

# Hungary between the Wars

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## Keypoints

- Prior to World War I, Magyars (ethnic Hungarians) were a minority in Hungary
- Hungarians developed theories of a superior national Magyar “Volk” (ideologically similar to the German theories of a master race)
- The feudal structure of Hungarian society discouraged modernization
- Jews and Germans were both over-represented in the small middle class that developed before World War I
- Jews who embraced “Magyarization” (learning the Magyar language and adopting Magyar culture) seen as cultural oppressors by ethnic minorities
- Post-Trianon Hungary was a homogeneous Magyar state
- Jews, the only significant minority in inter-war Hungary, were made scapegoats
- Hungarian Christians co-operated with deportation and murder of Jews

## Hungarian Nationalism and the Austro-Hungarian Empire

Hungary was a subject nation of the Habsburgs after the Ottoman Turks were driven from the Carpathian Basin in 1699. Hungarians lost several wars to gain independence from Austria. The last one was fought twenty years before the Dual Monarchy of Austria-Hungary was established in 1867 (as a compromise between the emperor and Hungarian nationalists).

The Hungarian’s struggle for independence and revolutionary wars were unlike the American or French Revolutions, however. For the most part, Hungarians were not inspired by liberalism—individual rights and limited power for monarchs. The Hungarian nobleman already had the “Golden Bull,” which limited the king’s power and gave nobles the right to depose a king who disregarded their counsel.<sup>1</sup> As a result, Hungarian nobles who fought for independence did not do so to gain individual rights for all Hungarians but rather for a Hungary independent of foreign rule. While nobles wanted an independent modern Hungary, few wanted the change to mean less authority over the peasants and tradesmen on their estates.<sup>2</sup>

## Nationalism in Hungary

The concept of a “nation” developed differently in Hungary than in Western Europe or the United States. From the American Revolution on, the belief that American citizenship grants one the right to fully participate in our democracy has been strengthened through legal protections. The Fourteenth Amendment, passed in 1868 to protect the rights of former slaves, has been understood to also protect the rights of all Americans against infringements on their rights by individual states or the federal government. The emphasis America placed on the government’s responsibility to guarantee citizens’ rights can also be seen in the requirement that those wishing to become Americans must first demonstrate an understanding of the rights and responsibilities of citizenship. There is no “cultural” test of “American-ness.”

In Eastern European countries like Hungary nationalism was based on cultural and linguistic exclusiveness. Much influenced by Johann Gottfried Herder’s philosophy (see reading “German Volk”), many Hungarians believed that the Magyar “nation” was a living organism comprised of all the individual Magyars. This living entity was thought to be vulnerable to contamination, and even ruin, from other languages and cultures. In 1867, the Hungarian “Nationalities Act” defined Hungarian citizens as part of the “united Magyar [Hungarian] nation.”<sup>3</sup> Inclusion in the “nation” was determined by cultural practices and the ability to speak Magyar, not political boundaries. For many decades, the ability to speak Magyar would determine if one was seen as a “true” Hungarian or a foreigner, regardless of how long ones family had resided within Hungarian borders.<sup>4</sup>

However, Magyars did not make up the majority of people in Hungary. Most Hungarians were ethnic Croats, Serbs, Germans, Slovaks, and Romanians. The fact that Magyars were outnumbered increased their sense that the “Magyar nation” was vulnerable. As the Industrial Revolution advanced in other countries, Hungarian nobles (who were mostly Magyar) wanted a

modern, independent state, to develop, but creating a nation modeled after Western democracies would have meant sharing power with these “others.”<sup>5</sup>

Because Magyar nationalism focused on linguistic exclusivity, the relationship between these minorities and the Magyar population never developed the cultural pluralism characteristic of Western democracies. After 1874, while the United States was working toward treating former slaves as equal citizens, Hungary developed an official policy of “Magyarization,” thereby forcing ethnic minorities to adopt Magyar language and culture. However, Slovakian, Romanian and other minorities resisted pressures to conform. Noblemen of Slovakian and Romanian origin became increasingly nationalistic themselves and demanded an independent state of their own (rather than working for a united Hungary in which all peoples were accepted and respected).<sup>6</sup>

These developments increased Magyar Hungarians’ fear that their culture was threatened. Many peasants (who still lived in feudal conditions) valued their national identity even over individual rights. Although modernization meant increased rights for them, Magyar peasants saw the inclusion of ethnic minorities and Jews in the reforms as an assault on their culture. Resisting changes to their feudal way of life became an expression of Magyar pride.<sup>7</sup>

However, although Jews made up only 5% of the Hungarian population, as they embraced Magyarization, they helped to “tilt the ethnic balance in favor of Magyar.” Before World War I, Hungarian Christians seemed to value their Jewish neighbors not only for the commercial skills and entrepreneurial talents they brought to help modernize the feudal, rural Hungarian society and create an industrial, urbanized, modern society, but also for their intense Hungarian patriotism.<sup>8</sup>

### **Hungarian Estates, “Magyarization,” and Ethnic Tensions**

More than any other group, Hungarian Jews embraced the chance to show their patriotism and love of their homeland by learning Magyar. By 1910, although Jews made up only 5% of the overall population, more Hungarian Jews (76%) spoke Magyar than Hungarian Catholics (55%).<sup>9</sup> While this made Jews more acceptable to Magyar Hungarians, the majority of people living on the estates in rural Hungary spoke Romanian, Croatian, Slovakian, or German.

In order to understand the impact of this, one must try to imagine the size of some Hungarian estates, on which the majority of Hungarians lived. For example, in 1918, the Esterházy estate included sixty market towns, over twenty castles, and over four hundred villages in Hungary alone. The Esterházys also owned castles and surrounding lands in Austria, In Bavaria, Germany, they owned an entire county.<sup>10</sup> Although there were Jewish, Slovakian, and Romanian noblemen and estates as well, the vast majority of noblemen were Catholic Magyar-speaking Christians, like the Esterházys.<sup>11</sup>

Jewish Hungarian patriotism grew despite centuries of restrictions on these estates. At times, Jewish Hungarians were not allowed to live on the estates. At other times, they were not allowed to live in towns and cities, to hold official positions, own land, hire Christians, or be employed as tradesmen or farmers. Often noble families (like the Esterházys) received permission from the king to allow Jews to live on their estates and collect their rent and taxes or lend money to peasants and tradesmen. But, these jobs often created tension between Jews and their neighbors. When Jews were allowed to live in market towns (towns that had the legal right to hold a market), the nobles encouraged Jews to develop commerce—to buy and sell the local goods and farm produce that Hungarian law forbade Jews from making or growing themselves.<sup>12</sup>

Again, this relationship between Jews and Christians created tensions; Jews were blamed for poor market prices. Or, when crops failed, peasants found themselves having to borrow money from Jews. When Magyar became the official language of Hungary, Jews had to conduct business in it. This further angered the Slovakian and Romanian-speaking peasants and German tradesmen who felt Jews were forcing them to “Magyarize.” But when Jews clung to their traditional religious practice and continued to speak their original language, particularly Galician Jewish emigrants, they were not accepted either, but seen as “foreigners” by Magyars, Slovaks, and Romanians alike.<sup>13</sup>

### **A Small Middle Class: Magyar-speaking Jews and German Antisemites**

Jews in the cities also embraced “Magyarization.” After Jews were allowed to live in any Hungarian city (1783),<sup>14</sup> many moved to Buda and Pest (eventually Budapest). By the 1900s, Jews made up 20% of the population there. Because of the limited way that Hungary industrialized, by 1890, only a very small Hungarian middle class had developed, totaling 3.8% of the total population. Most were either Germans (who were often more anti-semitic than other Hungarians) or Jews (who like the peasants in rural areas were mostly Slavic) – a fact that only increased the sense among the new working class that they were being dominated by “others.”<sup>15</sup>

As other countries in Europe underwent industrialization, Hungarian nobles resisted modernizing, fearing it would bring democracy and alter the feudal social structure on their estates. But they understood that only a modern Hungary could be independent from Austria. To achieve this, they would need a middle class, or bourgeoisie, to create a capitalist, industrialized economy. Unlike peasants and artisans in a feudal economy – who are tied culturally and economically to the estate for which they work, members of the middle class must be able to move from place to place, obtain an education and provide the financial skills to build and run banks and factories and to develop commerce. The middle class also provides capital (money) to invest in new ventures. In Hungary, only ethnic Germans and Jews had the skills, experience, and abilities required to function and even thrive as entrepreneurs.<sup>16</sup>

After restrictions on university attendance were lifted in the 1850s, another avenue into the middle class was through education. Many Jews joined Croats, Serbs, and Romanians in receiving university educations. In fact, 65% of graduates from Hungarian universities were ethnic minorities.<sup>17</sup> Another reason for the large number of minorities earning degrees was that the landed gentry in Hungary viewed careers in business and professions such as physicians, lawyers, or teachers and journalists as beneath their status. As a result, these positions were often held by Hungarian Jews or ethnic Germans from Austria, or other minorities who earned university degrees.<sup>18</sup>

Less influential, or affluent Hungarian nobles who refused to modernize their estates often lost them.<sup>19</sup> Typically, they became bureaucrats for the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Desiring economic stability, they saw little reason to call for political change. While Magyars made up only 50% of population in 1910, Magyars had 413 representatives in the Diet (Hungarian Parliament). The rest of the population, mostly Slavs and Germans, had eight.<sup>20</sup> This state of affairs was less acceptable, however, to the new middle class and to the small, but growing, intellectual and professional community in the cities, many of whom were Jewish. Increasingly, the left demanded emancipation of all peasants while conservatives of all ethnicities focused on nationalism—either Magyar “purity” or on statehood for Romanians, Slovakians, or Croats. Nationalism became a secular religion defining the world and peoples’ place in it.<sup>21</sup>

While Jews were allowed to assimilate if they learned Magyar, they were also expected to “modernize” their religion as well. Jews in Hungary split between those who modernized (Neologs) and those who continued traditional practices and dress (Orthodox). Many Galician Jews were among those who lived separately and practiced their religion traditionally even after emancipation.<sup>22</sup> Their choice not to Magyarize so threatened the “united Magyar nation” that their numbers were grossly exaggerated. In reality, the number of Orthodox Jews of any origin – Polish, Slovakian or Hungarian – never comprised more than a miniscule portion of the entire Hungarian population, a minority within a minority of less than 5%.<sup>23</sup> Fighting against foreign corruption of Magyar culture became the “prevalent expression of Christian-national principal.”<sup>24</sup> Jews became associated with Western democracy...another foreign influence.<sup>25</sup>

Like all racist nationalist movements, Hungarian nationalism after WWI focused on retrieving the lost national glory of an idealized past. Jews embodied all that was bad about modernization. Having been invited to modernize Hungary, they were now blamed for benefiting from it. The Jewish “problem” (which in the previous century seemed to be solvable through emancipation and assimilation) became one of racial hatred. Once Hungary was a homogeneous Magyar society nationalist still needed an “other” against which they could define their superiority. Despite ten thousand Hungarian Jewish war casualties, they were once more demonized and ostracized.<sup>26</sup>

## **World War I and the Treaty of Trianon**

When Hungary's loss seemed imminent, Romanians, Czechs, Croats, Slovaks, and Sub-Carpathian Ruthenians declared independence from the Kingdom of Hungary even before the Austro-Hungarian Emperor signed an armistice on 3 November 1918. The Republic of Hungary was created on 16 November. The new government had to deal with returning soldiers, pillaging, refugees, and the transfer of ethnic groups to the newly-declared, but not yet legally-defined countries, and the desire of Magyar Hungarians not to be made minorities in the new states.<sup>27</sup>

In 1919, in the midst of the economic chaos, Communists took over Hungary for 133 days, declaring the Hungarian Soviet Socialist Republic (HSSR). However, their land reforms fell short of redistribution, and so failed to receive the peasants' support. Similarly, the nationalization of all business that employed over twenty people alienated the middle class. Romania and Czechoslovakia invaded. The Romanians occupied Budapest on 4 August 1919 and stayed until November 1919, plundering an estimated 3 billion gold crowns worth.<sup>28</sup>

The day after the Romanians left, under international pressure, Miklos Horthy rode into Budapest on a white horse. In the following months, Hungary descended into the first widespread anti-semitic violence in its history. Nearly 70,000 people were put into concentration camps, 27,000 arrested, and 329 executed. Estimates of the number murdered range from 1,200 to 1,500. Victims included many Jews, but also Communists and Social Democrats.<sup>29</sup> The perpetrators included army officers, clerics, and secret fascist and nationalist societies.<sup>30</sup> Horthy was elected to lead the new government on March 1, 1920, in the most open election Hungary had ever held: thirty-nine percent of Hungarians could vote compared to ten percent before the war.<sup>31</sup>

Many historians explain the antisemitic violence that followed the end of the HSSR by referring to communist leader Bela Kuhn's "Jewishness" (As a communist, Kuhn rejected religion). But the majority of Jews opposed Kuhn.<sup>32</sup> Ranki believes that Hungarians were responding to a deeply-rooted Christian anti-semitism that Magyarization had done little to alleviate.<sup>33</sup>

Ranki wrote:

Modern antisemitism condemns Jews for being capitalists, for being Communists, for being liberals, for being nationalists (Zionists), in other words, for fitting into the modern world. The target of modern, political antisemitism is not the 'authentic' Jew, but the assimilated Jew. Assimilated Jews, the beneficiaries of modernization and emancipation, who had previously been ostracized, excluded, and separate, were no longer recognizable. By blending into Christian society and taking economically advantageous roles, they disadvantaged Christians. The phenomenon of exposing the 'hidden' Jew is observable for instance, in right-wing post-Versailles Hungary, during the soviet purges of 1948-53 and in Poland in 1967-68. (16)

The first anti-Jewish measures, passed in 1938, were economic, intended to solve unemployment by pushing Jews out of middle class jobs. Thousands of civil servants (unemployed as a result of the Dual Monarchy's collapse) and an increased number of university graduates in the inter-war years wanted middle-class jobs traditionally held by Jews. The second antisemitic law in 1939 defined Jews as different racially on religious grounds had dire economic consequences, as well.<sup>34</sup>

Similar to the Dollfuss' regime in Austria, Horthy's regime was influenced by Mussolini's corporatism and functioned within a parliamentary democracy with strong police rule. Bans on Social Democrats and Communists resulted in right wing coalitions: all were antisemitic, all believed in Magyar racial superiority over the successor states. Ironically, as antisemitism rose in Hungary, the right of self-determination and the right of minorities to petition the League of Nations if mistreated in the successor states were used by Hungary to demand the return of territories lost as a result of Trianon. Centuries of intermarrying (between Magyars, Slavs, Christians, and Jews) made racist theories of "purity" impracticable for many Hungarian fascist leaders.<sup>35</sup> However, the belief in Magyar superiority caused many to prefer Horthy to Hitler, and most fascists remained loyal. Hungarian fascist continued to identify themselves as Christian, causing distance with Nazism's paganism. Yet, no large scale Christian resistance arose to halt the deportation and murder of Hungarian Jews.<sup>36</sup> As Ranki wrote, the Jewish problem became one of racial hatred. Excluding or exterminating them became the "solution."<sup>37</sup>

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- <sup>1</sup> Levendi, Paul. The Hungarians. Hurst and Company: London, 47
- <sup>2</sup> Ranki, Vera. The Politics of Inclusion and Exclusion: Jews and Nationalism in Hungary. New York: Holmes and Meyer, 1999, 33-37
- <sup>3</sup> Ranki, 39
- <sup>4</sup> Levendi, 237-38
- <sup>5</sup> Ranki, 41-42
- <sup>6</sup> Levendi, 211, 224-225, Ranki, 58-59
- <sup>7</sup> Ranki, 39-42
- <sup>8</sup> Patai, 433
- <sup>9</sup> Patai, 429
- <sup>10</sup> Shandor, Vincent. Carpatho-Ukraine in the Twentieth Century. Boston: Harvard U., 1997, 37
- <sup>11</sup> Ranki, 33
- <sup>12</sup> Patai, Raphael, The Jews of Hungary. Detroit: Wayne State, 1996
- <sup>13</sup> Patia, Levendi, 299-300
- <sup>14</sup> Patai, 213
- <sup>15</sup> Patai, 439
- <sup>16</sup> Ranki, 11-15, Patia, 439
- <sup>17</sup> Patai, 435
- <sup>18</sup> Ranki, 33-39, Nagy-Talavera 65
- <sup>19</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>20</sup> Shandor, 37
- <sup>21</sup> Ranki, 46-48
- <sup>22</sup> Ranki, 19-20, Patai, 217-225
- <sup>23</sup> Patai, 234-235
- <sup>24</sup> Ranki, 101
- <sup>25</sup> Ibid., 102, Nagy-Talavera, Nicholas M. The Green Shirts and Others. Stanford: Standford U, 1970, 74-77
- <sup>26</sup> Ibid. 41
- <sup>27</sup> Lendevai, 376-379
- <sup>28</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>29</sup> Nagy-Talavera, 54-55
- <sup>30</sup> Ranki, 88
- <sup>31</sup> Nagy-Talavera, 55
- <sup>32</sup> Nagy-Talavera, 65
- <sup>33</sup> Ranki
- <sup>34</sup> Nagy-Talavera, 68-69, Ranki, 97
- <sup>35</sup> Levendai, 414
- <sup>36</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>37</sup> Ranki, 2