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Competing Nationality Politics Targeting German Communities in the Hungarian- Romanian Border Zone after the Great War

Abstract

In my study, I focus on the events that took place in the short period after the Great War ended (1918) and before the consolidation of Romanian power in the Hungarian-Romanian Border Commission (1922) from the point of view of the artificially created ethnic category: the *Satu Mare Swabians* or *Sathmar Swabians*. The historiography related to the “ethnographic” aspects of these events have appeared multiple times and in several contexts and forms in the years since. However, the question of ethnicity has not arisen in relation to the population of German descent, but rather in relation to the Hungarian-speaking Greek Catholic communities of Romanian and Rusyn/Ruthenian origin who were treated by the Romanian side as Magyarized Romanians. Following this example, the Romanians later began to collect data on the Magyarized Germans, which they then presented to the Border Commission. Germans living in the territory witnessed a strong competition between identity politics and discourse supported by rival Hungarian and Romanian states. One of the key features of this rivalry was the intensive propaganda activity promoted by both the Romanian and the Hungarian authorities to gain territories to the detriment of the other.

Keywords: World War I, Satu Mare Swabians, german minority, identity politics, borders

One of the major consequences of World War I for Central and Eastern Europe is the emergence of new countries and the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. This paper focuses on an “artificially created” ethnic category: the *Satu Mare Swabians* or *Sathmar Swabians* (*Sathmarer Schwaben* in German). From the end of the war (1918), until the termination of the Hungarian–Romanian Boundary Commission’s work (1923), Germans living in the territory witnessed a strong competition between identity politics and discourse supported by rival Hungarian and Romanian states. One of the key features of this rivalry was the intensive propaganda activity promoted by both



the Romanian and the Hungarian authorities to gain territories to the detriment of the other. Based on Hungarian and Romanian archival materials and interviews,¹ I present how local communities in the course of these four years tried unsuccessfully to represent their social, economic, and political interests to both states. Although both states restricted their propaganda work to border zone German settlements, discourse formed on ethnic identity politics during these years determined the future of German communities in the whole region.

The Swabians' origin is German, but as two centuries passed their place of origin became a distant and foreign place. When the Swabians left the areas of Baden and Württemberg, the German nation had not yet been formed. After they settled – apart from a few cases of people who returned in the first decades² – their relations with each other ended. Due to this, the Swabians' homeland is not based on an ethnic-national, but rather a political-national basis, which is geographically determined, in which “familiarity and feelings of home” are important and determining factors. They considered Hungary to be their homeland, however within the borders of Hungary their land was limited to smaller villages.³

The historical narrative of immigration among the *Satu Mare* Swabian communities is well known and frequently reflected in situations where ethnic identity is questioned. When the Swabians left the German provinces of Baden and Württemberg in the first half of the 18th century, the German national awakening movement had not yet started. They were all aware of their German origins, but over the past three centuries the memory of the ancestral home had faded, the idea of the motherland was more and more attached to Hungary, and became even more limited to their village of residence. Their sense of ethnic cohesiveness did not exceed the boundaries of their village of residence.⁴

The Swabian peasants rather felt that their sense of wealth increased their sense of patriotism. As they grew loyal to their land, they grew loyal to the (Hungarian) nation.⁵

“The history of the Swabians begins with settlement, and at the time of becoming a nation, they were already living in Hungary. Thus, neither German

¹ The interviews were conducted within the *Parallel ruralities. Rural realities in four Transylvanian (Romania) microregions* K120712 NKFIH research programme. Proofreader: John Glenn.

² About the settlement see more: Vohnáz 1931. About the area bond and inside the historical events see Marinka 2011: 147–159, 152.

³ Bindorffer 2001a.

⁴ Bindorffer 2001b: 71.

⁵ cf. Lampland 1994: 301–302.

culture, nor their German mother tongue could become an element of their national identity; the image of the mother nation is broken off from the contents of the German mother tongue and the German national culture and the ideological place of the homeland designation.”⁶

The *Satu Mare* Swabians were among the most Magyarized minority communities in pre-Trianon Hungary. During the 18th century the Swabians of *Satu Mare* were bondsmen without any significant level of intellect or class, so they did not have the means to stand up to Hungarian assimilation pressure together as a community. However the assimilation process did not happen in a uniform way. Scattered across *Satu Mare* county, the 31 settlements inhabited by the Swabians differed in size and location and were on both sides of the Hungarian-Romanian language border. In the areas dominated by the Hungarian-majority, the Magyarization and change of language of the Swabians began as early as the second half of the 19th century,⁷ while in the Romanian-majority areas the use of the German language persisted mostly until their mass emigration to Germany in the 1990s.

There is a clear gap in Hungarian and German historiographic analysis between the cause and correlation of assimilation among Swabians in *Satu Mare* at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. The importance of this difference comes to the fore during the border changes of 1918, when German movements were strongly supported by the new Romanian administration in *Satu Mare*. Was it really a national movement by the Swabians, or was it cooperation with the Romanian administration together with the Saxons in Transylvania and the Swabians of *Banat* in an attempt to aspire to a new German identity?⁸ The role of the Magyarization of the church and ecclesiastical schools is generally accepted by those involved in the history of the Swabians in *Satu Mare* on both sides.⁹

Historians who profess and promote the violent Magyarization of the Swabians cite the Roman Catholic bishopric that was putatively Hungarian-friendly, and the Hungarian-language schools maintained by the Catholic Church as the main assimilation forces.¹⁰ In other research, the assimilation of Swabians emerged as a natural process, although the fact that it had minority

⁶ Bindorffer 2001b: 75.

⁷ It should be noted that the change of language did not take place in a uniform way in the western group either, there were also significant differences in the language use in these villages.

⁸ Sárándi 2009: 302

⁹ Reszler 2001: 228.

¹⁰ Barabás 1989: 297; Hauler 1998.

policy aspects also proves that “voluntary assimilation” and unconditional allegiance were not only present in the case of the Swabians of *Satu Mare*, but also in relation to almost all minority groups.¹¹ I see the assimilation of the western group of Swabians in *Satu Mare* as a result of several combined factors. One of these factors is the gradual introduction and spread of the Hungarian language in schools and churches. Another factor is the (lack of) Swabian national collective consciousness as discussed at the beginning of this paper, which was shaped along territorial rather than ethnic lines of power. As a third factor, I consider the significance of the development of economic dependence on Hungarian cities. The economic relations of the Swabians outside the village were exclusively with Hungarians.

The discovery of the Swabians in *Satu Mare* must, in fact, be credited to the Romanian state, which intended to strengthen its new borders. The first (Romanian) prefect of *Satu Mare* County drew the attention of the Saxon and *Banat* Swabian political elite of Transylvania to the German population of the county. Their need to stabilize new areas of the country and to expand centralized power as quickly as possible soon made them recognize the political potential of the Swabians in *Satu Mare*. In a short time, the mediation of the Romanian government was noticed not only by the German communities in Romania, but also by the German state, and hence interest in the Swabians of *Satu Mare* expanded. Domestic and foreign German officials arrived in turn who studied the local conditions and at the same time began to hold meetings and lectures, and organized the entry of Swabians from *Satu Mare* into national German movements. In addition to German organizations from Romania, several German organizations dealing with minority German populations in foreign countries arrived to collect data. However, the success of the Germanisation of the Swabians in *Satu Mare* between the two world wars was far behind the achievements of the Saxons and the Swabians of *Banat*, despite the fact that the Romanian government gave the Germans unlimited power to do so in order to weaken the position of the Hungarians. Radical change took place once Romania became part of the German sphere of interest. By the beginning of the Second World War, the ideology of the German community could be realized, the German minority had independent economic and cultural autonomy, and could maintain schools.¹² The history of the relationship between the German people’s movement during the inter-war years, and the Swabians in *Satu Mare* is described in detail in the extremely well-

¹¹ Gyurgyák 2001; Sárándi 2009.

¹² Sárándi 2009: 302.

documented work of Bernadette Baumgartner.¹³ In my study, I focus on the events that took place in the short period after the war and before the consolidation of Romanian power in the Hungarian-Romanian Border Commission¹⁴, because the historiography related to the “ethnographic” aspects of these events have appeared multiple times and in several contexts and forms in the years since. However, the question of ethnicity did not arise in relation to the population of German descent, but in relation to the Hungarian-speaking Greek Catholic communities of Romanian and Rusyn/Ruthenian origin, who were treated by the Romanian side as Magyarized Romanians. Following this example, they began to collect data on the Magyarized Germans later and subsequently presented it to the Border Commission.

The Hungarian-Romanian Border Commission

The Hungarian-Romanian Border Commission was established on August 2, 1921 in Paris. Its chairman was General Meunier of France. The leaders of the Hungarian delegation were Colonel Géza Dormándy, Colonel Aladár Czeke, Captain Gyula Oláh, and Andor Szentmiklósi beginning April 4, 1922, and Captain Alfréd Dietrich beginning June 23, 1922. The leaders of the Romanian delegation were Colonel Toma Dumitrescu followed by Colonel Constantin Dumitrescu.¹⁵ Negotiations between the two countries on where to draw the borderline were interrupted on November 21, 1921, after the first meeting. The Hungarian proposal had been submitted on November 19, 1921.

Hungary presented proposals that were not in line with previous commitments, and were not in line with the previous decisions made by the Borders Committee, nor with the content of the *Lettre d’envoi*¹⁶. Due to this, the delegates of the Border Commission – Hungarian and Romanian – could only propose changes at a local level. The Hungarian delegation presented proposals with much more significant adjustments. The Romanian Commissioner rejected these proposals, citing the texts mentioned above. The protest was accepted by non-aligned members of the committee. The head of the Hungarian delegation, Colonel Géza Dormándy (or Henrik), resigned as a result and withdrew the proposals. Dormándy was replaced by Captain Gyula

¹³ Baumgartner 2012.

¹⁴ Here in after referred to as the Border Commission.

¹⁵ Suba 2015: 104.

¹⁶ Cover Letter from the Allied and Associated Powers to the President of the Hungarian Peace Delegation (Millerand Letter, May 6, 1920), in which they assured the Hungarian government that the border commissions would listen to the wishes of the local population.

Oláh. Following this rejection, the Hungarian party requested more time in order to further elaborate and develop new proposals.

As this procedure formally complied with the Commission's requirements, the head of the Romanian delegation, Colonel Constantin Dumitrescu was forced to accept this, but, as he writes in his report to his superiors, he set a very short deadline for the Commission to submit new proposals.¹⁷ The new Hungarian proposals were submitted on November 19, 1921, and the Border Commission discussed it on November 28. The new Hungarian proposals were not accepted, but nor were they rejected; during the meeting it was decided to establish the border, effective immediately.

The map of Hungary and Romania was redrawn according to the terms of the peace treaty, forcing a new social, political, and economic investigation. The positioning of the borderline was primarily the result of a decision that took into account the interests and economic considerations of sovereignty. A key role in establishing new, politically drawn borderlines were the railway lines and railway junctions. The "ethnographic" and ethnic aspects, although mentioned and negotiated, were the basis for a series of meetings of the Committee on Romanian-Yugoslav Affairs,¹⁸ but were pushed into the background of the final meeting. However, this does not mean that their significance would have been negligible, as later both Romanian and Hungarian politicians developed their policy on nationalities living along the border, relying on the data collection carried out at that time.

Establishment of the demarcation line and the Romanian military administration (1918–1920)

Following the successful advance of the Romanian troops after April 16, 1918, a Romanian military administration was established. Although there were no actual battles around the village, the occupation still opened up some conflicts. Take, for example,

“A bell was rung because of an incident, and the villagers ran to extinguish the fire with hoes and pitchforks. The Romanian soldiers, thinking that the people were marching against them, were frightened and fled, then later returned with reinforcements, and severe punishments and beatings followed. Chief Notary Sándor Becsky was taken away for a week because he did not allow the requisitions.”¹⁹

¹⁷ A.M.R., M. St. M. Adjutants Section, crt. 5431, file 495.

¹⁸ Ádám–Ormos 2006.

¹⁹ Reszler 2001: 207.

In the years immediately following the Great War, those living along the newly formed Romanian-Hungarian demarcation line (not the final border line),²⁰ regarded the Romanian military administration as hostile regardless of their ethnic or national affiliation.²¹ In the Romanian military reports²² at least, the Hungarians and Swabians had not yet been separated from each other.

The reason for this was that the Swabians who were in close proximity to the border were settlers who belonged to the group of the most linguistically assimilated Swabian villages. Thus, in the absence of sufficient background information it was neither possible nor practically necessary for the Romanian military forces to make a distinction. There was a lack of coherence between the Romanian military and the political leadership in the first few years after the war. The interests of the military and politicians often clashed, with military leaders calling for stronger border controls – and for stronger action to be taken – while the political elite worked to build cooperative relations with the public, eyeing the possibility of strengthening their power. As of March 1920, the areas around the border were under military rule and only through their military superiors could the civil forces advance their own interests.

In order to relieve the tension between the border guards and the population, the Deputy Prefect of *Satu Mare*, Dr. Ioan Pogăciași, wrote a letter to the Army General Staff on February 24, 1922,²³ through the Romanian Border Commission, to put an end to the ongoing harassment of the Hungarian people. In his letter, he explains in detail the reasons for the Hungarian population's hostile attitude towards Romanian rule: the border guards and police, as well as the ability of other officials to request and acquire property and animals from local village farmers without paying compensation.

He calls for the replacement of all staff serving along the border in order to win over the public by the time the Border Commission arrives. This did not happen, nor did the distrust of the Romanian authorities decrease. After recognizing this, the Romanian authorities chose a different strategy: the communities that had, up to then, been treated as Hungarian were differentiated from the German, Romanian, and Ukrainian/Rusyn/Ruthenian-originated communities, who were presented as victims of the Hungarian assimilation policy. We can learn about this mainly through the counter-propaganda activities of the Hungarian delegation. Almost all members of the significant Greek

²⁰ Date of finalization of the Hungarian-Romanian border on the examined section L: 16 October 1923.

²¹ Of the 31 settlements in Szatmár/Satu Mare county inhabited by Swabians, only *Vállaj*, *Mérk* and *Zajta* remained in Hungary.

²² A.M.R. Pitești, fond 1635, file 241: 1; AMR. Pitești, fond 1635, file 241: 3–4.

²³ A.M.R., fond 5418 (M.St.M.) – Secția Operații, file 1122: 131.

Catholic community of Romanian origin living in *Csanáloserdő*/Urziceni Pădure wrote to the Commission requesting that their residence be attached to Hungary.

“To the Honorable Border Commission!

I turn with this humble request to the honorable Border Commission, to be so kind as to annex my possessions and myself to Hungary. I am György Nagy, 64 years old, Greek Catholic 18 acres yeoman and householder. I live together with my 26-year-old son and wife. My possessions are located in the Puszta part of Csanálos. Although I speak Romanian I have good reasons to ask for the re-annexation to Hungary of myself and my family. This is our main and only wish.

Csanálos, september 1922

György Nagy”²⁴

However, until the Border Committee’s field visit and final decision, the feeling of uncertainty about the final borderline was most significant for those living along the border. Neither the framework of the present study nor my qualifications as a historian make it possible to explain in detail why the Hungarian diplomats thought there would be a real chance of influencing the decision making it more favorable for the Hungarians.

In my study, I therefore rather focus on how the local communities tried to adapt to this notion and the changes that were going on in high levels of politics. With regards to the newly drawn borderline, they experienced a more rigid attitude in politics as well. Initially, the fight was for the preservation of entire regions, then settlements, and ultimately productive, arable land, grassland, and forest strips. In most cases, information arrived with significant delays in areas that were in the hands of decision-makers whose criteria were sometimes based on long-lost policy frameworks. An example of this is the Border Commission’s on-site inspection by *Csanálos*, which will be described in detail later.

The activities of the Border Commission’s intensive preparations were ripe for spectacular and covert propaganda activities for secret organizations on both the Hungarian and Romanian sides. The interests of the state, i.e., the control (or recovery of control) over the largest area possible, maintained a constant tension in the border area. In preparation for the demarcation of the Border Commission, the parties used intensive data collection, persuasive activities, and intimidation. Romanian reports repeatedly expressed distrust of people living in the border area: “The inhabitants of the villages along the border are all Hungarians who have accepted the new power, they are loyal, but we cannot be sure of their feelings, so the Hungarian authorities must be

²⁴ MOL K51-B package 10, file j – petitions written by the inhabitants of *Csanálos* and *Vállaj*. Trans. LSz.

careful in their direction.”²⁵ These reports testify to the hopeful and expectant attitude prevailing on the Romanian side. Preparations continued to intensify as the Border Commission’s visit grew near. The atmosphere of this period is stated in the report of Dénes Gagyhy on the border villages of *Satu Mare* county. To quote his text:

“The indigenous inhabitants of the village (Vállaj) are old settlers of Swabian origin, but they are completely Magyarized, their national feeling is completely intact, and there can be no doubt about their attachment to Hungary, much less because they declared themselves Hungarians during the occupation and under pressure from the Oláh [Romanian – L. Sz.] authorities. But the Greek Catholic population from the ‘puszta’ also had no sign of hostility that would indicate a hostile mood, but it was rather based on mere suspicion. Either way, all preparations will be made by both the manorial administration and the municipal authorities to prevent any disturbing incidents.

[...]

As a very important political phenomenon, I respectfully report that, according to reliable information, the atmosphere in the following border villages in the occupied territory: Csanálos, Börvely, Kaplony, Kálmánd, Gilvác, Mezőterem, Mezőpetri is in such a state, that in case such a question would arise they would declare to join Hungary.

[...]

In these places, Hungarian irredentist performances and the propaganda related to them can only be held with the utmost tact and prior strict criticism, even with special regard to the nationality sensitivity, because a badly selected phrase destroys the results of much arduous work and adversely affects any serious patriotic endeavor. I received information from reliable, serious men here and there (Csengerújfalu, Nyírábrány) that by signing the residents of the Hungarian villages requested by or on behalf of the Oláh authorities, petition-like memoranda were submitted to the border adjustment committee in order to join Romania. Should this news prove to be true, I have the courage to suggest that a step should be taken to verify the authenticity of the signatures contained in the memoranda, as there is a high probability that the signatures are forged and that the application is fabricated.”²⁶

This tension, which could be felt by both the Romanian and Hungarian authorities, as well as the civilian population living along the border, flared up during the Border Committee’s on-site inspection, especially in *Csanálos*.

²⁵ A.M.R. Pitești, fond 1635, file 241: 96. – Preparations of the Romanian military leadership for the arrival of the Border Commission.

²⁶ MOL K-L/1-I package 10 – Dénes Gagyhy’s report on the border villages of *Satu Mare* County. Trans. LSz.

The on-site inspection of the Border Commission in Csanáros and Vállaj

The events concerning the border-realignments, which locals only referred to as “revision” took place in 1922. As part of these, the Border Commission²⁷ visited all settlements along the border in March, 1922. Its job was to determine where the final border should run, however, they only had the power to make decisions concerning less significant territories of local interest, but not entire settlements. During these on-site inspections the Commission listened to both parties, sometimes even sending for the principals of the settlements. Before the visitations the commission requested the documentation regarding the land, economic circumstances, and social relations of the settlements they were about to visit. For these surveys they used questionnaires.

The idea that *Vállaj*²⁸ should belong to Romania was first mentioned in the recommendations written by the Romanian delegation, to which they attached a letter written to the Border Commission by the *Nagykároly* city council²⁹ requesting the annexation of *Vállaj*, *Mérk*, *Ura* and *Csengerújfalu*. In this letter the principals of the city argued that due to their close economic and cultural ties, *Nagykároly* and the other settlements strongly depended on each other. They summarised their arguments in four points: a) *Nagykároly* is the central (railway) transport node of the area, and thus it is the only connection nearby settlements have to the rest of the country; b) *Nagykároly* is a cultural centre, the place of education, and its fairs are the most important marketplace for people living in these settlements, both for buying and marketing goods; c) *Nagykároly*'s food processing plants are the most important purchasers of crops produced in these villages, additionally, the savings of villagers are managed by banks and financial institutions in *Nagykároly*, and people from these villages are amongst the initiators and board members of these financial institutions; d) Some of the assets and pump-houses of *Ecsedi-láp lecsapoló és Szamos bal parti Ármentesítő és Belvízszabályozó Társulat* [The Ecsed Marsh Drainage and Szamos Left Hand Flood and Runoff Control Association] are on lands belonging to these villages.³⁰

The on-site inspection of the Border Commission was preceded by surveys and studies including historical, ethnographic and economic analyses. Romanian authorities submitted a series of reports to the *Marele Stat Major* (the

²⁷ In petitions by the locals the commission is always named as Border Revision Commission.

²⁸ The population of both villages is of Swabian origin.

²⁹ MOL K51-B package 11, file J.

³⁰ MOL K51-B package 10, file J.

Romanian counterpart of the General Staff of the Hungarian Armed Forces, a supreme organisation of the Romanian army for military and joined force planning), in which they petitioned for human and technical supplies necessary for efficiently counteracting persons who were infiltrating the region to spread Hungarian propaganda.³¹

In one of his reports, Colonel Dumitrescu, head of the Romanian delegation, penned the following recommendations concerning the main directions for Romanian propaganda: civilians spreading propaganda in Hungarian and German settlements should refer to: a) the benefits of land reforms; b) the benefits and preferences provided by the peace treaty to minorities; c) the importance of the integrity of market districts; d) those democratic principles that are recognised more in Romania than in Hungary.³² The last point was clearly aimed at the German inhabitants.

In his account following the Border Commission's on-site inspection in *Csanálos*, the Hungarian commissioner, Colonel Aladár Czeke reported both about the work of the commission and the local situation and events.

*“Subject
Vállaj and Csanálos minutes*

I have the honour to submit in 7-7 copies the minutes taken at the on-site inspection in Vállaj and Csanálos, 11 March, current year, and, for handling reason, only 1 copy of a survey attached to the latter, while also reporting the following:

In both villages, the Romanian commissioner made an effort to convince the commission that the non-Greek Catholic elements of the population are Germans (Swabs) the last generation of whom was only magyarized as the regrettable consequence of the ‘well-known Hungarian school terror.’

In Vállaj, on Hungarian territory, he could not plausibly advance his intentions, because the interrogated inhabitants led by the magistrate with a German name ardently denied the allegations that they were not Hungarians. After this he could only object to the magyarization of the 300 Vlach Greek-Catholics, who make up 12% of the entire population, but this did not impress the commission more than usual.

Based on the interrogations and questionnaires the commission could see that the loss of Nagykároly would not affect local economic interests.

[...]

In Csanálos, on Romanian territory, inhabitants greeted the commission with a lively pro-Hungarian demonstration when it was merely travelling through the village. All this intensified at the arrival of the commission, which created a sensation amongst the non-aligned commissioners.

³¹ A.M.R. Pitești, fond 950, file 16: 391–392.

³² A.M.R. (M. St. M.) Adjutants Section, crt 5431, file 495, 283.

I already had the honour to write about this demonstration and its sad consequences in my report nr. 982 written on the 15th of this month. The honest outbreak of Hungarian feelings were in stark contrast to the data in the questionnaires presented by the Romanian commissioner, according to which there was not a single Hungarian inhabitant in the village, and the language of schooling is German on the request of the inhabitants. To prove this claim, Colonel Popescu showed a church registry from 1834, which refers to the village as a German speaking community. I felt obliged to use this occasion and declare once for all that as the representative of the Hungarian government I will never identify with such an approach to ethnic issues. In Hungary, ethnographic issues cannot be solved on historical-genealogical grounds. According to the Hungarian approach, anyone whose mother tongue is Hungarian and by choice uses Hungarian within the family is Hungarian. It is the more so in places where inhabitants only speak Hungarian, regardless of their historical genealogy. Hungarian statistics have always been based on free individual testimonies.

The Romanian commissioner also explained his standpoint – which, unfortunately, has already been adopted by the commission – that the Hungarian state had committed a huge injustice against national minorities by artificially magyarizing them. Experience so far has shown that the commission has exactly these ethnographic (and economic) ‘injustices’ in mind when they want to eliminate these along the Trianon line.

According to the last rubric of the questionnaire, the inhabitants had no requests. Seeing the demonstrations in front of the window I was rather dubious about the truthfulness of this claim, and expressed so every time, telling the president that I think it necessary to ascertain to the contrary through asking the summoned priest, teacher etc. or anybody from the inhabitants. The president firmly refused my request each time, thus I had to do with a formal protest. During the negotiations the door to the village hall was closed and guarded by 10-12 armed soldiers (or gendarmes). Unfortunately this could only be seen after the negotiations had ended, because it was not visible from the windows of the meeting room.

It is my impression that the annexation of Vállaj to Romania had fallen, and the fate of Csanálos depends on the fate of Börvely.

Nagyvárad, 5 April 1922
The Hungarian commissioner:
Col. Czeke”³³

The on-site inspection in Csanálos and Vállaj took place on March 11, 1922. We know from the report by the Hungarian commissioner that apart from the inhabitants of the two settlements, people from the neighbouring Mezőfőny and Csomakőz also attended the event in great numbers. The Commission arrived from the direction of Nagykároly, and after crossing through Csanálos, first started negotiations in Vállaj, where the Hungarian party with the assistance of

³³ MOL K51-B package 10, file J. Trans. LSz.

local principals was able to influence commission members according to its own interest. A (Swabian) man from *Csanáros* remembers this day as follows:

“– There was a revision here in '22, I was nine years old, it was a border revision... It was interesting, there was a customs officer, a Romanian customs officer, and he was afraid of losing his position. There was a great feeling in the air. People from Fény came on carts, many of them, with Hungarian national flags, because they said that Csanáros and Fény would be annexed to Romania, that there's going to be a border revision. Then we were waiting for the commission, me too. We, the kids, ran up the tower, and were looking for the commission, and they came. But this customs officer...people were in great spirits, as one is at such times...Then the officer made a phone call that there is going to be trouble. And then the soldiers came, armed. A car arrived, I don't know (I was a kid, you know) if they were French or what they were, then they were gone, and the army arrived and they fired into the air, thrashing. Ah, what was going on here then!

– Did they only fire in the air?

– At first only in the air. Then I ran into the church with a couple of others. I was looking, but I was afraid, of course, because everything happened there. In a cautious moment I opened the door and there I was, running home to Károlyi street. Many people were beaten up badly and tried in military courts. But there was a brass band, there was great joy. I had a cousin, a woman who was teaching in the school and who sang the Hungarian national anthem with the kids, and after that she wasn't allowed to teach anymore; she was also tried at the military court. She had a younger sister, a nursery school teacher, she had a training-college degree and they never allowed her to...Oh, the circus started then. It is sad, I have always been watching ever since, because I thought that they came in but they would leave soon, but then they haven't left yet (laughing).

[...]

But it was the customs officer's fault, because there wouldn't have been any trouble, but he was afraid that, I don't know, there was a mood, but there was no rebellion, the whole thing was because of him. There was a man from Fény, I can't remember his name now, ... G., and he had the flag. And he pushed the customs officer with it and the officer fell. The soldiers attacked this man and he died, not then but later. So there was a big thing in '22.”³⁴

After the commission had left, Romanian authorities collected men and women who participated in the events in *Csanáros*, and transported about 40 people to the police headquarters in *Nagykároly*, where many of them were beaten and incarcerated.

We can find further information about the March 11 events and their aftermath in Romanian archival sources. As I mentioned earlier, both parties had been preparing for the on-site inspections with studies, property censuses, demographic tables, and economic and natural historical analyses. Beside these, they put law enforcement units – the army, gendarme, police, and border

³⁴ A.F. *Csanáros*, born in 1913. Trans. LSz.

control – on alert, and temporarily increased their numbers along the commission's route.

*“Romanian–Hungarian Border Commission
ROMANIAN DELEGATION
Report on 23 March 1922
The letter of the Roman Delegation to the Military Staff*

I respectfully report that in the village of Csanálos, near Nagykaroly, Satu Mare county, during the on-site inspection of the Border Commission on 11 March this year, inhabitants have demonstrated with Hungarian national flags. The Hungarian commissioner insistently asked the Commission to let him talk to these people. Listening to our objections the Commission refused the request of the Hungarian commissioner, especially because it was clear the action was organised in advance by agents from Hungary.

[...]

On account of these events I respectfully report that there was very strong pro-Hungary propaganda amongst the intellectuals living in settlements along the border, the impact of which we could only partly counter.

Turning back to the events in Csanálos, I request immediate and stringent inspection, so that after the departure of the commission the organizers of the continuing demonstrations would be punished. The commander of the Satu Mare Gendarme Squadron has begun investigating the case, but had to suspend it due to the Commission's on-site work in the region. Inspections should restart with immediate effect, since the Commission has already left the region.

*THE COMMISSIONER OF THE GOVERNMENT
Colonel C. S. Dumitrescu”³⁵*

Commissioner Aladár Czeke had informed the Border Commission about the punitive measures following the *Csanálos* events, asking them to investigate the interventions of the Romanian authorities. The commission found the actions of the Romanian authorities legitimate.

The archival material of the *Csanálos*/Urziceni incident provides a detailed insight into the struggles of border communities that proved futile in pursuing their own interests. Both the Hungarian and the Romanian authorities used them only as tools in their competition for gaining territories. Accordingly they used the “voice” of the border communities, through the petitions made on their behalf, only to influence the members of the Border Commission. Hungarian commissioners faced the problem at the very beginning of the negotiations that the national-historical arguments provoked antipathy in the commission, moreover Romanian commissioners could easily turn this

³⁵ A.M.R., fond 5418 (M.St.M.) – Secția Operații, dos. nr. 1122, f. 126. Trans. ISz.

argumentation in the favor of Romanian interests: they introduced the discourse of Magyarization of Romanians and Germans. Thus, the initial argumentation based on national, ethnographical aspects was soon supplemented, then replaced, by economic reasoning. Even so, they could not achieve a significant change in the Commission's approach, and sometimes made the situation of the communities on the Hungarian side even more difficult. A request "written by the people of *Vállaj*," on behalf of their "brothers" from *Csanálos*, *Börvely*, *Kaplony*, *Kálmánd*, *Szaniszló*, *Csomaköz* and *Börvely* on the Romanian side of the border, living in an economically paralyzed situation and even oppressed by the Romanians, asked the Commission to authorize a referendum. In response, the Romanians petitioned the city council of *Nagykároly*, and based on the same economic reasoning, they demanded the annexation of additional villages from the Hungarian side.

The Swabians of *Csanálos*, *Vállaj*, *Mérk*, *Mezőfőny*, *Kálmánd*, *Kaplony*, and *Csomaköz* accosted during the operation of the Border Commission spoke unanimously and always in accordance with Hungarian interests, however they never referred to themselves as Swabians, but as a Hungarians clinging to the Hungarian homeland.

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