

Pázmány Péter Catholic University  
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THE ARGUMENTS OF THE DOCTORAL THESIS

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**The German Policy of the Third Reich in Hungary**

Doctoral School of History

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There are countless beliefs and misconceptions regarding the story of Hungarian Germans – or as they were called for a long time in order to show their separation: the Germans from Hungary – which grew into taboos with time.

Today we do have the sufficient timely distance from the tragic period of Hungarian Germans, which provides a great opportunity for young researchers. We can assume new points of view, which can lead to questions so far considered to be taboo, and we can provide answers to those. We can even raise old questions anew in order to give new answers. The subject is therefore not a novelty, but the approach is. In the past 30 years, Hungarian historiography has already examined the world involving Hungarian Germans and gained an insight also into their inner world, but could not analyse the events in an unbiased way due to its political nature.

## **1. Precedents**

The first basic research was carried out back in Communist times, in an age when the political attitude was of collective German war guilt. Historiography could not stay independent of party state doctrines and could therefore examine facts only from a given aspect, which revealed a completely different reality to both specialists and the public. In the 60's and 70's, however, a slow change came about. Before thinking that the state (and party) gave way to a historian's interest and the disclosure of facts, we need to examine the philosophy behind the first works that served as „scientific” bases of all the later works. The „builders” who

registered these „basic works” sifted the facts carefully and took the political tendency of the age into consideration when making their rather ideological than historical establishment of principles. In their studies written in the 60’s, Erzsébet Andics and Aladár Mód chose aspects that „led” them to conclusions not that carefully chosen, though politically correct. The terminology applied for Hungarian Germans already defined the course of analysis. The ideology of ‘all the Germans are war criminals, therefore deserved their fate’ remained valid until the regime change as a feature of politicised Hungarian historical approach. All this although outside impulses had previously enabled the politically independent analysis of the history of Hungarian Germans.

In the 1970’s, the Federal Republic of Germany opened to the east while testing its forces. Hungary became one of the „beneficiaries” of the Ostpolitik, in return the dogmatic reins surrounding historiography were loosened at home too. Thanks to the easing, institutions were created, dealing with the history of Hungarian Germans among others, or provided adequate help to the selected researchers. Opening up politics did not, however, imply questioning the bases. Some doors have been opened, maybe even some division walls were knocked down, but the pillars stayed where they were, and everything looked the same as it used to in the 50’s.

The economic decline and the solution-seeking of the Kádár-system was felt in other walks of life too. But only when some dignitary of the system allowed for controlled opening. Historians examining Hungarian Germans only dared – politely, of course – to suggest that

the doctrine of collective crime and punishment was not substantiated only after György Aczél, ruling as secretary of the Central Committee and member of the Political Committee, permitted it in his 1983 speech. The researchers understood the message, published new aspects and the stress shift could be perceived in the final conclusions too. The emblematic historian of the age, Loránt Tilkovszky was already examining the nationality policy of the 30's and 40's. The results of his research carried out both in Hungary and Germany were still published in two, popular subjects: the factual works on Volksbund and SS-recruitments still count as basic research work. Local historians also had their share next to the „great ones”. They provided new impulses to future historians, and at the same time raised the attention and interest of local communities towards the past of their own settlement.

In the meantime, interest towards the history and fate of Hungarian Germans gained new impetus in Germany too. After the 70's, considered to be the age of discovery, they started to examine the life of their fellows from the Danubian basin once more. The reference figure – well-known also in Hungary - of the new age became Norbert Spannenberger. His works also examined the events and the fate of Hungarian Germans typically from an institutional point of view – mostly analysing the NSDAP and the SS. The German authors - Johann Weidlein, Friedrich-Spiegel Schmidt, Matthias Annabring -, nevertheless, went already further than their Hungarian counterparts. They assumed a wider perspective, also raising questions that could provide a less idologised image of the Germans living in the Danubian basin.

Regime change opened the subject also in Hungary – theoretically. Documents which were considered to be classified till then could be researched, people who had witnessed the events could evoke their memories in a family environment, giving a further impetus to local research carried out in the 80's. New points of view were born thanks to younger authors. From the new generation of historians – András Grósz, Gábor Gonda, Péter Somlai – arose the researchers who created a more nuanced image of the history of Hungarian Germans by choosing a new field of research. The bases, however, were not questioned by them. They preferred looking for and finding new grounds in local research. The human side, oral history started to gain the upper hand.

With this kind of exodus, however, they still accepted the limits set back in the 60's. They brought new opinions and new aspects into the topic that was slowly becoming monotonous, but they did not wish to redefine the subject permeated with taboos.

The modern age exodus of the Germans was not forgotten in Germany – also due to Günther Grass's oeuvre. 60 years after the events, German historians - Hans Lember, Erik Franzen, Guido Knopp – examine the relocation and processes leading up to them with renewed energy. Instead of the limited environment and history of the Germans from the Danubian basin, they tried to understand what and why happened the way it did based on the relationship between the Germans and national socialism, the Germans and Hitler. Henrik Eberle for instance compiled a unique source collection from the letters written to the Führer. While Hungarians

accepted taboos, in Germany they started tearing them down.

## **2. Methodology**

This was the impulse due to which – as a continuation of my thesis topic – I chose the destiny of Hungarian Germans and the forces affecting them as my field of research. Based on the well-known material, the documents and information revealed in the meantime, I strived to redraw the conditions in which Hungarian Germans lived. My main interest was the examination of the appearance of the Third Reich and of the German policies affecting the Hungarian Germans. Paralelly to this, I also examined Hungary's nationality policy. Emphasis is on Hungarian Germans. A truthful response can be given to countless issues only by getting to know their point of view, collecting their remembrances.

Archive sources enable us to approach and interpret the world affecting Hungarian Germans from a diplomatic and political aspect. The backbone of my sources is therefore provided by the written material of the Hungarian National Archive and the documents of the Historical Archive of the State Security Services. I revealed the written material referring to the age between 1920 and 1945 to a varying depth, always considering how they help me set up the precisest historical framework, thus enabling me to identify the forces affecting Hungarian Germans, as well as the – typically limited – reactions given to them. That is because what I consider to be the most important issue is what Hungarian Germans considered their state to be like. For this reason I also used the result of my research carried out in the Sopron Town Archives, the confidential

reports sent to the mayor encompassing the period between 1938 to 1945 and research targeting reports from police observations. The reports of the news service of the Hungarian News Agency kept in the Hungarian National Archive and published electronically also helped me find further nuances, discover and integrate new aspects.

In order to find the most truthful answer to the question I consider to be the most exciting, I included a field of research whose values and positive traits modern historical research starts to discover these days. Oral history shows a particular side of political decisions taken in the past, namely a side historians should definitely analyse, and that is the human aspect. The historian's work, nevertheless, is made more difficult by the fact that 90% of the witnesses had been relocated, less and less people who had experienced this period personally are still alive. Due to their experience from the 50's, many Hungarian Germans still do not dare to make open declarations. Nor do civil servants who watched them, wrote reports on them or even put them on the relocation lists. Everybody was and still is afraid of revenge.

### **3. Results**

Renovating petrified final conclusions by bringing in new aspects and new terminology related to it – that is the aim of my doctoral thesis.

„Heimat” – this is the German equivalent of Hungarian „otthon” (home), also of a positive emotional connotation. They are close synonyms, mean the same, yet still, their true content, when placing

them in a historical context, is still significantly different. Hungarian Germans considered their town and region where they worked and made a living, that is which they lived, as their home. Politically defined national identity, appearing after the first world war, did not or could not understand this particular identity. The political need that tried to formalise people and thereby shape unified national identity became particularly strong in the Danubian basin. This „modern” worldview, however, could not be reconciled with the identity of Hungarian Germans, and therefore Hungarian politics soon considered this to be an old-fashioned social layer that needs to be reformed the sooner the better. The post-Trianon phobia, that is the fear that non-Hungarian national groups would sooner or later want to separate from the nation, tearing away valuable regions, all this led in the end to a violent Magyarization policy further strengthened with protective measures that created enemies and thus provoked hostile reactions from Hungarian Germans. Frustration escalated with the strengthening of the Third Reich and the appearance of Hitler’s German policy in the Danubian basin. There were therefore two factors affecting Hungarian Germans, one distanced their home from them, the other distanced them from their home.

„Identity” – one of the most important words of Europe crawling out from under the ruins of world war I. New states – and state forms – were born, feverishly looking for the common ground that would unite those living within and outside the borders, based on which they could strengthen, and from which position they could increase their influence in the limited region they were forced to share. The

common ground and at the same time the source of conflict became „identity”, more precisely one of its relevant pillars, „national feeling”. „Identity”, so simple, so easy to conceive by everybody, mobilizing the large masses, grew into the organizational force of the state, also becoming the spark of conflict exploding among the states. The topic still hides widespread fields of research, still, I analyse two states that are not in the same weight division but share the same historical fate after losing world war I and becoming deprived – though to a varying degree – of their territory: Hungary and Germany. In the case of Germany, I also consider the special situation that the foundation of modern unified German identity was laid down by Hitler, he was the one who recognised the need to unite as a consequence of the effects of the Versailles peace treaty. Hitler was the one who could show the power that strengthened the need for union. He was the one who took advantage of this union and created an attractive ideology that suppressed the primacy of home in the German identity and placed big national identity on top of it. In the beginning this collective did not comprise the significant German groups living abroad, the so-called „Volksdeutsch”. This is because Germans from the fatherland did not consider the ethnic groups living in the Danubian basin that had German as a mother tongue and were of a German background culture as part of their empire-creating nation. This protected the „Volksdeutsch” against national socialist German identity, but only until Hungary in the second half of the 30’s became so efficient in distancing Hungarian Germans from their homes that the ethnic group, having become an orphan from both an ideological and sociological aspect, became easy prey to national socialism.

„Ungarndeutschen / Hungarian Germans” – this is the self-definition providing the basis to identity to which we associate numerous Hungarian notions, as we cannot express the deeper meaning. Hungarian Germans, the German minority, members of the German nationality, ethnic Germans - the only common feature and at the same time sole message of the Hungarian equivalents created in different ages is that they are an ethnic group that separates itself, that they are outsiders, not organic part of the so-called majority society. It is therefore not accidental that in the age of collective punishment the majority felt they had the right to exclude and repatriate Hungarian Germans from their homes. „They” in the meantime did not consider themselves as a separate entity, especially not as outsiders. It is perhaps precisely due to these features that outer effects distanced them – whether intentionally or not – from the world that provided them a home, while the home around them also changed. That is why it is so hard to find a concrete denomination used consequently throughout the thesis instead of „they”, a denomination that would stress the human factor and present an authentic image of the identity and situation of the people of German mother tongue and culture, indigenous in Hungary for centuries. The term 'Hungarian German' reflects this duplicity, that is why I use it consequently.

Progressive age – this is the attribute we can describe the first fifty years of the 20th century with. This is the time when three ideologies and forces appeared and gained ground, questioning habits and rules, not putting up with the structure of the completely new social and

economic systems. All three wanted to develop the new man, the man who defines and places himself into society based on the idea. All three ideologies had the same roots, objectives and means. They differed in the extent in which they stressed their identity, which in all cases originated from the peculiar characteristics of the country and people that made up the fatherland. National socialism was the most important of the three from the point of view of my thesis, as it created the totally progressive society in a record time before communism and fascism, and the (ideal) man fitting into it alongside. Modernising Hungary, striving to keep its historical identity, had to prevail in such a force field. Hungarian Germans got into a difficult situation, and had to choose between two identities. They could visibly not cope with the new challenges. The older generation, following the identity of their ancestors of 'making ends meet somehow but not giving up' did not want to acknowledge the effects coming from either the Hungarian government or the Third Reich or the organizations financed by these. They thought the forces affecting Hungarian Germans would subside in history as they had done in the past, and everything would stay the same. The younger generation, however, did not accept the static and defensive attitude of their parents. The wish to undertake something and the revolt became the two powers that moved and at the same time exposed them to national socialism. The Hungarian Germans were simply torn apart by the forces affecting them. It was collective punishment and the fact of expulsion/relocation that united them.

Reference point. I place Hungarian Germans in a historical force field, that is the easiest way to understand the struggle of the

contrary forces that in the end knocked the Hungarian Germans off their natural – social and economic – development route. One of the force fields was Hungary, finding itself after Trianon, whereas the other was the rising and then falling Third Reich. After the first world war it seemed that the old empire could be forced to its knees from all aspects, and thus tear away and redistribute the region belonging to its sphere of interest. This new world order, hoped to be lasting, only became temporary, Hitler and his policy cancelled it and restored previous power relations by bringing something new. The system that was thought to bring lasting peace failed. This was known by the Entente that let Hitler carry out a policy which targeted the recreation of German hegemony. By the second half of the 1930's it was obvious that the processes of the Danubian basin slipped out of the hands of the Entente and of the little states to be found in the region. The Reich imposed its will even in matters of internal politics. The „Lebensraum” ideology stood in the background of expansion. This became the organizational principle of the Third Reich. This meant the happy and richer future. Hitler expanded his control over Central Europe based on this, starting from which he could expand the Lebensraum even further. First of all, however, he had to lay hands on the Danubian basin, and the local Germans were used as a means to achieve this goal. Due to ideological, and later military and political aspects, the Germans living in the area had to be part of the German nation, so that Hitler could take ulterior, primarily military, secondarily diplomatic steps of conquest in the right moment by referring to their interest and safety. Central-European Germans became the link with which

the Third Reich tied the Danubian basin, including Hungary, to itself.

Hungarian Germans were at the wrong place at the wrong time, because as they became the main targets of the Magyarization processes in post-Trianon Hungary due to their native language, the Reich – feeling all the more responsible – for Germans living outside its borders – got them into their focus too. The Hungarian Germans walked into a pincer-like trap without noticing.

#### **4. Publications in the subject**

- Precedents of the relocation of the Germans from Sopron (1921–1946), *Soproni Szemle*, Sopron 2006 (4) 395-410

- The Germans of Sopron in the vicinity of the Third Reich, *Sketches on Hungarian history*. Edited by Balázs Antos, Ágnes Tamás. Published by. J. Nagy László, Szeged, 2010. 131-141.