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Diaries and Memoirs about the Eastern Theatre of War

1942

PhD Dissertation Theses

University of Szeged

History PhD Course

Szeged

2005

Choice of Subject and Goal

My professor and tutor of my doctor universitatis dissertation, **Lajos Serfőző** drew my attention to the

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importance of diaries and memoirs, which were published in ever growing number from the 1980's, and at the same time he also pointed out the latent possibilities in the research of subjective sources. My PhD dissertation is partly a tribute to his memory. **Péter Sipos**, tutor of the present dissertation, also encouraged me to continue my research into this field; I should like to thank his support with respect.

My dissertation is about the history of the 2nd Hungarian army; its goal is to describe how the authors of these diaries and memoirs, Hungarian soldiers directed to the front in 1942, experienced this individual and social cataclysm. After I had completed my doctor universitatis dissertation (*In the Flow. Turning Points in Hungary's Road into World War II until 1941 On the Basis Diaries, Memoirs, and Autobiographies. Szeged, 1993.*) my attention turned towards this new topic. The most important goal was a systematic, deep-going, analytic and comparative description of unpublished diaries and memoirs. In the last two decades the number of published documents has been growing. I also relied on these sources, but I concentrated on the unpublished documents. I could not aim at completeness, because a great number of manuscripts may be hiding in the hands of descendants. However, I managed to cover the material preserved in the Article Collection of the Military Archive.

By processing this source material I did not aim at depicting the military events, though – as most of the documents of the army perished – some diaries may contain facts, which help reconstruction of these events as well. For me the most important factor was not the reliability of the authors, because my work predominantly aims at how the individual recognises interprets his historical role. It is indisputable, that each person emphasises his viewpoint in the discourse of history. As the authors were participants and not makers of the events, their writings describe the individual consequences of the historical decisions. My point is that on the basis of these diaries the way of thinking and mentality characteristic of the soldiers can be depicted, which also gives a hint about the general way of thinking of the age.

Antecedents in the history of research

A detailed, objective description of the history of Royal Hungarian Army in World War II has been missing for decades. There were only a few works on military history at the disposal of historians, e.g. *Adonyi-Naredy, Ferenc: The Hungarian Soldier In World War II*, published in emigration (Klagenfurt, 1954), *Data To The Study Of The Organisation And War Activity Of The Horthy-Army (1938—1945)* compiled by János Csima (Budapest, 1961). In the last two decades a number of military historical source publications and studies have been published. Earlier synthetic works, however, did not cover the history of the 2nd Hungarian army in detail, e. g. *Dombrády, Lóránd—Tóth, Sándor: The Royal Hungarian Army 1919—1945*. (Budapest, 1987), *Gosztonyi, Péter: The Hungarian Army in World War II*. (Budapest, 1992). In connection with mobilisation, equipment and supply of the army the works of Lóránd Dombrády threw new light on the issues, especially his *The Hungarian Military Economy In World War II*, published in 2003, which described the Hungarian-German military and economic relations in a new light, and also his collection of studies, which dealt with the military policy issues as well, titled *Military Policy And Army 1920—1944*. (Budapest, 2000).

From the viewpoint of my dissertation the most important, basic work is Péter Szabó's full army history written on the basis archival sources titled *Don Bend. The History Of The 2nd Royal Hungarian Army (1942—1943)* (Budapest, 2001). He is also one of the authors of the volume about the losses of the army, which also made use of abundant subjective sources *Bús, János—Szabó, Péter: May They Rest In Peace... Documentary Memorial Album on the Hungarian Soldiers and Forced Labourers Fallen in World War II in the Eastern Theatre*. Budapest, 1999. Apart from these, study of my topic is greatly aided by *Hungary in World War II. A Lexicon A—Zs* (Budapest, 1997, chief-editor: Péter Sipos), and important data is contained by the book of Sándor Szakály: *The Hungarian Higher Command 1938—1944. A Lexicon and Reference Book*. The book of Krisztián Ungváry: *The Hungarian Army in World War II*. (Budapest, 2004.) cover the struggles of the 2nd army only in small detail.

Mention must be made about the fact, that from the viewpoint of the topic the published memoirs and diaries are also of utmost importance, e.g. *Koltai, Jenő: Recollections Of A Hungarian Military Officer – Portrait About The 20th Century*. (Washington, 1971), or *Lajtos, Árpád: Memory Of the 2nd Hungarian Army 1942—1943*. (Budapest, 1989).

Only a few general, analytic works have been published on **subjective sources**. The book of György Ránki:

Memoirs and The Reality about Hungary's Role in World War II. (Budapest, 1964) deals with content of memoirs published in emigration, and according to the allegation of the author, it is a biased, to some extent polemical, work, but from a methodological point of view I found it rather useful.

From the 1980's an ever-growing number of diaries and memoirs dealing with the Horthy-Era can be reckoned with, the forewords of which analysed the published mostly texts from the viewpoint of source criticism described the portrait the authors setting them in their age and evaluated their roles. A common feature of them – which I found worth following – is the analysis of the diaries from the viewpoint of reliability, comparative analysis and setting them in the portrait of the age.

Since the last two decades of the last century two joint tendencies can be observed in historiography, which can be associated with the topic of my research. One of them analyses the individuals and the **common participants** of history, the other the different fields of everyday life, the **historicism of weekdays**. In connection with these fields – together with other documents – the subjective sources came in the forefront of interest, their common characteristic feature being that the interest is self-centred, and the tone is personal.

On the basis of the volume of *Gábor Gyáni: Memory, Recollection and The Discourse of History.* (Budapest, 2000) it is evident how great importance is attached to the subjective sources, especially diaries by the author. These documents are not important from the viewpoint of political, economic, social macro-history, although in my opinion they may complete the general picture, but because of their personal viewpoint.

Thinking over the doubts of post-modern concept of history on the cognition of history, the opinions of *Mária Ormos (History: Is There Such A Thing?)* (<http://www.origo.hu/mindentudasegyeteme/ormos/20030307ormos1.html> 2003.03.28), Ignác Romsics (The Myth Of The Objectivity Of Historiography And The Unattainable Mythicised Past. In: Myths, Legends and Misconceptions about 20th Century Hungarian History. Ed. by: Romsics, Ignác, Budapest, 2002) and Pál Pritz (Some Problems Of Our Historiography, Especially Post-modern. *Múltunk* 2003/4.) are considered to be the most important by me. Ignác Romsics emphasised that the number of interpretations may be unlimited, but the value of the individual narratives may be different. Mária Ormos quoted the example of World War II, all the participants experienced it from his own viewpoint, and the different experiences generated different discourses. The description of events permits certain approaches and attitudes, but only to the limit of framework set by the checked sources. Total reconstruction of the past may be impossible, but to some extent, on the basis of reliable sources a certain patchwork can be attempted. Though I consider the researched diaries important primary sources, their authors did of course not compiled their works by following the above-mentioned standards, so their discourses can be regarded as a subjective narration of history.

The study of Pál Pritz dealing with post-modern historiography enumerated convincing arguments for the possibility of historical cognition. For me his most important methodological consideration was his answer to the fact of the existence of different discourses, which differed from the post-modern concept: there are rational explanations to these differences (op. cit. 265.). His other argument supports my view: differences in certain discourses of history may be emphasised, but common features of them are more important, because they convey reliable information about the past (op. cit. 277.). If I were after a motto for my work, I would choose the following thought of Pál Pritz: "... even though of its weaknesses, history possesses the greatest number of tools to help society look on its past without myths and legends." (Op. cit. 263.). There is also an urgent need to look on Hungary's history in World War II without legends, and in my opinion this can greatly be helped by the use of war diaries and memoirs.

Sources of the thesis

I used diaries and recollections as a basis for my thesis from the pool of **subjective sources** – diaries, private letters, memoirs, recollections, oral history and autobiographies. Beside the diaries, which were written parallel with the events, I also consider private letters a primary source, but as on the front there was no correspondence without censorship, I did not rely on the latter category. In case of oral history, the storyteller forms a conscious picture of the past, when his memories are biased by time, present expectations and other factors. In this way recollections to some extent reflect the time of their writing as well. To put it simply: the diary is written for the self, the memoir for the reader, the diary writer wants to record the events, the memoir writer wants to reconstruct them. The object of description also differs, because diaries are concentrated on the individual, while memoirs take the age as their centrepiece.

The individual may be actor, or only a passive part of the events, but it can be established how he felt, thought about them, what was his set of values in the certain period, what he considered as viable courses of action and why he took, or did not take these courses of action. To what extent did he live up to the expectations, what goals did he accept, what did he refuse to do and why, how and to what extent was he affected by the ideas, tendencies of the age? The diary writer works synchronised by the events, he characterises them in an honest, personal way, since his aim is not to inform the readers, but to record his experiences and thoughts. The direct utterances, instant reactions and the unfeigned way of writing make diaries different from the other types of subjective sources and contribute to a better reconstruction of the age. On a wider scale, everyday entries of participants are extremely important from the viewpoint of historical reconstruction.

Memoirs are written about a greater part of one's adult life span, while recollections are compiled about a shorter period, an important event, but both are written past the events. The goal of their writers is to consciously inform the readers, to survey the events, perhaps to analyse them, but very often one can establish the apologetic, self-redeeming factor, too. The author undertakes to describe the background of historical events and to re-adjust those views, which he considers inappropriate. Sometimes he also conveys so-far unknown facts and documents. In this way the centre seems to be the age and not the individual. Memoir writers often use sources during their work: diaries, everyday entries, documents and historical literature as well. Circumstances even in this case are not always favourable, many memoirs were written in POW camps, emigration, underground, or forced retirement. These factors may contribute to false judgement and may hinder objectivity, unbiased evaluation of the age.

During compilation of my work I attempted to make use of the **unpublished memoirs and diaries** in the collection of the Military Archive, but I also selected among, and relied on the recently published similar writings. In the course of my study I examined nearly 130 sources, so I could directly profit from nearly the half of the available material. These are – with only a few exceptions – manuscripts: 21 war diaries, 44 memoirs. Most of the sources were written by officers – 24 professional officers and 21 reservists --, 10 were written by privates, most of them reservists, and two by forced labourers. The number among the 235 thousand soldiers and 39 thousand forced labourers serving on the eastern front who wrote diaries cannot be established. Many of these diaries may have perished when their writers fell, disappeared, got wounded or was taken into captivity, but some of them may have been preserved by their respective families.

In my view war diaries are not documents of everyday life, although their writers are common people, but they have to act under extreme circumstances. On the front one's life is in constant danger, so activities to avoid certain death became the ever-present features of life, and the simplest facts of life got into another dimension. It is most probable, that most of the authors felt compelled to write his experiences because of these circumstances. As I pointed out, reliability of the diaries was not judged by me from the viewpoint of historical truth, but that the authors record instant experiences, thoughts, atmosphere and feelings. This time I did undertake the general examination memoirs – which are available in a far greater number, than the number of those, which I actually made use of --, because on the one hand I consider them to be far more inaccurate, on the other hand their authors had not written about their instant impressions, and later they were under the influence of many other factors, when they recorded their memories. When making a difference between the reliability of diaries and memoirs it is not only a difference in the level of historical truth, but there are differences in the writers' intention and content as well. Taking all these into consideration when selecting the available memoirs, one criterion was whether it contained a direct reference or other evidence to the existence of a previously written diary or recollection, which served as a basis for compiling the memoir. There are cases when an individual wrote a diary and a memoir as well, which clearly demonstrate the above-mentioned difference. It is very interesting to establish the change in the opinion of the author as contained in the diary and the memoir. Thematic differences can also help select between the memoirs based on diaries: worries and feelings about home, family and work appear in diaries, while these are normally missing from memoirs.

In the examination of subjective sources a basic point is the authors background: his education, vocation, social status, religion, world-picture, because these factors influence him in formulating his experience and attitude. However, not all of the above-mentioned pieces of information are at our disposal, because the manuscripts sometimes contain only the name, rank and number of unit. Very little is known about the authors themselves: in most of the cases only what they say about themselves. In these cases we can only conclude only on the basis of their texts what their governing motifs, intentions, emotions were in their deeds and opinions. A common feature of the diaries written by soldiers of different ranks is that most of them were not members of the power mechanism, so they were unaware of the background of events and they were not in a position to direct or influence either the course of history, or their personal fate.

The war diaries originating from 1942 allow for establishing a balanced picture. The diaries of reservist officers and privates depicting everyday life on the front changes in atmosphere and personal emotions are priceless documents of the age. Professional officers tended to write predominantly about the struggles, they made fewer personal remarks, though some of them also contain personal experiences. These sources accurately describe the shift in the moral of officers and privates from the enthusiasm of arriving at the front until coming to the conclusion that they were left alone in a situation without any prospect of returning. After some time the experiences induced the authors to question the course of the war and of victory. They had to come to the conclusion that the Soviet is not defeated, but defends itself steadily on the 200 kilometres' front. Former enthusiasm gives way to doubt, feelings of being left alone, distrust, bitter remarks began to appear in the diaries. It is not a surprise, that many members of the army set about writing diaries, even those soldiers, who under normal circumstances would not have been considered to be men of letters. It is quite probable, that this was a kind of defence reflex in extraordinary situation: the reflex of people in constant danger of life. Writing a diary may have helped endure the ever present fear, anxiety, which exposure to almost certain death or injury meant for soldiers, who had to exchange their former civilian life for soldiery.

Apart from the diaries and memoirs, other documents found in the documentation of the 2nd army, e.g. diary appendices, situation and atmosphere reports, situation evolutions, summaries also contained important details in connection with my topic. Subjective opinions also appear in official documents. They may either support the descriptions found in the diaries of officers and privates, or help solve controversies, so they are also worth examining.

Structure of the thesis and the method of processing

My dissertation is divided into 22 chapters; its **structure** follows the themes of diaries and memoirs. Chapters I-III contain the introduction and description of sources; chapter IV is about the mobilisation a short history of the 2nd army. Chapter V deals with the role of propaganda in formulating views on participation in the war. Chapters VI-VIII compares scholarly views on the supply and constitution of the army, chapters IX-XII contain experiences and opinions in connection with the march, the struggles, life on the front and the Red Army. Chapter XII also describes the situation in the autumn and winter of 1942, XIII depicts what the diaries contain about the relation of the theatre of war and the home front. Separate chapters deal with opinions on the soviet system and the people (XIV), the partisans (XV), the war (XVI), the Jewish forced labourers (XVII). Chapter XVIII is about the war crimes committed by Hungarian soldiers and mentioned in the diaries. Chapter XIX summarises the soldiers' experiences with, remarks on women. Chapters XX-XXI deals with the literary allusions present in the diaries and the humorous episodes. Chapter XXII is the conclusion. At the end of the dissertation there are tables showing the rank and service of the authors in different units of the 2nd army. There are also two appendices: a satiric writing and a map.

The characteristic topics in the diaries form an organic unit and record the experience of progress in space and time making up for a continuous narrative. In connection with actual events or incidentally they are interwoven with the details about other thoughts, feelings and moods of the authors.

When processing the sources my primary method was comparative analysis: the texts of diaries and memoirs were not only compared with each other, but in certain cases with the relating documentation of the army and the opinion of literature as well. When interpreting the opinions I took into consideration the factors influencing the authors, that is why I analysed the role of propaganda reflected by their works.

On the basis of the war diaries one can describe that way of thinking and mentality, which was characteristic of the soldiers, and also sheds light on that of the age. However, there are certain differences, as the authors found them in an exceptional situation, exposed to war circumstances, far away from their homes, torn from their homeland, in constant danger of death. At home their attitudes were biased by different family background, life standards, educational differences, local communities may have influenced them and countless impressions touched them, on the front, however, their attitudes became to some extent, uniform.

Among the extraordinary circumstances emotions and feelings of soldiers were intensified. Examples of good and bad could be cited: comradeship, patriotism, responsibility as well as solidarity or the lack of it, envy, malevolence. The sources recorded the phases of change, when the individual morals are undermined, and the individual becomes capable of committing deeds, which in normal circumstances would be deemed by himself. The diaries and memoirs clearly describe the consequences of power encouraging deeds, which would anyway

be deemed, by employing a double set of values to measure the value of life. The principle of stealing or robbery also gains a new dimension when the state approves of it.

Though there are identical characteristic features in the statements of the diaries, and we may assume that they contain general opinions, still the picture preserved by them is colourful and complex. The soldiers of the 2nd Hungarian army were victims, who did not go to war on their own intention and they were not responsible for their role. But they found themselves in a twofold role: their life was in danger, and at the same time others' life, freedom was at their disposal. It depended upon them how they used, or abused this – otherwise non-existent -- power. In many cases there was no limit to the emotions set free by the political and military leadership, for some inhumanity became the standard. Obviously there were countless explanations to the effectiveness of extreme propaganda – the Trianon decision, the euphoria of the success of irrendenta, the war situation – still it is astounding that according to the sources it influenced uneducated people as well as members of the intelligentsia – doctors, teachers, professional officers, too. The question is that if they could realise the bias of propaganda when facing reality. Some of the authors with a seemingly natural way of thinking blame all the problems on the Jews, and take it for granted that they may dispose of the people, territory and goods of the Soviet Union.

The possibilities of the topic's further development

Analysis of the processed source material can be further developed in many directions. On the one hand the history of the January, 1943 breakthrough and retreat can be examined. However, there are few diaries dealing with this topic survive, a great number of memoirs discuss the history of the mauling and losses of the 2nd army. The other possibility is the examination of the memoirs, but from a different point of view: with a thematic approach. Many memoirs, recollections written after the 1950's contain ideas, stereotypes, which are generated by circumstances, which characterise the time of writing instead of the time of narration. E.g. reverse projection of Hungarian-Soviet co-operation in the times of war, idealised picture of circumstances found in the war, opinions about the cause and goal of war. Some examples of the latter: the emphasis on the negative role of German officers, blaming the political leadership for not taking into consideration the Hungarian interests, and other legends promoted by films, press or literature (e.g. the Krúdy-legend, according to which the bombing of Kassa was a German, or German-Hungarian provocation).

I plan the examination of a similar type Russian source material. On two occasions (2002, St. Petersburg, 2004, Moscow) I had the chance to perform, however short, research in libraries and archives in Russia and to consult with Russian historians. My predominant interest is if there is a change in recent Russian historiography in connection with World War II, if there are similar manuscripts to the ones I analysed, and what opinions they contain on Hungarian soldiers.

The scholarly results of the dissertation

One of the important goals of my work is to contribute to the evolution of a more realistic opinion about the activity of the soldiers of the 2nd Hungarian army. This included the enumeration of those negative deed, which the Hungarian soldiers- according to the source – committed in the theatre of war, but also the acts of bravery and firm resistance, which characterised most of the soldiers. In Hungary there is a stable negative picture, countless stories are told about their behaviour, but deeds of Hungarian soldiers committed on the front are hard to face, even if we know how circumstances deformed their set of values. Obviously, I do not intend to say that all negative examples can and should be generalised, but we cannot leave them out without paying any attention.

The many-sided interpretation of the examined sources generates a colourful picture. Nobody interprets the events in the same way; the possibilities of approaches are almost countless. The most important is if there evolves a commonly accepted – independent of individual narratives – version of the events. If it happens, perhaps nobody wants to promote his history as the solely acceptable one.

The soldiers arrived at the front with firm ideas, these were partly influenced by experiences of the former

generation, which fought on the Russian front in World War I, or were taken captive there. The picture was further modified by propaganda and military training, then came the personal experiences. The diaries preserve this process until today and this became the basis for a new common experience. After World War I front oral and written front stories had become organic parts of common talk, that of World War II remained taboo for a long time because of political reasons. Veterans of World War I had been highly esteemed heroes for their communities and society as a whole, while soldiers having participated in World War II after 1945 became scapegoats of the Horthy-era. They had to repress their memories, they could not be proud even of those deeds – and society could not even learn about them –, which would have been worthy of it, their valour was not esteemed. In this way most personal experiences did not become known or a valuable part of common experience of society. This not only true for their experiences about the Stalinist system, but for war experiences as well. A new type of propaganda, different stereotypes covered reality again, that is why experiences of soldiers recorded by them immediately could be important.

It cannot be ascertained how many diaries are still unknown, but I think the amount of sources at our disposal is enough to suppose that the general picture would not have to be modified even if there were a greater number of diaries available. I am fully convinced that I have managed to learn about an appropriate number of diaries to complete the history of Hungary in World War II with a mentality and social historical approach.

During the preparation of the present dissertation I tried to keep in mind the principle voiced by Pal Prates: '... according to experience witnesses remember the events differently countless times, but by solving contradictions and the use of logic we have an almost perfect tool to differentiate between the false and appropriate conclusions.' (Op. cit. 247.)

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