

Eötvös Loránd Univeristy
Faculty of Humanities

DOCTORAL (PhD) DISSERTATION THESES

Szécsényi András

**Labour service for university students in Hungary with special reference to
the activity of the Turul Association**

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I. Choice of topic, topicality of dissertation

The following dissertation is devoted to the attempt to cast light on the history and function of the Hungarian voluntary labour service for university students (henceforth: voluntary labour service) in the interwar period. There are four reasons for the importance and topicality of my research:

1. To begin with, labour service used to be an undoubtedly vital and characteristic institution in the Horthy Era, which may enrich our knowledge about this particular period with numerous data related to youth history, social history and the history of ideas. On the contrary, no comprehensive work has been compiled regarding the institution of labour service for university students; furthermore, not until the past few years have any publications about certain details of the institution been brought out.
2. Secondly, labour service for university students developed from university youth movements, including associations of comradeship (loan translation of the Hungarian term *bajtársi egyesület*) of university students, the most important of which was the race defender (loan translation of the Hungarian term *fajvédelem*, an ideology based on anti-Semitism, anti-liberalism and nationalism) Turul Association (*Turul Szövetség*). Research on such movements and associations – predominantly due to Andor Ladányi's, Gábor Ujváry's, Róbert Kerepeszki's and Ákos Bartha's thorough work – has advanced approximately for the past two decades to such an extent that it has enabled us to place labour service for university students in the history of Hungarian youth movements.
3. In addition, only in the past decade have books and studies on the international aspects of my research topic been brought out – it is especially the works of German historian Kiran Klaus Patel that are worth highlighting –, which facilitated the placing of labour service for university students in international context apart from placing it in national context.
4. Last but not least, there is a vast amount of deficiency and also misconception in the historiography of the holocaust. Since the 1960s comprehensive national and international research (Elek Karsai, Randolph L. Braham, Szabolcs Szita et al) has been carried out on the history of the obligatory (subsidiary) labour service created by

Defence Act 1939 Act 2, which gave birth to countless publications of great importance. Nevertheless, in these historical works the notion of labour service only applies to the labour service of Jews (and – to a small extent – also to that of Romani people and members of minor churches), which developed beyond doubt from the Defence Act. During this labour service – which was part of the holocaust – tens of thousands of Hungarian Jewish citizens were persecuted and exterminated. The development of the institution was, however, not entirely disclosed; furthermore, the assertion still alive today, according to which obligatory labour service was a completely new institution, did not seem well-established.

II. Content of dissertation and results of research

Labour service for university students is a European phenomenon which came to being with the purpose of sorting out societal decadence experienced predominantly in the post-World War I middle class.

After the section detailing its sources, references and methodology, the following dissertation introduces that some youth and university organisations attempted to cope with the problem mentioned above by establishing labour camps, where they undertook inexpensive communal labour which was useful for society yet could not be done individually. In exchange for all this, they were paid an insignificant amount of money by the state. In the camps, which operated in civil self-organisation and employed a few dozens of young intellectuals (mainly university students), road maintenance, deforestation, dam reparation, swamp draining and summer agricultural work were done. In European countries, this led to the birth of various solutions and organisational patterns. In some countries, it remained in the framework of university youth organisations. However, the greatest success was achieved by those countries where the government, recognising their potential, facilitated their function by means of financial support. The most successful models functioned in England from 1920 (Voluntary Labour Service), in Switzerland (called *Schweizerischen Zentralstelle für Freiwilligen Arbeitsdienst* from 1935) and Bulgaria from 1925 and in Germany from 1931. After English fashion, the term ‘labour service’ came to be used to refer to the institution of labour camp, which employed tens of thousands of people in twenty European countries every year until 1935. Labour service was an immense success overseas

as well; President Roosevelt, as an achievement of his New Deal, established a similar public employment system in 1933 after German fashion (Civilian Conservative Corps).

In these countries university students and young unemployed people could volunteer to take part in labour service. That said, from the middle of the 1930s serving in labour camps was made compulsory for young people prior to their university studies or military service in return for state guarantees. This may be typically exemplified by Germany, where Hitler believed this to be a remedy for the Great Depression. Accordingly, in 1935 the labour service system, which had been voluntary since 1931, was turned into a compulsory six-month labour camp service for every man aged 18–24. In 1939 this obligation was extended to women as well. In the enormous, centralised camp system of the organisation functioning under the name of *Reichsarbeitsdienst* (RAD) from 1934, communal labour (agricultural work, road building and reparation, renovation of municipal buildings, landscaping, etc.) was done, just as in other countries. However, the German labour service system was unique in the sense that there was national socialist ideological training going on; furthermore, it showed some military traits, it served as a kind of pre-training prior to military service.

Labour service was favourably received in Hungary as well. The following dissertation comprising five, separate chapters is devoted to the examination and analysis of the youth and idea historical framework of the Hungarian labour service with the help of several sources used for the first time in youth historical research. This research is chiefly related to the history of the Turul Association, the greatest race defence-based mass organisation of university students and graduates. The interest in labour service is due to the changes brought about in the Turul Association and also in other associations of comradeship of university students from the beginning of the 1930s. The race defence-based comradeship ideology, established in 1919, considered the Hungarian peasantry the strongest force of the nation, which had resisted foreign influence for centuries. Accordingly, the association set the goal of raising this particular social class.

This basic thought underwent a change in the 1930s under the influence of three of the most significant national movements of the time: the ‘folk ideology’ (loan translation of the Hungarian term *népi gondolat*, a movement with the primary purpose of improving the social state of the peasantry), the extreme-right Arrow Cross movement and the penetrating communist movement, all of which broadened the initially relatively coherent comradeship ideology. Owing to folk movements and the results and popularity of village research, race defender peasant protection developed a social characteristic. This development reached its

peak when Gyula Gömbös became Prime Minister of Hungary in October 1932: due to folk movements, new groups sensitive to societal and social issues, along with the earlier race defender groups, strengthened among the commanders-in-chief and in the member associations. These groups were, however, not in the least heterogeneous; effects of communism and the extreme-right Arrow Cross movement could be perceived. By 1935 there developed, under the leadership of Vilmos Fitos, a 'folk wing' (calque of the Hungarian term *népi szárny*), which attempted to achieve a severe advancement with the association led by József Végvári, which was, however, also open to societal issues to a certain extent. For a short period (from 1935 to 1937) the different tendencies seemed to have a positive effect on the Turul Association: village researcher camps were organised; 'folk defender missions' were established subsidised by the Gömbös government and later the Darányi government, which attempted to improve the social and health condition of the peasantry. However, the union was not durable, and there began an internal conflict in the Turul Association, which was burdened with generational oppositions as well. Eventually, at the 1941 re-election of the officials of the national delegate camp the extreme-right groups influenced by Gyula Szabó and Commander-in-chief József Ambrus, who were uninterested in the reforms, managed to relieve Vilmos Fitos of his position of commander-in-chief of culture in January 1939. From that time onward, the Turul Association began to dissolve, and in 1943 it eventually split in two.

This dissertation contains a detailed discussion of the polarisation and dissolution mentioned above. A subsection of this chapter discusses the endeavours and achievements of peasant defender movements. One of their major accomplishments (after 1935, but especially between 1939 and 1941) was the establishment of the Bolyai College (*Bolyai Kollégium*).

The history of labour service in Hungary can be best grasped in the light of the international background as well as the changes brought about in associations of comradeship throughout the decades. The lengthy chapter about the appearance of labour service first discusses the fact that the Turul Association had already sent observers to Swiss, German and British labour camps in 1931, and the fact that relatively early, in 1932, there arose a demand for the establishment of similar voluntary labour camps. This lobby based on folk defence and folk ideology was supported sufficiently by the Gömbös government as well as by the heterogeneous member associations of the Turul Association. A separate subsection is devoted to the discussion of the fact that the notion of camping was well-known to Hungarian students of tertiary education; the bigger umbrella associations (National Association of

Hungarian Students [*Magyar Nemzeti Diákszövetség*] and Association of Hungarian University and College Students [*Magyar Egyetemista és Főiskolai Hallgatók Szövetsége*]) of the Horthy Era did have student camps, the operation of which provided sufficient experience in order for labour camps to be set up. Miklós Kozma, Minister of the Interior encouraged folk defender movements and supported voluntary labour camps, which were to be established by the Turul Association due to the great number of volunteers among university and college students. This scheme was eventually elaborated in the autumn of 1934 with the help of the Ministry of Religion and Education. The first such camp was set up in Magyarcsanád situated near the Hungarian-Romanian borders in July 1935. In this camp, the students and the local unemployed people rebuilt the dam system of the river Maros. It was around that time that labour camps, based on the calque of the German term *Arbeitsdienst*, came to be called ‘labour service’. Also, this chapter deals with the ‘sidetrack’ labour camp (*különutas*, given the fact that it was a religion-based labour camp develop independently of international effects), a camp established by the village seminar of the Reformed College of Sárospatak (*Sárospataki Református Kollégium*) in the summer 1935 on the initiative of the Turul Association and entirely independent from the Association as well as from foreign influence. The task of the approximately 40 students of the labour camp set up in Bodnárölgy – situated near Sátoraljaújhely and Sárospatak – and led by Professors Kálmán Újszászy and Zoltán Szabó, well-renowned theologians of the college was to establish one section of the county road between Károlyfalva and Rudabányácska. The religious camp was based on the village research of the college in Sárospatak, which went back several years. The chief purpose of the research was to throw in their lots with the agrarian population. Although the camp functioning in 1935 as well as in 1936 did not manage to reach the goals that it has set, its role in the life of the community proved to be vital. The final section of the chapter is an analysis of the plans of Miklós Kozma, Hungarian advocate of labour service outlined on his visit to Berlin in October 1936, as a result of which he, causing quite a stir in the governing party, put forward the proposal of the nationalised extension and, after Nazi fashion, the militant reorganisation of the Turul Labour Service as well as making participation in it obligatory for university students.

The subsequent chapter of this dissertation discusses the development of the Turul Labour Service, which was established in 1935 and extended by camps for women in the summer of 1936. The four labour camps established around that time was considered a success by the Turul Association. These camps were responsible for work serving the welfare of the rural

population, and during this work young people from the middle class threw in their lots with the peasants. In the spring of 1937, as a partial realisation of Kozma's earlier plans, the Turul labour camps were nationalised under the name of National Voluntary Labour Service for University and College Students (*Egyetemi és Főiskolai Önkéntes Nemzeti Munkaszolgálat*, henceforth EÖM). The subsequent part of the chapter is an analysis of the rules that apply to EÖM and also a comparison of the connections between the EÖM and the Turul Labour Service. Another subsection of this chapter is devoted to the Turul Association and the institution of labour service made obligatory for citizens found unsuitable for defence work, which was introduced by Defence Act 1939 on the initiative of Prime Minister Béla Imrédy, who was German-oriented as far as his policies are concerned. With the help of abundant archival and press sources, my analysis is meant to point out the fact that obligatory labour service, which was directed against Jews from the 1940s, was *not* an entirely new institution, and by doing so to clear up this misconception in historiography.

The subsequent chapter, with separate subchapters for both sexes, explores the internal world of the Turul and EÖM labour service, which, due to their ideology, need to be considered one unit. Charts and figures show the internal function of the 60 male camps functioning in almost 30 different places between 1935 and 1942, and that of the 100 female camps functioning in approximately 70 different places between 1936 and 1942. The connections and differences between the Hungarian and foreign (predominantly German) camps are also discussed. In the male camps, lasting a couple of weeks and functioning chiefly in the summer, mainly road and dam reparation and river regulation were done whereas members of the female camps took part in subsidiary labour in rural families and work done on the fields. Furthermore, members of the male camps had to take part in military pre-training as well whereas members of the female camps received ideological training based on the ideology of comradeship. Archival material and illustrations in the press and in the possession of private collectors proved to be of much help in presenting labour camp life.

The following chapter reflects on the reactions to Turul and EÖM labour service of the time. The first subsection is meant to investigate the self-reflection of university students published in the press and other, rather homogeneous and supporting publications. Unsuccessful attempts to establish other labour camps are also presented. The second subsection introduces some of the significant societal reactions (for instance, that of Hungarian writer Imre Kovács) as well as some politically-oriented press articles and news reports at the time.

The subsequent chapter deals with the symbols and representation (uniform, badges) of labour service for university students. This analysis describes and compares material found partially in museums but predominantly in the possession of private collectors. A thorough discussion is devoted to posters, badges and identity cards. Male and female labour service uniforms are illustrated with the help of photographs and newspaper articles at the time.

The last chapter of this dissertation, which serves as a closing and concluding part, gives a brief insight into the history of labour service for university students during World War II. Given the even greater lack of sources, literature and therefore knowledge regarding this topic, the history of labour service during the war period cannot be reconstructed. Nevertheless, there is one thing that is known for sure: until the spring of 1944, the labour service went on functioning with a similar system and similar goals. The continuity of the Turul Association between 1939 and 1944 can therefore be proved. In addition, there were further varieties of labour camps set up in Transylvania on the initiative of the locals. In the spring of 1944, the EÖM was dissolved by order of the Sztójay government. The final section presents the Defence Labour Service of Students (*Diákok Honvédelmi Munkaszervezete*), which was taking shape at the time; furthermore, it summarises the conclusions drawn in the separate chapters.

Twenty-five invaluable photographs originating from private archives make this dissertation complete; most of these photographs help to grasp the function and internal world of labour camps.

III. Sources, references and methodology of dissertation

There is a close connection between the number of sources at my disposal and, as mentioned above, the gaps in the historiography of the holocaust. As it applies to associations of comradeship of university students in general, including the Turul Association, most of the primary archival sources, namely the documents of the Turul Association and the University Voluntary Labour Service (*Egyetemi Önkéntes Munkaszolgálat*), perished during World War II. In addition, there are but partially preserved documents found in the National Archives of Hungary. Among these the relevant documents of the Ministry of Religion and Education and the Ministry of Interior are worth highlighting, which were inevitable to discern the endeavours of the government. Furthermore, the association fonds (Turul Association,

Hungária Association of Hungarian Technicians [*Hungária Magyar Technikusok Egyesülete*], Foederatio Emericana, Hungarian Association of University Students [*Magyar Egyetemi Diákszövetség*] and National Association of Hungarian University and College Students [*Magyar Egyetemisták és Főiskolások Országos Szövetsége*]) are also worth mentioning. Owing to the devastation of the documents in the central archives, the importance of university archives increased. In the course of my research, I examined the documents of all, approximately ten Hungarian universities (the Archives of the University of Pécs and the Archives of Corvinus University of Budapest need highlighting due to their abundance in sources) in order to familiarise myself with the impact that university labour service had on tertiary education. Studying the documents of the Archives of the Scholarly Collections of the Reformed College of Sárospatak (*Sárospataki Református Kollégium Tudományos Gyűjteményei Adattára*) seemed indispensable for getting acquainted with the activities of Sárospatak students in Bodnár völgy. The Archives of Military History of the Museum of Military History provided me with rather few documents for exploring the EÖM's war period. Research carried out in the Historical Archives of the Hungarian State Security and Budapest City Archives and the examination of the documents of the people's tribunal proved to be useful in getting acquainted with the key figures of the Turul Association and the Turul Labour Service. The sporadicity of the archival material gave grounds for my including a significant amount of press products comprising approximately fifty newspapers published from 1935 in my research, national and – in order to gain some local information about the labour camps – also local newspapers and periodicals. Given the fact that the Turul Labour Service and the EÖM were in the interest of and financed by the state, the examination of newspapers which were in favour of the government was crucial. The material of university and college student press between 1935 and 1943 was also thoroughly examined.

The keystone of this dissertation was the treatment of archival material and other material at my disposal as equal instead of relying exclusively on written sources. In order to do so, I made an attempt to collect and examine camp material (posters, printed publications and numismatic material), photographs and films. However, the amount of material and visual sources found in national public collections (Museum of Military History, Ethnographic Museum, Hungarian National Museum) are rather sparse. I succeeded in carrying out research in the archives of six private collectors, who made unique sources available to me. Last but not least, I thoroughly studied the printed publications of the time: almanacs, parliament minutes and the publications of comrades associations for university students. I endeavoured

to embed my sources in the processes of national youth movements as much as possible. The amount of literature at my disposal was, however, sparse; it was predominantly the works of the above-mentioned Andor Ladányi, Gábor Ujváry, Róbert Kerepeszki, Ákos Bartha, György Péter Laborc, Béla Hajdú and Zoltán Zombor, literature related to national folk movement and village research and also András Szécsényi's studies. The Oral History Archive of the 1956 Institute of the National Széchényi Library and interviews recorded and published recently (the works of Pál Péter Tóth and Tibor Hajdu) facilitated the exploitation of the method of oral history. Not only did all these sources make this dissertation more various but in many cases it was also a remedy for the lack of literature.

It was predominantly the works of Anglo-Saxon authors (Timothy M. Mason, Richard J. Evans, Jane Caplan et al.) published in the 1980s that were of the greatest help to me in outlining the international context of my dissertation. As the Hungarian labour service for university students considered the Nazi RAD the model, the illustration of the international context called for reference to German sociological and youth historical works (works of Norbet Götz, Martin Broszat et al.) published in the last two decades. The works of Kiran Klaus Patel are of paramount importance. I chiefly relied on his comparative monograph of the Nazi obligatory labour service (RAD) and the American voluntary labour service (CCC): „*Soldaten der Arbeit*“. *Arbeitsdienste in Deutschland und den USA, 1933–1945*. Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2003; English publication: *Soldiers of Labor. Labor Service in Nazi Germany and New Deal America, 1933–1945*. New York, Cambridge University Press. These were complemented by national socialist publications (for instance, the works of Peter Hussman, Hermann Müller-Brandenburg and Gertrud Zypries) as well as the non-German summaries of the time (mainly *Arbeitsdienst in 13 Staaten* published in Switzerland in 1938 and the summary of American Kenneth Holland entitled *Youth in European Labor Camps* written in 1939).

Relating publications:

- Lovagias ügy. Epizód az antiszemitizmus történetéhez az 1930-as években. *Múlt és Jövő*, 2009/1., 133–138.
- A Turul Szövetség felépítése és szerepe a két világháború közötti ifjúsági mozgalomban. In: *Fejezetek a tegnapi világból. Tanulmányok*. Főszerk. GERGELY Jenő. Budapest, ELTE, 2009., 214–233.

- „Hogy ki a magyar, azt mindig csak maguk a magyarok dönthetik el.” A Turul Szövetség a Közgazdaságtudományi Egyetemen 1941-ben. *Kommentár*, 2009/3., 69–78.
- A Turul Szövetség akciói: a Magyar Egészség Hete és a Magyar Nép Hete. In: Vázlatok két évszázad magyar történelméből. Főszerk. GERGELY Jenő. Budapest, ELTE BTK, 2010., 191–204.
- A Turul Szövetség revíziós propagandája. In: Pest Megyei Levéltár honlapja: <http://www.pestmlev.hu/data/files/201572583.pdf>, 1–18.
- Egyetemi és főiskolai munkatáborok Magyarországon 1935–1939. In: Visszatekintés a 19-20. századra. Főszerk. ERDŐDY Gábor. Budapest, ELTE, 2011., 149–164.
- Egyetemi munkaszolgálat Magyarországon a Horthy-korszakban. *Történeti Muzeológiai Szemle*, 2011. évi szám., 149–164.
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- „Áldásos munkát!” Egyetemisták és főiskolások női munkaszolgálata. *Katonaujság*, 2012/2. (április), 38–46.
- Az egyetemi munkaszolgálatosok táborélete. *Katonaujság*, 2012/3. (június), 6–13.
- A Turul Szövetség kettészakadása 1943-ban. Adalékok a Horthy-kor második felének ifjúsági-értelmiségi törésvonalainak megértéséhez. *Múltunk*, 2013/1., 65–100.
- Turulisták és rongyos gárdisták a második világháború utáni Magyarországon. In: Búvópatakok. A jobboldal és az állambiztonság 1945-1989. Szerk. UNGVÁRY Krisztián. Budapest, Jaffa, 2013., 257–292.
- Kozma Miklós és a munkaszolgálat. *Modern Magyarország*, 2014/1., 204–224. <http://moma.elte.hu/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/mm.pdf>

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- A Turul Szövetség felépítése és szerepe a két világháború közötti ifjúsági mozgalomban. In: „Mégy-e előre fajzatom?” avagy kandeláberek a magyarság útján a 19-20. században. Az ELTE BTK Új- és Jelenkori Magyar Történeti Tanszék doktorandusz-hallgatóinak konferenciája. Budapest, ELTE BTK, 2008. június 17–18.
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- Egyetemi bajtársi egyesületek és a zsidókérdés. In: Eltiporva. A vészidőszak és az Országos Széchényi Könyvtár. Budapest, Országos Széchényi Könyvtár, 2014. május 28.