



**B · L · E · S · S**

Balkans  
Legal,  
Economic and  
Social  
Studies

# Analysing the Public Mood in Bačka through Various Sources (1941–1944)

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.14232/bless.2025.1.1-11>

Csőke Márk

## ABSTRACT

In the following study, I examine the public mood in the Bačka region during World War II based on various sources. The analysis of social atmosphere is a challenging aspect of historical research; therefore, I attempt to illustrate it using different sources. For this purpose, I rely on materials of the Ministry of Interior, the reports of the local ethnic Hungarian associations and the different crimes committed in the Bačka. According to the sources, it was a dynamic period for the region, where ethnic conflicts and social tensions were common. The Budapest-centric authorities observed the events from a security perspective, but the reports of the cultural association and the analysis of the trials reveal a local-level perspective, showing the tensions existing in the region, from which the social mood also becomes apparent.

## AUTHORS:

CSŐKE MÁRK

Faculty of Humanities and  
Social Sciences, University of  
Szeged, Hungary

[csmark32@gmail.com](mailto:csmark32@gmail.com)

[0009-0001-2137-8964](https://orcid.org/0009-0001-2137-8964)

## KEYWORDS:

Bačka, public mood, ethnic  
conflicts, Hungarian minority,  
Crimes Against the Honour of  
Hungarian State and Nation

## Introduction

In December 1940, Hungary and Yugoslavia had signed a treaty of friendship, but within half a year, the coup in Belgrade<sup>1</sup> at the end of March 1941 changed all the geopolitical situation. Following the German military attack, Hungarian forces also initiated an assault, which was linked to the revisionist aspirations of Hungarian politics at the time. In April 1941, Hungary gained control over the regions of Bačka, the South of Baranja and Prekmurje. However, they were disappointed with the outcome regarding Banat, as this region did not return to Hungary. The reannexed Bačka region exhibited a highly diverse linguistic, cultural, and religious landscape. Although ethnic Hungarians had a relative majority, the area was also home to hundreds of thousands of Serbs, Croats, Germans, Slovaks, Rusyns, and Jews.

The southern regions (re)annexed by Hungary between 1941 and 1944 have been explored from multiple perspectives by historians. Pioneering research by Enikő Sajti (Sajti 1987, Sajti 2004) must be acknowledged, but recent publications have also brought valuable new insights. Among these, Linda Margittai (Margittai 2023) has published a monograph on the "Jewish Question," while Balázs Valastyán has written a dissertation on Hungarian settlement policy. Zoltán Dévavári, in numerous studies and volumes, has dealt with the Jewish communities of Bácska, the prevailing political circumstances, and the key actors directing policy (Dévavári 2024).

Since 2015, ethnographic approaches have also been applied to the study of this period. (Papp 2015) The two-volume work *Igaz történetek Mindenkeföldjéről* (*True Stories from Everyone's Land*), edited by Árpád Papp, contains a collection of personal testimonies and recollections gathered between 2009 and 2013. Papp's work is particularly valuable, because before the existing records and studies on everyday life in this period tended to rely on generalizations and only fulfill the most basic expectations. Yet the understanding and interpretation of this era cannot be divorced from the lived social contexts in which events unfolded.

In one of his studies, Papp argues that the years between 1941 and 1948 represent one of the most traumatic chapters in the history of Hungarians in

Vojvodina – characterized by summary justice, internments, raids, deportations, the activities of partisans, and postwar trials. Furthermore, in the postwar years, the pressure to remain silent – imposed by the victorious side – left a deep imprint on the psychological condition and collective memory of the Hungarian community.

My study aims to contribute to this field by going beyond (without diminishing the value of oral history) personal recollections and by introducing sources that clearly reflect aspects of everyday life and social mood. These sources can provide valuable perspectives for constructing broader syntheses of the period. Considering the archival materials and recollections examined below, there is significant potential to conduct research in the region that engages with key themes such as trauma and collective memory.

Methodologically, the analysis moves from the macro-level—starting with reports of the Ministry of the Interior—towards the micro-level, including anti-minority reports by local organizations and judicial proceedings. These sources are significant because they reveal a form of "*personalized reality*", showing how individuals and communities perceived their circumstances. Alongside the initial wave of celebratory sentiment observable among segments of the Hungarian population, the archival material reveals an atmosphere suffused with trauma and fear: it is present in the mindset of the gendarme who sees Chetniks and communists behind every bush in his reports; in the letter of Peter Fernbach, who notes that Hungarian civil servants do not feel safe; and in the mutual denunciations that pervade neighborhood life.

After the (re)annexation, the region's predominantly minority population expressed dissatisfaction with the evolving political and economic situation. Furthermore, due to the economic and supply difficulties arising from the war, a form of discontent was also observed among the local ethnic Hungarian population. This discontent is excellently reflected in the sources, such as the documents of Lesé-Regent lawsuits concerning violations against Miklós Horthy regent, as well as harm to the honour of the Hungarian state and nation. The most examined topics of this period include the raids in Šajkaška (Sajkásvidék)<sup>2</sup> and Novi Sad, as well as the anti-Hungarian atrocities following October 1944. (Matuska 1990, Kasaš 1996) However, the sources presented in this study also suggest that interethnic tensions were prevalent throughout society during this period.

To demonstrate how the public mood was perceived in

<sup>1</sup> On 25th of March 1941 Yugoslavia joined the Tripartite Pact led by Germany, which caused great dissatisfaction in Yugoslavia, and after a pro-British coup, power was seized in Belgrade.

<sup>2</sup> Šajkaška (Sajkásvidék) is an area located at the confluence of the Danube and Tisza rivers in Bačka. The region was named after the "*šajkaši*", who were mostly Serbian Danube border guards serving in the military. This region was predominantly inhabited by Serbs in Bačka.

Budapest, I use documents from the Ministry of the Interior<sup>3</sup> and the Nationalities and Minority Department of the Prime Minister's Office.<sup>4</sup> Moving closer to the local level, I also examine reports from the Délvidéki Magyar Közművelődési Szövetség showing how Bačka's ethnic Hungarian cultural and political leaders perceived reality. Finally, to explore the sentiments of ordinary people, I incorporate various legal documents such as those related to Lesé-Regent Crimes and Crimes Against the Honour of the Hungarian State and Nation.

## Results

### Occupation – Liberation

The ethnic Hungarian population of Bačka experienced these events as a liberation from 23-year-long Serbian occupation, during which they had been treated as second-class citizens, affecting them on political, economic, cultural, and educational levels (Dimić 1997, Sajti 2004, Janjetović 2006). The Hungarian army was met with celebratory crowds in ethnic Hungarian villages. Locals generally selected national guards to maintain public order during the period between the withdrawal of Yugoslav forces and the arrival of Hungarian troops.

Yugoslav forces did not offer significant resistance, as the regular Yugoslav army had largely withdrawn from the Bačka area by April 12 due to the rapid German assaults. Only near Bački Petrovac did a battle occur between the regular forces of the two countries. However, the Yugoslav military apparatus also included irregular forces, consisting mostly of armed dobrovoljac<sup>5</sup> and chetnik units, though no organized action took place, as these groups were only supplementary to the regular units. (Sajti 2004, 164–168.) While sporadic resistance emerged in the region, it was harshly repressed by the Hungarian army. During the pacification process, the Serbian population was disarmed, though later investigations revealed several instances of excesses. The Hungarian military leaders even acknowledged that panic had broken out in certain areas, leading to overreactions against the civilians. During the military action, seven Hungarian officers and 119 soldiers were killed, and two officers and 239 soldiers were wounded. According to post-war Yugoslav data, 3,506 civilians died as a result of the Hungarian invasion. In contrast, Hungarian records

state that the death toll was 1,435. 313 were summarily executed, and 1,122 died in various "gang" skirmishes (Sajti, 2004, p. 153–198.).

These excesses poisoned relations between the local ethnic Hungarian and Serbian populations from the beginning of the occupation. In response, the military leadership instructed the ethnic Hungarian upper class in Bačka to contact with the Serbs. A letter received by the military command from Imre Deák, a local officer in Sombor, stated:

"A firm call has come to the Hungarian Reading Society (Magyar Olvasókör) to invite Serbs, Bunjevci, and Germans to engage in social interactions. We are now tasked with establishing contact with those Serbs with whom, for 23 years, our interactions have been limited to official spaces. Without knowing exactly where this idea came from, we are compelled to begin socializing. This includes engaging with those Serbs who are still mourning the loss of family members or whose relatives are still in flight."<sup>6</sup>

### Reports of the Ministry of Interior and Department of Nationalities

The unpredictable situation, marked by changes to the national borders, further intensified the already tense interethnic relations, as demonstrated by the processed documents. These tensions can only be traced through archival sources, as wartime censorship heavily restricted the press. Among the preserved documents of the Ministry of the Interior and Department of Nationalities and Minorities, there are dozens of reports sent by police, gendarmerie, and other intelligence officers, which paint a very dynamic picture about the region. Given the large volume of documents, I focused on the reports issued by the local police forces in Sombor, Subotica, Novi Sad, and Senta, as they were required to send monthly situation reports to the Ministry of the Interior's Public Security Department. The documents clearly show that local police forces extended their activities beyond the country's borders. The reports from Sombor contain extensive information about the situation in neighbouring Croatia, while reports from Novi Sad also cover the Srem region. Senta, likely due to its proximity to the Tisa bridge, emerged as a hub for news originating from the Banat.

According to the reports from Croatia and Srem, partisans were really active, while in the Banat, the German military was cracking down on ethnic populations, including the

<sup>3</sup> Hungarian National Archives, Reserved Documents of the Ministry of the Interior (MNL OL K149)

<sup>4</sup> Hungarian National Archives, Prime Minister's Office, Department of Nationalities and Minorities (MNL OL K28)

<sup>5</sup> Dobrovoljac (volunteer in Serbian) were slavic colonists who were settled to Vojvodina between the two world wars

<sup>6</sup> MNL OL K-28 101. b. 1941–R–18509.

ethnic Hungarian community. Similar incidents also occurred in Bačka, causing widespread panic among the local population. According to the sources, at the beginning of the occupation, these elements were referred to as Chetniks. However, later on, the sources predominantly mention the Partisans. This also illustrates how the national resistance gradually lost ground to communism within the local resistance movements, and also how the Hungarian authorities saw bigger threat from the partisans than the chetniks. One lengthy report details the investigation into communist organizing activities, outlining 56 sabotages actions committed in Bačka between July 20 and October 2 1941. These actions not only endangered lives but also posed a threat to crops and infrastructure, causing considerable fear among the locals. The greatest damage occurred in Bački Petrovac, where 130 wagons of hemp were set on fire in early October, and the perpetrators were captured and executed summarily.<sup>7</sup> A report from Senta, dated July 1941, mentions:

"The mood in the city – generally – is not the most peaceful. The harvests have finished, and threshing is currently underway. The local farmers are full of anxiety, fearing possible sabotage and that the partisans will burn the crops. Some reassurance is provided by the fact that bicycle detectives and an adequate number of field guards (*mezőőr*) are patrolling the plains, monitoring the mood of the workers, and checking passers-by in the border area."<sup>8</sup>

At the beginning the press actively reported on the sabotage, but Péter Fernbach, Lord Lieutenant<sup>9</sup> of Novi Sad, requested that military authorities instruct newspapers to refrain from reporting on these acts of sabotage, as it was filling the local Serbs with pride.<sup>10</sup> The sabotage escalated significantly, prompting the Hungarian military leadership to organize a large-scale raid in the Šajkas region and Novi Sad, remembered as the "Cold Days." Several gunfights broke out between the partisans and Hungarian authorities, which led Ferenc Szombathelyi, the chief of military leadership, to deploy army forces to Novi Sad and Sajkasland.

On 4<sup>th</sup> January 1942, the general staff estimated the number of partisans to be 100–110. In the first days, the resistance was broken, but the raid's goal was not only to eliminate the remnants of partisan units but also to

rid the area of "undesirable elements." The operation targeted the municipalities of Čurog, Žabalj, Mošorin and Šajkaš, and confessions extracted from prisoners allegedly revealed a large-scale uprising. The military authorities claimed to „have found” plans for the uprising in the possession of Frigyes Freund, who was killed while attempting to flee.

Later, they "believed" that the uprising had been planned to come from the Banat and that the ethnic Hungarian and German populations would have been targeted for extermination. On 12<sup>th</sup> January 1942, Feketealmy-Czeydner Endre, the leader of the raid, sent a misleading report to the Minister of the Interior, stating that the partisans had retreated to Novi Sad and therefore the raid needed to be extended to the city. Between January 15<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup>, the raid expanded to the area bounded by Bečej, Srbobran, Temerin, and Novi Sad, under the justification that the local population supported the partisans. A complete news blackout was ordered regarding the events.

On 21<sup>st</sup> of January, an announcement was made in Novi Sad, informing the inhabitants that the raid had begun. The city was divided into districts, and identity checks began. On the first day, 25–30 people were executed, their bodies disposed of in the icy Danube. However, Feketealmy was not satisfied with the results. On January 23, it was reported that the Novi Sad raid's toll had reached 3,500 people, many of whom were innocent. The raid in Novi Sad concluded on January 23, and Miklós Nagy, the mayor of Novi Sad, along with local Hungarian leaders, demanded its cessation. On January 30, Szombathelyi gave the order to end the raid in the Sajkás region. According to statistics compiled in 1944, 3,340 people died during the raids, including 2,550 Serbs and 743 Jews. Among them were 2,102 men, 794 women, 299 elderly individuals, and 147 children. The news of these atrocities spread quickly, and the political fallout was difficult to quell. The exiled Yugoslav government based in London reported 100,000 Serbian victims. However, it is important to note that the main perpetrators were brought to trial during Miklós Kállay's tenure as prime minister, but they fled to Germany. Later, many of them were executed after the war. (Sajti 1987, p 152 – 168, Pihurik 2015, Buzási 1963, Golubović 2004, Veljić 2010).

According to reports, however, the raids failed to resolve the issue of sabotage, and reports continued to arrive regarding partisans crossing into the Banat and Srem

<sup>7</sup> MNL OL K159 72. b. 651 f 2/1941–6–12659

<sup>8</sup> MNL OL K159 72. b. 651 f 2/1941–6–12659

<sup>9</sup> Lord Lieutenant (*főispán*, *veliki župan*) is a historical administrative title in Hungary, referring to the appointed head of a county or free royal city. Their role traditionally

included overseeing local governance, implementing state policies, and maintaining order on behalf of the central government.

<sup>10</sup> Historic Archives of Novi Sad, F260 Veliki župan Sl. Kraljevskog grada Novog Sada Opšti spisi 1. box 168/1941.



regions, where they engaged in firefights with the gendarmerie and military.<sup>11</sup> Although there were attempts at rapprochement with the Serbs during the Kállay government, the shadow of the raid still loomed over the region, (Sajti 2004, p. 271–290.) and the raids failed to calm the tensions, as evidenced by a 1943 report from the 5th Hungarian Army Corps headquarters in Szeged. It mentioned that civil servants from Hungary were openly expressing their intent to request reassignment to territories within the borders, as they no longer felt safe in Bačka. This behavior caused concern among the local ethnic Hungarians, while the Serbian population spread rumors about the Hungarians fleeing.<sup>12</sup>

The reports from the Ministry of the Interior contain many details not only about ethnic movements but also about political activities and the actions of various individuals. These reports reveal that the authorities were desperately clinging to the established situation and viewed even minor actions with suspicion, even keeping track of conversations among the Jews in Subotica or how Hungarian János Vámos, member of the parliament secured positions for his family members in various city appointments.<sup>13</sup> However, these reports do not offer insight into the deeper society, particularly the relationships among ordinary people. Not only the Budapest-based central authorities but also the cultural organizations operating in the annexed territories worked hard to maintain order, often invoking old grievances while suppressing ethnic movements.

## Reports of the Délvidéki Magyar Közművelődési Szövetség

The history of Bačka between 1941 and 1944 cannot be fully understood without examining the activities of the Délvidéki Magyar Közművelődési Szövetség (DMKSZ),<sup>14</sup> which provides important insights into the public mood of the time. Due to the fragmented

documentation and scarcity of sources, the activities and significance of this organization have not been fully studied.<sup>15</sup>

Between the two world wars, after the 1929 ban on the Hungarian Party, the Hungarian community in Yugoslavia was left without unified political representation, and various efforts had different centers around Subotica, Novi Sad, Sombor, and Veliki Bečkerek.<sup>16</sup> Due to changing geopolitical circumstances and the Hungarian-Yugoslav convergence, the long-standing request of the Hungarian community was granted, and the unified cultural alliance was established, though they were prohibited from forming an ethnic political party.

The alliance, founded in November 1940, adopted its statute in early February 1941, and thereafter began unifying the ethnic Hungarian community in Yugoslavia. During the war, the alliance was very active, with over 300,000 members and 245 branches spread across significant towns in Bačka and Banat, engaging in a broad range of activities, including cultural, educational, economic, and sports. (Hegedűs, 1943) What is important for us and for studying the public mood is that under the guidance of the Novi Sad headquarters, the branch organizations compiled reports for the Prime Minister's Nationalities and Minorities Department about the ethnic movements in their areas. These reports also covered the non-annexed territories, and the well-organized branches in Banat<sup>17</sup> and the Independent State of Croatia<sup>18</sup> provided information to the Hungarian military and political leaders.

Although the order to send these reports has not yet surfaced in the archives, the first document about it is a letter from Gyula Kramer, the president of the alliance that he warns the branches that they ask again them to send the reports about nationalities immediately and the monthly reports should be sent until the 5<sup>th</sup> of each month.<sup>19</sup> Existing sources suggest that Gyula Krámer himself ordered the branches to prepare reports on his own initiative rather than under higher orders, because a report prepared for the Minister of the Interior in December 1941 suggests (!) consulting the closest leadership of the DMKSZ. The report emphasizes that the

<sup>11</sup> MNL OL K 28 100. box, 1943 – R – 16883.

<sup>12</sup> MNL OL K 28 166. box, 1943 – R – 31938.

<sup>13</sup> MNL OL K 28 100. box 1943 – R – 15026.

<sup>14</sup> Délvidéki Magyar Közművelődési Szövetség (South Hungarian Cultural Alliance) was a Hungarian umbrella organisation in Vojvodina which coordinated the ethnic Hungarian cultural associations.

<sup>15</sup> Because of the various activities, the documents of the DMKSZ are not well-organized. Before the leadership fled from Novi Sad, they burned the alliance's archive. The

remaining documents are now divided among several archives in Serbia and Hungary."

<sup>16</sup> In Subotica, the Hungarian Reading Circle (Magyar Olvasókör) had a significant influence, in Novi Sad, the cultural life was organized by the Reggeli Újság newspaper, in Sombor, Leó Deák played a central role, while in Veliki Bečkerek, Imre Várady was at the center of events.

<sup>17</sup> Cj: MNL OL K 28 165. box 1942–R–15408, MNL OL K 28 165. box 1942–R–16406, MNL OL K 28 1942–R –20854

<sup>18</sup> MNL OL K 28 165. box 1942–R–15101

<sup>19</sup> Museum of Vojvodina, Proces Deak Leo, Zombori (MV) 8473.

alliance not only understand the local conditions but also maintains records on the activities of dangerous and unreliable elements.<sup>20</sup> But according to the sources Krámer himself in 21 January 1942, instructed the branches to send a list of all Slavic and Jewish residents in their area, including their exact addresses, within a week.<sup>21</sup> This order coincided with the Novi Sad and Šajkaš region raids. However, due to the short timeline, I suppose the military authorities were unable to use these lists. The activities of ethnic groups continued to be reported to the Novi Sad headquarters.

The reports indicate that the authorities monitored ethnic groups' actions with heightened anxiety, and old prejudices often led to overreactions, interpreting minor actions as separatist attempts. The local branches actively opposed not only the Serbs but also ethnic groups from allied countries. The nature of these reports reveals a climate of wartime paranoia and hysteria. The most active were the Germans, particularly members of the Kulturbund.<sup>22</sup> Reports show that in November 1941, violence between German and Hungarian students became common in Odžaci, and in Deronje, German youth targeted Serbs, beating them when they were perceived as uncooperative or disrespectful.

However, the ongoing fear within the ethnic Hungarian community in the region led to close cooperation with the authorities, ensuring their survival during the wartime upheaval. An example of wartime paranoia is illustrated by a 1942 report suggesting that Slovak "nationalist" ambitions were suspected in Pivnice, a southwestern Bačka. The report states: "Under the guise of a church census, they are conducting an ancestry-based population survey. (...) It is feared that Slovak fanatics might register Hungarian families as Slovak. (...) According to whispered propaganda, Hungarians and Slovaks loyal to Hungary in the area will be exterminated after the war."<sup>23</sup>

A confidential letter from the Ministry of the Interior provides important insights into these reports. Pál Balla, a ministerial secretary, requests clarification from Leó Deák, the Lord Lieutenant of Bács-Bodrog County, regarding DMKSZ reports. One such report mentioned that the Bunjevci of Subotica were collecting signatures

to petition for the area to be annexed to Croatia as soon as possible. Deák investigated the matter but found no evidence to support the claim. In the letter, he points out to Balla that numerous reports are being received from the DMKSZ, but so far, none of the investigations have yielded results, and instead of focusing on cultural organization, the alliance seems preoccupied with denouncements.<sup>24</sup>

These sources reveal not only the conflicts between nationalities but also the perceptions of reality among ethnic Hungarian leaders in Bačka. However, these reports alone do not provide a completely accurate picture. To achieve this, one must delve into the everyday lives of ordinary people, where widespread suspicion was also observed toward those dissatisfied with the established order. The legal documents arising from these situations offer a rich glimpse into daily life. I consider the Lesé-Regent Crimes and Crimes Against the Honour of Hungarian State and Nation to be particularly revealing in this regard.

### **Lesé-Regent Crimes and Crimes against the Honour of Hungarian State and Nation Conclusion**

Lesé-regent crimes and crimes against the Honour of Hungarian State and Nation occurred frequently in the occupied Bačka during the three and a half years discussed. In my research, I examined 87 lesé-regent crimes and 93 crimes against the Hungarian state and nation documented at the Csongrád County Archive<sup>25</sup> in Szeged, which were committed in the occupied Bačka region (Csőke 2021). I chose these trials because they clearly reveal the public mood of the region and the trials are very detailed and noteworthy for the fact that even relatively minor offenses, by today's standards, led to numerous mutual denunciations. This also proves that a part of the ethnic Hungarian population, which had moved from a minority to a majority position, clung to the concept of intellectual defense due to past grievances, interpreting any statement insulting Hungary or Governor Miklós Horthy as a danger.

In several instances, an attempt was made to accuse someone of the crime, meaning that treason was also used as a tool for settling personal disputes (Bröker 2021). Anyone who insulted Horthy was likely dissatisfied with the

<sup>20</sup> BM K 149 72. doboz 651.f2/1941–6–18585

<sup>21</sup> MV 8475.

<sup>22</sup> This is referenced in Gyula Krámer's letter to Prime Minister László Bárdossy dated November 12, 1941, in which he informs him that, based on the reports received, there are numerous problematic issues concerning the Germans. MNL OL K28 118. box 1941–D–27032

<sup>23</sup> MNL OL K28 175.b. 1942–P–24768.

<sup>24</sup> MNL OL K 28. 165. b. 1942–R–16273.

<sup>25</sup> Hungarian National Archives, Csongrád County Archives, VII. Territorial Judicial Authorities, 2. Records of the Royal Court of Szeged, b. Criminal Case Files.

current situation. Additionally, fear of national independence movements and communism may have contributed to the denunciations. In this regard, I largely agree with Dávid Turbucz, who states: The insult of Miklós Horthy did not always have a concrete political reason. It is difficult to explain some citizens' expressions politically, especially if the defendant was drunk when making an insulting statement about Miklós Horthy (Turbucz 2015, p. 185).

The legal foundation for the Lesé-Regent trials was prepared by two laws: *The Act I of 1920, titled On the Restoration of Constitutionalism and the Temporary Arrangement of the Exercise of State Sovereignty*,<sup>26</sup> laid down the conditions necessary for stabilizing the situation in the country. The second chapter, paragraph 14, concerning the powers of the governor, states that: "The person of the governor is inviolable and is entitled to the same criminal protection as the king under our laws." This paragraph referred to *The Act XXXVI of 1913, On the Insult of the King and the Attack on the Institution of the Monarchy*,<sup>27</sup> the second section of which stated: "Anyone who insults the king or criticizes the king's actions in a manner that is offensive shall be punished with imprisonment for up to two years, suspension of political rights, and loss of office." The second section also covered treason against the governor committed through "printed material, illustrations," or "public speech," for which a sentence of up to three years imprisonment and a fine of up to four thousand crowns, alongside suspension of political rights and loss of office, could be imposed.

Crimes against the Honour of the Hungarian State and Nation were regulated by *The Act III of 1921, On the More Effective Protection of the State and Social Order*<sup>28</sup> (Drócsa 2017, p. 215.). "The first part of the law dealt with crimes and offenses aimed at subverting or destroying the state and social order, mainly punishing attempts by various extremists to violently establish the exclusive rule of a particular social class. The second part of the law concerns Crimes and offenses against the Honour of the Hungarian state and the Hungarian nation."<sup>29</sup> According to Section 7, "Anyone who states or disseminates false facts that are capable of damaging the honour or reputation of the Hungarian state or the Hungarian nation commits an offense and shall be punished with imprisonment for up to five years."

Section 8 further stipulates that "Anyone who uses derogatory expressions against the Hungarian state or the Hungarian nation or commits such an act shall be punished with imprisonment for up to three years."

According to the sources the mood of the non-Hungarian population in Bačka was chaotic, partly due to the Hungarian invasion and the uncertain circumstances. The illusion of a thousand-year-old Hungary, and Hungarian supremacy often led to unnecessary conflicts in the multi-ethnic region. The two trials mentioned above were similar to each other; the only difference that they insulted the state, the nation, or its leader. However, since the figure of Horthy himself symbolized Hungary and the established situation, similar motivations could have been behind the acts of these crimes.

Based on the 87 Lesé-Regent Crimes and the 93 Crimes Against the Honour of Hungarian State and Nation that I analyzed in Bačka, I categorized the background of these offenses into three groups: a) Crimes resulting from ethnic conflicts, which the heterogeneous ethnic composition of Bačka provided a good foundation for. b) Crimes committed due to social dissatisfaction, particularly during the war standard of living fell and people started to criticize Miklós Horthy or the circumstances. c) Accidental treason against the governor, where the perpetrator did not necessarily intend to insult Miklós Horthy or the state, or committed the crime as a result of drunkenness or due to the peculiar development of events that turned the situation into a crime.

A classic case of national disgrace is where the Hungarian people were depicted in a negative light. These cases are often similar to "crimes aimed at subverting or destroying the state and social order" because they were frequently uttered with the intention of disinformation. For example, Živko Miatov, while drinking in a pub in Sivac, stated: "If Hitler hadn't been, the Hungarians wouldn't have occupied Bačka."<sup>30</sup> In December 1942, a pro-Serb Hungarian in Novi Sad told his Hungarian neighbors, "Christmas is coming and so are the Russians, and they will hang themselves. The filthy Hungarian kids should not multiply."<sup>31</sup>

We should also pay attention to how previously pro-Hungarian elements, under societal pressure, became enemies of the system. In the trial, the Serbian factory manager Frigyes Stojadinović, who was presented as a pro-Hungarian figure, took part in a military parade in May

<sup>26</sup> 1920. évi I. törvénycikk az alkotmányosság helyreállításáról és az állami főhatalom gyakorlásának ideiglenes rendezéséről

<sup>27</sup> 1913. évi XXXIV. törvény a király megsértéséről és a királyság intézményének megtámadásáról

<sup>28</sup> 1921. évi III. törvény Az állami és társadalmi rend hatályosabb védelméről szóló

<sup>29</sup> A magyar állam és a magyar nemzet megbecsülése ellen irányuló bűntettek és vétségekről

<sup>30</sup> MNL CSML 63. b. 5610/1941.

<sup>31</sup> MNL CSML 71. b. 2261/1943.

1941. During the parade, the celebrating crowd chanted "Hitler, Horthy, take the Serbs out!" The next day, during an outburst, Stojadinović insulted the Hungarian nation.<sup>32</sup>

A significant portion of the trials took place in bars, where people were drinking. Bars like today, was a social gathering point of the time, where alcohol often loosened tongues. During such encounters, national issues, and sometimes even Horthy's persona, were often included in the curses, which were reported as acts against the nation. Occasionally, there were absurd and laughable cases, but we should not forget that in that era, such offenses could result in months of imprisonment for the perpetrator. To demonstrate this, consider the case of Erdevik Rado. "On 15 December 1941, from 7 am to around 2 pm, the accused and Varga Péter drank palinka together at Milin Radó's tavern in Čurog. In the afternoon, having consumed the palinka, they started insulting each other's mothers. First, Varga Péter, with poor Serbian, said to the accused: 'I f..k your mother, you Serb,' to which the accused replied: 'I f..k your mother, you Hungarian.' After this, they argued, Varga Péter reported the incident, and since "the accused intended to insult Péter Varga through his Hungarian origin and thus insulted the Hungarian nation, he was sentenced to one and a half months of imprisonment."<sup>33</sup>

The "thoroughness" of the Hungarian authorities is also demonstrated by the investigation in Budisava, where it was mentioned that "next to the unframed (!) picture of the Governor, a photograph of Adolf Hitler was also hung, which was properly framed."<sup>34</sup> However, the most interesting aspect, in my opinion, is the ideological and political expressions of the children; a few trials offer insights into this as well. On 6 June 1941, in Sivac, three German national students – Philip Kanzler, Jakab Hoffmann, and Fridrich Stieb, all of whom were under 16 years old – attempted to destroy a picture of Horthy in their school.<sup>35</sup> In Feketić, 13-year-old Hilda Breitweiser spat on the picture of Governor Horthy placed in the window of the "Batta Shoe Shop" twice.<sup>36</sup> There were also instances of "mischief" where Horthy's picture was placed on the wall of a bathroom.<sup>37</sup> During the interrogation of Miklós Kaizer, he recounted that "on 25 May 1941, he was present at the sports field in

Bukin when the football players from Bukin and Palona were playing. At the end of the game, the Palona players shouted three times 'heil' in German, to which the children of Bukin on the field responded with 'Heil Hitler'.<sup>38</sup> This could be evidence that war propaganda and Nazi ideas also influenced the thoughts of children.

The social aspects of the trials clearly show that the perpetrators came from poorer backgrounds. In this category, we also see a significant number of ethnic Hungarian offenders from Bačka. Shortly after the occupation of the territory, Hungary entered World War II, bringing with it scarcity, rising prices and mandatory military service. In addition, the citizens of Yugoslavia had lived in peace and only experienced the horrors of the war as inhabitants of Hungary. This led to many offenses such as: "Since the Hungarians came to Bačka, everything has become more expensive,"<sup>39</sup> or "damn Hungarians and the Regent, that big-headed, they ruined the country."<sup>40</sup> The land distribution issue was particularly sensitive for the Hungarians of Bačka. They were excluded from the Yugoslav land distribution, (Gaćeša 1968) which the local landless population wanted to revise. The Hungarian government made a promise to address this, though it did not have significant consequences, as only the Bukovina Székelys<sup>41</sup> and vitéz order<sup>42</sup> received land (Valastyán 2019). This caused considerable outrage. When Antalné Visnyei received a military draft notice for her husband, she told the police officer: "This is what Horthy is for, let the devil eat his flesh, they found my husband now, but they didn't find him during the land distribution."<sup>43</sup> Antalné Visnyei immediately regretted what she had said and begged the officers not to report her, as she was a mother of three and expecting her next child in nine months, while her husband had just received the draft. These circumstances did not affect the police or the court, and the Szeged Royal Court sentenced her to one month in prison. The wartime years following 1941 were undoubtedly harder in terms of livelihood than the "peaceful" years under Yugoslavia, and these hardships often became intertwined with criticism of the ruling regime in people's minds.

The scope of this study does not allow me to provide a detailed account of the antisemitism prevalent during the era; fortunately, this is addressed in one of Linda Margittai's books (Margittai 2023). However, I would like to point out that antisemitism is also present in my sources.

<sup>32</sup> MNL CSML 65. b. 416/1942.

<sup>33</sup> MNL CSML 64. b. 6873/1941.

<sup>34</sup> MNL CSML 65. b. 705/1942.

<sup>35</sup> MNL CSML 63. b. Fbl. 5911/1941.

<sup>36</sup> MNL CSML 63. b. Fbl. 5944/1941.

<sup>37</sup> MNL CSML 67. b. B 4632/1942.

<sup>38</sup> MNL CSML 64. b. B6164/1941.

<sup>39</sup> MNL CSML 78. b. 3921/1944.

<sup>40</sup> MNL CSML 64. b. 6611/1941.

<sup>41</sup> Székely people from Bukovina were settled in Bačka in place of the Serbian colonists who arrived after 1918.

<sup>42</sup> The vitéz order was an institution that served as a substitute for nobility during the Horthy era.

<sup>43</sup> MNL CSML 75. b. 7215/1943.



As early as 1941, records of Crimes Against the Honour of the Hungarian State and Nation already include incidents of physical violence against Jews. In Bečej, the equipment of the cinema owned by Jewish Windpassinger Béla was destroyed, prompting him to remark upon seeing the damage. "The barbarians have left, the Tatars have arrived," referring to the Hungarians.<sup>44</sup> "You scoundrel Hungarians, robbers, is this how you want to save the country?"<sup>45</sup> cried Rosenfeld Márton, a Jewish feather merchant from Senta, when he was attacked on the street in October 1941 because of his Jewish identity. His attackers fled when he shouted, but upon hearing his remarks, locals reported the incident, and Rosenfeld was not excused even on the grounds that he made the statements in a state of agitation. He was ultimately sentenced to three months in prison.<sup>46</sup>

Even without malicious intent, statements constituting insults to the governor, which also reflect antisemitism. In Bajmok, Erdélyi György, during a drinking session, tried to persuade a companion to take out a usurious loan from the local Jew. When his suggestion was rejected, he emphasized his point, saying, "Why not? After all, even Regent Miklós Horthy himself works with Jewish money."<sup>47</sup> It is also evident that Jews could find themselves embroiled in the Hungarian-German conflict. For instance, Eckhert Péter, a German-origin resident of Sekič, referred to the Hungarians with the comment, "These people are even worse than the Serbs," and added, "There has never been order in this country because it is a Jewish country, and old Horthy himself is an old Jew."<sup>48</sup>

The importance of the Lesé-Regent crimes and the Crimes against the honour of the Hungarian State and Nation in the context of Bačka lies primarily in the examination of social discontent. These offenses highlight that, alongside the "joyous euphoria" felt by the local ethnic Hungarian population after the (re)annexation, there was often a critical stance toward the process of the military occupation and the circumstances surrounding the happenings. These two types of trials are regulated by separate laws, but the motivations of the offenders stem from the same source: dissatisfaction fed by the newly established situation. The trials clearly show that the offenders committed the crimes detailed below due to resentment over the Hungarian annexation, and the failure of the expected prosperity after it. Some

attributed the situation to Miklós Horthy, while others generalized their dissatisfaction to the Hungarian nation as a whole. Even the slightest criticism of the Governor could easily result in someone being placed in the defendant's chair. On the other hand, the lack of criticism contributed greatly to the idealization of Miklós Horthy and the cult surrounding him. The cases presented above, the reports of the DMKSZ, and those of the internal affairs sources also reveal that the period under discussion was highly chaotic, marked by social dissatisfaction and ethnic conflicts. I do not claim that the social atmosphere can be fully reconstructed, but these sources contribute to understanding the processes that shaped the events.

As the sources presented above clearly illustrate, the period between 1941 and 1944 was marked by significant tension and conflict in everyday life, affecting both the Serbian and Hungarian populations. These sources are particularly valuable because they enable an examination of everyday social realities and shed light on interethnic conflicts during the occupation. Naturally, what is most crucial is the *personalised reality*, a reality shaped not only by the joy some felt at the moment of "liberation," but also by the fear of losing previously acquired rights. As mentioned earlier, the years 1941 to 1948 represent one of the most traumatic periods in the history of the Hungarian community in Vojvodina. With this study, I aim to contribute to future research by drawing attention to this body of sources, which is particularly well-suited to reconstructing and analyzing the social atmosphere of the time.

## Conclusion

This study has explored the public mood in the Bačka region during World War II through a diverse range of sources, including state security reports, local Hungarian cultural association records, and criminal case documentation. The findings reveal a dynamic and often volatile social environment marked by ethnic conflict and heightened tensions. While Budapest authorities interpreted events primarily through a security lens, local sources offer a more nuanced perspective on daily life and communal relations. Together, these materials illuminate the fragmented and contested nature of social sentiment in the region, underscoring the importance of multi-source analysis in reconstructing historical atmospheres.

<sup>44</sup> MNL CSML 68. b. B 1794/1942

<sup>45</sup> MNL CSML 66. b. B 2459/1942.

<sup>46</sup> MNL CSML 66. b. B 2459/1942.

<sup>47</sup> MNL CSML 71. b. 2677/1943.

<sup>48</sup> MNL CSML 72. b. 3158/1943.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

## REFERENCES

- Bröker J., 2011, „Horthy is a nobody” – Trials of lése-régent in Hungary 1920–1944., 2011, Central European university History Department
- Buzási J., 1963, Az újvidéki „razzia”, Budapest, Kossuth Kiadó
- Csőke M., 2021, „A szerbek rosszak voltak, de a magyarok még rosszabbak” – Kormányzósértési perek, valamint magyar állam és nemzet elleni vétségek a visszacsatolt Bácskában in Híd, n. 6, p. 110–138.
- Dévavári Z., 2024, Elfeledett mártírunk. Deák Leó Bács-Bodrog vármegyei főispánsága (1941–1944), in Veritas évkönyv 2023, Budapest, Veritas Történetkutató Intézet és Levéltár 302–338.
- Dimić Lj., 1997, Kulturna politika u Kraljevini Jugoslaviji: 1918–1941. Deo 3, Politika i stvaralaštvo, Beograd, Stubini kulture
- Drócsa I., 2017, „Az állam és társadalmi rend hatályosabb védelméről szóló 1921: III. törvénycikk elhelyezése a XX. századi magyar büntetőjogi rendszerben”, in: Iustum Aequum Salutare XIII. n. 2. p. 215–231.
- Gaćeša N., 1968, Agrarna reforma i kolonizacija u Bačkoj 1918–1941., Novi Sad: Matica Srpska
- Golubović Z., 2004, Racija 1942, Novi Sad, Enciklopedija Novog Sada
- Hegedűs L. (ed.), 1943, A Délvidéki Magyar Közművelődési Szövetség évkönyve 1942/1943, Újvidék, DMKSZ
- Janjetović Z., 2006, Deca careva, pastočad kraljeva: Nacionalne manjine u Jugoslaviji 1918–1941, Beograd, Insitut za noviju istoriju Srbije
- Kasaš, A., 1996, Mađari u Vojvodini, 1941–1946, Novi Sad, Filozovski Fakultet u Novom Sadu
- Margittai L., 2023, „Zsidókérdés” a Délvidéken, Pécs, Kronosz Kiadó
- Matuska M., 1991, A megtorlás napjai, Novi Sad, Forum
- Papp Á. (szerk.) 2015, Igaz történetek Mindenkeföldjéről. Zenta, Vajdasági Magyar Művelődési Intézet
- Pihurik J. 2015, „Vagy ők vagy mink”. Harminc évvel a csurogi razzia után. in: Pihurik J., Perben és haragban világháborús önmagunkkal, Pécs-Budapest, p. 69–97.
- Sajti E., 1987, Délvidék 1941–1944, A magyar kormányok délszláv politikája, Budapest, Kossuth Kiadó
- Sajti E., 2004, Imériumváltás, revízió, kisebbség, Magyarok a Délvidéken 1918–1947., Budapest, Napvilág Kiadó
- Turbucz D., 2015, Horthy – kultusz 1919–1944, Budapest, MTA Bölcsészettudományi Kutatóközpont Történettudományi Intézet Budapest
- Valastyán B., 2019, Magyar földbirtok- és telepítéspolitika a visszacsatolt Bácskában 1941–1944. Szeged, Szegedi Tudományegyetem Phd értekezés
- Veljić A., 2010, Istorija o Novosadskij raciji, Sremska Kamenic

**Submitted: 21 October 2024    Accepted: 05 July 2025    Published: 07 July 2025**

**TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:**

Márk, C. 2025. Analysing the Public Mood in Bačka through Various Sources (1941–1944). *Balkans Legal, Economic and Social Studies* 2(1):1–11. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14232/bless.2025.1.1-11>

**COPYRIGHT:**

© 2025 The Author(s). This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

*BLESS – Balkans Legal, Economic and Social Studies* is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Western Balkans Centre.