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The Mobile Forces of the Hungarian Royal Army, 1938-1941

Doctoral (PhD) dissertation
thesis booklet

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Research aim

The story of the Second World War has been told from many viewpoints in the Hungarian special literature. However, these writings mostly point out the events that happened in 1942, or the following years. They especially emphasize the deployment of the 2nd Hungarian Army in 1942/43, and also the battles in that took place in Hungary in 1944-45. Obviously, this is because these are the most significant and spectacular Hungarian participations in the war, and these are the well-known topics. It is remarkable, that these topics were highlighted also in the socialist era, even though in a different context. The defeat at Don is portrayed as the biggest tragedy in the Hungarian military since Mohacs in 1526, and of course it was used as a reason to criticize the Horthy administration. Another reason for highlighting these events was the Red Army's liberating operations during 1944-45. Still, numerous subtopics have remained undiscovered. I consider the question of the Army's mobile branch is one of this kind.

This subject is not only interesting because of the historical point of view. The speed, the quick reaction and the logistical connections between these are all very important aspects in modern day's military. In a military action, the theory of "to the right place at the right time" is just as important as the size and strength of the deployed forces. Another question of current concern is the coalition warfare that is important to point out with its historical proofs.

The role of the Hungarian Royal Army in the Second World War can not be interpreted without analyzing all the events preceding it. This is true for my chosen topic as well.

My aims are:

- To introduce and evaluate the Hungarian Royal Army's newest and most modern branch of arms and its functions
- To introduce and evaluate the experiences that were gained during the deployment, and the conclusions that were drawn back then
- To complete and refine the image that is portrayed about the Army – this image only points out the out-of-date, conservative characteristics of the Army's mentality and material conditions. I would like to set a contrast with this image and the actual organizational and theoretical progress that they have reached.

- To illustrate the theoretical and practical efforts that were taken in order to create a modern branch of arms.
- To prove that in Hungary, the changes of the military theories were followed with attention.

The present dissertation is not going to discuss the armament and military technology of the motorized brigades in details. Neither military technology and apparatus, nor technical background of development will be analyzed rigorously, only their most important features will be described. The thesis will indeed briefly summarize the chronology and foreign policy in order to make the events of warfare comprehensible.

Research Methods

The methods that I used were influenced by my research objectives. There are plenty of available sources, but most of them deal with the question briefly or they are summaries, or their main subject is military techniques. Some sources must be examined with criticism because they are bearers of special characteristics of the time they were written. Throughout my research, I processed the available primary and secondary sources by using the methods of analysis and synthesis.

Researchers who aim to examine the early history of Hungarian motorized brigades between 1938 and 1941 will encounter several difficulties. First of all, Hungarian historiography still wants monographs in this topic; therefore composite works have to be consulted for extracting the necessary information. Works and monographs covering the history of the Royal Hungarian Army mainly concentrate on the period from 1941 to 1945, and the pre-1941 era is referred to concisely.

Although there are some secondary sources that deal with the period mentioned above, they usually intend to analyse a subtopic. Despite of being quality works, they can be seen as textbooks or pieces of popular science, rather than academic essays. In addition, there are no comprehensive studies on the history of contemporary weapons used by the Royal Hungarian Army. However, in the examination of motorized brigades the histories of separate units, that constituted a popular genre of Hungarian historiography in the past and reappeared after the political transition in 1989, play a more significant role. The recent works on unit history enable to get a more detailed picture of armoured vehicles.

The lack of primary sources probably accounts for the deficiency in historiography, as the majority of the archives were lost in the World War II. Since the records concerning military operations were also destroyed, the investigation gets even more difficult. The surviving material is currently stored in the Military Archives, of which the documents produced by the chief of general staff of the Royal Hungarian Army are extremely valuable. Unfortunately, these files were preserved partially, and they are now classified into the first main group of fonds.

The 3b section of the Ministry of Defence was responsible for armoured and other military vehicles, so its official papers can be the source of collecting financial and technical data.

The registers of the Royal Hungarian Army and the Royal Hungarian Gendarmerie, which belong to the second main group of fonds (regional authorities, units), were seriously damaged as well. The extant records of army corps and other divisions, documents of military leadership of both higher and lower ranks are also very limited in number.

For interpretation of military operations some specific sources, the recommendations for military awards and decorations can be a useful help. These documents described the war accomplishments or the feat of arms as an explanation for the proposal, and in this way they contribute to the reconstruction of military events which would be otherwise complicated in the absence of military bulletins and unit records.

As supplements of the investigation, personal data of army officers can be added from the Officers' Identity and Birth Certificates, Army History Sheets fond ("Tiszti személyügyi és anyakönyvi lapok, minősítési táblázatok") of the first main group of fonds.

The memoirs of war witnesses are conserved in the Studies Collection ("Tanulmánygyűjtemény") fond of the seventh main group of fonds. Despite the subjectivity of these accounts, they provide the researchers with useful pieces of additional information.

The issues of the monthly journal "*Magyar Katonai Szemle*" published between 1931 and 1944 were of primary importance in course of the research. The articles, reports and war stories released in the *Szemle* reflect the contemporary viewpoints of Hungarian military personnel. Furthermore, descriptions of different weapon types and the situation of armed units were included in the publications as well.

Description of Survey

Besides the Introduction and Conclusion, the paper has three main chapters. In the first chapter, I describe the circumstances and military trends that determined and influenced the birth and evolution of the new branch of arms. Here, I review the international and national tendencies and events that preceded the transformation of the army in 1938. I tend to introduce that the Hungarian innovations were carried out based on a thorough theoretical background and knowing all the foreign tendencies.

The following two main chapters (4 subchapters) will explain how the theories were turned into practice through the deployment of the mobile forces, and what conclusions can be drawn from these operations.

The parts about the occupation of Felvidék and Northern Transylvania are shorter on purpose, than the parts introducing the operations in Kárpátalja and Délvidék. This is because only the latter mentioned locations gave place to concrete military actions, while to the North and the East, they made successes by using the tools of diplomacy. However, during these actions to Kárpátalja and Délvidék, the participation of the Hungarian forces was rather limited. At Kárpátalja, the opposing forces –or perhaps the lack of them –, were the ones who saved the Hungarian forces from a bloody battle, while at Délvidék, it was the German army and their successes that helped out the Hungarians.

In the chapter entitled *The Occupation of Felvidék*, I introduce the mobile formations in their first stages. This is especially true for the Second Motorized Brigade, whose formation was just in progress. In Kárpátalja, the mobile forces were already in combat environment. The units without any established human and material conditions were doing well in these limited war circumstances. The experiences after the march-in had shown though, that they need some serious improvements. One important experience is that the mobile strategic formation needs a unified leadership. This brought the Mobile Army Corps into existence.

The reoccupation of Northern Transylvania proved and helped the military leadership to realize that the Mobile Army Corps is not ready yet to fulfill most of the tasks that were

meant for them. The experiences during the action and - if a Hungarian-Romanian war occurs -, the potentials of the Romanian Army showed, that the mobile forces are still not armed sufficiently and they are far from being able to complete the tasks determined by the Field Manual.

I reveal the conditions of the deployment in details in the chapter titled *Operation at Délvidék*. I delineate the forces of the opposing armies, the geographical conditions and their war plans. Based on this, I will locate the operations of the Mobile Army Corps and prove that the mobile forces, with their current organization, equipment and training are still deployable only in a limited way, compared to their requirements. There are serious lacks in basic parameters which have not been repaired yet (proved by previous experiences).

Summary – A general overview about the actions of the mobile forces

The Hungarian Royal army had realized soon that between the two world wars there was a new military theory created that could actually be useful. In the 30s, there were already theories that served as the basis of the deployment of the new branches of arms in the 2nd World War. The reason for the basic changes was the motorization and the military changes that came up with it.¹ By end of the decade, the armor, automobile and aircraft techniques have developed enough to put these theories into practice more generally. There were many factors hindering Hungary's armament. One of them was that the country was bound by the Treaty of Trianon. Furthermore, the economic and personal background was unsatisfactory. By the end of the 30s, these factors began to take a positive turn, and in 1938, a vast armament program had begun. This is how the mobile branch was formed. This new branch of arms was dealing with all the growing pains that the newly reorganized Army also had, and due to its characteristics, it had other problems as well.

¹ Obviously, we can also list several other outstanding results of other fields (electronics, broadcasting, chemical industry, mining, etc.), but the key for innovation is definitely the appearance and spread of a new source of energy.

The mobile forces that had been set up in 1938, first got deployed during the occupation of Felvidék. The actions of these barely organized formations only slightly exceeded the level of an army exercise. However, while recapturing Kárpátalja, there were concrete military actions. The forces did not have the optimal organizational, human and material conditions, and they did not even get the chance to be deployed accordingly to the modern tactical theories either. Even though the units of recruits were doing well, it was still in doubt whether they can carry through the planned operations in case of organized resistance. Their training and their material supplies were not satisfactory either.

Based on the experiences, the creation of the Mobile Army Corps in order to command the mobile strategic formations did not only mean an organized and professional leadership in a possible operation, but it also served as a peacetime commander and a head of the trainings as well. This made it possible to create and apply the required and unified principles, and also to prepare the commanders to lead the army based on these new rules. It became clear, that a new branch of arms can not be maintained for “ad hoc” situations. They have to set up the mobile forces already in peacetime with strong material and human conditions. From this point, they started to unify the motorized forces of the groups – rather unsuccessfully, especially in case of the civil vehicles –, and started to provide the armored units much more modern army vehicles than the previous ones. (Csaba armored car, Toldi light tank, Nimród antitank vehicle, Turán medium tank).

At the time of the Hungarian-Romanian “almost-war” in 1940, the Hungarian strategy was ready to fulfill the orders of the Mobile Army Corps’s Regulation. After breaking through the Romanian defense, the mobile formations were supposed to act in the depth of the Romanian defense. The war did not happen, and the only thing the groups had to fight with was a peaceful march-in, same as it went in Felvidék. Here, the enemy was not really the Romanian force, but the big march distances and circumstances. The mobile units, that were presenting much more significant marches than some other groups, still had to deal with numerous problems, that would have influenced badly their efficiency in war circumstances. The supplementary shipment had often got left behind, and the signal unit network was not satisfactory either. The shortage in vehicles and horses caused a lot of losses to many formations, without even getting involved into a battle.

The German victories meant a lot of important experiences. This could convince the doubters, that motorizing means the future for the army, and not the astray. Moreover, they also confirmed the deployment theories born before the war. The campaigns to Poland and to the West had justified the importance of the armored battalions, but because they did not have any war experience on their own, they assigned new ways of improvement as well. After this, they started to organize the armored battalions, and to improve the armament of the units. However, these ambitions had to fit to the country's potentials. It was obvious, that the Germans served as an example for a lot of reasons, but – as a report refers to it – they can not be copied. There are basic differences in the German requirements regarding not only the economical, technical and personal abilities, but also the army's possible deployment conditions.

In April 1941, the Army got deployed again. The campaign to Délvidék was now a coalition war, with all the benefits of a powerful alliance. The soldiers did not confront any organized opposing forces now either, but had problems dealing with the irregular forces. And, of course, the usual problems came up again. The poor supplementary shipment, the untrained soldiers, the imperfect material circumstances, the problematic commanding were all problems the attacking groups had to deal with. Earlier, diplomacy was the reason for not confronting the enemy, but now the reason was that the Hungarian forces did not encounter any significant resistance by the time they took off, with the help of the German ground-and air forces. Thus, the Army did not get the chance to be tested in war circumstances again, the trial did not happen now either. They were not missing the military experiences though, even if they were incomplete. But they did not have enough time to solve their problems, because after Délvidék, the Mobile Army Corps got deployed again. But this time, they were in a "one weak against two strong" situation. Now, they had to pay with blood for their weak techniques, for neglecting the developments and cutting back costs for no reasons.

New academic results

In my dissertation, I pointed out that the Hungarian military innovators were constantly following the international tendencies with attention, and I introduced and evaluated the development of the mobile forces.

The Hungarian military commanders did not only view the events of the Second World War as war-experiences, but they also analyzed them, and while innovating and deploying the mobile forces, they always took these experiences into account in a modern way.

I summarized the story of the Hungarian Army's mobile forces between 1938 and 1941 based on their deployments and the conclusions that can be drawn from them.

Alongside with the deployments, I also introduced the ideas and processes of the developments.

As opposed to many labeling statements about the Hungarian Army, we can say that the leadership of the Army had reached the current standards of its time. (Despite the problems coming up in the material and technical conditions, we can tell that the Hungarian mobile forces were representing more modern theories from many respects, than other, opposing forces of their level). It had also turned out, that the theoretical preparedness was not always supported by practical knowledge.

Further research objectives

In the future, I plan to complete my work with a broad overview of the material conditions of the mobile forces, especially comparing their characteristics with the equipments of the existing and possible enemies. Besides introducing the arms and equipments, it would also be important to collect the officers of the groups. Regarding each type of groups, it would be necessary to do a more detailed research, focusing on their equipment, tactics and human background.

Practical usage of the scientific achievements

The dissertation can be used in teaching history in general, helping to refine the stereotypical thinking about the mobile forces. It can also have a role in teaching military history. It can be useful for the field officers as well. The historical analyses are also helpful for the current military leaders. The methods of commanding the operations, cooperating with the allies are current and actual questions.

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