, 'Honvéd voltam a II. világháborúban. Hadtörténeti események a m. kir. 27. székely könnyűhadosztály alegységein belül 1942–1945' [I Was a Honvéd (Hungarian Soldier) in the Second World War: Military Events within the Subunits of the Royal Hungarian 27th Szekler Light Division, 1942–1945] (Hungarian Military History Archives, TGy 3405).

Blénassy, Jenő. *A Mikó-vártól Darnicáig* [From the Mikó Castle to Darnica] (Csíkszereda, 2006).

Damó, Elemér. *Névtelen katonák: a 115. önálló utász század a háború utolsó évében* [Unknown Soldiers: the 115th Independent Engineer Company in the Last Year of the War] (Budapest, 1994).¹⁷

Dimény, János. 'Az életem fényben és árnyékban' [My Life in Light and Shadow] (Manuscript in the possession of János Dimény, Covasna County, Romania).¹⁸

Erdélyi, Imre. *Megnőttek a hegyek* [The Mountains Have Grown Taller] (Marosvásárhely, 2022).

Éltető, Gábor. 'Hadinapló' [War Diary] (Hungarian Military History Archives, TGY, 3282).

Fekete, Lajos. *Dalból van a lelkem* [My Soul Is Made of Music] (Brassó, 2008).

Ferenc, Mihály, 'Fogalmunk sem volt a nagypolitikáról' [We Knew Nothing of High Politics] in Gocz, József (ed.), *3006 év hadifogságban* [3006 Years in Captivity] (Sepsiszentgyörgy, 2001), pp 174-191.

G. Szabó, Ferenc (ed.). 'Az utolsó harcos. Kövér Almos visszaemlékezése békéről, háborúról' [The Last Warrior: Álmos Kövér's Recollections of Peace and War] in *Székelyszék*, vol. xxiv, no. 7 (2020), pp 127-150.

¹⁷ Although Damó did not serve in the 27th Light Division, his company operated for a time in the division's rear area during 1944.

¹⁸ Like Damó, Dimény served in an engineer company, but unlike Damó's unit, his company was attached to the 27th Light Division.

Gál, Sándor, 'Visszaemlékezéseim' [My Reminiscences] (Manuscript in the possession of Árpád Róbert Berekméri, County Mures, Romania).

Gocz, József. 'Magas észak nyírfájától a hazai gyertyánig' [From the Northern Birch to the Hornbeam at Home] in Gocz, József (ed.), *3006 év hadifogságban* [3006 Years in Captivity] (Sepsiszentgyörgy, 2001), pp 91-138.

Hajzer, András. 'Orosz fogságban' [In Russian Captivity] (http://www.sulinet.hu/oroksegtar/data/telepulesek_ertekei/Nyirbogdany/pages/005_fejzetek.htm) (05 May 2012).

Harmath, Ferenc. *Az emlékek megszólalnak* [The Memories Begin to Speak] (Kolozsvár, 2010).

Ilyés, Ferenc. 'Visszaemlékezés a második világháború szörnyű történeteire' [Recollections of the Terrible Events of the Second World War] (Manuscript in the possession of Árpád Róbert Berekméri, County Mureș, Romania).

Incze, Pál. *Gyűlölet nincs, csak fájdalom* [There Is No Hatred, Only Pain] (Sepsiszentgyörgy, 2014).

Jenei, Jenő's memoir excerpts in Nagy, Lajos. *Nagyernye* (Nagyernye, 2007) [A village history of Nagyernye], pp 102-104.

László, Ferenc, 'Egy zászlós a második világháborúban' [An Ensign in the Second World War] (Manuscript in the possession of Árpád Róbert Berekméri, County Mureș, Romania).

Lisovszki, József's memoir excerpts in Mikolai Bertics, Mihály. *Harcok és arcok* [Fights and Faces] (Vásárosnamény, 2007), pp 197-226, 254-257.

Lőrincz, Gyula. 'Nem mindenki ébredt fel...' [Not Everyone Woke Up...] in Ferencz, Imre (ed.). *Történetek a fogságból. Hatvan székely hadifogoly* [Accounts from Captivity: Sixty Szekler Prisoners of War] (Csíkszereda, 1997), pp 59-60.

Magyar, László. 'Tanmese a m. kir honvédség életéről csapattiszti szemmel 1920–1945' [A Parable about the Life in the Royal Hungarian Army as Seen by a Company Officer, 1920–1945] (Hungarian Military History Archives, Budapest, TGy 3171).

Makkai, András. 'Életem eseményei' [The Events of My Life] (Manuscript in the possession of Árpád Róbert Berekméri, County Mureș, Romania).

Makrai, László, 'Ki tudja, merre, merre visz a végzet' [Who Knows Where Fate Will Lead Us] (Hungarian Military History Archives, TGy 3616).

Mihálcz, József. A társaim nem tértek haza [My Comrades Never Returned Home] in Ferencz, Imre (ed.). *Történetek a fogságból. Hatvan székely hadifogoly* [Accounts from Captivity: Sixty Szekler Prisoners of War] (Csíkszereda, 1997), pp 74-75.

Mirk, János. 'Visszaemlékezés az elmúlt hatvan évre' [Reflections on the Past Sixty Years] (Manuscript in the possession of Szidónia Mirk, Harghita County, Romania).

Molnár, Károly, 'Kaphattam volna fakeresztet' [I Could Have Ended Up Beneath a Wooden Cross], in József Gocz (ed.), *3006 év hadifogságban* [3006 years in captivity] (Sepsiszentgyörgy, 2001), pp 159-173.

Móring, Sándor. ‘Megszálló és hadifogoly voltam a Szovjetunióban’ [An Occupying Soldier and a Prisoner of War in the Soviet Union] (Manuscript in the possession of Árpád Róbert Berekméri, Mureş County, Romania).

Péter, József. ‘Így emlékszem vissza’ [As I Recall It] (Manuscript in the possession of Judith Szász, Germany).

Sükei, Ferenc’s memoir excerpts in Nagy, Lajos. *Nagyernye* (Nagyernye, 2007) [A village history of Nagyernye], p. 105.

Tövisháti, Ferenc. ‘Személyes élményeim a II. világháború utolsó kilenc hónapjából’ [My Personal Experiences During the Last Nine Months of the Second World War] (<http://www.hatarvadasz.hu/Irodalom/index5.html>) (21 May 2016).¹⁹

Tövisi, Albert’s memoir in Berekméri, Árpád Róbert. ‘Katonaemlékek Hagymásbodonból’ [Soldiers’ Memories from Hagymásbodon] in *Székelyszó*, vol. xxviii, no. 8 (2024), pp 127-150.

Tuzson, Vince. ‘Emlékeim a háborúról. Farkaslaka, 2007. január 30.’ [My Recollections of the War. Farkaslaka, 30 January 2007] (Manuscript in the possession of Árpád Róbert Berekméri, Mureş County, Romania).

Zsigmond, Ferenc, *Hadifogságban: Naplótöredékek, emlékfoszlányok 1944–1948* [In Captivity: Diary Fragments and Recollections 1944–1948] (Bukarest, 1995).²⁰

¹⁹ Although Ferenc Tövisháti did not serve directly in the 27th Light Division, his unit operated under the formation’s command.

²⁰ Although Zsigmond provides only the designation of his original unit, the locations he mentions for November 1944 suggest that the remnants of that formation had by then been absorbed into the 27th Light Division.

Memoirs of Officers and Soldiers of the Hungarian First Army

Benkő, Miklós. 'Katonaság és háború baka/béka nézőpontból' [Military Service and War from a Private Soldier's/Frog's Perspective] (Hungarian Military History Archives, TGy 3607).

Eszenyi, László. *Trianoni nemzedék* [The Trianon Generation] (Budapest, 1989).

Fülöp, Sándor. *Elindultam Kolozsvárról, megérkeztem Clujra* [I Set Out from Kolozsvár and Returned to Cluj] (Csíkszereda, 2010).

György, Sándor (ed.). 'Ráth András feljegyzései a 16 felderítőosztály 1944–1945 közötti működéséről' [András Ráth's Notes on the Operations of the 16th Reconnaissance Battalion, 1944–1945] in *Hadtörténelmi Közlemények*, vol. cxxvi, no. 4 (2013), pp 1106–1135.

Hidvégi, Lajos. *Fegyver alatt az ungvári magyar királyi 24-ik hadosztályban* [Under Arms. In the Royal Hungarian 24th Division of Ungvár, 1944–1947] (Barót, 2018).

Hollósy-Kuthy, László. *Élményeim a második világháború alatt 1939–1945* [My Experiences During World War II, 1939–1945] (Székesfehérvár, 1992).

Kékkői, László. *Tűzözőn – Ahogyan én láttam* [Inferno – As I Saw It] (Budapest, 2015).

Lakatos, Géza. *Ahogyan én láttam (Visszaemlékezések)* [As I Saw It (Memoirs)] (München, 1981).

Nagy, József. “‘A szegény huszárnak szomorú a sorsa’” [‘The Poor Hussar’s Fate Is a Sad One’] in *Székelyföld*, vol. xvii, no. 8 (2013), pp 136-137.

Varga, Ferenc. Besztercei hegyitüzérek a Kárpátokban [The Mountain Artillerymen of Beszterce in the Carpathians] (Barót, 2009).

Other Memoirs and Diaries Relating to the Experience of War

Antal, János. *Fogságom naplója* [Diary of My Captivity] (Budapest, 2008).

Földi, István. *Székelynek születtem. Földi István visszaemlékezései* [I Was Born a Szekler: The Memoirs of István Földi] (Kézdivásárhely, 2014).

Somorjai, Lajos. *Megjártam a Don-kanyart* [I Had Been at the Don Bend] (Budapest, 2002).

Szepesvári, Béla. *A hazáért mindhalálig* [For the Homeland unto Death] (Budapest, 2013).

Interviews with Veterans of the 27th Light Division

Interview with Andor Albert of Olasztelek, Romania (31 December 2014) (Audio recording in the possession of Sándor Magyarosi, Dublin, Ireland).

Interview with Ferenc Antalfi (2007) (Audio recording in the possession of Árpád Róbert Berekméri, Mureş County, Romania).

Interview with Dániel Aszalós (Audio recording in the possession of Árpád Róbert Berekméri, Mureş County, Romania).

Interview with Gábor Baczó of Homoródalmás (Audio recording in the possession of József Nagy, Remetea, Romania).

Interview with Ferenc Balázs of Székelyudvarhely (Audio recording in the possession of József Nagy, Remetea, Romania).

Interview with Dénes Bálint of Kökös (Audio recording in the possession of József Nagy, Remetea, Romania).

Interview with Lajos Bálint of Sepsiszentgyörgy, Romania (Audio recording in the possession of Sándor Magyarosi, Dublin, Ireland).

Interview with Gyula Balogh of Kézdimartonfalva (Audio recording in the possession of József Nagy, Remetea, Romania).

Interview with Lajos Beke of Csíkszentkirály (Audio recording in the possession of József Nagy, Remetea, Romania).

Interview with Mihály Birmann of Borszék (Audio recording in the possession of József Nagy, Remetea, Romania).

Interview with Gyula Botha (Audio recording made in 2005, in the possession of Árpád Róbert Berekméri, Mureş County, Romania).

Interview with János Csicsáky (Audio recording in the possession of Árpád Róbert Berekméri, Mureş County, Romania).

Interview with András Dimény of Kézdimárkosfalva (Audio recording in the possession of József Nagy, Remetea, Romania).

Interview with Sándor Farkas of Homoródalmás (Audio recording in the possession of József Nagy, Remetea, Romania).

Interview with Sándor Farkas of Homoródalmás, Romania (1 May 2014) (Audio recording in the possession of Sándor Magyarosi, Dublin, Ireland).

Interview with Miklós Felcser of Ozsdola, Romania (27 December 2014) (Audio recording in the possession of Sándor Magyarosi, Dublin, Ireland).

Interview with Lajos Ferencz of Kászonimpér (Audio recording in the possession of József Nagy, Remetea, Romania).

Interview with Mihály Ferencz of Mikóújfalu, Romania (11 April 2006) (Audio recording in the possession of Sándor Magyarosi, Dublin, Ireland).

Interview with János Fodor of Székelykeresztúr (Audio recording in the possession of József Nagy, Remetea, Romania).

Interview with János Gál Pál of Gyergyóalfalu (Audio recording in the possession of József Nagy, Remetea, Romania).

Interview with Ferenc Harmath (Audio recording in the possession of Árpád Róbert Berekméri, Mureş County, Romania).

Interview with János Karácsony (Audio recording in the possession of Levente Benkő, Cluj County, Romania).

Interview with Dr László Kasza (Audio recording in the possession of Árpád Róbert Berekméri, Mureş County, Romania).

Interview with József Kiss (Audio recording in the possession of Árpád Róbert Berekméri, Mureş County, Romania).

Interview with József Kolozsi of Orotva (Audio recording in the possession of József Nagy, Remetea, Romania).

Interview with Alajos Köllő of Gyergyóditró (Audio recording in the possession of József Nagy, Remetea, Romania).

Interview with Sándor Kuti of Sepsillyefalva (Audio recording in the possession of József Nagy, Remetea, Romania).

Interview with Ferenc Luka (Audio recording in the possession of Árpád Róbert Berekméri, Mureş County, Romania).

Interview with Imre Márkos of Ozsdola, Romania (Audio recording in the possession of Sándor Magyarosi, Dublin, Ireland).

Interview with János Márton of Csíkszentsimon (Audio recording in the possession of József Nagy, Remetea, Romania).

Interview with István Pokornyik of Pereg, Hungary (27 July 2014) (Audio recording in the possession of Sándor Magyarosi, Dublin, Ireland).

Interview with Ede Poráczky of Gyergyószárhegy (Audio recording in the possession of József Nagy, Remetea, Romania).

Interview with Árpád Póra of Gyimesfelsőlók (Audio recording in the possession of József Nagy, Remetea, Romania).

Interview with Balázs Sándor of Kénos (Audio recording in the possession of József Nagy, Remetea, Romania).

Interview with István Szántó (Audio recording in the possession of Árpád Róbert Berekméri, Mureş County, Romania).

Interview with Mihály Szén (Audio recording in the possession of Árpád Róbert Berekméri, Mureş County, Romania).

Interview with Ignác Tamás of Kászontáltíz (Audio recording in the possession of József Nagy, Remetea, Romania).

Interview with József Tőkés (Audio recording in the possession of Árpád Róbert Berekméri, Mureş County, Romania).

Published Interviews with Former Members of the 27th Light Division

Beke, Lajos. ‘A herét lekaszáltatták, béhozták, nekünk megfőzték, s azt ettük’ [They Cut the Clover, Brought It In, Boiled It, and We Ate It] in Gál, Mária. *Honvédelet, fogolysors* [Military Service and Captivity] (Csíkszereda, 2018).

Károly, Kilyén. *Fennmaradni! Beszélgetések életről, halálról, örömről, szenvedésről* [To Survive! Conversations on Life, Death, Joy, and Suffering] (Marosvásárhely, 1997).

Szijártó, József. *Falusi élet a XX. században: Pokornyik István élettörténete* [Village Life in the Twentieth Century: The Life Story of István Pokornyik] (Pereg, 2012).

Ujváry, Mihály. Interview in: Roland Maruzs and János Szentváry-Lukács, *Hajlíthatatlanok. Magyar Arany Vitézségi Éremmel kitüntetett katonáink, 1939–1945* [The Unyielding. Our Soldiers Awarded the Hungarian Gold Medal for Bravery, 1939–1945] (Budapest, 2022), pp 112-113.

Interviews with Family Members of Veterans of the 27th Light Division

Interview with Tibor Bíró, son of József Bíró (Audio recording in the possession of Sándor Magyarosi).

Interview with Tibor Bíró, son of József Bíró in Iochom, István and Kiss, Erika, *Hadiárvasors: Kézdi–Orbaiszéki hadiárvák visszaemlékezései* [The Destiny of War Orphans: Recollections of War Orphans from the Historic Szekler Seats of Kézdi and Orbai] (Kézdivásárhely, 2022), pp. 24-26.

Interview with Gergely Daczó, son of Zsigmond Daczó in Iochom and Kiss, *Hadiárvasors*, pp. 42-44.

Interview with László Gábor, son of László Gábor (Audio recording in the possession of Sándor Magyarosi).

Interview with Imre Hella, son of Géza Hella in Iochom and Kiss, *Hadiárvasors*, pp. 58–60.

Interview with Gergely Kelemen, son of Gergely Kelemen in Iochom and Kiss, *Hadiárvasors*, pp 63-65.

Interview with Klára Kovács, wife of Károly Kovács (Audio recording in the possession of Sándor Magyarosi).

Letters

Áron Dombi's letter, 10 January 1980 (Letter in the possession of Sándor Magyarosi, Dublin, Ireland).

Áron Dombi's letter, undated (Letter in the possession of Sándor Magyarosi, Dublin, Ireland).

Zoltán Paxy's letter to military historian Péter Illésfalvi (Letter in the possession of Péter Illésfalvi, Budapest, Hungary).

Military Manuals and Publications

‘Alap kiképzés’ [Basic Training] (Budapest, 1937).

A M. Kir. Honvéd Vezérkar Főnöke [Chief of the General Staff of the Royal Hungarian Army], ‘A K-i harctér terepviszonyai és az ellenség méltatása’ [Terrain Features of the Eastern Front and an Appraisal of the Enemy] in *A folyó háború tapasztalatainak összefoglaló ismertetése* [A Summary of Experiences from the Ongoing War], no. 18 (Budapest, 1943).

Éltető, Gábor. ‘Védelem hegyvidéken’ [Defence in Mountainous Terrain] in *Magyar Katonai Szemle*, vol. xiii, Second Quarter (1943), pp 44-50.

Szabó, János. ‘Harctapasztalatok védelemben’ [Combat Experiences in Defence], in *Magyar Katonai Szemle*, vol. xiv, Second Quarter (1944), pp 33-42.

Zentai, Ferenc. 'Páncélromboló kiképzés' [Anti-armour Training] in *Magyar Katonai Szemle*, vol. xiv, Second Quarter (1944), pp 73-83.

SECONDARY SOURCES

Adams, Michael C. C. *The Best War Ever. America and World War II* (Baltimore and London, 1994).

Allison, Fred H. 'Remembering a Vietnam War Firefight: Changing Perspectives over Time' in *The Oral History Review*, vol. xxxi, no. 2 (2004), pp 69-83.

Apor, Balázs. *The Invisible Shining. The Cult of Mátyás Rákosi in Stalinist Hungary, 1945–1956* (Budapest–New York, 2017).

Ashworth, Tony. *Trench Warfare 1914–1918. The Live and Let Live System* (London, 2000).

Asztalos, Lajos and Papp, Annamária. *1944. június 2. – Kolozsvár bombázása* [2 June 1944 – The Bombing of Kolozsvár] (Kolozsvár, 2014).

Babington, Anthony, *For the Sake of Example. Capital Courts-Martial 1914–1920* (London, 1983).

Babucs, Zoltán and Szabó, Péter. *Szent Istvánnal álljuk mindig a vártát* [Standing Guard with Saint Stephen] (Budapest, 2009).

Barkóczi, Janka. *Ezerszemű filmhíradó: A mozgóképes propaganda története Magyarországon 1930–1944* [Thousand-Eyed Newsreel: Visual Propaganda in Hungary 1930–1944] (Budapest, 2017).

Barkóczi, Janka. 'Vizuális propaganda Magyarországon 1931–1944' [Visual Propaganda in Hungary, 1931–1944] (PhD thesis, Corvinus University, Budapest, 2020).

Bartov, Omer. *Hitler's Army. Soldiers, Nazis, and War in the Third Reich* (New York and Oxford, 1991).

Baumeister, Roy F. and Leary, Mark R. 'The Need to Belong: Desire for Interpersonal Attachments as a Fundamental Human Motivation' in *Psychological Bulletin*, vol. cxvii, no. 3 (1995), pp 497-529.

Bene, János and Szabó, Péter. *Huszonnégyes honvédek a Kárpátokban. A m. kir. 24 gyaloghadosztály története 1944–1945* [The Twenty-Four Infantrymen in the Carpathians: A History of the Royal Hungarian 24th Infantry Division, 1944–1945] (Nyíregyháza, 1997).

Benkő, Levente. *Fogolykönyv* [Book of Prisoners of War] (Sepsiszentgyörgy, 1999).

Berekméri, Árpád Róbert. 'A marosvásárhelyi 27. székely könnyűhadosztály története megalakulásától 1944 szeptemberéig' [The History of the 27th Szekler Light Division from Its Formation to September 1944] in *Hadtörténelmi Közlemények*, vol. cxviii, no. 1–2 (2005), pp 152–187.

Berekméri, Árpád Róbert. *Fegyver alatt* [Under arms] (Marosvásárhely, 2008).

Berekméri, Róbert Árpád. *A Delatyn–Mikuliczyn-i ütközet (1944. július 24.–augusztus 10.)* [The Battle of Delatyn–Mikuliczyn (24 July–10 August 1944)] (MA Thesis, Babeş-Bolyai University, Kolozsvár, 2013).

Berekméri, Árpád Róbert. *Lesz még kikelet!* [Spring Will Come Again!] (Marosvásárhely, 2015).

Berekméri, Árpád Róbert. 'A Delatyn–Mikuliczyn-i ütközet a magyar források tükrében' [The Delatyn–Mikuliczyn Battle in the Light of Hungarian Sources] in Kincses, Katalin Mária and Illésfalvi, Péter (eds). *Élet az arcvonalt mögött. Tanulmányok Szabó Péter hadtörténész tiszteletére* [Life Behind the Front: Essays in Honor of Military Historian Péter Szabó] (Budapest, 2019), pp 116-130.

Binder, Tamás. 'A VKF-2. Osztály nyilvántartó alosztálya' [The Registry Sub-Department of the General Staff's Department 2] in János Béres (ed.), *Válogatás a magyar katonai felderítés és hírszerzés történetéből* [A Selection from the History of Hungarian Military Reconnaissance and Intelligence] (Budapest, 2018), pp 250-270.

Bonhardt, Attila. 'Tájékoztató Magyarország felszereltségi és katonapolitikai helyzetéről. 1942 december' [Report on Hungary's Equipment and Military-Political Situation, December 1942] in *Hadtörténelmi Közlemények*, vol. cvi, no. 2 (1993), pp 176-190.

Bonhardt, Attila. 'Munkaszolgálat a magyar királyi honvédségben' [Labour Service in the Royal Hungarian Army] in Horváth, Miklós (ed). *Magyarország hadtörténete IV. 1919-től napjainkig* [Military History of Hungary, iv: From 1919 to the Present] (Budapest, 2018), pp 221-230.

Bottoni, Stefano, 'National Projects, Regional Identities, Everyday Compromises Szeklerland in Greater Romania (1919-1940)' in *Hungarian Historical Review*, vol. ii, no. 3 (2013), pp 477-511.

Bourke, Joanna. *An Intimate History of Killing: Face-to-Face Killing in Twentieth-Century Warfare* (New York, 1999).

Braham, Randolph L. *Genocide and Retribution: The Holocaust in Hungarian-Ruled Northern Transylvania* (Boston, The Hague, Dordrecht, Lancaster, 1983).

Bucur, Maria. *Heroes and Victims* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, 2009).

Bull, Stephen. *Second World War Infantry Tactics* (Barnsley, 2014).

Bús, János and Szabó, Péter. *Béke poraikra... I. kötet* [Peace to Their Ashes, i] (Budapest, 1999).

Case, Holly, *Between States: The Transylvanian Question and the European Idea during World War II* (Stanford, 2009).

Cornelius, Deborah S. *Hungary in World War II* (New York, 2011).

Csima, János. *Adalékok a Horthy-hadsereg szervezetének és háborús tevékenységének tanulmányozásához (1938–1945)* [Contributions to the Study of the Organisation and Wartime Activities of the Armed Forces of the Horthy Regime (1938–1945)] (Budapest, 1961).

Deák, István. *Beyond Nationalism: A Social and Political History of the Habsburg Officer Corps, 1848–1918* (Oxford, 1990).

Egyed, Ákos. *A székelyek rövid története a megtelepedéstől 1918-ig* [A Short History of the Szeklers from Their Settlement until 1918] (Csíkszereda, 2006).

Fehér, Csaba. 'A Magyar Rádió története Náray Antal elnöksége idején, 1942–1944' [The History of Radio in Hungary during the Presidency of Antal Náray, 1942–1944] in *Fons*, no. 3 (1999), pp 337-370.

Fekete, Bálint. 'Newsreels and Propaganda in Horthy Era Hungary' in *Carnival. Journal of International Students of History Association*, xvii (2015), pp 43-66.

Fekete, Edit and Gyarmati, György. 'Nemzetközi konferencia a Közép- és Délkelet-Európa felé irányuló második világháborús propagandáról' [International Conference

on Second World War Propaganda Directed Towards Central and Southeastern Europe] in *Történelmi Szemle*, xxii, no. 3–4 (1979), pp 552-561.

Ferencz, Imre (ed.). *Történetek a fogságból – hatvan székely hadifogoly* [Accounts from Captivity: Sixty Szekler Prisoners of War] (Csíkszereda, 1997 (Csíkszereda, 1997)).

Ferenczes, István. *Székely apokalipszis* [Szekler Apocalypse] (Csíkszereda, 1994).

Fleisz, János. *Az erdélyi magyar sajtó története 1940–1944* [The History of the Hungarian Press in Transylvania, 1940–1944] (Pécs, 2016).

Fóris, Ákos. ‘A magyar megszálló politika a szovjet területeken 1941–1944’ [Hungarian Occupation Policy on Soviet Territories, 1941–1944] (PhD thesis, Eötvös Loránd Tudományegyetem, Budapest, 2021).

Fóris, Ákos, “‘Pehely voltam a nagy viharban’ – A magyar 2. hadsereg tábori lelkeszeinek tűzkeresztsége a Donnál’ [‘I Was a Feather in the Great Storm’ – The Baptism of Fire of the Hungarian Second Army’s Military Chaplains on the Don] (<https://ujkor.hu/content/pehely-voltam-a-nagy-viharban-a-magyar-2-hadsereg-tabori-lelkeszeinek-tuzkeresztsege-a-donnal>) (09 September 2015).

Frieser, Karl-Heinz (ed.). *Germany and the Second World War*, viii: *The Eastern Front 1943–1944: The War in the East and on the Neighbouring Fronts* (Oxford, 2017).

Friessner, Hans. *Árulások, veszített csaták* [Betrayals and Lost Battles] (Budapest, 1992).

Gidó, Attila and Sólyom, Zsuzsa. *Kolozsvár, Nagykároly és Nagyvárad zsidó túlélői. A Zsidó Világkongresszus 1946-os észak-erdélyi felmérése* [The Surviving Jewish Inhabitants of Cluj, Carei and Oradea. The Survey of the World Jewish Congress in 1946] (Cluj-Napoca, 2010).

Glantz, David M. and House, Jonathan M. *When Titans Clashed. How the Red Army Stopped Hitler* (Lawrence, 1995).

Gosztonyi, Péter. *A magyar honvédség a második világháborúban* [The Hungarian Honvéd Army in the Second World War] (Budapest, 1992).

Grauer, Ryan. 'Why Do Soldiers Give Up? A Self-Preservation Theory of Surrender' in *Security studies*, xxiii, no. 3 (2014), pp 622-655.

Gyarmati, György and Pihurik, Judit. 'Előszó' [Preface] in Gyarmati, György and Pihurik, Judit (eds.). *Háborús hétköznapiak hadszíntéren, hátszágban 1939–1945* [Everyday Life in Wartime: At the Front and on the Home Front (1939–1945)] (Budapest and Pécs), pp 7-12.

Gyimesy Kásás, Ernő. 'A magyar híradófilm diadalútja. A Magyar Filmhíradó ezredik hete áll a nemzeti talpraállásunk szolgálatában' [The Triumph of the Hungarian Newsreel: Celebrating the Hungarian Newsreel's Thousandth Week in the Service of National Recovery] in *Magyar Film*, vol. v, no. 16 (1943), pp 5-8.

Harward, Grant T. *Romania's Holy War: Soldiers, Motivation, and the Holocaust*. (Ithaca, 2021).

Holmes, Richard. *Acts of War. The Behaviour of Men in Battle* (London, 2004).

Hoffmann, Kay. 'Propagandistic problems of German newsreels in World War II' in *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, xxi, no. 2 (2001), pp 127-144.

Horne, John and Kramer, Alan. *German Atrocities, 1914: A History of Denial* (New Haven, 2001).

Horváth, Franz Sz. 'The Divided War Remembrance of Transylvanian Magyars' in Cornwall, Mark and Newman, John Paul (eds). *Rebirth and Sacrifice. The Legacy of the Last Habsburg War* (New York and Oxford, 2016), pp 75-96.

Horváth, Miklós (ed.). *Magyarország hadtörténete IV. 1919-től napjainkig* [Military History of Hungary, iv: From 1919 to the Present] (Budapest, 2018)

Illésfalvi, Péter. 'Harctéri levelezőlapok' [Postcards from the Battlefield] in *Székelyföld*, vol. vii, no. 9 (2003), pp 89-108.

Illésfalvi, Péter, Szabó, Péter and Számvéber, Norbert. *Erdély a hadak útján* [Transylvania on the Road of Armies] (Budapest, 2005).

Juhász, József *et al.* (eds), *Magyar értelmező kéziszótár* [Hungarian Explanatory Dictionary] (Budapest, 1985).

Kallay, István, 'Székely újoncok' [Szekler Recruits] in *Magyar Katonai Szemle*, vol. xi, Second Quarter (1941), pp 239-240.

Karsai, László. *Szálasi Ferenc. Politikai életrajz* [Ferenc Szálasi: A Political Biography] (Budapest, 2016).

Keegan, John. *The Face of Battle* (London, 2004).

Keegan, John. *The Second World War* (London, Sidney, Auckland, Johannesburg, 1989).

Kerepeszki, Róbert. 'A leventemozgalom' [The Levente Movement] in *Rubicon* (2010), no. 4-5, pp 104-115.

Keszeg, Vilmos. 'Az eltűnt katona emlékére' [In Memory of the Missing Soldier] in Ilyés, Sándor and Keszeg, Vilmos (eds.). *Az eltűnt katona. Kriza János Néprajzi Társaság Évkönyve 16* [The Missing Soldier. Annual of the Kriza János Ethnographic Society No. 16] (Kolozsvár 2008), pp 7-9.

Kissel, Hans. 'Panic in Battle' in *Military Review*, xxxvi, no. 4 (1956), pp 96-107.

Kocsis, Károly, 'Historical Predecessors and Current Geographical Possibilities of Ethnic-Based Territorial Autonomies in the Carpathian Basin' in *Hungarian Geographical Bulletin*, vol. lxii, no. 1 (2013), pp 3-46.

Lynn, John A. *The Bayonets of the Republic: Motivation and Tactics in the Army of Revolutionary France, 1791–94* (London and New York, 2019).

Lyall, Jason and Zhukov, Yuri. 'Fratricidal Coercion in Modern War' in *International Organization*, lxxix, no. 1 (Winter 2025), pp 173-192.

MacMillan, Margaret. *War: How Conflict Shaped Us* (New York, 2020).

Magyarosi, Sándor, 'A 27. székely könnyűhadosztály első napjai a keleti fronton' [The First Days of the 27th Szekler Light Division on the Eastern Front] in *Acta Siculica 2012–2013* (Sepsiszentgyörgy, 2013), pp 399-412.

Magyarosi, Sándor, 'Háromszéki katonák a második világháborúban' [Soldiers from Háromszék in the Second World War] in *Háromszék*, 14 December 2013.

Magyarosi, Sándor, 'Háromszéki katonák a második világháborúban 2' [Soldiers from Háromszék in the Second World War, ii] in *Háromszék*, 21 December 2013.

Manstein, Erich von. *Lost Victories* (Minneapolis, 2004).

Márquez, Xavier. 'Two Models of Political Leader Cults: Propaganda and Ritual' in *Politics, Religion & Ideology*, xix, no. 3 (2018), pp 265-284.

Márkus, László and Vásárhelyi, Miklós. 'A sajtó szerepe Magyarországon a háborús propaganda terjesztésében' [The Role of the Press in Spreading War Propaganda in Hungary] in *Történelmi Szemle*, vol. xxii, no. 3–4 (1979.), pp 505-521.

Marshall, S. L. A. *Men Against Fire. The Problem of Battle Command* (Norman, 2000).

Maruzs, Roland and Szentváry-Lukács, János. *Hajlíthatatlanok. Magyar Arany Vitézségi Éremmel kitüntetett katonáink, 1939–1945* [The Unyielding. Our Soldiers Awarded the Hungarian Gold Medal for Bravery, 1939–1945] (Budapest, 2022).

Mikes, Imre. 'A sajtó' [The Press] in Győri Illés, István. *Metamorphosis Transylvaniae. Országrésünk átalakulása 1918–1936* [Metamorphosis Transylvaniae: The Transformation of Our Region in 1918–1936] (Cluj, 1937), pp 30-39.

Mikolai Bertics, Mihály. *Harcok és arcok* [Fights and Faces] (Vásárosnamény, 2007).

Millett, Allan R. and Williamson, Murray (eds). *Military Effectiveness iii: The Second World War* (Cambridge, 2010).

Molnár, István. *Ároktő község 25 éve 1944–1969. No. 1 of Mezőcsáti Helytörténeti Füzetek* [The 25 Years of Ároktő Village: 1944–1969] (Mezőcsát, 1970).

Molnár, Simon, 'Konstruált katonatípusok a második világháború magyar sajtójában' [Representations of Soldiers in the Hungarian Press during the Second World War] (Unpublished university paper, Zsigmond Király Egyetem, Budapest, 2018).

Nagy, József. *Békeévek Mars árnyékában. A Székely Határvédelmi Erők története (1940–1944)* [Years of Peace in the Shadow of Mars: The History of the Szekler Border Guard Forces (1940–1944)] (Kolozsvár, 2021).

Niehorster, Leo W. G., 'The Hungarian Army in the Second World War' (Manuscript, Hungarian Military Archives, Budapest, 1989).

Oláh, Sándor. 'A „kis magyar világ”, 1940–1944' [The 'Little Hungarian World' 1940–1944] in Bárdi, Nándor and Pál, Judit (eds). *Székelyföld története*. III. kötet [The History of Szeklerland, vol. iii] (Székelyudvarhely, 2016), pp 409-439.

Overy, Richard. *Why War?* (New York, 2024).

Ölvedi, Ignác. *Az 1. Magyar Hadsereg története 1944 január 6-tól október 17-ig* [The History of the Hungarian First Army from 6 January 1944 until 17 October] (Budapest, 1989).

Pahirja, Olekszandr. 'Fejezetek az Ukrán Felkelő Hadsereg és a magyar megszálló csapatok kapcsolattörténetéből: Volhínia és Dél-Polisszja, 1943–1944.' [Chapters from the History of Relations between the Ukrainian Insurgent Army and the Hungarian Occupation Forces: Volhynia and Southern Polissya, 1943–1944] in *Hadtörténelmi Közlemények*, vol. cxxiv, no. 2 (2011), pp 496-512.

Paksa, Rudolf. *Szálasi Ferenc és a hungarizmus* [Ferenc Szálasi and Hungarianism] (Budapest, 2013).

Papp, Zoltán. 'Mezőkövesd története 1918-tól 1945-ig' [The History of Mezőkövesd from 1918 to 1945] in Sárközi, Zoltán and Sándor, István (eds). *Mezőkövesd város monográfiája* [Monograph of the City of Mezőkövesd] (Mezőkövesd, 1976), pp 175-208.

Pihurik, Judit. 'Háborús propaganda és a harctéri naplók valósága. A 2. magyar hadsereg katonái a szovjet fronton' [War Propaganda and the Reality of Battlefield Diaries: Soldiers of the Second Hungarian Army on the Soviet Front] in *Történelmi szemle*, no. 1–2 (2005), pp 99-127.

Pihurik, Judit. *Naplók és memoárok a Don-kanyarból, 1942–1943* [Diaries and Memoirs from the Don Bend, 1942–1943] (Budapest, 2007).

Portelli, Alessandro. 'What Makes Oral History Different' in Perks, Robert and Thomson, Alistair (eds). *The Oral History Reader* (London, 1998), pp 63-74.

Rainer, M. János. *Századosok* [Captains] (Budapest, 2018).

Rakaczki István. 'A Hunyadi-állás' [The Hunyadi Line] in *Hadtudományi Szemle*, xvii, no. 3 (2024), pp 89-116.

Ravasz, István. 'Az erdélyi hadműveletek 1944 késő nyarán-kora őszén. IV. rész. A Székelyföld kiürítése' [The Military Operations in Transylvania in Late Summer and Early Autumn 1944. Part IV: The Evacuation of the Szekler Land] in *Hadtörténelmi Közlemények*, vol. cxii, no. 3 (1999), pp 539-576.

Ravasz, István. *Erdély, mint hadszíntér* [Transylvania as a Theatre of War] (Budapest, 1997).

Ravasz, István. *Erdély ismét hadszíntér* [Transylvania Once Again a Theatre of War] (Budapest, 2002).

Ravasz, István. *Magyarország és a Magyar Királyi Honvédség a XX. századi világháborúban 1914–1945* [Hungary and the Royal Hungarian Army in the World Wars of the 20th Century, 1914–1945] (Nagykovácsi, 2003).

Romsics, Ignác. *Hungary in the Twentieth Century* (Budapest, 1999).

Ross, Corey. *Media and the Making of Modern Germany. Mass Communications, Society, and Politics from the Empire to the Third Reich* (Oxford and New York, 2008).

Rottman, Gordon L. *World War II Infantry Anti-Tank Tactics* (Oxford, 2005).

Rottman, Gordon L. *Soviet Field Fortifications 1941–45* (Oxford, 2007).

Rozett, Robert. *Conscripted Slaves: Hungarian Jewish Forced Laborers on the Eastern Front During the Second World War* (Jerusalem, 2013)

Schönherr, Klaus. ‘The Battles for Galicia and the Beskid Mountains’ in Frieser, Karl-Heinz (ed.). *Germany and the Second World War*, viii: *The Eastern Front 1943–1944: The War in the East and on the Neighbouring Fronts* (Oxford, 2017), pp 675–728.

Schönherr, Klaus. ‘The Withdrawal Battles in Romania and Transylvania in the Summer and Autumn of 1944’ in Frieser, Karl-Heinz (ed.). *Germany and the Second World War*, viii: *The Eastern Front 1943–1944: The War in the East and on the Neighbouring Fronts* (Oxford, 2017), pp 729–845.

Sakmyster, Thomas. *Hungary’s Admiral on Horseback: Miklós Horthy, 1918–1944* (Colorado, 1994).

Sárándi, Tamás. *Levezényelt visszacsatolás. A magyar katonai közigazgatás Észak-Erdélyben, 1940* [Re-annexation by Command: Hungary's Military Administration in Northern Transylvania, 1940] (Csíkszereda, 2016).

Sheffield, Gary D., 'Officer–Man Relations, Morale and Discipline in the British Army, 1902–22' (PhD thesis, King's College, London, 1994).

Shils, Edward A. and Janowitz, Morris, 'Cohesion and Disintegration in the Wehrmacht in World War II' in *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, vol. xii, no. 2 (1948), pp 280-315.

Sipos, Balázs. *Sajtó és hatalom a Horthy-korszakban* [Press and Power in the Horthy Era] (Budapest, 2011).

Sipos, Balázs. 'Sajtó, sajtópolitika és nyilvánosság' [Press, Press Policy, and the Public Sphere] in *Korunk*, vol. xxiii, no. 11 (November 2012), pp. 76-81.

Sipos, Péter and Ravasz, István (eds). *Magyarország a második világháborúban. Lexikon A-ZS* [Hungary in the Second World War. Encyclopaedia A-Z] (Budapest, 1997).

Smith, Leonard. *Between Mutiny and Obedience. The Case of the French Fifth Infantry Division during World War I* (Princeton, Chichester, 1994).

Samuel A. Stouffer, Arthur A. Lumsdaine, Marion Harper Lumsdaine, Robin M. Williams, Jr., M. Brewster Smith, Irving L. Janis, Shirley A. Star, Leonard S. Cottrell, Jr., *The American Soldier*, ii: *Combat and Its Aftermath*. (Princeton, New Jersey, 1949).

Suba, János. 'Erdély határvédelme 1940–1944' [Transylvania's Border Defence 1940–1944] in *Rendvédelem-történeti Füzetek*, xxvi (2016), no. 51, pp 75-86.

Sylvester, Lajos. *Úz-völgyi hegyomlás* [Landslide in the Úz Valley] (Sepsiszentgyörgy, 1996).

Szabó, Peter, 'Hungarian Soldiers in World War II: 1941–1945' in Veszprémy, László and Király, Béla K. *A Millenium of Hungarian Military History* (New York, 2002).

Szabó, Péter, *Don-kanyar 1942–1943. A Magyar Királyi 2. Honvéd hadsereg képes krónikája/Don bend 1942–1943. An Illustrated Chronicle of the Royal Hungarian 2nd Honvéd Army* (Budapest, 2013).

Szabó, Péter and Számvéber, Norbert, *A keleti hadszíntér és Magyarország. 1943–1945* [The Eastern Theatre of War and Hungary] (Budapest, 2003).

Szabó, Zoltán. 'Az 1. és 2. hegyidandár részvétele a Kárpátok előterében folytatott hadműveletekben és Magyarországon 1944–1945' [Participation of the 1st and 2nd Mountain Brigades in Operations in the Foothills of the Carpathians and in Hungary 1944–1945] in Szabó, Zoltán. *Hegyvadászok. A Magyar Királyi 1. Honvéd Hegyidandár története 1939–1945* [Mountain Troops. The History of the Royal Hungarian 1st Honvéd Mountain Brigade 1939–1945] (Budapest, 2003).

Szakály, Sándor. *A magyar tábori csendőrség* [The Hungarian Field Gendarmerie] (Budapest, 1990).

Szakály, Sándor. *A magyar katonai elit 1938–1945* [The Hungarian Military Elite, 1938–1945] (Budapest, 2019).

Számvéber, Norbert. 'Magyarország német megszállása és szovjet elfoglalása' [The German and Soviet Occupation of Hungary] in Horváth, Miklós (ed.). *Magyarország hadtörténete IV. 1919-től napjainkig* [The Military History of Hungary, iv: From 1919 to the Present] (Budapest, 2018), pp 147–220.

Szijj, Jolán and Ravasz, István (eds). *Magyarország az első világháborúban. Lexikon A-Zs* [Hungary in the First World War: An Encyclopaedia from A to Zs] (Budapest, 2000).

Tajfel, Henri and Turner, John C. 'The Social Identity Theory of Intergroup Behavior', in Worchel, Stephen and Austin, William G. (eds). *Psychology of Intergroup Relations* (Chicago, 1986), pp. 7-24.

Tertinszky, Edit. 'A Magyar Rádió háborús évei (1939–1944)' [Radio in Hungary during the War Years 1939–1944] in Kollega Tarsoly, István. *Magyarország a XX. században. III. kötet* [Hungary in the Twentieth Century, vol. iii], (Szekszárd, 1998), pp 362-370.

Tilkovszky, Loránt. *Ez volt a Volksbund A német népcsoport-politika és Magyarország 1938–1945* [This Was the Volksbund: German Minority Policy and Hungary, 1938–1945] (Budapest, 1981), p. 331.

Thomas, Nigel, and László, Szabó. *The Royal Hungarian Army in World War II* (London and New York, 2012).

Tosh, John. *The Pursuit of History: Aims, Methods and New Directions in the Study of Modern History* (London, 2002).

Tóth, Sándor. 'A 2. Ukrán Front jobbszárnyának felszabadító harcai Észak-Magyarországon (1944. november – 7 december 31.)' [The Campaign of the 2nd Ukrainian Front's Right Flank for the Liberation of Northern Hungary (7 November–31 December 1944)] in *Hadtörténelmi Közlemények*, vol. xxii, no. 1 (1975), pp 46-72.

Tóth, Sándor. 'Háborús propaganda és nevelés a magyar hadseregben 1941–1944' [Wartime Propaganda and Education in the Hungarian Army, 1941–1944] in *Történelmi szemle*, vol. xxii, no. 3–4 (1979), pp 540-551.

Tunstall, Graydon A. *The Austro-Hungarian Army and the First World War* (New York, 2021).

Turbucz, Dávid. *A Horthy-kultusz 1919–1944* [The Horthy Cult, 1919–1944] (Budapest, 2015).

Ungváry, Krisztián, *Battle for Budapest* (London, New York, 2003).

Ungváry, Krisztián. *A magyar honvédség a második világháborúban* [The Hungarian Honvéd Army in the Second World War] (Budapest, 2005).

Ungváry, Krisztián. *Magyar megszálló csapatok a Szovjetunióban, 1941–1944* [Hungarian Occupation Forces in the Soviet Union, 1941–1942] (Budapest, 2015).

Ungváry, Krisztián. “The Hungarian Theatre of War’ in Frieser, Karl-Heinz (ed.). *Germany and the Second World War*, viii: *The Eastern Front 1943–1944: The War in the East and on the Neighbouring Fronts* (Oxford, 2017), pp 846-960.

van Creveld, Martin. *Fighting Power: German and U.S. Army Performance, 1939–1945* (Westport, 1982)

Walto, Rodney Earl. ‘Memories from the Edge of the Abyss: Evaluating the Oral Accounts of World War II Veterans’ in *The Oral History Review*, vol. 37, no. 1 (winter/spring 2010), pp 18-34.

Wette, Wolfram. ‘Német propaganda és a csatlósországok: Magyarország, Románia és Bulgária (1941-43)’ [German Propaganda and the Satellite States: Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria (1941–43)] in *Történelmi szemle*, no. 1–2 (2005), pp 454-483.

Winkel, Roel Vande. Nazi Newsreels in Europe, 1939–1945: The Many Faces of Ufa's Foreign Weekly Newsreel (*Auslandstonwoche*) versus the German Weekly Newsreel (*Deutsche Wochenschau*)' in *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, vol. xxiv, no. 1 (2004), pp 5-34.

Wesbrook, Stephen D. 'The Potential for Military Disintegration' in Sam. C. Sarkesian (ed.) *Combat Effectiveness. Cohesion, Stress and the Volunteer Military* (Beverly Hills, London, 1980), pp 244-278.

Zeidler, Miklós. *A revíziós gondolat* [The Revisionist Idea] (Budapest, 2001).

Zeidler, Miklós. *A magyar irredenta kultusz a két világháború között* [The Hungarian Cult of Irredentism Between the Two World Wars] (Budapest, 2002).

Zeidler, Miklós. 'Irredentism in Everyday Life in Hungary during the Inter-war Period' in *Regio* (2002), pp 71-88.

Ziemann, Benjamin. *Violence and the German Soldier in the Great War: Killing, Dying, Surviving* (London, 2017).

Ziemke, Earl F. *From Stalingrad to Berlin: The German Defeat in the East* (Washington, 1968).