

The Land of Peace? The 1921 Borderland Conflict of Burgenland in the International Context

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Introduction

On 4 October 1921, the modest baroque building of the *Bezirksgericht* (the district court) in the small Western Hungarian rural town of Oberwarth / Felsőőr witnessed a very curious event. This house, built to represent the power of the Habsburg Empire, was used to proclaim a new state named Lajtabánság (or in German, Leitha-Banat). This regime was the brainchild of a former Habsburg hussar officer, Baron Pál Prónay. He established the Lajtabánság with his right-wing comrades in a power vacuum created by the retreating Hungarian army on the territory of present-day Burgenland.

Proclaiming the founding of such a peculiar state after the end of the First World War was not unique at all. Between 1917 and 1923 many regions in East Central Europe witnessed the establishment of similar short-lived regimes. They were especially common in the different contested shatter zones of the collapsed empires. In the western peripheries of the Romanov Empire, on the territory of today's Ukraine and in the Baltic region, temporary formations changed in quick succession during 1918 and 1919. Similar states were founded on the ruins of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The most notable of these was undoubtedly Gabriele D'Annunzio's infamous regime in Fiume / Rijeka, which lasted almost one and a half years in the Adriatic coastal town. These regimes were established mostly by clandestine figures, disillusioned soldiers like D'Annunzio or Prónay. They formed powerful paramilitary groups made up of First World War veterans and the "war youth generation". They shared a similar ideology of militant nationalism that was combined with anti-Bolshevism and often very strong antisemitism. These paramilitary groups perceived the contested shatter zones of the empires as laboratories for

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their new radical nationalist projects. Consequently, their states were mostly the products of different shorter- or longer-lasting borderland conflicts.²

The recent literature argues that soldiers' experiences during these wars played a crucial role in political radicalisation during the interwar period. The "heroic deeds" of paramilitary soldiers became the cornerstone of radical nationalist subcultures developed in Germany, Italy, Austria and Hungary. Many elements of these mythologies were later incorporated into the ideologies of Italian Fascism and German National Socialism. D'Annunzio, for example, introduced practices that later became part of Fascist rituals.³ Similarly, heroic stories about the Freikorps in the Baltics influenced the National Socialist perception of the "Ost" and the policy of the Third Reich in the region during the Second World War.⁴

At first glance, Burgenland and Lajtabánság fit into this type of infamous post-First World War borderland. In many ways, however, this territory seems to challenge the assumption of the radicalisation effect of these conflicts. Unlike the Baltics, Silesia, Carinthia or the Adriatic region, Western Hungary did not become a stronghold for right-wing paramilitary movements. Although some veterans among Prónay's men later became notorious figures in the Race Defender movement in Hungary, the territory had never been a centre for right-wing nationalist movements. Hungarian revisionism did not disappear, but the area of Sopron did not have as great a symbolic importance as Transylvania or, for example, Carinthia for German nationalists, or the Dalmatian coastline for Italian nationalists. The traditional literature mostly explained this phenomenon through the 1921 plebiscite, which put a "democratic" end to the conflict.⁵ Although the referendum was able to play a major role in reconciling the two countries, this alone hardly explains the lack of brutal behaviour in the region. Plebiscites were organised in other contested territories (such as in Silesia and Carinthia), which later turned out to be hotbeds of right-wing nationalist movements.

² Robert GERWARTH, *Fighting the Red Beast. Counter-Revolutionary Violence in the Defeated States of Central Europe*, in: IDEM / John HORNE (Eds.), *War in Peace. Paramilitary Violence in Europe after the Great War*. Oxford 2012, 52–72, 59. For the case of the Baltic states see Vejas LIULEVICIUS, *War Land on the Eastern Front. Culture, National Identity and German Occupation in World War I*. Cambridge 2005 (Studies in the Social and Cultural History of Modern Warfare, 9), 228.

³ Michael A. LEDEEN, *The First Duce. D'Annunzio at Fiume*. Baltimore/MD 1977, 7–11; Robert GERWARTH, *The Vanquished. Why the First World War Failed to End, 1917–1923*. London 2016, 220–7.

⁴ LIULEVICIUS, *War Land on the Eastern Front*, 247.

⁵ See for example Mária ORMOS, *Civitas fidelissima. Népszavazás Sopronban, 1921*. Győr 1990; from an Austrian perspective see Richard LEIN, *Die "Burgenlandnahme" 1919–1924*, in: Maximilian GRAF / Alexander LASS / Karlo RUZICIC-KESSLER (Eds.), *Das Burgenland als internationale Grenzregion im 20. und 21. Jahrhundert*. Wien 2012, 1–45, 43.

This paper intends to explain the conflict's relatively moderate impact on the radical right-wing soldiers by comparing developments in the region with the other borderland wars of East Central Europe. Since Austria used regular gendarmerie units, the study primarily focuses on the Hungarian side, which deployed paramilitary soldiers in massive numbers.⁶

The paper is divided into three main parts. The first part discusses the pre-1921 history of the region, analysing its role in the different and competing nation-building projects. It then presents the history of the conflict, including the diplomatic manoeuvres of the Hungarian government. The second part shifts perspective and concentrates on the paramilitaries themselves. It discusses the social background of the participating soldiers, the methods of their recruitment and their political programme. The last part of the paper compares Burgenland with similar East Central European conflicts. It identifies the most important distinguishing characteristics of the region, which could explain this borderland war's modest impact on the brutal behaviours of the participating soldiers.

Fighting for an Uncontested Borderland. Burgenland or Western Hungary? Prelude to a Conflict

During the late nineteenth century, East and Central European nationalist activists began to discover certain territories – borderlands – that they perceived as zones of ongoing national struggle. These regions were portrayed as both threatened frontiers and potential sources of a national “awakening”. Journalists published glorifying reports about the “true virtues” of the local population, and they “warned” the public about the importance of preserving these regions’ national character. The local elites – or at least a large part of them – often began to identify with these ideas. Many of them joined nationalist associations and through primary-school education they began to shape the region’s identity in line with these nationalist concepts.⁷ In these regions, intense political mobilisation had already occurred before 1914. This established the infrastructure and know-how that became essential to many paramilitaries in the post-First World War conflicts. In the Habsburg Empire, many contested borderlands such as Southern Styria, Silesia, Carinthia or Transylvania could be placed in this category.

⁶ On the historiography of the post-World War I Burgenland, see Andrew F. BURGHARDT, *Borderland. A Historical and Geographical Study of Burgenland*. Madison / WI 1962; ORMOS, *Civitas fidelissima*; Gerald SCHLAG, *Aus Trümmern geboren. Burgenland 1918–1921*. Eisenstadt 2001 (*Wissenschaftliche Arbeiten aus dem Burgenland*, 106); Peter HASLINGER, *Der ungarische Revisionismus und das Burgenland. 1922–1932*. Frankfurt / M. et al. 1994.

⁷ Pieter M. JUDSON, *Guardians of the Nation. Activists on the Language Frontiers of Imperial Austria*. Cambridge / MA 2006, 16–20.

Despite its multi-ethnic character, the territory of today's Burgenland did not belong to this group. Unlike many of the abovementioned borderlands, Burgenland had neither a universally used name nor widely accepted borders until 1921. Originally, German nationalists called the most western part of the Hungarian Kingdom "Deutsch-Westungarn" or "Hienzenland". The term Vierburgenland or Burgenland was only invented in 1918 and it derived from the name of the four most western counties of the Hungarian Kingdom (Pressburg, Ödenburg, Wieselburg and Eisenburg).⁸ Meanwhile, Hungarians also did not have one universal term for the region. Only the southern parts of the future Burgenland had a distinct name, Órvidék. The term originated from the mediaeval period when Hungarian tribes established their most western frontier zone there.⁹

Not only did the name of the territory remain ambiguous, the exact borders of Burgenland did as well. Some radical German nationalists argued that all the four most western counties of the Hungarian Kingdom could be considered Deutsch-Westungarn. Others defined the region according to ethnic lines and claimed only the lands with a clear German majority. This became more or less universally accepted in 1918. The territory demanded by Austria in 1918 consisted of 5,801 square kilometres and was populated by half a million citizens, of whom around 325,000 were native Germans. According to the 1910 census, 15.2 per cent of the population of this region was Croatian and only 8.4 per cent was Hungarian. The latter mostly lived in the southern territories and their largest centre was the town of Oberwarth.¹⁰ Most of the region's population belonged to the peasantry and worked in the lands of the wealthiest aristocrats of the Hungarian Kingdom. This powerful elite had been closely connected to the Viennese court since the seventeenth century.¹¹ The only major town of the region was the county seat, Sopron. Despite

⁸ Imre TÓTH, *A nyugat-magyarországi kérdés, 1922–1939. Diplomácia és helyi politika a két háború között*. Sopron 2006 (*Dissertationes Sopronienses*, 2), 13–14.

⁹ László ERDÉLYI, *Árpádkori társadalomtörténetünk legkritikusabb kérdései*. Budapest 1915 (*Kolozsvári értekezések a magyar művelődéstörténelem köréből*, 6), 538.

¹⁰ Gerhard BAUMGARTNER, *Austria*, in: Nándor BÁRDI / Csilla FEDINEC / László SZARKA (Eds.), *Minority Hungarian Communities in the Twentieth Century*. Boulder/CO 2011 (*Atlantic Studies on Society in Change*, 138), 69–81, 69–70; Katalin SOÓS, *A nyugat-magyarországi kérdés, 1918–1919*. Budapest 1962 (*Értekezések a történeti tudományok köréből*, N.S., 25), 7. See for details on the lack of national identity among the local communities and the nationalization of ethnic groups, Andreas MORITSCH (Ed.), *Vom Ethnos zur Nationalität. Der nationale Differenzierungsprozess am Beispiel ausgewählter Orte in Kärnten und im Burgenland*. Wien 1991 (*Wiener Beiträge zur Geschichte der Neuzeit*, 18).

¹¹ For details on the economic relations in the region, see Scott M. EDDIE, *Historisches Verzeichnis der Grundbesitzer des Burgenlandes. 1893–1930. Burgenland történelmi gazdacímháza. Eisenstadt 1999* (*Burgenländische Forschungen*, 79).

a strong Magyarisation process, in the early twentieth century Sopron had a slight German majority and was still dominated by a wealthy German *Bürgertum*.¹²

Despite its massive non-Magyar population, the territory had not yet been particularly important for Hungarian nationalist efforts. Budapest felt more threatened by the Slovakian and Romanian nation-building projects, and paid far less attention to the Magyarization of its Western Hungarian citizens. They could afford to pay less attention because during the late nineteenth century the constantly growing German nationalist movement remained weak in the region. The German nationalists in Austria focused more on the perceived “Slavic threat” in Styria, Carinthia and the Czech Lands.¹³ *Großdeutsch* activists “discovered” Burgenland only at the beginning of the twentieth century. In 1905 the victory of the anti-Ausgleich opposition in the general elections caused a deep political crisis in Hungary. Many intellectuals on both sides of the Leitha began to question the future of the Dual Monarchy. At this moment a German nationalist journalist, Josef Patry, published the first article about the region in the *Alldeutsches Tagblatt*. He demanded the immediate annexation of Deutsch-Westungarn to Austria.¹⁴ One year later his concept entered the mainstream political discourse when it was included into Aurel Popovici’s famous plan regarding the federal transformation of the Habsburg Empire.¹⁵ In 1907 Josef Patry, together with another nationalist activist named Gregor Meidlinger, established the Verein zur Erhaltung des Deutschtums in Ungarn, an association aiming to promote German nationalism on the territory of the Hungarian Kingdom. However, this organisation only had a moderate impact on local politics and provoked little response from the Magyar elite.¹⁶

The outbreak of the First World War changed this situation very quickly. In 1914 the Czechoslovak immigrant community in the USA developed the concept of a “Slavic Corridor”, a strip of land linking the planned Czechoslovak state to the Adriatic coastline through the present-day territory of Burgenland.¹⁷ Also, the relationship between the Austrian and Hungarian sides of the empire deteriorated quickly. The increasing problems with the food supply led to constantly growing

¹² József BOTLIK, Nyugat-Magyarország sorsa, 1918–1921. Vasszilvágy 2012, 20–21.

¹³ Peter HASLINGER, A regionális identitás kialakításának egy esete. Burgenland 1921–1938, *Regio* 11 (2000), No. 4, 67–92. For details on the German nationalism, see JUDSON, Guardians of the nation.

¹⁴ TÓTH, A nyugat-magyarországi kérdés, 1922–1939, 13–14.

¹⁵ Joseph IMRE, Burgenland and the Austria-Hungary Border Dispute in International Perspective, 1918–22, *Regio* 4 (2015), No. 2, 219–46, 224; Soós, A nyugat-magyarországi kérdés, 1918–1919, 6.

¹⁶ August ERNST, Geschichte des Burgenlandes. Wien 1987 (Geschichte der österreichischen Bundesländer), 186.

¹⁷ Borut KLABJAN, “Scramble for Adria”. Discourses of Appropriation of the Adriatic Space Before and After World War I, *Austrian History Yearbook* 42 (2011), 16–32, 29.

tensions between Vienna and Budapest. This was particularly important in the imperial capital, where hunger became part of the everyday life of almost every citizen. This led to the quick radicalisation of politics. Blaming different ethnic groups – including Hungarians – for the lack of adequate food supply was quickly adopted by mainstream political forces.¹⁸

*Between the Two Defeated States.
The Emerging Conflict for Burgenland, 1918–1921*

These tensions intensified until the final collapse of the empire. On 31 October 1918, the Hungarian National Council took power in Budapest under the leadership of Count Mihály Károlyi. The political parties of his coalition all agreed that the Hungarian Kingdom had to be preserved with its 1867 borders. They wanted to offer territorial autonomy and a limited form of self-governance to the non-Magyar ethnic groups. To find common ground, the Minister of National Affairs, Oszkár Jászi, began to negotiate with the leaders of the Romanian, Ruthenian and German ethnic groups.¹⁹

Meanwhile, in Vienna, the German-speaking representatives of the last imperial parliament established a temporary national assembly and elected their new government. The coalition was formed from the three largest parties of the time, the Social Democrats, the Christian Socials, and the German nationalists, under the leadership of the Social Democratic chancellor, Karl Renner.²⁰ By 12 November 1918, the new German-Austrian National Assembly had begun discussing the planned eastern borders of the republic. The major political forces all agreed that the most western part of the former Hungarian Kingdom, Deutsch-Westungarn, should belong to their state. However, the members of the coalition had different views about the timing and method of the annexation. The most radical, the German Nationalist Party, demanded quick action and established the Westungarische Kanzlei to coordinate the pro-Austrian propaganda campaign in the region.²¹ The Christian Socials also argued that Burgenland should be occupied immediately because only these agricultural lands could ensure food supplies to the capital city.²² This “hawk” approach

¹⁸ Manfred RAUCHENSTEINER, *Der Erste Weltkrieg und das Ende der Habsburgermonarchie. 1914–1918*. Wien et al. 2013, 207–8; Maureen HEALY, *Vienna and the Fall of the Habsburg Empire. Total War and Everyday Life in World War I*. Cambridge 2007 (Studies in the Social and Cultural History of Modern Warfare, 17), 301.

¹⁹ For details on these negotiations, see György LITVÁN, *A Twentieth-Century Prophet. Oszkár Jászi, 1875–1957*. Budapest 2006.

²⁰ Walter RAUSCHER, *Die verzweifelte Republik. Österreich 1918–1922*. Wien 2017, 49–50.

²¹ SOÓS, *A nyugat-magyarországi kérdés, 1918–1919*, 7–11.

²² TÓTH, *A nyugat-magyarországi kérdés, 1922–1939*, 228–9.

was rejected by the Social Democrats, who did not yet want to engage in armed conflict for the region. They wanted to ensure that the local population would have the right to determine the future of the territory in a referendum and that Hungary would continue to transport the necessary food supplies to Vienna. After negotiations with Budapest on 25 November, the two sides reached a temporary agreement along these lines. The decision over the status of Burgenland was postponed, while Budapest agreed to continue shipping food to Austria.²³

Meanwhile, Western Hungary suffered heavily from the atrocities committed by the returning Habsburg soldiers. In the northern part of the region, the railway station Királyhida / Bruck an der Leitha became one of the most important entry stations for returning Hungarian soldiers. According to official reports, every day around 10,000 to 15,000 soldiers arrived there from the Italian and French fronts. Many of them participated in looting farmhouses, stores and shops. The Hungarian authorities quickly demobilised these people, and many of them were incorporated into the newly established national guards.²⁴

At the same time, German national councils were also established in small villages in the territory.²⁵ To coordinate their policy, on 12 November 1918, moderate German intellectuals founded the Deutscher Volksrat für Westungarn. Later, they joined the larger Deutscher Volksrat für Ungarn, which had more than 200 local groups in the region. Their main demand was the political autonomy of Germans in the region, without complete secession from Hungary.²⁶ Fearing the increasing German nationalism in the region, the Hungarian authorities began to call for military reinforcements from Budapest. One report claimed that workers in Lower Austria were preparing for the invasion of the region.²⁷ The fear of secession was reinforced when on 6 December, Austrian soldiers under the leadership of Albert Ritter, a Voralberg-born officer, arrived in Mattersburg and proclaimed Hienzenland to be independent.²⁸ Their main aim was to achieve the immediate incorporation of the territory into German-Austria. Their efforts were ended after a few hours when

²³ Soós, A nyugat-magyarországi kérdés, 1918–1919, 8–10.

²⁴ Tamás Révész, Nem akartak katonát látni? A magyar állam és hadserege 1918-1919-ben. Budapest 2019 (Trianon-dokumentumok és -tanulmányok 4.), 57; Hadtörténeti Levéltár, Polgári Demokratikus Forradalom katonai iratai (further HL P.d.f.) [Hungarian Military Archive, Papers of the Hungarian Democratic Revolution] B/2. d. 3475. 695.

²⁵ HL P.d.f. B/3. d. 3646. 193.

²⁶ Soós, A nyugat-magyarországi kérdés, 1918–1919, 13, 16–17.

²⁷ HL P.d.f. B/2. d. 3419. 35. The recruitment of workers began a year later, see Gerald Schlag, Die Anfänge der Sozialdemokratischen Partei im Burgenland. Wien 1966, 93.

²⁸ Ibolya Murber, A burgenlandi impériumváltás 1918–1924. Kikényszerített identitásképzés és politikai erőszak, *Múltunk* (2019), No. 2, 181–214, 193.

a small Hungarian national guard detachment was transferred to the town from nearby Sopron.²⁹

From the perspective of Budapest, the events in Western Hungary still had only secondary importance. The main concerns of the Károlyi government were undoubtedly the northern and eastern borders of the country. Therefore, they wanted to appease the German elite of Hungary, and at the end of January 1919, a minority decree was issued. It provided autonomy and language rights to the German communities. Moreover, an independent Ministry for German Affairs was established.³⁰ Only a couple weeks later, though, in late March 1919, the Károlyi regime was toppled by the Hungarian Communists. On paper, they also tried to appease the German minority and transformed the former ministry into the People's Commissariat for German Affairs.³¹

Simultaneously, the Allied expert commission led by Archibald Coolidge finished its final memorandum for the peace conference. They argued that a referendum would be the fairest solution through which to decide on the future of the territory. They were, however, convinced that neither side could organise a plebiscite fairly, and that the entire Burgenland should therefore belong to Austria.³² Backed up by this expert opinion, the Austrian peace delegation in Saint-Germain demanded Western Hungary, excluding territories already occupied by the Czechoslovak army. They argued that the majority of Burgenland's population spoke German and that only this region could guarantee the food supply of Vienna in the long run.³³ After long negotiations, the Great Powers rejected the idea of a Slavic Corridor, and the entire territory, including its largest town of Sopron, was awarded to Austria.³⁴ Due to the political turmoil in Hungary, the decision was only sealed a year later when Hungary finally signed the Treaty of Trianon. Budapest was ordered to vacate the territory, but the details of the handover were left for the negotiations between the two countries.³⁵

While the Great Powers debated in Saint-Germain, the Hungarian Soviet Republic was defeated by the advancing Romanian army, and in the summer of 1919,

²⁹ ERNST, *Geschichte des Burgenlandes*, 188; SOÓS, *A nyugat-magyarországi kérdés, 1918–1919*, 11.

³⁰ BOTLIK, *Nyugat-Magyarország sorsa, 1918–1921*, 38–39.

³¹ Béla BELLÉR, *A Magyar Népköztársaság és a Tanácsköztársaság nemzetiségi kultúrpolitikája, Történelmi Szemle* 12 (1969), No. 1–2, 1–25, 12.

³² IMRE, *Burgenland and the Austria-Hungary Border Dispute in International Perspective, 1918–22*, 234.

³³ BURGHARDT, *Borderland*, 175–6.

³⁴ ORMOS, *Civitas fidelissima*, 19–26, 30–31; SOÓS, *A nyugat-magyarországi kérdés, 1918–1919*, 21, 42–47, 61.

³⁵ ORMOS, *Civitas fidelissima*, 57–58.

Miklós Horthy's counter-revolutionary regime seized power in the western region of the country. As the situation was highly unstable, Antal Sigray, a wealthy royalist aristocrat, was appointed as the state commissioner of Western Hungary. He was entrusted with assuming control over the civilian administration of the entire territory.³⁶ Despite Horthy's growing popularity, the main political forces in Western Hungary remained the pro-Habsburg legitimist political camp. They were supported by both the aristocracy and the gentry that controlled the lower levels of the civil administration. They only joined Miklós Horthy's camp because they were convinced that he could help to consolidate the country before the return of King Karl.³⁷

Despite their different political views, all major political forces in Western Hungary agreed that at least some part of the territory had to be preserved for the Hungarian state. By November 1919 they had established the Western Hungarian League, a territorial defence organisation, and demanded that a referendum determine the future of the territory.³⁸ During 1921 Burgenland became increasingly important for the counter-revolutionary government in Budapest. After the national humiliation of the Trianon Peace Treaty, it sorely needed a foreign policy success and believed that Vienna did not have the power to seize the territory on its own.³⁹

The Last Fight. The Borderland War in Burgenland in 1921

The Hungarian government began to plan the armed defence of Burgenland in April 1921. The newly appointed Prime Minister, István Bethlen, presented his concept in a cabinet meeting on 28 April. He argued that Budapest had three options in resisting the will of the Great Powers. First, through the ongoing negotiations, they could try to convince the Austrian side to give up some of their demands. However, Bethlen believed that finding a compromise with Vienna was very unlikely. Therefore, as a second option, Hungary could prepare its army to repel an Austrian invasion of the territory. This solution, however, risked triggering the intervention of the much stronger Czechoslovak and South Slav armies. In this case, Bethlen suggested a third possibility. Facing overwhelming odds, the local Hungarian members of parliament could declare the autonomy of the region. Bethlen thought that in the long term a temporarily independent regime like that of D'Annunzio's state in Fiume could save the territory for Hungary. After the cabinet meeting, military preparations began in the country. Western Hungarian gendarmerie units were reinforced,

³⁶ Tibor ZSIGA, *Horthy ellen, a királyért*. Budapest 1989, 50–51.

³⁷ MURBER, *A burgenlandi impériumváltás 1918–1924*, 203.

³⁸ ZSIGA, *Horthy ellen, a királyért*, 81, 90.

³⁹ ORMOS, *Civitas fidelissima*, 79–80, 111.

and funding was allocated for nationalist organisations to recruit new soldiers.⁴⁰

As Bethlen predicted, the negotiations between Austria and Hungary proved to be unsuccessful during the summer. The last Hungarian proposal, which still insisted on Sopron and its immediate surroundings, was rejected by the Austrian parliament on 13 August 1921.⁴¹ Meanwhile, an Allied military commission was transferred to Sopron to coordinate the handover of the territory. They devised the detailed schedule of the transfer. Burgenland was divided into three zones: A, B and C. The A zone was the westernmost part, while the C zone was situated in the north around the Neusiedler See. The B zone, the area around Sopron, more or less corresponded to the last demand of the Hungarian delegation. According to the plan of the Allied commission, these territories had to be vacated gradually between 26 and 28 August by the Hungarian authorities. Austrian gendarmerie forces would then occupy the region. The deployment of the regular army was forbidden, because after the conflict in Silesia, Allied generals feared an escalation of the situation.⁴² The Austrian government accepted this proposal relatively easily because early in May the Bundesheer, i.e. the Austrian army, had reported that they did not possess the necessary force to defeat the Hungarian troops in the region.⁴³

The definitive end to the Austro-Hungarian negotiations and the arrival of the Allied commission accelerated the Hungarian mobilisation. The Honvédelmi Bizotmány (National Defence Board) was established under the leadership of Baron Zsigmond Perényi. Perényi was the schoolfellow of Prime Minister Bethlen and the former head of the Hungarian National Association, an umbrella organisation incorporating many revisionist groups. The leadership of the Honvédelmi Bizotmány was mostly formed from committed right-wing nationalists like Gyula Gömbös, Nándor Urmánczy and Iván Héjjas, who were counted among Horthy's most loyal followers. In addition, notable royalists like István Friedrich and Albin Lingauer were also members of the board, together with some local leaders of the nationalist

⁴⁰ Magyar Nemzeti Levéltár, Országos Levéltár W 12 1921.04.28. Minisztertanácsi jegyzőkönyvek 7. [Hungarian National Archive, State Archive, Cabinet Protocols], at (<https://www.elevertar.hu/digitalis-tartalom?source=preservica&ref=673fb512-17bc-4b69-8164-cf60d8a71cfb>), 30. 5. 2020; Ignác ROMSICS, Bethlen István. Politikai életrajz. Budapest 2005, 189.

⁴¹ *Ibidem*, 190.

⁴² Ludwig JEDLIČKA, Die militärische Landnahme des Burgenlandes und deren innerpolitische Bedeutung, *Burgenländische Heimatblätter* 23 (1961), No. 3, 117–123, 119; László FOGARASSY, A nyugat-magyarországi kérdés katonai története (II. rész: 1921 augusztus – szeptember), *Soproni Szemle* 26 (1972), No. 1, 23–39, 23–24; BOTLIK, Nyugat-Magyarország sorsa, 1918–1921, 143–4.

⁴³ Österreichisches Staatsarchiv, Archiv der Republik, Bundesministerium für Landesverteidigung, AR Abteilung 2 1921 (Grenzschutz Burgenland) Faszikel 936. A2 65-10: Mitwirkung des Bundesheeres bei Übernahme des Burgenlandes durch die Republik Österreich.

groups. They tried to coordinate the actions of the Hungarian paramilitary troops transported to the region during early August 1921.⁴⁴

On 26 August the National Defence Board received a note from Prime Minister Bethlen to vacate the A zone, but to defend Sopron and its surroundings. However, Pál Prónay and his men refused to follow the orders of Budapest and began to attack the arriving Austrian gendarmerie units.⁴⁵ Over the following days, the Hungarian paramilitary groups defeated the advancing Austrian columns all over Burgenland and some groups even entered the territory of Lower Austria.⁴⁶ After its defeat in the Second Battle of Agendorf on 8 September 1921, the Austrian government realised that its weak gendarmerie was simply incapable of occupying the entire region and it withdrew its troops from Burgenland.⁴⁷ Altogether 16 Austrian and 24 Hungarian soldiers died in the conflict.⁴⁸

Although Budapest did not originally support the resistance in zone A, the actions of the paramilitary groups put Bethlen in a very favourable position. For the Great Powers it became obvious that without the cooperation of the Hungarian government, the stalemate in Burgenland would not end.⁴⁹ In renewed negotiations Bethlen promised to vacate the territory in exchange for a plebiscite organised in the area of Sopron, to be held under the supervision of the Allies. Hungarian troops were ordered to withdraw until 3 October 1921.⁵⁰ However, Prónay, the head of the paramilitaries in the south, had a different plan. He was not satisfied with the results of the negotiations and declared Lajtabánság independent on 4 October 1921. Initially, Prónay's new state was restricted to southern Burgenland, but soon the northern royalists joined him. At its peak, Lajtabánság spread over a territory of 2,740 square kilometres with a population of almost 200,000 people.⁵¹

To resolve the problems created by Prónay, the Italian government decided to organise an international conference in Venice. Rom was worried that the escalation of the conflict would lead to Czechoslovak or South Slavic intervention. The

⁴⁴ István HILLER, A soproni egyetemi hallgatók mozgalmi a két világháború között. Fejezetek a soproni egyetem történetéből. Sopron 1975, 76; ROMSICS, Bethlen István, 190.

⁴⁵ ZSIGA, Horthy ellen, a királyért, 118.

⁴⁶ BOTLIK, Nyugat-Magyarország sorsa, 1918–1921, 170–82; JEDLICKA, Die militärische Landnahme des Burgenlandes und deren innerpolitische Bedeutung, 117.

⁴⁷ ORMOS, Civitas fidelissima, 126–8.

⁴⁸ 10 Jahre österreichische Gendarmerie im Burgenland, *Die Gendarmerie. Illustrierte Zeitschrift für die allgemeine und fachliche Fortbildung der Gendameriebeamten Österreichs*, Sonderheft 1931, 1; Tarján M. TAMÁS, 1921. augusztus 28. Kirobban a nyugat-magyarországi felkelés, Rubicon-Online, at http://www.rubicon.hu/magyar/nyomtathato_verzio/1921_augusztus_28_kirobban_a_nyugat_magyarorszag_i_felkeles, 11. 5. 2020.

⁴⁹ HILLER, A soproni egyetemi hallgatók mozgalmi a két világháború között, 93.

⁵⁰ ORMOS, Civitas fidelissima, 128, 150–1.

⁵¹ ZSIGA, Horthy ellen, a királyért, 136, 140–2.

establishment of the Slavic Corridor could reinforce Belgrade's positions on the Adriatic coastline and threaten Italy's influence over the region. Moreover, the Italian government also considered Hungary as one of their potential long-term allies in East Central Europe.⁵² In the negotiations, Bethlen wanted to exploit the success of the paramilitaries, but he feared that their independence and insubordination could cause major problems. He sent the most respectable right-wing leader, Gyula Gömbös, to appease Prónay.⁵³ Gömbös warned him that "the negotiations in Venice should not be disturbed, because it is currently going well for us". He argued that the "too loud propaganda of the Leitha-Banat" could harm the Hungarian cause and he asked him to "be quiet" for a while.⁵⁴ After three days of negotiations in mid-October 1921, Bethlen was able to convince the Italian Foreign Minister, Della Torretta, that he had the power to disarm the paramilitaries. After pressure from the Italian side, the Austrian Chancellor Schober finally agreed on a referendum in the region of Sopron. In exchange, the rest of Burgenland was handed over to Austria, and the Hungarian government promised to pacify the local paramilitary groups.⁵⁵

Prónay was not satisfied with this solution. Despite the repeated calls of Budapest he refused to retreat from this territory. The situation was further complicated by the sudden and unexpected arrival of King Karl to Western Hungary. He flew from Switzerland into the region and landed on 20 October 1921. Karl was invited by loyal aristocrats who hoped that with the help of the royalist paramilitaries he could be restored to the Hungarian throne. The northern forces joined him immediately, but Prónay refused to support the monarch. Karl travelled with his soldiers to Budapest, but he was stopped by Horthy's hastily organised paramilitaries in the Battle of Budaörs, whereupon Karl went into exile.⁵⁶

After the failed return of the king, most of the Western Hungarian paramilitaries were captured and disarmed by Horthy's forces, leaving Prónay the only potent leader in Burgenland. Despite his loyalty, his position was rapidly deteriorating. At the end of October, Miklós Horthy invited him to Budapest to find an agreement. Horthy personally convinced Prónay to vacate the territory. The governor argued that the "uprising" achieved its goal and any further resistance could only risk the success of the referendum. Moreover, in case of further insubordination, Horthy also threatened Prónay with the use of the national army against his paramilitaries. The "Ban" reluctantly agreed and ordered his most loyal men to retreat from Bur-

⁵² Katalin Soós, *Burgenland az európai politikában (1918–1921)*. Budapest 1971, 153.

⁵³ ORMOS, *Civitas fidelissima*, 152–3, 167.

⁵⁴ FOGARASSY, Prónay Pál emlékezései az 1921. évi nyugatmagyarországi eseményekről. Harmadik rész, *Soproni Szemle* 40 (1986), No. 3, 21–41, 31.

⁵⁵ ORMOS, *Civitas fidelissima*, 154–5, 160.

⁵⁶ Dósa RUDOLFNÉ, *A Move. Egy jellegzetes magyar fasiszta szervezet 1918–1944*. Budapest 1972, 115–6.

genland.⁵⁷ The referendum on the future of Sopron was held between 14 and 16 December 1921, and it ended with a Hungarian victory. Altogether, 65 per cent of the voters, the vast majority of them from Sopron, chose Hungary. Although the result was disputed by the Austrian side, the issue of the region's future was finally settled.⁵⁸

“Heroes of the Nation” and Their New State. The Social Background of the Paramilitary Soldiers

The Hungarian paramilitary groups fighting in Western Hungary can be sorted into two major categories. First, the vast majority of the forces were mobilised in the central and eastern parts of Hungary by the different right-wing associations. Most of them were former members of Horthy's infamous white paramilitaries. These people were the main perpetrators of the “white terror” between 1919 and 1920. They shared the same radical nationalist ideology and harboured strongly antisemitic and anti-Bolshevik views.⁵⁹ After Horthy's election to regent in March 1920, the “golden age” of the paramilitaries ended relatively quickly. The new government led by Pál Teleki sought a quick political consolidation. Many of the paramilitaries were disbanded or integrated into the regular army and the gendarmerie. Although most radical right-wing circles gradually lost their power, many members remained very influential. They occupied key positions in the different nationalist organisations like the ÉME (Union of Awakening Hungarians) or the MOVE (the Hungarian National Defence Association). While the former were more loyal to Miklós Horthy, the latter were dominated by royalist political circles. In Western Hungary, the ÉME was undoubtedly the most popular and influential association.⁶⁰

The first major force transferred formally to the region was a gendarmerie battalion, the successor to Gyula Ostenburg-Moravek's infamous terror group. Moravek was born in a middle-class family in Transylvania and was married to an aristocratic woman who introduced him to the social elite of the country. In previous years,

⁵⁷ ORMOS, *Civitas fidelissima*, 177–8, 189.

⁵⁸ BURGHARDT, *Borderland*, 182–3. On the Austrian counterarguments, see Viktor MILTSCHINSKY, *Das Verbrechen von Ödenburg. Auf Grund authentischen Materials dargestellt*. Wien 1922.

⁵⁹ On these paramilitaries, see Béla BODÓ, *The White Terror. Antisemitic and Political Violence in Hungary, 1919–1921*. London, New York 2019 (*Mass Violence in Modern History*, 3).

⁶⁰ ZSIGA, *Horthy ellen, a királyért*, 87.

Moravek's men had been responsible for many atrocities in the countryside, including the murder of two Social Democratic journalists, Béla Somogyi and Béla Bacsó.⁶¹

The second unit in Burgenland was the paramilitary group of Baron Pál Prónay. He was born into an aristocratic family and fought in the First World War as a hussar officer. In 1919 he organised his elite paramilitary formation in Szeged. Eight counts and seven barons served in his unit, and around 30 per cent of his men came from a noble family. His deputy and most trusted man was Iván Héjjas. Prónay's father was an influential landowner from the central plains of Hungary. He relied on his family's good connections to the local public administration in making his hometown Kecskemét the centre of recruitment. Many farmers from the region and recently demobilised members of the terror groups volunteered for his unit.⁶²

Many soldiers in Prónay's unit came from the south-eastern part of Transylvania. These Székely soldiers formed their first units during the winter of 1918–1919 to fight against the advancing Romanian troops in Transylvania. Many of them continued to serve in Béla Kun's Red Army and after the collapse of the regime joined Horthy's national army. The Székely units were broken up and their members were either demobilised or sorted into various units.⁶³ The humiliating defeats of the previous years and the loss of their homeland radicalised many – but not all – of these Székely soldiers. Although after 1919 they were sorted into separate units, they kept in contact through different refugee associations. In the national army, their main patron was a Franciscan monk, Bónis Arkangyal, who later became the commander of a paramilitary unit in Burgenland. Prónay's battalion consisted of around 350 people and marched to Western Hungary on 10 August 1921.⁶⁴

The second type of soldiers fighting in the borderland war of Burgenland was mobilised by the local elites, close to the battlefields. The vast majority of these servicemen were students of the Hungarian Royal Mining and Forestry College in Sopron. The college was established in the eighteenth century in the northern Hungarian town of Selmecbánya / Banská Štiavnica. The institution left the town during the winter of 1918, fleeing from the advancing Czechoslovak army. After a long journey, it settled in the abandoned garrison buildings of Sopron.⁶⁵ Although the college's activities slowly restarted during the following months, the experience

⁶¹ Béla BODÓ, *The White Terror in Hungary, 1919–1921. The Social Worlds of Paramilitary Groups*, *Austrian History Yearbook* 42 (2011), 133–63, 142; IDEM, *The White Terror. Antisemitic and Political Violence*, 100.

⁶² Ibidem, 68; IDEM, *The White Terror in Hungary, 1919–1921*, 141–2, 151.

⁶³ Barna GOTTFRIED / Szabolcs NAGY, *A Székely Hadosztály története*. Csíkszereda 2018, 178–82.

⁶⁴ István ZADRAVETZ / György BORSÁNYI, *Páter Zadravecz titkos naplója*. Budapest 1967, 156; ORMOS, *Civitas fidelissima*, 113–6.

⁶⁵ Lajos MISSURAY-KRUG, *Tüzek a végeken. Selmectől – Sopronig*. Sopron 1930, 55.

of fleeing had a profound impact on the students and professors. In 1921 these people once again faced the prospect of expulsion. In addition, irredentism was particularly popular among students. They not only had an emotional connection to the lost territories, but also an existential one. The vast majority of forests and mines of Greater Hungary became part of Czechoslovakia and Romania, which provided extra motivation to the future foresters and mining engineers to join revisionist groups.⁶⁶

In college, the recruitment of new soldiers began in late August 1921. It was mostly organised by the leadership of a student group named the Student Circle (*ifjúsági Kör*). The head of the club, Otto Leicht, was also a lieutenant in the reserves of the Hungarian army. Unfortunately, we know relatively little about the students' political views, but most of them were not involved in right-wing paramilitary circles before 1921. According to some sources, they supported the moderate monarchist political circles. This club sent the first appeal to the students via mail because most of the potential volunteers were still on their summer vacations. After they arrived in Sopron, they formed their own exclusive company that was later incorporated into Ostenburg's unit. The number of forestry students is estimated at between 300 and 400.⁶⁷ Volunteers from other higher educational institutions joined the students of Sopron as well. Young men came from the nearby agricultural academy of Magyaróvár, the Technical University of Budapest, the agricultural college of Keszthely, and the law college of Kecskemét. Moreover, in late September, 45 high-school students from Győr volunteered to serve in Western Hungary.⁶⁸

In addition to the recruitment of students, the Western Hungarian political elite also tried to find volunteers among the local population. Here, Antal Sigray and the influential journalist and politician Albin Lingauer coordinated the mobilisation. They relied on the network of the Awakening Magyars (ÉME) and organised political rallies in the region's major towns. According to available sources, recruits were found mostly among high-school students, immigrants from Transylvania and middle-class people. The latter were mostly state employees, many of whom had served in the First World War as reserve officers. The largest group was recruited in Szombathely and consisted of only 78 people.⁶⁹ These different paramilitary units

⁶⁶ Ibidem, 34.

⁶⁷ HILLER, A soproni egyetemi hallgatók mozgalmái a két világháború között, 76, 82; MISURAY-KRUG, Tüzek a végeken, 33, 55.

⁶⁸ HILLER, A soproni egyetemi hallgatók mozgalmái a két világháború között, 99, 102.

⁶⁹ Tibor ZSIGA, A Nyugat-Magyarországi fegyveres felkelés és Vas megye 1921, *Savaria* 15 (1981), 409–50, 419, 423.

remained highly independent throughout the entire conflict. Their overall number fluctuated and most likely did not exceed more than 3,500 or 4,000 people.⁷⁰

*Living the Paramilitaries' Dream. The Paramilitary State
and its Political Programme*

Unfortunately, we have very limited information about the political programme of the paramilitaries active on the territory of present-day Burgenland. The various leaders and groups had very different ideas about the future of the territory. Probably the only common ground among all the fighters was their short-term foreign policy aims. They wanted to challenge the decision of the Paris Peace Conference through a combination of armed resistance and the propagation of the Wilsonian idea of self-determination. They portrayed themselves as the representatives of the local “people” and argued that the “will of the population” had to determine the future of the territory and not the “intervention of foreign imperialists”. However, they had very different views about the next step, namely, what did this “self-determination” mean in practice?

The northern royalist forces of Gyula Ostenburg and István Friedrich formed closer connections with the Bethlen government – at least until the arrival of King Karl – and followed the policy of Budapest more closely. Consequently, they did not want to establish an independent state and only declared some kind of temporary regional autonomy. In their proclamation of late September 1921 they claimed that the Hungarian state “had to terminate its authority” in Burgenland, and in order to “organise the public life”, the National Defence Association had taken control of the territory. They stated clearly that this did not entail independence and confirmed their loyalty to the “1000-year-old Hungarian homeland”. Moreover, they clearly based their legitimacy on the pre-war Hungarian Kingdom, and called on all to obey their orders and perform their duties in the name of “God, king and the homeland”.⁷¹

Unlike the northern, royalist paramilitary groups, Prónay acted more independently of the Bethlen government. He was convinced that autonomy was not enough to “save” Western Hungary and that a new state had to be established. He declared in his first speech that the communities of former Western Hungary “do not want to be part of communist Austria, therefore Western Hungary should be independent and sovereign!” Later Prónay also declared the complete “neutrality” of his state

⁷⁰ Tibor ZINNER, *Az ébredők fénykora, 1919–1923*. Budapest 1989 (Értekezések a történeti tudományok köréből, új sorozat, 110), 126–30; ZSIGA, Horthy ellen, a királyért, 137.

⁷¹ Hadtörténeti Levéltár, Horthy-kori katonai kerületi parancsnokság II. 1243 (HL II. 1243) 1.d. Szombathelyi Katonai kerületi parancsnokság, Szombathelyi kerületi parancsok. 38. melléklet-Felhívás Nyugat-Magyarország lakosságához; *Lajtabánság Hivatalos Lapja*, 10 April 1921, p. 2.

towards all of its neighbours. According to Prónay's memoir, he wanted to live "in harmony" with Hungary and only reunite with the motherland when the opportunity arrived.⁷²

To the most radical paramilitaries the declaration of the independent Lajtabánság was not only a matter of formality. They did not only want to defend Burgenland but also intended to "liberate" the entire Greater Hungary. For Prónay and his men, the participation of Székely soldiers symbolised this more ambitious aim. "The border mountains [in Burgenland] are echoing their sad Székely songs, sending a message back to the east: the liberators will appear there soon", wrote the official newspaper of the Lajtabánság.⁷³ Prónay was so convinced of the mission of Lajtabánság that he wanted to refuse to cede the territory on these grounds. At the meeting with Horthy in late October, he argued that with substantial aid from Budapest they could cement the paramilitaries' position in Burgenland and establish a basis for the Hungarian irredentist movement. Thus, an independent Lajtabánság could help to re-establish Greater Hungary without compromising the government in the international theatre. Prónay even hoped that his paramilitary movement could cooperate with the Austrian right-wing forces and jointly liberate "Upper Hungary from Czechoslovak rule".⁷⁴ The radical paramilitaries also perceived their mission in more transcendent terms. For them, the struggle for Burgenland was also the beginning of national redemption, embodied in the mass participation of high-school and university students. After the "Calvary of the nation" – as they called the years between 1918 and 1921 in their official newspaper – these young men could lay the foundations for a brighter future.⁷⁵

While we know more about the foreign policy of the paramilitaries, their domestic political programme remains somewhat unclear. Prónay's state of Lajtabánság was essentially a special type of military dictatorship. He did not intend to define exactly the form of government, because he simply did not want to commit himself to the monarchist or the pro-Habsburg camp.⁷⁶ The official head of the state was the "Ban" Pál Prónay himself. Historically, "bans" were the civilian and military governors of the Hungarian Kingdom's southern borderlands and the Kingdom of Croatia. The founders of Lajtabánság originally wanted to elect a local aristocrat to the position, but because the project was generally rejected, Prónay could not find a suitable

⁷² *Lajtabánság Hivatalos Lapja*, 10 October 1921, p. 1–2; Pál PRÓNAY, *A határban a halál kaszál. Fejezetek Prónay Pál feljegyzéseiből*. Budapest 1963, 278.

⁷³ Bozsó RODRIGÓ, Séta közben, *Lajtabánság. Politikai és szépirodalmi időszaki lap*, 11 November 1921, p. 2.

⁷⁴ PRÓNAY, *A határban a halál kaszál*, 298–9.

⁷⁵ József ÁRKY, *A soproni diákok cselekvő hazafisága, Lajtabánság. Politikai és szépirodalmi időszaki lap*, 11 November 1921, p. 3.

⁷⁶ ZSIGA, Horthy ellen, a királyért, 139.

candidate.⁷⁷ The Ban of Lajtabánság had almost absolute power over his subjects. Prónay, as supreme commander in chief, was the head of both the army and the civilian administration. He had the exclusive right to appoint all seven members of his cabinet. The entire state had a strong militaristic character. Prónay was always portrayed in uniform and his cabinet consisted only of war veterans. The six ministers and the head of the government, László Apáthy, were all former reserve or professional officers. They had all served in the Great War as lieutenants or captains, and this military background was always highlighted in the state's official papers.⁷⁸ This strong militarism characterised the lower levels of the administration as well. After the state's proclamation, the territory was divided into military districts, all of which were commanded by Prónay's loyal paramilitary leaders.⁷⁹ They were not only responsible for "maintaining the order", but also took over other duties. For example, the local gendarmeries and the civic guards had to oversee legal and public-health issues.⁸⁰

Prónay's military state had little to do with the Western Hungarian political elite and most of its leaders had no previous connection to the territory. The most influential military commanders like Héjjas, Father Bónis or Ostenburg were not born in the region and were never stationed there permanently. During 1919–1920 their terror groups were most active in other parts of the country. Anton Lehár, the most powerful paramilitary leader of Western Hungary, did not join Prónay's camp. In fact, he completely rejected their endeavour and strongly opposed the establishment of Lajtabánság.⁸¹ The political leadership also had little to do with the local elite. All members of the cabinet belonged to the Szeged group of right-wing activists that originated from other parts of the country. They were members of the educated *Bildungsbürgertum*, and most of them were lawyers or journalists before the war and had limited experience in public administration.⁸²

The leaders of Lajtabánság mostly used the locals to legitimise their regime. They wanted to demonstrate that their rule was based on the will of the region's population. Before proclaiming the new state, Prónay consulted priests and pastors from nearby villages as well as the heads of the local civilian administration of Burgenland. According to his memoirs, these figures were "asked" about the future of the territory and all of them supported the proclamation of an independent state.⁸³

⁷⁷ PRÓNAY, A határban a halál kaszál, 271.

⁷⁸ *Lajtabánság Hivatalos Lapja*, 10 October 1921, Nyilatkozat, p. 2.

⁷⁹ ZINNER, Az ébredők fénykora, 1919–1923, 126–30; ZSIGA, Horthy ellen, a királyért, 137.

⁸⁰ *Lajtabánság. Politikai és szépirodalmi időszaki lap*, 11 November 1921, Közigazgatás, p. 4.

⁸¹ Anton LEHÁR, Erinnerung. Gegenrevolution und Restaurationsversuche in Ungarn 1918–1921. Wien, München 1973, 219.

⁸² FOGARASSY, Prónay Pál emlékezései az 1921. évi nyugatmagyarországi eseményekről, 30.

⁸³ PRÓNAY, A határban a halál kaszál, 278.

Although the leadership had no ties to the locals, they made efforts to create their own Lajtabánság identity. However, this was a very ambiguous process. First of all, there was seemingly no agreement over what to call the new state. The official name, Lajtabánság, was a completely new invention, suggested by Prónay's trusted Interior Minister Béla Bárdoss.⁸⁴ The term not only lacked any historical reference, but it was also used inconsistently even by the representatives of the regime. For example, the official seal of the state's gendarmerie used the name Western Hungary / Burgenland. In his memoir, Pál Prónay also refers to the territory as Burgenland.⁸⁵ The Hungarian authorities also did not really accept the new term Lajtabánság. The Szombathely divisional headquarters reported laconically on 4 October 1921, that "the independence of Western Hungary was declared".⁸⁶

Paramilitary leaders also wanted to create new symbols for their state. Almost immediately after the declaration, official stamps were issued. They depicted the Ban Prónay himself and the "old castles" of the territory. The castles aimed to symbolise the region's special frontier character. These were portrayed as fortresses of Hungarian rule built to repel any kind of foreign invasion.⁸⁷ The official journal *Lajtabánság* also emphasised the state's borderland status. One of its articles drew a direct line between the Middle Ages and 1921 and claimed that the paramilitaries were the successors of "Árpád's frontier guards" who settled there in the ninth century to prevent an invasion from the west.⁸⁸ This borderland ideology appeared in other texts as well. In his memoir, Missuray-Krúg, a student of the forestry college, called the town of Sopron the "most western fortress of Hungarian culture".⁸⁹

The domestic political programme of the paramilitaries remained relatively moderate and somewhat unclear. Despite the militarisation of certain fields of public life, as discussed above, the Hungarian public administration remained more or less intact. The members of the public administration and the mayors kept their position and Hungarian laws were not suspended.⁹⁰ Moreover, the paramilitary leaders seemingly had no plans for the ethnic transformation of the region. Despite their radical nationalism, the original programme of the Lajtabánság declared "national peace" and propagated peaceful cooperation between Magyars, Germans and Croats. The official proclamations were all published in these languages and the newspaper *Lajtabánság* also wrote about the brotherhood of these nations that had been fighting

⁸⁴ Ibidem, 271.

⁸⁵ ZSIGA, Horthy ellen, a királyért, 136.

⁸⁶ HL II. 1243. 1.d. 47. melléklet. Szombathelyi katonai parancsnokság helyzetnaplója, 1921.10.04.

⁸⁷ PRÓNAY, A határban a halál kaszál, 272.

⁸⁸ *Lajtabánság. Politikai és szépirodalmi időszaki lap*, 10 November 1921, p. 1.

⁸⁹ MISSURAY-KRUG, Tüzek a végeken, 25.

⁹⁰ *Lajtabánság Hivatalos Lapja*, 10 October 1921, p. 1.

together against foreign invaders since the tenth century.⁹¹ Although the state programme was formally tolerant, according to some sources, paramilitaries committed atrocities against the local population.⁹² Unfortunately, only limited information is available about the number of civilian casualties. There were no known mass-killings during the fighting, but there were a few instances of arbitrary executions of supposed “criminals”.⁹³ Lootings and plundering were also commonplace. The main perpetrators were usually not the locally raised forces, but Prónay’s paramilitaries who were transported from the central regions.⁹⁴

A Lack of Brutal Behaviour? Burgenland in the International Context

As the first section demonstrated, Burgenland / Western Hungary did not become a contested “borderland” in the late nineteenth century.⁹⁵ Although the region had a mixed population of Germans, Croats and Magyars, it remained unimportant for the national activist groups in Vienna, Zagreb and Budapest. They did not create a popular cult of the territory, and competing nationalisms did not transform the local political landscape. Although a few journalists began to publish on Western Hungary in the early twentieth century, in the eyes of the public it never gained the significance of regions like Styria, Transylvania or Tyrol. Their weak associations did not threaten the dominance of the Hungarian state, so Magyar nationalists also remained relatively indifferent to the territory. The importance of Burgenland only increased dramatically after the collapse of the Habsburg Empire. Austria and Hungary suffered massive territorial losses and the contested Western Hungary remained practically the only region where these governments could achieve any foreign policy success. In addition, the Viennese government badly needed the agricultural lands to feed its starving capital. Stabilising the fragile First Republic was also important for the Great Powers after the rejection of any form of Austrian annexation to Germany. The frequent regime changes in Hungary and the inadequacy of the Austrian armed forces postponed the handover of the territory to 1921. This delay gave the

⁹¹ Ibidem; *Lajtabánság. Politikai és szépirodalmi időszaki lap*, 11 November 1921, Közigazgatás, p. 3.

⁹² ERNST, *Geschichte des Burgenlandes*, 193.

⁹³ VIKTOR MADERSPACH, *Menekülésem Erdélyből és Élményeim a Nyugat-Magyarországi szabadságharcból*. Szeged 2019, 172; SCHLAG, *Aus Trümmern geboren*, 396.

⁹⁴ HILLER, *A soproni egyetemi hallgatók mozgalmái a két világháború között*, 95–6.

⁹⁵ This claim does not contradict the argument in the literature about the multi-ethnic character of the region. This paper only claims that Burgenland was not a borderland in the mental map of the national activists. See IMRE, *Burgenland and the Austria-Hungary Border Dispute in International Perspective, 1918–22*, passim; BURGHARDT, *Borderland*, passim.

Hungarian government time to prepare for the armed defence of at least some part of Western Hungary.

Lacking a large army and without a powerful ally, the Bethlen government thus decided to deploy its paramilitary forces in the region. These soldiers were entrusted with organising a “national uprising” to provide proof of the “will of the people”. This solution – also used by many anti-colonialist movements after the First World War – allowed the government to exploit the Wilsonian idea of self-determination to challenge the decisions of the Great Powers.⁹⁶ In addition, the outsourcing of state power enhanced the bargaining position of Budapest in international diplomacy. The decision of the Bethlen government to use these paramilitaries was directly influenced by the success of Gabriele D’Annunzio’s free state of Fiume. They were not the only one who adopted this method, as the deployment of such nationalist groups was a common phenomenon in East Central Europe. Two years earlier in Burgenland, Austrian officers had attempted to proclaim the independent Hienzenland to force the secession of the territory from Hungary. Berlin also supported the organisation of the Baltic Freikorps in 1919, hoping to change the country’s eastern borders. Polish and German governments used paramilitary forces in Upper Silesia to gain a more advantageous position before the referendums too.⁹⁷

Despite its numerous advantages, this method also had significant drawbacks. The paramilitaries often became loose cannons and refused to follow the orders of Budapest. Prónay and his men did not only defend the area of Sopron but the entire territory of Burgenland. Moreover, they even declared the Lajtabánság to be their completely independent state. A few weeks later, the otherwise more-disciplined northern groups joined the returning King Karl to topple the government. Their behaviour was similar to D’Annunzio’s clandestine action in Fiume. In late December 1919, D’Annunzio also did not obey the orders of the Italian government and refused to accept any kind of diplomatic compromise. He defeated the moderate, internal opposition in the city and maintained his rule for almost another year. As in Hungary, where the monarchist troops had to be defeated by Horthy’s army, D’Annunzio’s men were also forced out from the town by Italian units.⁹⁸ After they arrived in the region, the German paramilitaries in the Baltic also began to follow their own independent policies. They soon became uncontrollable for both

⁹⁶ Erez MANELA, *The Wilsonian Moment. Self-determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism*. Oxford 2007, 219.

⁹⁷ LIULEVICIUS, *War Land on the Eastern Front, 230*; Jochen BÖHLER, *Civil War in Central Europe, 1918–1921. The Reconstruction of Poland*. Oxford, New York 2018, 109–10.

⁹⁸ Lucy HUGHES-HALLETT, *The Pike. Gabriele d’Annunzio, Poet, Seducer and Preacher of War*. London 2013, 508–15.

the Latvian government and for Berlin. They attacked their own allies, until their final defeat by the united Baltic armies in June 1919.⁹⁹

The social composition of the paramilitary units in Burgenland was also comparable with similar armed groups fighting in East Central Europe. Dissatisfied, right-wing war veterans formed the backbone of the Hungarian forces. These people were mostly recruited by powerful right-wing associations. Most of them were radical nationalists and many of them had participated in the white terror in previous years. Additionally, refugees from Transylvania joined their ranks in massive numbers. They fought together with locally raised forces, most notably with students from the different colleges and high schools close to the region. These types of volunteers appeared in almost every borderland conflict in the post-First World War period. War veterans were mobilised by nationalist networks to fight in the Baltics and D'Annunzio also organised his army from the *arditi*, the elite Italian shock troops.¹⁰⁰ Refugees fought in the Kärntner Abwehrkampf, i.e. the Carinthian Defensive Struggle, as well, most of them having left the already occupied territories in the southern regions of the province.¹⁰¹ The involvement of the war youth generation is also well documented. Studies proved that many young men growing up in the shadows of the Great War were eager to join the newly established paramilitary units. They wanted to prove themselves in battle, and therefore they often belonged to the most radical and violent groups of paramilitaries.¹⁰² These “young warriors” fought on many post-First World War battlefields. For example, the most famous representative of this generation, Ernst von Salomon, was a member of the Baltic Freikorps.¹⁰³ University and high-school students also participated in massive numbers in Carinthia and in the Polish – Soviet War. They were mostly recruited in their schools by different student associations.¹⁰⁴

Despite the major similarities, the fighting forces in Burgenland had some special characteristics. First, the Hungarian paramilitaries of the region were deeply divided by their attitudes towards the Habsburg family. Most of the soldiers were recruited by relatively moderate monarchist circles. These people – although they were committed nationalists – did not share the radical views of the right-wing

⁹⁹ LIULEVICIUS, *War Land on the Eastern Front*, 231.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibidem*, 230; GERWARTH, *The Vanquished*, 225.

¹⁰¹ RÉVÉSZ, For the “Freedom and Unity” of Carinthia? New Perspectives on the Military Remobilization in the Carinthian Borderland War (1918–1919), *First World War Studies* 7 (2017), No. 3, 265–86, 285.

¹⁰² For more details on this phenomenon, see GERWARTH, *Fighting the Red Beast*, 70.

¹⁰³ LIULEVICIUS, *War Land on the Eastern Front*, 230.

¹⁰⁴ Julia EICHENBERG, *Soldiers to Civilians, Civilians to Soldiers. Poland and Ireland after the First World War*, in: GERWARTH / HORNE (Eds.), *War in Peace. Paramilitary Violence in Europe after the Great War*, 184–99, 192–3.

soldiers on the complete transformation of society.¹⁰⁵ Second, the refugees fighting in Burgenland were not locals who primarily wanted to return to their homeland, as in Carinthia. They came from Transylvania and were fighting a “substitute conflict” in the western parts of the country.¹⁰⁶ Third, in this location the members of the war youth generation were not the most radical nationalists. The special status of their expelled school meant that their attitudes were closer to those of the refugees, and they mostly supported the monarchist political circles.

The otherwise divided Hungarian paramilitaries were united only on one issue. They all wanted to defend (at least some part of) Western Hungary by defeating the Austrian forces under the pretext of a “national uprising”. However, the two main groups disagreed over their relationship to the “Hungarian motherland”. The moderates in the north followed the orders of Budapest and declared only the autonomy of the region, while the radicals in the south established an independent state. They rejected the political compromise and wanted Lajtabánság to form the basis for the irredentist movement that they hoped would eventually restore Greater Hungary. Their ambitious plans resembled the programme of Gabriele D’Annunzio. He also rejected a *modus vivendi* solution because he intended to “liberate” the entire Adriatic coastline. They believed that the example of Fiume would inspire Italian uprisings in Dalmatia, helping to restore the lost glory of the Roman Empire in the region.¹⁰⁷

Contrary to the clear foreign political objectives of the paramilitaries, there is much more uncertainty over their domestic political concept. Their state, the Lajtabánság, was undoubtedly an established military dictatorship, yet it excluded the local elite. This practice resembled the situation in Fiume. Contrary to Carinthia, Silesia and the Baltics, where local Germans and paramilitary leaders cooperated closely, D’Annunzio had a very ambiguous relationship to the town’s population. Initially, he worked together with the elite of Fiume, but in December 1919 he refused to accept the results of his own plebiscite. After that, he gradually replaced the members of the local town council with his men.¹⁰⁸

Although locals played a minor role in their state, Prónay and his men tried to create a local identity for their territory. Like the German and Italian paramilitaries, they used historical references and presented themselves in their speeches as the leaders of an old heroic borderland. The Freikorps members in the Baltics also portrayed themselves as the descendants of the Teutonic knights and the successors of German

¹⁰⁵ On their political views, see Márton BÉKÉS, *A becsület politikája. Gróf Sigray Antal élete és kora. Vasszilvágy 2007* (A Magyar Nyugat történeti kiskönyvtára, 4).

¹⁰⁶ Nir Arielli developed the concept of substitute-conflict volunteering, see Nir ARIELLI, *From Byron to bin Laden. A History of Foreign War Volunteers*. Cambridge/MA 2018, 114–9.

¹⁰⁷ HUGHES-HALLETT, *The Pike*, 508–9.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibidem*, 505.

volunteers fighting against Napoleon in 1813–1814.¹⁰⁹ However, unlike the above-mentioned East Central European paramilitary groups, the founders of Lajtabánság did not want to transform the land that they occupied. They did not introduce new laws and regulations, and on paper they did not discriminate against the non-Magyar population. Such proclamations of overarching ethnic cooperation were relatively rare. A somewhat similar programme could be found in Carinthia, where the local German elite developed the Windisch theory. This concept emphasised the importance of the regional identity, and claimed that the local Slavs had always been loyal to the German majority. Although in theory the concept propagated ethnic peace, it was mostly used to legitimise the assimilation of the province's Slovene population.¹¹⁰ In other regions, right-wing nationalists had more radical concepts regarding the transformation of society. In Fiume, D'Annunzio implemented a new constitution that introduced a corporative economic system.¹¹¹ Although his regime was not built on racial principles, discrimination against the local Slavic population was commonplace.¹¹² The Baltic paramilitaries were probably even more radical in this regard. They wanted to colonise the region and establish a new, more egalitarian and ethnically pure German society.¹¹³

Conclusions

Upon comparing the different characteristics of the post-First World War borderland wars, it becomes clear that the struggle for Burgenland fits into this period of contemporary European history well. However, two key attributes distinguished this region from the other cases and they indirectly and unintentionally mitigated possible brutal effects of the conflict.

First, the overall political and geographical context of Burgenland differed fundamentally from other cases. The hostilities only began in late summer 1921, well after the end of the Fiume crises, the third Silesian Uprising and the borderland war of Carinthia. The Allied powers learned from these experiences. They monitored the

¹⁰⁹ GERWARTH, *The Vanquished*, 71; LIULEVICIUS, *War Land on the Eastern Front*, 233–5. Similarly, the constitution of Fiume used historical argumentation and tried to legitimise the state in this context, see Nancy R. CIRILLO, *D'Annunzio's Poem of Aggression. The Constitution of the Regency at Fiume*, *The European Legacy* 2 (1997), No. 7, 1185–1207, 1196.

¹¹⁰ For more on the concept, see Tom PRIESTLY, *On the Development of the Windischentheorie*, *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 24 (1997), No. 124, 75–98.

¹¹¹ CIRILLO, *D'Annunzio's Poem of Aggression*, 1190, 1194.

¹¹² LEDEEN, *The First Duce*. See for example the case of the Slavic tugboat captains in the diary of Lajos Egan, the last Hungarian vice-governor of Fiume, see Ágnes ORDASI (Ed.), *Egan Lajos naplója. Impériumváltások Fiumében a kormányzóhelyettes szemével (1918–1920)*. Budapest 2019, 251–2.

¹¹³ LIULEVICIUS, *War Land on the Eastern Front*, 230.

situation closely and tried to limit the number of participating forces. Their presence, together with the looming prospect of a Czechoslovak intervention, prevented the escalation of the conflict. Neither side could use massive military force, and this limited the violence in the conflict. In addition, the geography of the region did not help to establish an enduring paramilitary regime. Burgenland was not situated in an isolated shatter zone, but was rather located close to the political centres of both countries. Regular army units could reach the territory easily by train from every direction. Moreover, the area lacked the necessary economic infrastructure to support a paramilitary regime. The only town in the region, Sopron, did not have the industrial capacity or the large, wealthy middle class to make the regime relatively self-sufficient. Thus, the paramilitary groups majorly depended on financial aid from the Hungarian government.

Second, the ideological background of the participating soldiers differed. Unlike Carinthia, Silesia, the Adriatic or the Baltic lands, Burgenland had not been a contested borderland in the eyes of the national elites before 1921. This “neglected status” had two profound consequences. First, the region was a terra incognita in the mental map of the arriving Hungarian paramilitaries. Before the war, they could not read mythicised stories about the importance of Western Hungary or the special character of the population. For them, towns like Sopron or Eisenstadt did not carry any symbolic meaning. Their inconsistent naming habits clearly demonstrated this phenomenon. Magyar right-wing nationalists often used the freshly invented German name, Burgenland, for the region. This unknown status also explains why Prónay and his men did not have a detailed plan. This lack of “knowledge” prevented the otherwise committed right-wing nationalists from introducing radical programmes of ethnic or social transformation. The paramilitaries, who were otherwise ready to use violence to achieve their aims, simply could not “identify” their enemies in the region.

The indifference of the national activists towards Western Hungary had another profound consequence. Burgenland did not have a powerful nationalist elite or strong nationalist organisations that could cooperate with the arriving paramilitary groups. Western Hungarian politics was dominated by wealthy pro-Habsburg aristocrats, who had massive reservations regarding some of the paramilitaries. They were undoubtedly conservative nationalists, but they rejected the most radical right-wing figures like Prónay. For the local Magyar elite, restoring King Karl to the throne was more important than fulfilling a vague paramilitary dream. Although their restoration attempt in 1921 failed, they continued to determine regional politics throughout the interwar period and kept Western Hungary a stronghold for the moderate, royalist cause.

The official mainstream of the counter-revolutionary system also refused to build a strong cult around the events in Sopron. Although after the plebiscite the title “Civitas Fidelissima, the most loyal town” was awarded to the community, the new

counter-revolutionary elite had reservations about the conflict. The failure of the royalist coup against Horthy discredited many paramilitaries in the eyes of the ruling elite. Horthy had pardoned all the participants by November 1921, but many of them remained on the peripheries of power. Ostenburg continued to be a committed royalist, but struggled to influence mainstream politics. He died due to natural causes in 1944. Eventually, Pál Prónay also turned against Horthy and tried to establish a new radical right-wing movement. However, his unpleasant, maverick-like personality and inability to make compromises prevented him from attaining the status of a cult figure in right-wing circles. In 1945, he organised his last paramilitary militia to fight against the Soviets in the siege of Budapest. He was captured by the Red Army and died in the Gulag in 1946.¹¹⁴ Shortly after his death, Burgenland came to the forefront of another conflict, the Cold War.

ABSTRACT

During the last few years, the immediate post-First World War period has shifted to the centre of academic interest. Many studies have emphasised the importance of these turbulent years in understanding brutality in the East Central European politics of the interwar period. Leading scholars have argued that the war itself was not necessary, but the experience of homecoming, demobilisation and the borderland wars led to the quick political radicalisation of many war veterans. They developed radical nationalist subcultures that later became integrated into the ideologies of Fascism and National Socialism. These paramilitary movements were particularly influential in the shatter zones of the collapsing empires where they sometimes even assumed control over entire regions. In areas like Fiume, or the Baltics, radical war veterans had the chance to implement their new policies and sometimes even establish their own states. This paper examines one of these paramilitary projects, the Lajtabánság (Leitha-Banat). This short-lived state was established in 1921 by the notorious Hungarian paramilitary leader Pál Prónay on the territory of present-day Burgenland. The study analyses the character of this state formation and tries to explain its (lack of) importance in radicalising Hungarian right-wing paramilitary groups.

¹¹⁴ Béla BODÓ, Favorites or Pariahs? The Fate of the Right-Wing Militia Men in Interwar Hungary, *Austrian History Yearbook* 46 (2015), 327–59, 343–4.

