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Theses of PhD Dissertation

**Biography of Honvéd (Home Defence) General
Miklós Gyulai Gaál**

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I. Aims

Concerning the biography of Miklós Gyulai Gaál, I have decided to deal with the following questions:

1. What career did Miklós Gaál have in the Imperial and Royal Army and which were the reasons that led to his retirement?
2. Why did he join the Home Defence Force (Honvéd) and what was his role in the different phases of the War of Independence?
3. How can the role of Honvéd General Miklós Gaál be evaluated? At what extent do the examined sources substantiate the image of Gaál and should this image be corrected?
4. What remembrances of Gaál have survived?

The dissertation answers these questions in five chapters. The *first chapter* deals with the education of Miklós Gaál and his career in the Imperial and Royal Army. The *second chapter* depicts the farming and economic activities conducted on his estate. The *third chapter* examines the role of Gaál in 1848-49, which can be divided into several phases. Gaál joined the Home Defence Forces in September 1848 and from October he fought beside Perczel in Muraköz. In December he was assigned to command the Arad siege army, and, following the events of 8 February 1849 he was taken under investigation. After he acquitted himself, he was appointed commander of the Army Corps of Engineers and was assigned to construct the defense system of the Balaton Uplands. The *fourth chapter* deals with the judgements of the Imperial and Royal military court of Arad and with the years of General Gaál in captivity. The *fifth chapter* examines the present memory of Miklós Gaál and gives an account of his remembrances and the Gaál memorials.

II. Sources

The biography of Honvéd General Miklós Gyulai Gaál is relatively a white patch in the field of historiography. Sparse details about his activities could be found, concerning the siege of Arad (December 1848 – February 1849) and the planned construction of the Balaton Uplands defense system (May-July 1849). Dr László Burucs made an attempt to partially reconstruct his life in his manuscript titled „The history of Zalaszegvár”. Jakab Böhm, an associate of the Military Archives, was the first to make the memoirs of Miklós Gaál about the War of Independence public. Gábor Bona wrote about Miklós Gyulai Gaál in his work concerning the generals and officers of the War of Independence.

Tamás Csikány examined the Arad events in his book „The history of the fortress of Arad”; István Pelyach dealt with the dispute between Damjanich, Gaál and Boeckó in his work titled „The lessons of a missed siege”. Róbert Hermann has touched certain phases of the life of Gaál in his works, for example his role in the Muraköz (November-October 1848) and his relationship with Kemetty (June 1849). In one of his latest publications, titled „Kossuth’s army, Kossuth’s supreme commanders”, he evaluated the activities of Gaál. Klára Palágyi provided useful details about the settlement of the Gaál family in Zala county in her work dealing with local history, titled „Hosztót”. Gaál’s letters written to his sister, published by Eszter V. Waldapfel in her source-book, made it easier to understand his activities in September 1848. Details concerning the events of September and October 1848 can be found in the study of Aladár Urbán and also in his source-collection examining the papers of Count Lajos Batthyány.

This present work has considerably extended the circle of sources, based on which I have endeavoured to give a detailed and authentic account of the life of Gaál.

I managed to explore the educational progress of Miklós Gaál by finding him among the students of the Saint Astrik Secondary School of Sopron in the documents of the School District Authority of Győr.

The sources concerning the service of Miklós Gaál in the Imperial and Royal Army included his personal and family papers and his letter book recently added to the Military Archives (Personalia). His correspondence with his mother, the documents dealing with his illness and his retirement request all provided a considerable amount of new information.

His assessment sheet from 1835/36 (Kriegsarchiv) and the assessment sheet attached to his retirement documents, which elaborated on his 30-year-long career in military engineering, should be mentioned here.

Miklós Gaál counted as a well situated nobleman and landlord in Zala county. In 1844 he had his estates surveyed and assessed the income they yielded. The record, which can be found in the Zala County Archives, gives a detailed description of feudal estates management.

Gaál joined the Home Defense Force in September 1848 and from October he served beside Perczel in Muraköz. This period was examined with the help of bibliographical sources (Aladár Urbán, Róbert Hermann, Eszter V. Waldapfel, etc.) and archive documents (Zala County Archives, Hungarian National Archives, Military Archives).

Gaál was the commander of the Arad siege army from December 1848 to February 1849. Many archive documents were found from this period. From the section H of the Hungarian National Archives' 1848-49 documents I primarily used the documents of the Prime Minister's Office, the National Home Defence Committee, the Governing Presidency (H. 2.) and the Kossuth Polizei Akten (H. 2. KPA.) adjunct to this, the Ministry of War (H. 75.) and some documents from other sections (H. 77., H. 79., H. 83., H. 95., H. 112). Furthermore, I used the Military Archives' documents of 1848/49, the documents of the Békés County Archives (the documents and records of the Defense Committee of Békés County, the documents of the permanent committee) and a number of documents from the National Archives Governorship of Arad County (Romania). An extremely important source was the logbook of the siege of the Arad fortress, which recorded the events from the perspective of the imperial defense forces on a daily basis (30 November 1848 – 1 March 1849). The examination of the events recorded in the logbook between January the 1st and February the 14th of 1849 revealed a considerable amount of new information. It could be found out that Gaál made effective preparations for the seizure of the fortress and the artillery barrage (24-28 January) preparing the charge caused great damages in the stronghold. The success was overshadowed by the fact that the imperial army temporarily retaking the fortress managed to seize Old-Arad for a couple of hours on the 8th of February. As a result of this, Gaál was dismissed from his post and his responsibility was investigated. Concerning this issue, valuable sources are the record and the report of the investigation of the Old-Arad Committee and the documents of the military court of justice of Debrecen, which can be found in the Hungarian National Archives.

At the end of the investigation Gaál was acquitted and was assigned new tasks. Furthermore, he was appointed head of the Army Corps of Engineers. Gaál's new responsibilities included the direction of the fortification works on the Balaton Uplands and the organization of the national guard and the territorial army. The sources dealing with this period are found in the Zala County Archives and the Veszprém County Archives (records of permanent committee sessions, documents of the permanent committee, recruitment documents, documents of officials).

After the defeat of the War of Independence, following two trials conducted by the royal and imperial court, Gaál was sentenced to 20 years imprisonment. The documents of the military court of Arad concerning Gaál (hearing, sentence, summarizing report) were available in the Military Archives. The diaries of Ernő Galsai Kovách and István Pongrácz, found in the Manuscript Archives of the National Széchenyi Library, deal with the years of captivity. Concerning the funeral of Gaál (1854), the manuscript of Lajos Abonyi gives a moving account of the event (the manuscript collection of the Abonyi Lajos Museum). Valuable relics are possessed by Gaál's direct descendant, Dr Péter S. J. Nemeshegyi (the death reports of Miklós Gaál and Vilma Gaál). The memory of Miklós Gaál is kept in Zalaszegvár, Hosztót, Hévíz and Abony (memorials and memorial tablets). The personal possessions of Miklós Gaál (portraits, paintings, drawings, his snuff-box, his general's seals and his prayerbook), which have been given to the former Arad Museum of Relics, can be found in the Museum Complex of Arad (Complex Muzael Arad).

III. Findings

1. In the service of the Double-Headed Eagle

Miklós Gaál, engineering officer of the Imperial and Royal Army (1818-1848)

Miklós Gyulai Gaál was born on the 14th of February in 1799 in Szegevár, Zala county, to a land-owning noble family. He received his elementary education in Szegevár and he attended the benedictine secondary school in Sopron between 1808 and 1811. In order to prepare for the military career, he continued his studies at the Engineering Academy in Vienna. He studied there from the age of 12 to 20. Afterwards, while he had been rising in rank and position, he spent several decades in different fortresses of the Habsburg Empire. His last post was in Károlyváros, where he served as director of the engineering and fortificational district in the rank of lieutenant colonel.

His assessment report issued in 1836 described him as a talented, broad-minded and conscientious soldier. In February 1848 Gaál was sent to Nagyszeben, where he was appointed as director of the Transylvanian fortificational district. However, during the journey he got ill and was confined to bed for months. Due to his health condition, he requested his retirement.

Ferdinand V. granted Gaál's retirement on 5 September 1848. His assessment sheet rendered his posts and positions according to his rise in rank and determined 29 years and 10 months of service altogether. According to his retirement documents, Engineering Lieutenant Colonel Miklós Gaál was taken from the active military ranks from 30 September 1848 and his pension was given from 1 October.

Miklós Gaál had inventors ambitions as well. Two of his works were published in Brünn (in 1837 and 1841), one of them dealing with the removal of smoke from kitchens and rooms, the other introducing his invention concerning the construction of drainage systems. Furthermore, he was a very talented drawer and an amateur painter. He participated in the 1844 application call for the design of the House of Parliament in Pest. He sent in his application through the general assembly of Zala county.

2. Managing a middle-sized estate in Zala county

Gaál spent his almost 30 years in the service of the Imperial and Royal Army far away from his estates. In his letter written on 5 May 1844, he asked Zala county to assess his estates in Szegvár, Hosztót, Galsa, Kohár Plain and the Badacsony vineyards, of which he requested an authenticated certificate. The certificate, issued on 15 November 1844, gave a detailed account of Miklós Gaál's estates and the income they yielded. His estates amounted to 804 acres altogether and yielded a total net income of 3496 Forint 65 denars per year. Whith his Gaál counted as a prosperous middle landlord in Zala county.

3. The motherland is above all! Miklós Gaál, general of the 1848-49 War of Independence

a. Wavering and commitment *September 1848*

Miklós Gaál lived in Szegvár until the outbreak of the War of Independence. He thought that the years of rest would come – his was just about to retire –, however, due to the coming events, his life was turned to a very different direction.

In the southern camp, at the beginning of September, Minister of War Lázár Mészáros was substituted by Bertalan Szemere, who made his best efforts to fill the ranks of generals lacked by the Hungarian forces. After he was informed that Engineering Lieutenant Colonel Miklós Gaál was in Szegvár preparing for his retirement, he wrote him a request for his service in the Hungarian army. Gaál answered to Szemere on 16 September and offered his services. On 17 September, the next day, he joined the Hungarian army retreating from Jellasics in Keszthely.

He told about the following events in his letters written to his sister, Nina Gaál (Balázsne Sipeki), between 23 and 27 September. He dealt with the condition of the Home Defence Force, the Croatian army, criticised the court's minority policy, and expressed his concerns regarding Palatine István's leaving of office.

Gaál wrote his prophetic words on 27 September: „I have left all my estates and possessions in order to save my precious motherland. The fulfilment of my duty, out of conviction, will be my wage, which no one can take away from me.”

The role of Miklós Gaál in the battle of Pákozd is unknown. Following the victory, he took rest at his home in Szegvár and he wrote his next letter to his sister from there.

b. Fights in Muraköz *November-December 1848*

Gaál was assigned a new task by the National Home Defence Committee on 25 October and he was appointed chief of staff of Perczel in Muraköz.

They had met back in September and they developed a friendship. Colonel Perczel – general from 1 November –, who was the commander of the troops sent to clear Southern Transdanubia, called the „Drava corps”, managed to clear the Muraköz after launching his attack on 17 and 18 October.

Perczel had not enough forces to execute the next campaign against Croatia. However, on 9 November he launched a preemptive strike against the Styrian troops holding Friedau. The successful operation in Friedau hindered the enemy from making a concerted attack and lifted the spirits of the Hungarian army and the population. Besides, it meant a significant victory for the Home Defence Force after the defeat at Schwechat and the fall of Vienna.

Perczel appreciated the role of Lieutenant Colonel Miklós Gaál in his report written on 9 November in Csáktornya. Minister of War Lázár Mészáros promoted Miklós Gaál to colonel on 1 December and the decree was published in the 18 December issue of the Közlöny (Official Journal). Being chief of staff in Perczel's army did not satisfy the ambitions of Gaál and their relationship had also deteriorated.

On his request he was given a new task and on 21 December he already served as commander of the army that was to siege Arad.

c. Commander of the Arad siege army
December 1848 – February 1849

Gaál made robust preparations for the siege. He had a bridge built over the river Maros, on which part of his army marched into New Arad. On 27 December he happily reported to the Home Defence Committee that the blockade around the fortress had been completely closed again and the enemy had been cut off from the outside world. He considered the construction of gunposts his most important task and requested additional battalions, guns and ammunition in order to successfully continue the siege. Dániel Boczkó, government commissioner of Arad county, had a favourable opinion on the new commander, describing him as an experienced, ambitious and assiduous soldier. Colonel Miklós Gaál was promoted to general by the decree of the National Home Defence Committee on 13 January 1849, Kossuth hoping that he would achieve quick successes.

As the result of hard work, by 21 January 15 siege batteries had been constructed by the right side of the Maros. After these preparations, on 24 January the bombardment of the fortress could eventually be started, which continued up until 28 January. According to the siege logbook, the five-day-long continuous gunfire caused the defenders severe damages and Gaál took efficient measures to capture the fortress. During the five days 10 thousand shells hit the fortress and caused 21 casualties. The defenders saw the situation more and more hopeless and their fighting morale deteriorated.

General Gaál was only waiting for the arrival of Damjanich's division in order to make a concerted attack on the fortress before Damjanich would make his way to the Tisza to join the force-concentration determined by the strategy approved in January. On 26 January the last units of Damjanich's division arrived to New Arad and the attack was planned for the next day. On 27 January, despite the promising preparations, the attack was postponed due to the unexpected melting of the ice on the Maros, which caused the trenches around the fortress to be flooded by the icy river, making a perfect protection for the defenders. In the following days a heated debate erupted between Gaál and Damjanich and Damjanich and Commissioner Boczkó. On 4 February 1849 Damjanich's division left Arad for its destination determined by the Home Defence Committee.

On 6 February an enemy force of 12 thousand troops reached New Arad, which consisted of the right wing of General Todorovic's Serbian-Austrian division and Imperial and Royal troops sent out from Temesvár. On 7 February, General Gaál abandoned New Arad and from the enemy's superior numbers he retreated to Old Arad. The enemy entered New Arad on the same day and provided the fortress with food and other necessary supplies. On 8 February the enemy, charging across the Maros, had managed to capture Old Arad for a couple of hours, from where they were pushed out by the resistance of the Home Defence Force. On the next day, 9 February, the enemy left New Arad and retreated towards Temesvár. On 10 February Commissioner Dániel Boczkó wrote a report to Kossuth, in which he blamed the affair on Gaál. Due to the report of Boczkó, Kossuth suspended Gaál from the command of the siege army and ordered him to Debrecen to defend himself against the charges.

d. Investigation and acquittal
March-April 1849

On 27 February Kossuth sent Lieutenant Colonel László Inczédy and Court Martial Justice Lieutenant István Illyés to Arad to investigate the events. The mixed (military and civil) investigation committee, established in Old Arad and chaired by Inczédy, started the hearings of the witnesses on 7 March and finished it on 21 March. During the two weeks 44 people were interrogated, among them all of the sergeant officers, some privates and civilians.

The report of the Old Arad committee acquitted Gaál from the charge of treason, but it did not determine the rate of his responsibility. Henceforth, the investigation was continued by the military court of Debrecen, headed by Court Martial Justice Major Károly Meirhoffner, military justice department director.

Major Meirhoffner summarized the investigation's results on 28 April 1849. According to his final judgement, Lieutenant Colonel Jenő Nagy (the commander of the garrison of Old Arad on the day of the attack) and Miklós Gaál were responsible for the happenings. Jenő Nagy ordered retreat upon the enemy invasion without the knowledge of Gaál and Gaál did not take adequate actions, however, he corrected his error by pushing the enemy back. On 4 May, The Ministry of Home Defence requested Kossuth either to put General Gaál back to service or order his retirement. The reason for this was that the charges against the General were mostly rebutted and the minor tactical mistakes that possibly occurred were corrected by the defeat of the enemy.

Gaál remained active even during the months of the investigation against him. He made plans for the establishment of a Transdanubian „mobile” division, analysed the spring campaign and the situation of Hungary's strongholds.

e. The idea of the defensive role of the Balaton Uplands in the last days of the War of Independence
May-July 1849

The government raised the plan of the Balaton Uplands defense system in Debrecen in the beginning of May 1849. It was based on the strategic idea that the final battle had to be fought in Transdanubia, exploiting the advantages of its terrain and the support of the patriotic population. The plan aimed the construction of a fortification system from the Bakony to the Tihany peninsula, which would become very useful especially if the fights would take too long. The central role in the system was given to Tihany, which was to be transformed into an island by cutting through the peninsula.

The command of the fortification works was given to General Miklós Gaál Gyulai, who received his order on 8 May in Debrecen to implement the plan. Gaál wrote a letter to the Ministry of War on 10 May, in which he described his intention to start the fortification in seven different locations – in Tihany, Szántód, Marcal-Hídvég, Karakó, Váth, Városlőd and Tapolca. Protected by the defense system of South Bakony and the Balaton Uplands he would fortify the Tihany peninsula so strongly during the summer that it would become impregnable and could endure even a longer siege.

Gaál was appointed commander of the Army Corps of Engineers dealing with fortifications and sieges and he was also assigned to organize the national guard and the territorial army in the involved Transdanubian counties (Zala and Veszprém counties).

After the fall of Buda, Gaál travelled to Veszprém to direct the fortification from there. He spent the 5th and 6th of July in Tihany, but after he examined the peninsula, he postponed its fortification. In the beginning of July Gaál went to Tihany again. However, he did not consider the implementation of the works realistic any more, which he reported to the Ministry of War on 7 July. The Ministry of War ordained that the sapper corps and the officers sent there from Pest go to Komárom to fortify the stronghold there.

This was, because, in the meantime the military situation became critical. The development of the war events and the abandonment of the defense strategy relying on Transdanubia made the continuation of the fortification works meaningless.

Miklós Gaál, in his letter written in Szántód on 17 July, pleading his bad health condition, resigned as general and commander of the Army Corps of Engineers and requested his retirement.

The fortification of the Balaton Uplands, the great plan envisioned in May, did not become reality. Traces of fortification works remained only in the area of Karakó.

The transformation of the Tihany peninsula into an island was a pivotal part of the plan, but the construction was never started. On the one hand, for the fortification of the Balaton Uplands and Tihany not months, but years would have been needed. On the other hand, neither the terrains, nor the population's spirits were as favourable as the government in Debrecen thought them to be. The hills of the Bakony did not mean a real obstacle for the armies of the age. The change of military situation in June, the ordination of the concentration in the area of Szeged, were the ultimate but not the basic reason for the abandonment of the plan.

4. The captivity of General Miklós Gaál in Arad
November 1849 – November 1854

Miklós Gaál, after filing his resignation on 17 July, had been hiding from the Imperial and Royal Army invading Zala county for almost a month. Then, on 12 September he gave himself up voluntarily to Colonel Knesevic, who commanded the imperial troops occupying Keszthely. After this, on 23 September he was taken for interrogation to Vienna, then on 13 October to Pest, and, on 14 November he was taken to Arad where he was court-martialled. The oral interrogation of Miklós Gaál took place in the fortress of Arad on 10 December, conducted by the military court headed by Colonel Moser.

The court passed the sentence on 18 December 1849, in which Gaál was convicted of accomplice in high treason. Thus, he was stripped of his rank, lost his pension, all his properties were confiscated and he was sentenced to 15 years imprisonment. However, when the sentence was sent for approval, General Haynau, commander-in-chief of the army, found it too light and thus he ordered a new trial on 24 December. In his opinion, Gaál belonged to the first line of the offenders and he had done a very successful and dangerous job. In the case of Gaál, who had committed such a serious crime, capital punishment should not be left out from consideration, since other officers had been sentenced to death for smaller offences.

The new trial was lead by Court Martial Justice Ernst and Gaál's next hearing took place on 23 February 1850. The military court of Arad passed the sentence on 24 February 1850, according to which Gaál was to be executed by hanging. The death sentence sent for approval was changed to 20 years imprisonment to be spent in irons by Haynau On 28 February 1850 out of clemency. His properties to be confiscated valued up to 29.604 Forints.

Concerning Gaál's trial and his years of imprisonment, the memoirs of his inmates, Ernő Galsai Kovách and István Pongrácz, provided useful details.

Gaál died in his 56th year in the prisoners hospital in Pest on 30 November 1854. He was buried in Nagyabony, where his honorary monument was erected on 13 October 1861.

The chroniclers of the War of Independence and the contemporaries of Gaál had different opinions about him. Rihárd Gelich considered him weak, however, Gábor Margitay described him as a sensible, conscientious, talented patriot who was a recognised expert in military engineering.

Based on the sources, the image of Gaál needs to be corrected. According to the siege logbook, Gaál made effective preparations to capture the fortress of Arad. Also the imperial military court saw it in this way. The general attack against the stronghold could have been successful if it had not been cancelled due to the belated arrival of Damjanich, the unexpected melt of the ice and the debate between Gaál and Damjanich. Gaál remained to be unlucky even later on. The investigation in Debrecen condemned him to inactivity in the most glorious monts of the War of Independence. When he was assigned a new task, due to the war becoming defensive, there was not enough time for the fortification of the Balaton Uplands. However, keeping his commitment, he remained faithful to his motherland up until the last hour, only fighting for his life before the Imperial and Royal military court.

On the other hand, the opinion of Róbert Hermann can also be accepted. In his opinion Gaál's military genius could not rival that of Görgei and Bem, his ingenuity that of Vetter and Klapka, his forcefulness that of Damjanich and his temperament that of Perczel. Gaál was rather a theoretical than a practical soldier. However, as one of the 30 generals who served all along the War of Independence, he played a major role and was involved in important events of the war. His narrower significance is heightened by the fact that he was the only general of the 1848-49 War of Independence from Zala county.

5. The memory of Miklós Gyulai Gaál

Gyulai Gaál's personal possessions, drawings, paintings and prayer book can be found in the Museum Complex of Arad and in the Kossuth Museum in Cegléd, Hungary. There is an elementary school named after Miklós Gaál in Abony, a monument in Hévíz and a memorial tablet in Zalaszegvár.

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