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Doctoral Dissertation
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The History of the Szekler Border Guard Forces Based on Memoirs
(1940-1944)

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Topic introduction

My dissertation summarizes the history of the Szekler Border Guard Forces within the Royal Hungarian Army between the years of 1940-1944, with an emphasis on how these units were set up and trained. By focusing on the process through which the military force in question was organized, it analyses in detail questions related to the local society and national defence.

Since the Szeklers are generally regarded as the defenders of the eastern borders of the historical kingdom of Hungary, their military past plays an important role in their historical self-perception, and the history of the Szekler Border Guard Forces is one of the elements vividly present in their collective memory. In fact, this is the last period when a partially autonomous Szekler military organization existed within the framework of the Hungarian army, contributing to the myth of the Szeklers as border guards in the Hungarian collective memory. Regarding the history of the Szekler Border Guard Forces no comprehensive account has yet been written, but there are several works which discuss certain aspects of the topic in question.

Historiography

Before 1989, the history of the Szekler Border Guard Forces could not be addressed neither in Romania nor in Hungary. After 1990, mostly as a result of the activity of war veterans, several war diaries and memoirs were published, inspiring other veterans to commit their own memories to paper. The most important ones include those authored by Dániel Szőts, József Gocz, Jenő Blénessy, István Ivás, etc., and one also has to mention the work of Lajos Sylvester, a journalist from Sepsiszentgyörgy, who interviewed a large number of former World War II soldiers. In Hungary, on the other hand, the issue was brought forward by the publication of memoirs and diaries written by officers who had served in Northern Transylvania between 1940 and 1944 (First Lieutenants Ődön Sebő and Béla Szepesvári, Ensign Ferenc Varga, etc.). In total, some 50 diaries and memoirs have been published, and there is an even more significant body of unpublished sources available for research (diaries, memoirs, letters). There is only one account on the situation of northern Transylvania written by an officer who decided to emigrate to the West after the war, namely the one authored by Colonel General Lajos Veress. This memoir, however, is only partially concerned with the military situation of the Szekler region or Szeklerland.
After 1990, military historian József János Szabó was the first to embark on research related to the history of the Árpád Line, and he also interviewed Szekler war veterans. Museologist and military historian István Ravasz, on the other hand, wrote the first comprehensive account on Transylvania’s military history in World War II, focusing mainly on the 2nd Army’s role in the fighting that took place in Northern Transylvania (the army in question, as opposed to the 2nd Army involved in the Don debacle, had been raised in the autumn of 1944). A detailed monograph, authored by three prominent Hungarian military historians, namely Péter Illésfalvi, Norbert Számvéber and Péter Szabó, have been published in 2005. Besides discussing the fighting that took place during the autumn of 1944, the three authors also touch upon the question of how the region’s military organization had been built from scratch. The last two accounts, however, deal mainly with the most important military clash that took place in Transylvania, that is, the battle of Torda, and focus mostly on the history of given military operations.

In an article written on the distinctiveness of the Szekler units, Péter Illésfalvi was the first to address questions related to the creation of the Border Guard Forces as a partly military, partly social organization. Archivist and historian Árpád Róbert Rerekméri, on the other hand, has published the first monograph dedicated to a Szekler military unit, namely the 27th Szekler Light Division. Although social and political historians rarely focus on the history of warfare, their research often complements military history. In this respect, one has to mention the work of the following historians: Nándor Bárdi, Balázs Ablonczy, Sándor Oláh, János Kristóf Murádin, András Tóth-Bartos, Tamás Sárándi and Péter Hámori. Finally, my dissertation has also been informed by several comprehensive and theoretical accounts in military history written by John Keegan, Liddell Hart, Dénes Harai, Samuel Huntington and Michael Howard.

**Methodology**

One of the major problems I faced embarking on my research related to World War II in 2007 was the scarcity of source materials. The Szekler Border Guard Forces, meant to be the first mountain corps of the Hungarian Army, consisted of 7 border rifle (határvadász) battalions, 20 Szekler Border Guard (határőr) battalions, 12 fortress companies (erődszázad), the 27th Light Division, and several other units; although there is some source material available on these units, none of the archives of their headquarters have been preserved. Due to this fact, I decided to interview war veterans from the onset of my research project, and
until 2015 I succeeded in interviewing some 460 veterans, most of whom live/lived in Szeklerland, and out of whom 251 had served in the Szekler Border Guard Forces during World War II.

The semi-structured interviews included questions referring to the following topics:
the beginning of one’s military service;
one’s military training;
life in the barracks;
the relationship between the troops and the members of the cadre, most of whom came from Hungary proper (as opposed to the recruits, mostly ethnic Hungarians from Transylvania);
questions related to the equipment of the troops,
questions related to the weaponry they used,
questions related to the German occupation of Hungary in 1944,
questions related to the mobilization,
and the military events which took part in the autumn of 1944.

Diaries and memoirs can be considered more reliable than interviews. Some of the diaries, however, had been re-published, or, indeed, rewritten over time, and the authors often decided to change the original texts by including new parts or thoughts into them. Memoirs are usually more comprehensive and contain more details. In addition to these sources, I also looked at approximately 20,000 photographs, letters, notebooks containing poems or songs related to the military, and postcards – some of the latter sent by POWs (prisoners of war), that is, soldiers captured by the enemy.

In parallel with interviewing war veterans, I began my archival research in the Hungarian Military Archives in Budapest. Orders and regulations referring to the Szekler units can be found in the papers of the General Staff and Ministry of Defence. Names, events, places and unit names were cross-checked against the surviving documents of the Royal Hungarian Army or the existing casualty lists; the careers of the officers from Hungary proper were reconstructed using documents from their personal files. I also went through certain collections of sources contained in the archives situated in the Szekler region, that is, the branches of the Romanian National Archives from Hargita, Maros and Kovászna counties. In this case, I looked at documents of the local administration; since local military commands were in continuous contact with civil servants, and the documents produced as a result of this relationship usually offer an insight into the everyday relationship between the military and the local community. The sources contained in the Gyergyószentmiklós branch of the
Catholic Church’s Archives offer an insight into the activity and everyday life of field chaplains. Instructions and regulations related to the organization of the army, military training and military tactics can be found in the Budapest Library of Military History; the Romanian Historical Archives in Bucharest house documents related to the Romanian military intelligence on the activity of the Hungarian military in Transylvania; and, finally, the Historical Archives of the Hungarian State Security contain sources related to the People’s Tribunals, or, more specifically, the documents of the trials conducted against the members of the Hungarian officer corps after World War II.

As the narrative sources are of an utmost importance for my research, I decided to include this fact into the title of the thesis as well. In some cases, I could only corroborate pieces of information originating from these sources against each other; in other cases, these sources led me to the location of some archival material; in such cases, I reference the archival sources, although on occasion both types of sources are referenced.

**The Structure of the Dissertation**

The first chapter is in fact the introduction; the second chapter discusses the setting up of the military structures in the Szekler region after the annexation of northern Transylvania to Hungary; the third chapter focuses on military training and the process through which the young recruits of Szekler background were to be transformed into soldiers of the Royal Hungarian Army. The fourth chapter deals with the activity of the units involved in patrolling Hungary’s borders in the Szekler region, with an emphasis on the challenges posed by the mountainous terrain.

In the interwar period certain age groups of the Szekler male population completed their military service in the Royal Romanian Army. After 1940 they were drafted into the Royal Hungarian Army, but the way they perceived military service often differed from the views of those who served in the Hungarian Army alone. The fifth chapter is based mainly on the differences between the two groups in question.

The Szekler community, as opposed to other Transylvanian regions inhabited mostly by ethnic Romanians, perceived the presence of the Royal Hungarian Army as a guarantee to the Hungarian statehood. Consequently, the sixth chapter focuses on the intricate relationship of the different ethnic groups towards the Hungarian military, emphasising the characteristic nature of the relationship that existed between the Szeklers and the Hungarian Army. Due to the fact that the army’s investment often resulted in modernizing the region’s infrastructure,
the local administration made serious attempts to support the claims of the military. The seventh chapter discusses issues related to the fortifications of the Árpád Line built in the north-eastern and eastern range of the Carpathians, with an emphasis on the section built in the Szekler region. From 1942 the Szekler community took part in the defence of country in a way which can be considered unique in Hungary’s history in the twentieth century. The eighth chapter offers an explanation as to why the veterans of World War I had been called up for a military service which had been different from the service of regular recruits. In 1943 the Szekler Command was formed. Headed by Major-General István Kozma, the command incorporated all military units stationed in the Szekler region. The issues related to the Szekler Command are discussed in the ninth chapter. The tenth chapter is concerned with the German occupation of Hungary and its impact on the Szekler Border Guard forces, while the eleventh chapter focuses on the mobilization of the Szekler community and the birth of military administrative structures which existed side by side with the civilian administration.

Chapter XII does not refer to the setting up of the Szekler Border Guard Forces, but discusses their engagement in the fighting of 1944, and in a way helps us understand some of the questions raised in the previous chapters (related to issues such as training and military tactics).

Chapter XIII focuses on the heritage of the Szekler Border Guard Forces, which until 1990 manifested itself in a hidden form, through various practices of collective memory, and which continues to play an important role in the Szekler community’s memory.

**Conclusion**

The Szekler Border Guard Forces (intended to become the X Szekler Mountain Corps) were a rather specific military organization within the Hungarian military history and the history of World War II. Brought into being by local elites and staff officers with Szekler origins, the forces were shaped by both the policies of the World War II Hungarian military and the local desire to revive a putative military tradition. Due to the strategic position of the Szekler region, the setting up of such a military force enjoyed the support of the Hungarian military leadership. Since those involved with the project were officers of Szekler origins and viewed the region as their native land, they were willing to go to any length to secure the necessary financial resources. With the help of the minister of defence, Vilmos Nagy, Major-General István Kozma usually managed to obtain the resources needed from the ministry of defence. The political support of the project came from the representative Gábor Pál and his
associates. Aware of the precarious situation of the region, Pál’s desire was to create a Szekler military force both for security reasons and to increase the leverage of the Hungarian community within Transylvania.

While the setting up of the border rifle battalions was part of the Hungarian defence strategy, the organization of the border guard units was more of a social project related to the Szekler community. The generation of middle-aged men who had experienced the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy as soldiers and never accepted the authority of the Romanian state, intended to set up a military force controlled by the local community (in addition to the local units of centrally controlled Royal Hungarian Army).

Initially the military leadership did not expect the Szekler Border Guards to become an efficient fighting force, but the Szekler society identified with military requirements to such extent that finally the units have been included into the body of the regular army. Due to the meagre financial situation of the Royal Hungarian Army, however, border guard units were rather poorly equipped, and the locals’ involvement in subsistence agriculture, as well as the age of the men recruited for these units often prevented them from acquiring the key elements of up-to-date military tactics. Since the military leadership was aware of these shortcomings, in 1943 it had been decided to call up and train the last two classes of the Levente movement in training camps established in the Szekler region. In a rather unique fashion, by 1944 all the able-bodied Szekler men between the age of 18 and 60 had been called up for military service. Their absence from the production of goods, however, led to a shortage of working hands, which, in its turn, had its impact on the local economy. To mitigate the situation, Major-General István Kozma and other military leaders envisioned the setting up of a social support system based on state aid measures, joint voluntary work (kaláka), and tax benefits offered for the inhabitants of the region. Established during the spring of 1944, the Szekler Border Guard Associations actually began to integrate the existing social organizations, bringing them under the control of the military leadership. These measures were meant to subordinate the whole community to the necessities of the military.

Whereas the various state-imposed measures implemented in the region from 1940 were part of a modernisation strategy inspired by a right-wing political ideology, the setting up of the Szekler Border Guard Forces was an attempt of the military leadership to create an ideal military society. In spite of this fact, the Szekler community has never became what one could call a militarized society, mostly because its military culture had its roots in the Clausewitzian principle of subordinating the military to political control. Since the Border Guard Forces were set up by a generation brought up in the military traditions of the Austro-Hungarian
Monarchy, there was a continuous tendency to transform these militia-like forces into a regular military organization; however, the Forces’ activity was governed by homeland defence interests and not the militant political ideologies of the period in question.

The development of the Szekler defence system, however, was brought to a screeching halt by the German occupation of Hungary on 19 March 1944. The peremptory mobilization of the IX Corps’ Command as well as the Szekler Command could have led to the escalation of the situation. Due to the fact that the Szekler Command consisted of officers loyal to Miklós Horthy who were more or less opposed to the unconditional German orientation, the Germans decided to separate the troops from their Headquarters, planning to remove them from the Szekler region. This plan, however, has never been implemented.

The Arpad Line, the main defensive structure of the region has never been completed; in fact, the Hungarian army lacked the necessary manpower to man the existing fortifications. The concept of the Szekler Border Guard system in which fathers and sons were supposed to defend their homeland fighting side by side has also failed to work in practice. However, one should keep in mind that prior to 1944 the Hungarian military leadership did not plan to deploy these forces against the troops of the Red Army. During the fighting in 1944 most Szekler soldiers decided to leave the ranks and return home, thus preventing a possible demographic crisis that could have been caused by the removal of some 50,000 men from the local community. The situation of the border rifle battalions trained in the tactics of mountain warfare was somewhat different in that their troops were up to the task of fighting the Soviets; however, they could not cope with the overwhelming numerical superiority of the enemy forces either.

After 1945, the Szekler community came under Romanian rule once again. The practice of remembering the war became part of a culture of resistance against the Romanian party state, and it was influenced by various myths, war traumas, and the everyday experiences of one’s being a member of an ethnic minority. Those who served with the border rifles found adjusting back to civilian life the most difficult; the transition was smoother for former border guards, mostly family men, who had been reluctant to leave their families when called up for service in the first place. Since 1990 new public forms of remembering the war came into being. These practices are far more frequent in the Szekler region than among other ethnic Hungarians who live in multi-ethnic regions of Transylvania.
Publications


