

Ethnic Germans from Hungary in the Waffen-SS. Case Study of the Western Hungarian Borderland

*Beáta Márkus*¹

In my study, I examine the recruitment actions of the Waffen-SS in the West-Hungarian region in the mirror of local archival sources. My hypothesis is that the voluntary recruitment campaigns in 1942 and 1943 were more successful and more popular in this region than in other parts of the country, and I try to find out what the reasons for this might have been. The German invasion of Hungary in the spring of 1944 also opened a new chapter in the history of SS recruitments. The forced recruitment of men at the western borderland was also hard hit because of its geographical location, where the war lasted longer, and men were still being taken as German soldiers in 1945, although by then, with few exceptions, the action had already met with resistance from those involved. [Waffen-SS; Second World War; Western Hungary; National Socialism; Recruitment]

According to the present state of research, between 1940 and 1945, the German Waffen-SS had between 100,000 and 120,000 people who were ethnic Germans from Hungary.² The majority of these were members of the country's German minority, known in the terminology of the time as "Volksdeutsche", who were recruited into the German army in various recruitment campaigns and, after the war was lost, were subjected to severe consequences and collective stigmatisation as war criminals. For this reason, public discussion and research into the events could not take place before the 1990s, and the silence of those involved was not broken by the change in the political regime.

In my study, I focus on the example of a smaller region, Western Hungary. One reason for this choice is that the history of the region's Germans

¹ University of Pécs, Institute for History; markus.beata@pte.hu.

² L. TILKOVSKY, *SS-toborzás Magyarországon*, Budapest 1974, p. 325.

is often marginalised in Hungarian literature on the minority, although there is a great deal of activity in the region in connection with the Waffen-SS recruitment actions. Due to the geographical location of the region, this area was the last to fall into Soviet hands in 1945, and the Waffen-SS recruitments were also the longest: while the Second World War practically ended in the eastern part of the country at the end of 1944, men were still being conscripted along the western border in the spring of 1945, mostly against their will. Thus, in the region, we can also trace how enthusiasm for the war and the German military waned during the war years.

My study is divided into the following sections: a presentation of the current state of research and a description of the region, followed by a summary of the history of the Waffen-SS, with particular reference to the recruitment of foreign “volunteers”. The next section describes the conscription phases in Hungary, followed by the specifics of the recruitments in the West-Hungarian region, with 1944 as an important turning point. The summary is preceded by a short sub-section on the aftermath of the events and attempts at interpretation.

State of Research in Hungary

The history of the members of the Waffen-SS recruited in Hungary has been a difficult and under-researched topic until today, due to the stigmatisation of those involved after the end of the war. In the history of the community, the possible National Socialist past, the participation in war crimes, is a blank spot, the processability of which is highly questionable.

In Hungary, between 1945 and 1990, while the country was part of the Eastern Bloc, in addition to the personal resistance and silence of those involved, the expectations of the political system made meaningful research impossible. The history of the “fascist war criminals” was not considered desirable, and if it was, it was only possible within the framework of the authorities, possibly censored. Nevertheless, a monograph on the subject was published in the 1970s, which, based on German and Hungarian sources, dealt with the history of the SS-recruitments.³ Apart from this work, however, there has been no other independent research on the subject in Hungary before or since 1990.

The Waffen-SS conscriptions also appear fragmentally in works on the Volksbund der Deutschen in Ungarn,⁴ the organisation of the German

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 15–76.

⁴ The Volksbund der Deutschen in Ungarn (People’s Federation of Germans in Hungary) was a cultural organisation of the German minority in Hungary, founded

minority in Hungary founded in 1938, as this organisation was involved in the implementation of the conscription in Hungary.⁵ In addition, the wartime activities of the members of the minority are reported in some military history works, which focus on the general history of the Second World War or the Waffen-SS and its members.⁶ However, the exploration of the regional, local and individual levels, the local implementation of recruitment and conscription, the resulting conflicts and consequences remain unexplored.

The situation is not much better in international research on Hungarian “Volksdeutsche” members of the German armed forces. Many works on the history of the Waffen-SS have been published in German and English since the 1940s, although their scientific basis is mostly highly questionable.⁷ Since the 2000s, however, several monographs have been published on the foreign units that served in the German army.⁸

The works published by members of the German minority settled in Germany after 1946 are also not characterised by a more detailed treatment of the subject. Such local histories, newspaper articles and memoirs typically omit the Nazi period and Waffen-SS membership altogether.⁹ There are exceptions, but these too tend to either focus on forced conscription only or to emphasise, in the context of a victim narrative, that conscription took place based on German-Hungarian agreements.

in 1938, which gradually came under National Socialist influence during the Second World War. After 1945, its members were persecuted in Hungary and most of them were expelled to Germany between 1946 and 1948.

- 5 N. SPANNENBERGER, *Der Volksbund der Deutschen in Ungarn 1938–1944 unter Horthy und Hitler*, München 2002.
- 6 Z. A. KOVÁCS – N. SZÁMVÉBER, *A Waffen-SS Magyarországon*, Budapest 2001, [https://mek.oszk.hu/05000/05002/html/\[2024-01-30\]](https://mek.oszk.hu/05000/05002/html/[2024-01-30]).
- 7 P. LIEB – J. E. SCHULTE – B. WEGNER (eds.), *Die Waffen-SS. Neue Forschungen*, Paderborn 2014, pp. 11–22.
- 8 T. CASAGRANDE, *Die volksdeutsche SS-Division „Prinz Eugen“*. *Die Banater Schwaben und die nationalsozialistischen Kriegsverbrechen*, Frankfurt am Main 2003; F. W. SEIDLER, *Avantgarde für Europa. Ausländische Freiwillige in Wehrmacht und Waffen-SS*, Selent 2004; P. MILATA, *Zwischen Hitler, Stalin und Antonescu Rumäniendeutsche in der Waffen-SS*, Köln 2007; A. WEALE, *The SS. A New history*, London 2010; R. MICHAELIS, *Die Volksdeutschen in Wehrmacht – Waffen-SS – Ordnungspolizei*, Berlin 2011; K. BENE, *A Nagy Károly hadosztály: a Waffen-SS francia önkénteseinek harcai a keleti hadszíntéren*, Pécs 2016; S. SORLIE, *Sonnenrad und Hakenkreuz. Norweger in der Waffen-SS 1941–1945*, Paderborn 2019.
- 9 W. SETZLER, Setzler Wilfried: Die NS-Zeit im Heimatbuch – ein weißer Fleck?, in: M. BEER (ed.), *Das Heimatbuch. Geschichte, Methodik, Wirkung*, Oldenburg 2010, pp. 203–220.

Somewhat more useful are the factual data: many of these works include photographs of SS soldiers, and sometimes the lists of war victims include a separate mention of those who served in the German army – but without any detailed explanation.

However, no work of greater volume has yet been written in Hungarian or in any other language, which would have presented the recruitments of the Waffen-SS in Hungary in detail, with a scientific approach, and with a focus on local aspects. We do not have such an analysis, either nationally or for a specific region. My study tries to fill this gap for the western part of the country.

The Region West-Hungary

Although West-Hungary as a region inhabited by a German minority was a common term in contemporary Hungarian and German terminology, it is worth explaining some details. West-Hungary refers primarily to the area near the Austrian (and from 1938 onwards German) border in the north-west of the country, i.e. the region of the city of Sopron. It includes parts of the counties of Pozsony, Győr, Moson, Sopron, Vas and Zala. The high number and proportion of the German population living in this area is well reflected in the native speakers' and nationality data of the official censuses, for example the data of the 1930 census, which can be seen in Table 1.¹⁰

Name of the district	Total population	German native speakers	%
District Magyaróvár (County Győr-Moson-Pozsony)	49.177	17.904	36%
District Sopron (County Sopron)	29.654	11.562	39%
District Szentgotthárd-Muraszombat (County Vas)	26.229	3.730	14%

Table 1. Number and proportion of native German speakers in the region in 1930

¹⁰ The source of the data is the statistical publication of the Royal Hungarian Central Statistical Office: Magyar Kir. Központi Statisztikai Hivatal (ed.), *Az 1930. évi népszámlálás. I. Rész. Demográfiai adatok községek és külterületi lakotthelyek szerint*, Budapest 1932, pp. 88–89, 110–111, 122–123.

As ethnic boundaries were not, by definition, adjusted to administrative divisions, district data often give an inaccurate picture of the true proportions of the population in areas with mixed populations. It is therefore also worth examining the data for individual settlements, Table 2 shows the 1941 data for some selected settlements from the region:¹¹

Municipality	Total population	German native speakers	%	German nationality ¹²	%
Ágfalva	2.541	2.306	90	2.205	86
Felsőrönök	819	768	93	706	86
Fertőrákos	3.745	3.472	92	2.304	61
Hegyeshalom	3.550	1.630	45	1.320	37
Kőszeg	10.320	1.555	15	406	4
Mosonszolnok	3.171	2.637	83	2.457	77
Rábafüzes	1.213	1.070	88	990	81
Sopron	42.255	12.633	29	7.698	18

Table 2. Number and proportion of native German speakers and nationalities in the settlements of the region in 1941

The presence of the German population and the preservation of their identity can also be examined in the light of other data in addition to official statistics, such as the number and activity of local groups of organisations founded by the Germans during the two world wars. In terms of the territorial division of German organisations operating in the country, the territory of Western Hungary was divided into four districts: Moson-vidéke (central town: Mosonmagyaróvár), Sopron, Szentgotthárd and Muraszombat.¹³ The Volksbund der Deutschen in Ungarn had local groups in 40 settlements in the region, and although this data does not give a reliable and representative picture of the location of the German

¹¹ Z. CZIBULKA (ed.), *A magyarországi németek kitelepítése és az 1941. évi népszámlálás*, Budapest 2001, pp. 300, 314, 322–323.

¹² Nationality in Hungary during the period was not understood to mean citizenship, but cultural-ethnic affiliation to a Hungarian or other minority group. This question was first asked in the 1941 national census.

¹³ B. BANK – S. ÖZE (eds.), *A "német ügy" 1945–1953. A Volksbundtól Tiszalökiig*, Budapest 2005, pp. 56–57.

minority in the region, it is nevertheless suitable for showing where self-conscious Germans who preserved their identity and mother tongue lived in the region. The Volksbund's presence is also of particular importance because of the important role played by the leaders of local groups in the Waffen-SS recruitment, as local sources mostly reveal.

A Short Historical Background – the Waffen-SS

There is a considerable amount of literature available on the history of the Waffen-SS, which cannot be covered in detail in this paper for reasons of space. Of particular relevance to my chosen topic is the aspect that the Waffen-SS membership grew dynamically in the 1930s, but this growth was mainly due to the recruitment of foreign citizens.

The history of the Waffen-SS is closely intertwined with the history of the National Socialist state. Although the name was only used in this form from 1939, the origins of the paramilitary formation go back many years. The Leibstandarte SS, Hitler's personal bodyguard, was created by Adolf Hitler's order in March 1933,¹⁴ and its first major action was to participate in the dismantling of the SA in 1934. This experience may have confirmed to the Reichsführer SS Heinrich Himmler that in the long term he could only consolidate his power by building up a strongarmed corps, and thus his efforts to turn the paramilitary corps into an organised, large army with heavy weapons can be observed throughout the 1930s.

However, the principle of voluntarism stood in the way: German citizens could only join the SS by voluntary application, and the conscription service, which was reintroduced in 1935, was not compulsory for all young people of military age, but for the Wehrmacht.¹⁵ The increasing preparations for war brought a change in this respect, in 1938. On 17 August 1938, a Hitler order, followed in May 1939 by an implementing decree, stipulated, among other things, that the SS could have artillery, merged the so-called Totenkopf corps and other smaller units, as well as the guard personnel of the concentration camps, and indicated that in the event of a possible outbreak of war, SS members would also have to take part in the armed conflicts.¹⁶

¹⁴ SORLIE, p. 34.

¹⁵ SEIDLER, p. 31.

¹⁶ B. WEGNER, Anmerkungen zur Geschichte der Waffen-SS aus organisations- und funktionsgeschichtlicher Sicht, in: R. D. MÜLLER – H. E. VOLKMANN HANS-ERICH (eds.), *Die Wehrmacht. Mythos und Realität*, München 1999, pp. 405–419, here p. 412.

However, the growth of the unit, which by then was officially known as the Waffen-SS, was still limited by the fact that even then it was only possible to volunteer, and volunteers had to meet several strict standards, both in terms of appearance and in terms of military and ideological training. The breakthrough came with the outbreak of the Second World War, with the Waffen-SS being the first to participate in the Western and Northern campaigns, and the participation of well-equipped and trained troops in the war proved to be a success.¹⁷ In addition, during the 1940 campaigns, the idea of recruiting racially equivalent ethnic groups, such as Swedes, Norwegians, Danes, Dutch and, in Belgium, Flemings, was also considered for the Waffen-SS.¹⁸ Separate divisions were created for the so-called “Germanic volunteers” (e.g. Wiking, Nordland), and their accession increased the Waffen-SS by some 50,000 men,¹⁹ but this still did not satisfy the leadership’s vision.

At the same time, in 1940, the Waffen-SS began to recruit a further, rather large group: the so-called “Volksdeutsche”, i.e. German minorities living in the states of Central and South-Eastern Europe. The first documented major attempt took place in Romania in June 1940, in the context of the 1000-men action. The location is not accidental: in addition to the large number of Germans in Romania and their ethnic consciousness, personal contacts probably played a more important role. Gottlob Berger, who headed the *Ergänzungsamt* of the Waffen-SS, was the father-in-law of Andreas Schmidt, the German ethnic group leader in Romania who organised the recruitments.²⁰ 1060 young people left the country without permission, some of whom were declared unfit during an inspection in Vienna, and the Romanian government’s protests caused diplomatic difficulties between the two countries.²¹

To avoid similar problems, the German state started diplomatic negotiations with the leaders of their allied states to legalise the recruitment of the German minority into the Waffen-SS. While the Romanian side was reluctant to do so, the Hungarian government proved more open to the possibility in 1942.

¹⁷ H. HÖHNE, *Der Orden unter dem Totenkopf. Die Geschichte der SS*, München 1976. p. 427.

¹⁸ WEALE, p. 266.

¹⁹ SORLIE, p. 47.

²⁰ WEALE, p. 266.

²¹ MILATA, pp. 67–69.

Recruitments for the Waffen-SS in Hungary

The recruitment and conscription actions carried out in Hungary for the Waffen-SS can be divided into three distinct waves: the illegal and voluntary conscription before 1942, the legal and voluntary recruitment actions from February 1942 until the occupation of Hungary on 19 March 1944, and the period of forced conscription from the spring of 1944.

Because of their illegal nature, we know very little about the actions before 1942, usually through complaints from the people concerned or their families. These accounts suggest a similar implementation to the 1000-man operation in Romania, but also question the voluntary nature of the applicants, since in most cases Hungarian citizens who minors at the time were actually misled into the Waffen-SS. Many were illegally transported out of the country for sporting competitions, or perhaps for work in the Herman-Göring-Werke in Germany,²² and only when abroad did they realise that they had in fact been taken as soldiers – those who refused to serve faced severe consequences, and their return to Hungary was also hindered or subject to sanctions for illegal border crossing.²³

However, the diplomatic tensions caused by such actions were also unpleasant for the German side in the longer term, and from 1941 steps were taken to legalise recruitment. The most important step in this process was the conclusion of a bilateral agreement, which came into force on 24 February 1942, for which Foreign Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop personally travelled to Budapest, and although a compromise solution was reached on many issues, he managed to reach an agreement with Prime Minister László Bárdossy on the recruitment of 20,000 ethnic Germans.²⁴

The agreement applied to men aged between 18 and 30, and parental consent was required for those under 24. By signing up, the volunteers lost their Hungarian citizenship and became citizens of the German Reich. The convention also contained provisions on financial support from Germany for family members who remained at home, compliance with which led to further conflicts in later years and stipulated that recruitment must be carried out without major media coverage. As a result of the first recruitments, about 25,000 people applied in the spring of

²² G. WILDMANN, *Donauschwäbische Geschichte. Die Tragödie der Selbstbehauptung im Wirkfeld des Nationalismus der Nachfolgestaaten 1918–1944*, München 2010, p. 179.

²³ M. FÜZES – K. WILD, *Babarc. A település története a római kortól a XX. század végéig*, Babarc 2008, pp. 161–164.

²⁴ SPANNENBERGER, p. 291.

1942, of whom about 18,000 were found suitable for the Waffen-SS.²⁵ It is worth noting that the number of volunteers in the first recruitment phase was well below German expectations.

Due to the high losses suffered by the German army, mainly on the Eastern Front, a new recruitment action was launched in Hungary in 1943, and a new agreement was signed on 22 May, raising the age limit for volunteers to 35. The new agreement left the question of the loss of Hungarian citizenship untouched, and the German side continued to provide financial support for family members.²⁶

The German invasion of Hungary on 19 March 1944 also opened a new chapter in the history of Waffen-SS recruitment, as from that time onwards the Hungarian political leadership had virtually no possibility to take a position on the issue. On 14 April, a new German-Hungarian agreement was signed, under which all the cohorts of 1894 and 1927 were obliged to enrol. Even men who had previously served in the Hungarian Army had to be delivered to the Waffen-SS. If they were considered ethnic Germans based on their origin and way of life (decided by local committees, which included representatives of the local administration as well as Volksbund leaders), they were handed over to the Waffen-SS even against their will. There was a great deal of abuse in the execution of the forced conscription, with many of those who were rounded up trying to evade their obligation to register, even under the threat of severe punishment. Nevertheless, by September 1944, a further 55,000 people had been recruited into the Waffen-SS.²⁷

Since in the western part of the country, which the Soviet Red Army did not reach until April 1945, men were still being transferred to German units after that date, the actual number was probably even higher.

Waffen-SS Recruitments in Western Hungary before 1944

Immediately after the bilateral agreement of 1942 came into force in February, recruitment campaigns for the Waffen-SS began in the country. However, neither the number of volunteers nor their physical condition met the expectations of the German side: during the 52-day recruitment campaign, a total of 25,706 people volunteered, but only 7,566 of them

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 292.

²⁶ Bundesarchiv, Militärarchiv Freiburg, RW5 Amt Ausland/Abwehr Gruppe VI/Ausland VI (Kriegsvölkerrechtsfragen), p. 30.

²⁷ SPANNENBERGER, p. 381.

proved to be suitable according to the strict rules of the Waffen-SS. A further 10,294 were found in German documents to have met Wehrmacht requirements and were in all likelihood also taken to German units.²⁸

The German data also include data on the number of applicants from which region and the number of those who were found to be suitable, by their own regional division. The popularity of the Waffen-SS was clearly greatest in the Batschka region (Southern Hungary, former Yugoslavia), where 12,868 people applied and 9,416 were found suitable.²⁹ The enthusiasm in the region is attributed by the German authorities organising the action and by literature in general to the organisation of the Kulturbund in the former Yugoslavian territory and therefore to the more self-conscious attitude of the local German population.³⁰ Although we do not intend to refute this idea, it is important to point out that the area known in German terminology as Batschka included several settlements that were part of Hungary after the Trianon borders were drawn, but that the number of applications in these settlements was as high as in those, which belonged to the former Yugoslavia, and where the Kulturbund had been very active in the preceding years.

In the region known as West-Hungary, German sources documented 2,044 applications, of which 1,121 were assessed by local recruitment committees. While this may not seem to be a particularly high number, it is also worth bearing in mind that this German settlement area was geographically and in terms of population considerably smaller than other German regions in Hungary, such as the so-called “Schwäbische Türkei”³¹ and the German settlement area around Budapest, where enthusiasm for the Waffen-SS was much lower.

For a more accurate picture, it is worth examining the Hungarian sources on this – although the comparison is complicated by the fact that the Hungarian side used a different territorial division, namely the division according to the gendarmerie districts. However, these sources do provide data on the number of applicants per settlement, and docu-

²⁸ J. BEER, *Donauschwäbische Zeitgeschichte aus erster Hand*, München 1987, p. 182; KOVÁCS – SZÁMVÉBER, <https://mek.oszk.hu/05000/05002/html/>; SPANNENBERGER, p. 292.

²⁹ KOVÁCS – SZÁMVÉBER, <https://mek.oszk.hu/05000/05002/html/>.

³⁰ SPANNENBERGER, p. 292.

³¹ The term dates to the 18th century, when the south-western part of the Kingdom of Hungary was unofficially called “Schwäbische Türkei”, which was formerly an Ottoman occupation area, then became a major destination for German settlers in the 18th century and is still the largest contiguous German settlement area in the country.

ment the 1942 spring action in two parts, the first report being made on 28 February, the second at the end of the action. This gives a more detailed insight into where the number of Waffen-SS recruits was immediately high. The territory of West-Hungary was divided into two gendarmerie districts, Nos. II and III, although it is important to note that the former also included other German settlement areas (Bakony, Vértes), so it is primarily the data per settlement that is worth examining.

In the gendarmerie district II, 1,414 people had registered by 28 February, 464 of them from 11 municipalities in the region I studied.³² In contrast, the applicants in district III all belong to the region, with 519 people from 7 municipalities by the end of February. These figures are again interesting when compared with other regions: in the gendarmerie district I, which included the large German settlement area around Budapest, a total of 750 people from 31 municipalities registered at that time. The number of volunteers from the gendarmery district IV, which included the counties of Baranya, Somogy and Tolna – i.e. the largest German settlement area in the country – was 841 from 34 municipalities. The number of applications per settlement in the western region is strikingly high in several cases, for example, 130 applications were received from Rajka with 2,932 inhabitants, 135 from Sopronbánfalva with 3,391 inhabitants,³³ 130 from Fertőrákos with 3,745 inhabitants, etc. Such a high number of applications was not typical in the municipalities with similar population sizes in the municipalities around the capital and in the South Transdanubian region.

In the weeks following the first report, the number of applicants in the region did not increase significantly, while the intensive agitation in Baranya and Tolna resulted in an additional 1,454 applications. In Western Hungary, however, there was apparently no need for this, as those who were open to it indicated their intention to join the Waffen-SS almost immediately.

We do not have similarly detailed figures for the 1943 recruitment, so it is questionable whether the enthusiasm continued. In this respect, there are references in the contemporary German press in Hungary, which suggest that the participation of the West-Hungarians in the war was

³² KOVÁCS – SZÁMVÉBER, <https://mek.oszk.hu/05000/05002/html/>.

³³ Magyar Nemzeti Levéltár Győr-Moson-Sopron Megyei Levéltára – Soproni Levéltár (hereinafter MNL GYSML SL), V, 48, Documents of the municipality Sopronbánfalva, 91, D.

considered exemplary in the period 1942/1943. The *Deutsche Zeitung*, published by the leaders of the Volksbund organisation, and the weekly newspaper *Deutscher Volksbote – Wochenblatt für Kultur, Politik und Wirtschaft*, regularly published articles about the Waffen SS, and especially about the German men from Hungary who served in it, from 1942 onwards. Heroic-style accounts of the medals they got, or eulogies for the fallen heroic dead, were a regular feature. The *Volksbote* became a regular column in which letters home were published under the title *Stimme der Front* (Voice of the Front), or photographs of soldiers serving in the SS were published under the title *Unsere Söhne im Felde* (Our Sons in the Field), in which they were briefly introduced. Since these articles also indicated the soldiers' area of origin, the West-Hungarian region is mentioned quite often.

The articles also show that Sopron became a special place where the Germans held sporting events,³⁴ where Dr. Franz Anton Basch, the leader of the Volksbund, sent off a group of SS-units in 1943,³⁵ or where wounded German soldiers were sent to recover.³⁶ And the first issue of the newspaper in 1943 clearly referred to the exemplary sacrifices made by the village of Ágfalva, where about 10 percent of the 2,000 or so German inhabitants volunteered for the Waffen-SS.³⁷ The exact numbers are not known, but the applications in Ágfalva also caused a stir locally, as contrary to the picture given by the German newspapers, some of the local population were reluctant to apply. This has sometimes led to conflicts in local communities, as illustrated by another case in Ágfalva. On 28 April 1942, the Győr prosecutor's office initiated proceedings against several local residents. In the case of one of them, for example, the accusation was as follows: "...when on 6 March 1942, in György Hammer's grocery store, Mrs Mátyás Läger, referring to András Holldonner's son-in-law, told him that András Holldonner's son-in-law had not registered as a German soldier because he was a Hungarian soldier; the suspect replied, 'if he was a Hungarian soldier, he was shit'."³⁸

Other sources also indicate that the men in the village who did not join the German troops were thrown out by the community. For example, on 10 April 1946, Mihály Garádi, who had previously changed his name to Hungarian, reported that he had served in the Hungarian army for

³⁴ *Deutscher Volksbote – Wochenblatt für Kultur, Politik und Wirtschaft* (hereinafter *Deutscher Volksbote*), April 23, 1943, p. 5.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, October 22, 1943, p. 6.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, August 6, 1943, p. 4.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, January 1, 1943, p. 6.

³⁸ MNL-GYMSML-SL, V, 2, Documents of the municipality Ágfalva 1209/1942.

28 months, and was persecuted in the village for this, especially after the German occupation.³⁹ For example, the local Mihály Sík reported that as a Hungarian barber he could no longer go to the pub because he was threatened that “*in the case of a Hitler victory, I would be taken away with the rest of my comrades locked in a box*”.⁴⁰

The German ethnic group leadership was thus clearly satisfied with the West-Hungarian region and tried to set an example for other regions. The early openness of the local population to the Waffen-SS played an important role in this. The large amount of press material on the subject is surprising, however, since in the 1942 bilateral agreement the Hungarian side had requested the exclusion of the press from recruitment campaigns. It is questionable why the Hungarian authorities nevertheless tolerated the continued presence of Waffen-SS volunteers in virtually every issue of the newspaper. Indeed, on occasion, the Hungarian censorship did indeed prohibit certain content in publications aimed at the German minority. For example, the 1944 yearbook of the German youth organisation *Deutsche Jugend* (German Youth) in Hungary did not allow the publication of certain quotations from the camp post, nor did it allow the publication of several articles glorifying Germany, the German people and Hitler, or encouraging people to join the German army, on the grounds that their “*excessive patronage was offensive from a Hungarian point of view*”.⁴¹

As for the Western region, it is questionable what the reason for the keen interest in Waffen-SS recruitment was. There are probably complex reasons behind this. The most obvious of these is the geographical location of the region, namely its proximity to the western border: the region was in the immediate vicinity of Austria after Trianon and of Hitler’s Third Reich after the Anschluss in 1938. Although the peace treaties following the First World War drew artificial borders in the region, they could not do away with the centuries-old traditional cohesion of the region on both sides of the border. The population here had close family, economic, commercial and employment ties with those on the western side of the border, and it is likely that from the 1930s onwards the transfer of ideology, propaganda, culture and political ideas was also more intense here than in other German minority areas of Hungary.

³⁹ Ibid., 66, D.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 593.

⁴¹ Politisches Archiv des Auswärtiges Amtes – Deutsches Reich Zentrale (hereinafter PA AA – DRZ), RZ 214, Referat D/Abteilung Inland, 100400, pp. 15–27.

It is also worth referring to the arguments that have been put forward for other settlement areas. The financial support promised by Germany to the families of Waffen-SS soldiers was certainly attractive to the sons of rural, often poor, farming families. In addition, SS propaganda had for years been geared to portraying the Waffen-SS as a military elite unit where better equipment, training, uniforms and care awaited volunteers – i.e. better chances of survival. The fact that the volunteers were divided between a wide variety of divisions, so that, unlike Hungarian soldiers, members of German units had some chance of not being sent to the Eastern Front, should not be neglected.

However, the improved chances of survival were mainly misinformation from SS propaganda, and the current state of research calls into question the previously widespread notion that the Waffen-SS was some kind of military elite.⁴² Although it is difficult to find any metrics for this, it was mostly underlined by the fact that they suffered higher losses at the front, which could be related to their fanatical fighting style and their more modest officer training compared to the Wehrmacht – and the motivation for volunteering was hardly to be assigned to a unit with high losses. Although there are no definite figures available on how many of the Germans from Hungary were killed, in 1962 the German tracing service compiled a database on the number of killed and missing soldiers per settlement based on the available sources, the part of which for the region is given in Table 3:⁴³

Municipality	Missing (German)	Fallen (German)	Missing (Hungarian)	Fallen (Hungarian)
Alsórönök	14	17	2	3
Balf	31	75	13	6
Gyórsövényháza	13	31	4	10
Mosonszentjános	140	63	17	33
Mosonszentpéter	51	83	11	17
Sopronbánfalva	53	100	20	18

Table 3. Data from the so-called Heimatortskartei on the number of Hungarian soldiers and German soldiers killed and missing in action during the war (1962)

⁴² WEGNER, p. 414.

⁴³ K. ZAHLECKER, Aus der Arbeit der Heimatortskartei, in: *Unser Hauskalender. Jahrbuch der Ungarndeutschen*, Ostfildern 1962, pp. 62–64.

It is worth noting that the data was considered almost completely reliable at the time, as the search services worked with a wide variety of sources. Nevertheless, it is not a complete record, but it does show that, in relative terms, the casualties of those who went from the western region to become German soldiers were significantly higher than those who served in the Hungarian Honvéd Army. However, this data is of little value, as we do not have precise data on the total number of men who served in each corps. In any case, the better survival chances are highly questionable in the light of these figures.

Many may have volunteered out of a sense of adventure or in the hope of faster promotion – career opportunities in the Waffen-SS were even faster than in the German Wehrmacht.⁴⁴ It cannot be excluded that some volunteers were motivated by antipathy towards the Hungarian army, and sometimes faced discrimination due to their lack of knowledge of the Hungarian language.⁴⁵

In the case of Hungary, the decision may have been helped by the fact that the country entered the war in a German alliance, so they were essentially fighting the “same” war as their Hungarian compatriots, and the choice of German troops was not as serious a dilemma as it was for the ethnic Germans from Yugoslavia, who could have been confronted by their own neighbours and acquaintances on the battlefield. In listing all these arguments, it is not intended to diminish the importance of volunteering, in many cases obviously motivated by racial and ideological considerations, the desire to fight Bolshevism, or the anti-Semitic convictions of some, but it is important to note that the complex motivations of individuals remain to be explored. In practice, the post-1945 image that volunteers decided to join the German forces out of national socialist sentiment is still widespread.

In the case of the West-Hungary region, in addition to the general motivations, it is worth pointing out a few local specificities. Although it is customary to consider the large part of the German minority living within the borders of Hungary after Trianon as a homogeneous group, its members belong to the so-called “Danube Swabians”, i.e. they were brought to the country during the settlements and resettlements of the

⁴⁴ WEGNER, p. 408.

⁴⁵ J. GSTALTER – P. HARTON – A. HIPPICH – K. J. LODERER (eds.), *Zweites Bácsalmáser (Batschalmáser) Heimatbuch. Aufsätze und Photos zur Geschichte und Kulturgeschichte*, Backnang 1990, p. 228; J. AMENT, *Es geht alles vorüber, es geht alles vorbei. Das Schicksal der Deutschen aus Elek in Ungarn. Dokumentation*, Sinsheim 2015, p. 61.

18th century after the expulsion of the Ottoman invaders. Although there were considerable differences within the group, even from one settlement to another, in terms of origin, dialect and customs, they formed a homogeneous group, which was reinforced by the fact that they were uniformly called “Swabians”⁴⁶ in the Kingdom of Hungary.

However, some of the Germans living along the western border did not belong to this group, as they had lived in the region since the Middle Ages but retained their distinct identities until the 20th century. The so-called “hienz,”⁴⁷ “poncichter”⁴⁸ and “heidebauers”⁴⁹ were small groups, but they preserved and were proud of their different historical roots. The latter group in particular has been traced back to the Carolingian period, i.e. they arrived in the Carpathian Basin earlier than the conquering Hungarians.⁵⁰ A specific formulation of this can be found in the local monography of Hegyeshalom in West Germany, whose author claims nothing less than that the Germans living along the western border actually played a major role in taming the nomadic Hungarians who came to the region and winning them over to Western, Christian values.⁵¹ The different identity may also have played a role in the SS actions: since the Germans living here always tried to emphasise their own distinctness and older origins than other German groups in the other parts of the Kingdom of Hungary. It can be assumed that in the early 1940s this factor also played a part in their being particularly open to showing their commitment to the “motherland”. The encouragement of voluntary enrolment in the Waffen-SS also provided an excellent opportunity within the German community to give a clear signal of attachment to Germanness.

⁴⁶ Even though a significant number of them were not actually Swabians, but Franks, Bavarians, Alsations, Tyroleans, Rhinelanders, etc. The word “Swabian” is a collective term that includes all these groups and has been used in a highly pejorative way in certain historical periods.

⁴⁷ This term is used for the German population in the counties Vas and Sopron, with the centre in the town of Kőszeg.

⁴⁸ Name for a part of the German population living in and around the city of Sopron. The name comes from the term bean grower (Bohnenzüchter), because these people also grew beans in their wine cellars.

⁴⁹ Name of the German minority on the Heideboden (Hungarian Fertő).

⁵⁰ R. KLEINER, *St. Johann, St. Peter am Heideboden: Geschichte deutscher Gemeinden in Ungarn*, Donnerskirchen 1982, p. 10; R. DRESCHER, *Kaltenstein, ein Gemeinwesen des Heidebodens*, Scheinfeld 1983, p. 25.

⁵¹ J. NITSCH (ed.), *Straß-Sommereiner Heimatbuch*, Amberg 1968, p. 30.

In the case of the western region, another important factor was the events of the preceding decades: the peace treaties ending the First World War, the new borders, the detachment of Burgenland to Austria and the referendum in Sopron in 1921. Although the 1921 referendum is clearly seen in a positive context in Hungarian historical literature and public consciousness, and Sopron was awarded the title of *civitas fidelissima* (i.e. the most loyal city), the perception of the vote from the point of view of those involved is far from clear when looking at the results and the aftermath of the vote. In fact, the results of the referendum showed that a large part of the local population wanted to join Austria. Of the 26,879 eligible voters, 24,063 participated in the referendum, of whom 8,227 (34.9%) voted for Austria and 15,334 (65.1%) for Hungary.⁵² While in Sopron nearly 73% of the votes went to Hungary, in the villages of Ágfalva, Harka, Fertőrákos, Balf and Sopronbánfalva a clear majority of the population voted for joining Austria.

One symbolic memento of this is the monument erected in Ágfalva in 2002, which records that 82.2% of the population of the village wanted to join Austria.⁵³ Local historical works published by in 1946 displaced Germans also often present the Sopron referendum result as a catastrophe,⁵⁴ which also questions whether the picture in the Hungarian historical narrative is truly representative of the views of the local population. The opinion of the ethnic Germans, who were forced to experience the hardships of deportation to Germany afterwards, should of course be treated critically, but there are indications that discontent was already present in the period.

In the summer of 1939, for example, the Hungarian Royal Prosecutor's Office in Győr brought a case against Hungarian citizen Karl Koczor and 12 of his associates for treason, accusing them of conspiring to forcibly subjugate the towns of Kőszeg, Sopron and Szentgotthárd to the German Reich in March and April of that year. According to the indictment, the execution would have started with the lighting of a wooden swastika in Kőszeg on Adolf Hitler's birthday on 19 April. The organisers had

⁵² Z. HORVÁTH, *Civitas Fidelissima. (Új Velencétől a soproni népszavazás magyar sikeréig)*, in: É. TURBULY, *Magyarok maradtunk" 1921–1996*, Sopron 1997, pp. 19–52, here p. 46.

⁵³ See the monument's online page on the Hungarian public art portal "Köztérkép": Ágfalvi csaták és a soproni népszavazás emlékműve 2002, <https://www.kozterkep.hu/13120/agfalvi-csatak-es-a-soproni-nepszavazas-emlekmuve> [2024–01–30].

⁵⁴ KLEINER, p. 76; DRESCHER, pp. 52–55.

promised the participants as early as the spring of 1939 that they would be placed in SS groups after the German invasion – and the document suggests that this promise was already attractive to many at the time.⁵⁵

Like the defendants, Franz Ferdinand May, a resident of Sopron, was also recruited into the Waffen-SS in protest the referendum in Sopron. May also came to the attention of the Hungarian authorities for a crime. On 12 February 1939, Prime Minister Béla Imrédy wished to visit Sopron, both to find a local chapter of the Magyar Élet Mozgalom (Hungarian Life Movement) and to take part in the commemorative celebrations of the City of Loyalty. May and his companions started to organise a counter-action, planning to disrupt the celebrations and distribute four different leaflets in the city the night before the celebrations, but were exposed and arrested by the Hungarian police. May was sentenced to six months in prison at first, but later to three years, by which time the young man had crossed the border and joined the Waffen-SS “Wiking” division as an artilleryman.⁵⁶

Although such cases cannot be considered representative, they do show that the drawing of the Trianon borders and the results of the referendum in Sopron caused discontent among a part of the German population living in the region, which sometimes even led to activities that could even escalate to violence. And for those who got into trouble in this way, crossing the border illegally and voluntarily joining the Waffen-SS was a potential way out, which was also a possible, though not typical, motivation for joining the German forces.

Waffen-SS Conscription in West-Hungary from 1944

The sources of the forced SS conscriptions carried out from the spring of 1944 onwards are very different from those of the earlier actions. While the voluntary enlistments were mainly informed by contemporaneous sources, but were completely concealed by the people involved afterwards, the 1944 conscriptions were the subject of many ex post sources, in which the veterans who were forced into the SS against their will reported themselves how they came to be in the German units.

This was done primarily with the aim of obtaining exemptions from various sanctions. Thus, before the People’s Courts, established by Decree

⁵⁵ Z. VITÁRI, *Volksbund és ifjúság. dokumentumok a magyarországi német ifjúság történetéből 1925–1944*, Pécs 2015, pp. 581–582.

⁵⁶ PA AA – DRZ, RZ 214 Referat D/Abteilung Inland 101021, pp. 59–60.

of the Prime Minister No 81/1945 ME of 5 February 1945, one of the most common charges was that of war crimes, mainly against men returning from the front who had served in German units. Membership of the Waffen-SS was also a heavy burden during the expulsion to Germany, and many former SS soldiers also tried to prove before the preparatory committees that they had been taken as German soldiers against their will. Such sources were created in a special, threatened situation, so the veracity of the testimonies is questionable, but the accounts do give us some idea of the recruitment process in Western Hungary in the last months of the Second World War. It is important to note here that, since Waffen-SS service became a serious stigma from 1945 onwards, the narratives that have emerged in the community since then have almost exclusively been those that portray the whole process as forced conscription.

However, the coercive nature of the 1944 recruitment sometimes obscures the fact that some of those conscripted that year may have been firstly fit for military service because of their age and volunteered to join the German forces. Although the approach of the front and the war situation in Hungary probably dampened the enthusiasm of the population by this time, there were some who wanted to support the defence of their country and the stopping of the Soviet Red Army with their personal military involvement. One example is András Komáromi from Ikervár, who confessed in a report recorded with him on 19 May 1945 that he had voluntarily joined the SS on 18 December 1944, “*because he was convinced that the Red Army must be crushed*”.⁵⁷ Another interesting fact about his person is that, according to the documents of the trial, he – and several other Ikervar comrades, listed by name in the trial – did not enter the SS as “ethnic Germans”, but as Hungarian members of the Hunyadi Panzer Division, which was formed at the end of 1944.

Among the expulsion documents of the village of Ágfalva, there are several accounts of people or family members who tried to obtain exemption on the grounds that they had served in the Hungarian army. In several cases, the Hungarian authorities subsequently wrote on the documents containing the confessions that the person had been “SS”, suggesting that many of them had tried to avoid their expulsion to Germany by making false confessions.

⁵⁷ Magyar Nemzeti Levéltár Vas Megyei Levéltára (hereinafter MNL VML), XXV3, A szombathelyi népbíróság iratai, Documents of the People’s Court in Szombathely, 92/1945.

Some of the more fortunate men were even confirmed by local parties and organisations. For example, on 10 April 1946, the Social Democratic Party of Ágfalva certified its former member, János Hartner, that he had gone to Szombathely as a Hungarian soldier after 1938, and even persuaded several local residents to join the Hungarian Army and thus escape SS restrictions.⁵⁸ Other locals did not succeed in this, including, according to his wife's testimony, Mihály Nolz, who had also been a Hungarian soldier from 1938, but in the summer of 1944 German soldiers captured him in the village and told him that he had to join them. On 7 April András Földesi claimed that during the 1944 action, the gendarmes forced him to join the conscription committee with a bayonet, so the only way he could express his protest was to lay down his weapon "at the first opportunity".⁵⁹ The same was the case with János Huber, who, according to his wife's testimony, had served in the Hungarian Army since 1932, but was discharged on 11 August 1944 and returned home, where he was taken away as a German soldier in September 1944, with a gendarmerie escort, despite all his protests.⁶⁰ Huber did not return home, his wife knew no more about him, and she was left alone with her four children, without property or a wage earner. However, the Hungarian authorities were probably not softened by these reports, because the documents of Nolz, Földesi and Huber also bear the inscription that they were German soldiers.

A recurring element in the accounts of the villages of Ágfalva and Sopronbánfalva is that in 1944 the men at home were taken to the Germans by gendarmes, despite their protests. However, there were also several references to the fact that those who joined the Hungarian army were sometimes able to evade German conscription, so this proved to be a possible way out. For example, Nándor Steinwenger from Sopronbánfalva, who refused to go to the SS conscription, joined the Hungarian army instead.⁶¹

Others, having been called up by the Germans, chose to flee or go into hiding, such as several residents of Fertőrákos. József Adler, for example, reported on 20 April 1946 that he had defied the SS summons and hid on the Fertő swamps until the arrival of the Soviet army. During this time,

⁵⁸ MNL GYMSML SL, V, 2, 66, D.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 651.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ MNL GYMSML SL, V. 48. 414–417.

his wife was threatened several times that if she did not tell where her husband was, she would be taken away and would never see the village again.⁶² János Rákosi, who had previously the surname Pfarkirchner, also went into hiding in the swamps of the Fertő because his son had been called up by the SS. While they were away, the SS took all their cattle.⁶³

In addition to the gendarmes, other local people were also accused of taking an active role in the conduct of the conscription. During the trial of József Frankl in Alsószölnök, locals accused him, among other things, of encouraging local men to join the SS and threatening those who refused with the German authorities.⁶⁴ The accusation was that he was a leader of the local Volksbund, who in 1944 wrote a list of those to be drafted into the SS, and that because there were not enough members of the Volksbund, he arbitrarily enrolled local Hungarians.

A similar accusation was made against István Skroper of Felsőszölnök, who was accused of being a Volksbund secretary, but who, according to his own statement, only joined the Volksbund because he had rented land in Austria and the Volksbund leader claimed that only members could cross the border.⁶⁵ According to local testimonies, Skroper organised the local SS conscription in a rather peculiar way: *“The way they did it was that those they were angry with were simply registered as SS soldiers. A list of Volksbundists was compiled.”*⁶⁶

Also, in Pornóapáti, the issue of SS conscriptions was attributed to István Rosner, the founder of the local Volksbund. One witness said that Rosner had been aggressive even when the Volksbund was founded, threatening anyone who refused to join with hanging.⁶⁷ In Felsőrönök, a “Volksbundist teacher”, a certain Hoffmann, was accused of the same by the local conscripts.⁶⁸

The testimonies given before courts and commissions paint a rather chaotic picture of the 1944 conscription phase in the region, with most people taken away by German soldiers against their will. Although certain escape strategies emerge, such as hiding or even enlisting in Hungarian units, these were not always feasible. There are also indications that,

⁶² Ibid., 20, Documents of the municipality Fertőrákos, 2533–2535.

⁶³ Ibid., 1665–1668.

⁶⁴ MNL VaML, XXV 3, 52/1945.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 366/1945.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 375/1945.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 160/1945.

although by the end of 1944 it may have seemed clear that the war was lost, there were pro-German individuals who were prepared to hand over the local population to the German military.

Of course, the context in which the ex-post sources were obtained must also be considered when examining them – most of the confessions were made by defendants who were facing years in prison, loss of property and civil rights, and in some cases the death penalty. In this situation, there is a clear intention to excuse oneself, even at the cost of false statements about having been voluntarily, coerced or deceived into the German forces. It is also clear from the records that the issue of SS conscription, both during the voluntary period and during the forced conscription, was a major divisive factor in the region and played a significant role in disrupting the solidarity and cohesion of local society.

An equally important aspect of the issue is that some of the SS-soldiers, many of the older cohorts conscripted in 1944, were not sent to the front, but to the extermination and concentration camps as personnel. It is also important to underline that the fact of forced recruitment does not absolve those involved from responsibility. In the database of the Institute of National Remembrance in Poland, I was able to identify 322 people from Hungary who served as guards at Auschwitz, of whom 46 have court records available.⁶⁹ In the Dachau trials between 1945 and 1948, 5 defendants were listed as Hungarian.⁷⁰ Among the former camps, I received further feedback from the archives of Buchenwald, Sachsenhausen and Mauthausen about guards of Hungarian origin – for the other camps I received no replies either, only information about the lack of documents. Further research will therefore be necessary in this area.

Aftermath

From the end of the Second World War, the German minority in Hungary was subjected to collective persecution. The legal basis for this was provided by a series of government decrees: Hungary had already committed itself to the internment of German citizens living on its territory in the

⁶⁹ The database can be found here: <https://truthaboutcamps.eu/th/form/60,Zaloga-SS-KL-Auschwitz.html> [2024-01-11]. It is important to note that for a large proportion of the guard staff, place of birth and residence are not given, so the actual number may be much higher.

⁷⁰ For the list of the trials see <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/dachau-war-crimes-trials> [2024-01-11]. The accused from Hungary: Nikolaus Wolf, Stefan Fleischer, Johann Hack, Joseph Huhn and Josef Jeisel.

armistice agreement signed in Moscow on 20 January 1945.⁷¹ This was followed by Prime Ministerial Decree 81/1945 of 25 January 1945 on the People's Courts,⁷² which, in addition to members of right-wing parties, passed severe sentences mainly on former Waffen-SS soldiers and Volksbund members, i.e. members of the German minority. At next the Prime Ministerial Decree No. 302/1945 of 27 February 1945 on the internment of Germans,⁷³ followed by Prime Ministerial Decree No. 600/1945 of 17 March 1945 on land reform,⁷⁴ decided that members of the German minority were to be deprived of their citizenship and the rights that went with it, and their land and houses confiscated, and were to continue living in a few houses in the villages designated for this purpose, generally in common with a lot of other families.

To settle the "German question" once and for all, on 29 December 1945 the Parliament adopted Prime Ministerial Decree No. 12.330/1945 on the resettlement of the Hungarian Germans to Germany.⁷⁵ According to this decree, those who had declared themselves to be of German mother tongue or German nationality in the last census of 1941, members of the Volksbund, members of the German units (Waffen-SS) and those who had changed their Hungarian surname to German had to leave the country permanently, together with their families. Execution took place between 1946 and 1948, and some 185,000 people had to leave their homeland. The decrees show that one of the most important factors in the collective punishment was former membership of the Waffen-SS – whether the person concerned had volunteered or had been conscripted under coercion.

Because of the strict sanctions, it has become in the vital interest of former SS soldiers in Hungary to keep silent about their past. Even the political regime changes of the 1990s did not change this, in Hungarian sources former SS soldiers only mentioned forced conscription, in the

⁷¹ Act V of 1945 on the ratification of the armistice agreement concluded in Moscow on 20 January 1945, <https://net.jogtar.hu/jogszabaly?docid=94500005.tv> [2024-01-29].

⁷² Prime Ministerial Decree No 81/1945 on the People's Courts, https://jogkodex.hu/jsz/1945_81_me_rendelet_9334301 [2024-01-29].

⁷³ Á. TÓTH, *Telepítések Magyarországon 1945–1948 között. A németek kitelepítése, a belső népmozgások és a szlovák-magyar lakosságcsere összefüggései*, Kecskemét 1993, p. 25.

⁷⁴ Prime Ministerial Decree No 17600/1945 on the abolition of the large landed property system and the land distribution of the peasantry, https://jogkodex.hu/jsz/1945_600_me_rendelet_1867470 [2024-01-29].

⁷⁵ Decree of the Prime Minister 12330/1945 on the resettlement of the German population of Hungary to Germany, https://jogkodex.hu/jsz/1945_12330_me_rendelet_3796854 [2024-01-29].

ex-documents voluntary reporting appears at most in the form of talking about other – usually unnamed – persons. This did not allow those concerned to face the past and process the events and made research extremely difficult.

The topic is also rare in the publications of the expelled Germans from Hungary, but the few exceptions are interesting because they sometimes present a rather specific interpretation of the past. To interpret this, however, it is important to briefly discuss the social context.

In Germany, after 1945, membership of the Waffen-SS also became a stigma, and the Nuremberg trials – after lengthy debates – saw the Waffen-SS collectively responsible as a war criminal organisation, which also meant the withdrawal of social benefits for veterans.⁷⁶ This and their shared wartime experiences soon led the ex-SS-men to seek each other's company again, and to defend their interests they founded first regional and then a national organisation in 1951, the *Hilfsgemeinschaft auf Gegenseitigkeit der Angehörigen der ehemaligen Waffen-SS e. V.* (HIAG for short). The organisation organised joint events and was also active in publishing, mainly war memoirs.⁷⁷ In this, a particular interpretation of the past could be observed, in which some elements of the former National Socialist propaganda were also present: the emphasis on the international character of the Waffen-SS, the interpretation of the war as a common struggle against Bolshevism, and the portrayal of the Waffen-SS as a military elite.⁷⁸ The latter was also often contradictory, as another typical argument was that the Waffen-SS was a simple military formation no different from the German Wehrmacht – the latter argument was often supported by a quote from Konrad Adenauer that Waffen-SS members were “Soldaten wie andere auch” (Soldiers like others).⁷⁹

A similar process began in Austria in the 1950s, where the rebuilding of a veterans' network began in commemoration of the German (and allied)

⁷⁶ K. WILKE, *Die Waffen-SS. Deutungsmuster der „Hilfsgemeinschaft auf Gegenseitigkeit“ (HIAG) und andere Apologien*, in: M. LANGEBACH – M. STURM (eds.), *Erinnerungsorte der extremen Rechten*, Wiesbaden 2015, pp. 157–175, here p. 161.

⁷⁷ K. WILKE, *Die „Hilfsgemeinschaft auf Gegenseitigkeit“ (HIAG) 1950–1990. Veteranen der Waffen-SS in der Bundesrepublik*, Paderborn 2011, p. 51.

⁷⁸ SEIDLER, p. 6.

⁷⁹ J. WESTERMEIER, „Soldaten wie andere auch!“ Der Einfluss von SS-Veteranen auf die öffentliche Wahrnehmung der Waffen-SS, in: J. E. SCHULTE – M. WILDT (eds.), *Die SS nach 1945. Entschuldungsnarrative, populäre Mythen, europäische Erinnerungsdiskurse*, Göttingen 2018, pp. 269–288, here p. 271.

victims of the Second World War.⁸⁰ One of the main organisers of this was the Kameradschaft-IV, which essentially covered the veterans of the Waffen-SS (the IV in the name refers to the fact that the Waffen-SS was the fourth branch of the Wehrmacht, alongside the Luftwaffe, the Heer and the Kriegsmarine). In 1953 the Ulrichsberggemeinschaft was founded, which organised annual international meetings for German veterans of the Second World War until 2017. Over time, these events have become increasingly marked by the participation of far-right organisations and political forces, particularly the Austrian FPÖ party, whose former leader Jörg Haider has repeatedly held speeches at the Ulrichsberg memorial.⁸¹ The spirit of the events was similar to that of the HIAG: internationalism, rejection of Bolshevism and restoration of the soldiers' honour were central themes.

There is no clear evidence that the Waffen-SS veterans who were expelled from Hungary to Germany were actively involved in the activities of the HIAG, but some of their publications show strong parallels with the spirit of it. To illustrate this, I will quote at length from just one item which illustrates this phenomenon. One of the most extreme examples is Michael Schlichter's article 1957 *Volkskalender der Deutschen aus Ungarn*:

*"We and those in charge of our people at the front soon realised that this struggle against the East was not about a political ideology, but about existence, about the survival or destruction of Western culture in the East and South-East, which had been pioneered and defended for centuries by the Germans living here. It was therefore our duty – and this should be emphasised here in particular – as Germans, alongside the Reich and other ethnic Germans, to defend the homeland and freedom, the god-fearing religion and culture, against the rotteness of Bolshevism, which knows no faith or freedom. The way we have gone has not been a wrong way, but a sacrifice we have owed to our country and our people."*⁸²

In his writing, Schlichter reiterates several elements that were often found in German propaganda of the 1930s and 1940s, as well as in the works of SS veterans: the common struggle of the ethnic Germans and the Reichswehr for survival, the radical rejection of Bolshevism, which was

⁸⁰ P. VERGÖRER, *Grenzen liberaler Demokratie am Beispiel der Kameradschaft IV und der Zeitung „Die Kameradschaft“*, Dissertation, Innsbruck 1995, p. 45.

⁸¹ W. FANTA – V. SIMA, „Stehst mitten drin im Land“. *Das europäische Kameradentreffen auf dem Kärntner Ulrichsberg von seinen Anfängen bis zu Gegenwart*, Klagenfurt 2003, p. 61.

⁸² M. SCHLICHTER, *Waffen-SS. Irrweg oder Opfergang unseres Volkes?*, in: *Volkskalender der Deutschen aus Ungarn*, München 1957, p. 36.

equated with the defence of culture, homeland, freedom and religion. All this in 1957, at a time when West German society, including the exiles in Hungary, might have been particularly open to this representation after the brutal Soviet crushing of the 1956 revolution.

In Schlichter's article, there are several topos that refer to the spirit of the HIAG. Whether this is the result of genuine links requires further research.

The same is the case with the Ulrichsberggemeinschaft, where the expellees from Hungary did not appear as a separate group. After the dissolution of the Eastern Bloc, however, representatives of the former socialist countries also attended the meetings (Romania for the first time in 1990), including Hungarian delegations, which sometimes even gave speeches (1995, 1998).⁸³ It seems likely that contacts were established before 1990, but the political situation did not allow the participation of Eastern European delegations, but communication and ideological transfer could possibly have taken place earlier. However, in the absence of documentation, this has not been explored so far.

Overall, it can be said that, with the few exceptions mentioned above, the fate of German Waffen-SS veterans in Hungary and their attempts to confront the past are white spots in research that have little chance of being explored, as the generation concerned is now extinct. The social milieu did not allow for honest communication and confrontation, either in Hungary, where Waffen-SS members faced persecution until 1945, or in the Western states, where this group did not develop its own narrative or interpretation of the war, but at most reported on it through the apologetic portrayal of larger veterans' organisations.

Summary

In my study, I focused on the voluntary and forced conscription of the Waffen-SS in the German minority-populated parts of Western Hungary. The analysis showed that, although the sources and narratives of the event in the decades since then have almost entirely suppressed the large number of volunteers, the number of young men who voluntarily enlisted in the German forces in the region during 1942 and 1943 was in fact quite high. The motivations for voluntary decisions, however, may have been complex and varied, both in Hungary in general and in the western region – and a more thorough exploration of these would be important

⁸³ FANTA – SIMA, pp. 153–155.

to better understand the events and to break down the collective social stigma of those involved. The sources also show that voluntary enlistment became increasingly unlikely as the war ended, but with the German occupation of Hungary in 1944, recruitment was not voluntary anymore but forced. A significant number of those who were called up, according to subsequent accounts, tried to protest, sometimes even to resist, but the scope and possibilities were quite limited.

Due to the lack of sources and narratives, and in many cases their questionable reliability, a more thorough exploration of the events is difficult, but I am confident that with this paper I have contributed to a more differentiated picture that goes beyond what is known so far.