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Legal,
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Social
Studies

Economic Blockade, Border Incidents, Military Manoeuvres Against Yugoslavia During the Soviet-Yugoslav Conflict (1948–1953)

DOI: https://doi.org/10.14232/bless.2025.1.25-35

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the way the British Foreign Office saw Hungary's role in the Soviet-Yugoslav conflict through the reports and analyses of British diplomacy. Hungary actively participated in this evolving conflict and took a leading role in the anti-Yugoslav propaganda campaign and war mongering, which resulted to a sharp deterioration of bilateral relations. The British Foreign Office understandably followed every step of the escalation of the conflict with keen interest. The actions of the Soviet Union and its Eastern European satellites against Yugoslavia were accompanied by economic pressure; the Hungarian government's suspension of the delivery of Yugoslav reparations was a special Hungarian aspect of the conflict. To resolve the issue, the Yugoslav leadership sought help from Western powers, including Britain. In parallel with the economic pressure, ideological warfare was waged against Yugoslavia. Hungary played its part through border incidents, the development of the Hungarian army and the movement of Soviet troops inside the country. This was of course noticed by British diplomacy, but the border incidents were seen as a normal part of the "war of nerves" and the development of the Hungarian army as part of the general armament of the Soviet camp. The British leadership was also opposed to the American plan to take joint action to protest the fact that the Hungarian forces had exceeded the provisions of the 1947 Paris Peace Treaty.

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KEYWORDS:

Soviet–Yugoslav conflict, Hungarian–Yugoslav relations, Cross-border Mobility, economic blockade, border incidents, Soviet Union

Introduction

On 10 February 1948, Stalin summoned Josip Broz Tito, the Secretary General of the Yugoslav Communist Party, and Georgi Dimitrov, the Secretary General of the Bulgarian Communist Party, to Moscow to personally confront them about their Balkan federation ambitions and Yugoslavia's excessive ambitions for power in Albania. But Tito excused himself on the grounds of ill health. His disobedience finally incurred the wrath of Stalin, who already resented Tito's ambitions for power in the Balkans (or, more widely, in Eastern Europe). Although the public only learned of the conflict on 28 June 1948, following a decision by the Information Bureau of the Communist and Workers' Parties (Cominform) condemning the Yugoslav communist leadership, it had been going on behind the scenes since the meeting of Yugoslav and Bulgarian party delegations with Stalin in Moscow on 10 February.[1] Hungary, led by Mátyás Rákosi, Secretary General of the Hungarian Workers' Party, actively participated in this evolving conflict.[2] The British Foreign Office understandably followed every step of the escalation of the conflict with keen interest. The Balkans (mainly through Greece) had traditionally played an important role in British foreign policy thinking (in the defence of the eastern Mediterranean and the securing of the Suez Canal), while the Western powers sought to exploit the loss of unity in the Soviet camp ideologically and militarily. By *keeping Tito afloat,* they sought to avoid a pro-Soviet communist leadership coming to power, and to create a gap in the southeastern European region in the hitherto monolithic Soviet bloc, thus significantly helping to defend Italy, Austria and Greece. The fact that, except for the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, with its 32 divisions, had the largest European military force, even if its equipment was far from modern, was not a minor factor in this for British and Western power interests.[3] It is not surprising, therefore, that British diplomacy systematically monitored the escalation of the conflict and, as part of it, dealt with the development of Hungarian-Yugoslav relations on a number of occasions, even though by 1948, together with the United States, they had virtually 'written off' Hungary as an area where they had serious interests.[4]

In my study, I am examining how the Foreign Office saw Hungary's role in the Soviet-Yugoslav conflict through the reports and analyses of British diplomacy. In general, the diplomatic reports from Budapest and the British diplomatic corps show that the leaders of the diplomatic corps have grasped Hungary's role well. For the most part, their information can be regarded as reliable, although there were occasional instances where they drew erroneous conclusions from the information available to them. It was also common that the British embassy in Belgrade had more reliable information on the development of Hungarian–Yugoslav relations. In its decision-making process, the Foreign Office relied heavily on information from the embassies, in particular the insights of the British Ambassador in Belgrade, Charles Peake (1946–1951). In many cases, Peake's opinion-forming role had a real influence on the direction of British foreign policy. The ambassador's role in improving Yugoslav-British (and thus Yugoslav-Western) relations was much appreciated by Tito and the Yugoslav leadership, too.

The actions of the Soviet Union and the so-called Eastern European people's democracies against Yugoslavia were accompanied by economic pressure from as early as the summer of 1948. Hungary, as a neighbouring country, played its part in this. The Hungarian government's suspension of the delivery of Yugoslav reparations was a Hungarian aspect of the conflict. To resolve the issue, the Yugoslav leadership sought help from Western powers, including Britain. However, the British–American action did not and could not lead to results because of the diverging interests of the Soviet Union. In the first chapter,

[1] On the causes of the Soviet-Yugoslav conflict: Leonid Gibianski, ˝The 1948 Soviet–Yugoslav Conflict and the Formation of the 'Socialist Camp' Model,˝ in *The Soviet Union in Eastern Europe, 1945–89*, ed. Odd Arne Westad, Sven G. Holtsmark, and Iver B. Neumann (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1994.): 26–46., Svetozar Rajak, ˝The Cold War in the Balkans, 1945–1956,˝ in *History of the Cold War*, ed. Melvin P. Leffler and Odd Arne Westad (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010): Vol. I. 198–220.

[2] On the consequences of the Soviet–Yugoslav conflict on Hungarian–Yugoslav relations: Vukman Péter, ˝„A fordulat évei". Magyar–jugoszláv kapcsolatok (1948–1949),˝ *Acta Historica Szegediensis* Tomus 141 (2017): 179–194. and Vukman Péter, ˝Barátból ellenség – ellenségből barát (?): A magyar–jugoszláv párt- és államközi kapcsolatok (1945–1956),˝ *Fejezetek a titói Jugoszlávia korai szakaszából*, ed. Molnár Tibor (Zenta: Történelmi Levéltár, 2016), 45–79.

[3] On British and American policy towards Yugoslavia after 1948: Beatrice Heuser, *Western 'Containment' Policies in the Cold War. The Yugoslav Case, 1948–53* (London-New York: Routledge, 1989), Lorraine M. Lees, *Keeping Tito Afloat. The United States, Yugoslavia, and the Cold War* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), Ann Lane, *Britain, the Cold War and Yugoslav Unity, 1941–1949* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 1996).

[4] On the policy of the United States towards Hungary after 1945: László Borhi, *Hungary in the Cold War 1945–1956* (Budapest – New York: CEU Press, 2004).

I discuss this issue.

In parallel with the economic pressure, ideological warfare was waged against Tito and the Yugoslav leadership. Hungary played its part through border incidents, the development of the Hungarian army and the movement of Soviet troops inside the country. This was of course noticed by British diplomacy, but the border incidents were seen as a normal part of the 'war of nerves' and the development of the Hungarian army as part of the general armament of the Soviet camp. The British leadership was also opposed to the American plan to take joint action to protest the fact that the Hungarian forces had exceeded the provisions of the 1947 Paris Peace Treaty. My conclusions in both chapters are based on archival research in the papers of the Foreign Office kept at the National Office – Public Relations Office, Kew Gardens, London.

Results

Hungary's Role in the Economic Blockade of Yugoslavia

The Soviet action against Yugoslavia, in addition to ideological accusations, was coupled with economic pressure already after the condemnatory decision of the Information Bureau of 28 June 1948. Although the initial statements of British diplomacy on the blockade were ambivalent, as time went on and the conflict became more and more evident, the economic blockade was treated as a fact. In particular, the actions of two countries, Czechoslovakia and Hungary, against Yugoslavia were addressed. The former, certainly because Czechoslovakia was the most industrially advanced country in Eastern Europe, and Hungary partly because of the reparation agreements in force between the two countries.

Although Alexander Knox Helm, the British envoy to Budapest (1946–1949), still stated in his confidentially classified telegram of 2 September 1948 that *officially* there were no economic sanctions in the field of trade negotiations, he was also informed that the delivery of Hungarian goods had recently slowed down considerably.[5] On 27 August the British embassy informed the Foreign Office that the Hungarian government had decided to suspend reparation shipments two days earlier. Helm assumed that this had been done on Soviet orders.[6]

Hungarian reparations were stipulated in point 12 of the armistice agreement of 20 January 1945, which obliged Hungary to pay the Soviet Union 200 million dollars in reparations and a further 100 million dollars to Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia. The Yugoslav–Hungarian reparations agreement, signed on 11 May 1946, provided for Hungarian reparations of $70 million over six years. The reparation obligation was also included in the 1947 Paris Peace Treaty, Article 23 of which provided for Hungarian reparation deliveries to be staggered over 8 years from 20 January 1945 instead of 6 years.[7] However, there were problems with the deliveries. In the summer of 1948 Hungary asked the Yugoslavs for an equitable reduction in reparations, but Yugoslavia refused on 16 July 1948. Then, as part of the escalating economic confrontation, Yugoslavia confiscated Hungarian assets. This was followed a year later by the Hungarian withdrawal from the five-year trade agreement.[8] Yugoslavia's response to the denunciation was cabled to London on 22 June by the Economic Secretariat of the British Embassy in Belgrade. However, the telegram gave no further details, merely stating that several Yugoslav accusations were believed to be well founded.[9]

Following the denunciation of the trade agreement, the dispute over the payment of Hungarian reparations, or rather the non-payment of them, became even more complicated. On 28 September 1949, Yugoslavia turned in desperation to Britain as one of the victorious powers that had signed the Paris Peace Treaty. In defence of their position, the Yugoslavs pointed out that Yugoslavia had proposed negotiations as early as November 1948, but that the Hungarians had made this subject to two conditions which they considered unfulfillable: firstly, that

5 From Budapest to Foreign Office, 2 September 1948. PRO FO 371/72575 R10283/300/92.

6 From Budapest to Foreign Office, 27 August 1948. PRO FO 371/72575 R10031/300/92.

7 Romsics Ignác, *Az 1947-es párizsi békeszerződés* (Budapest: Osiris, 2006), 223–224 and 233. For the text of the Hungarian-Yugoslav treaty: *A jóvátétel és ami mögötte van ...: válogatott dokumentumok 1945-1949*, eds. Balogh Sándor and Földesi Margit (Budapest: Napvilág, 1998), 8. and 13. The text of the armistice agreement is available: ˝Armistice Agreement with Hungary; January 20, 1945,˝ The Avalon Project. Documents in Law, History and Poltics, accessed January 31, 2025, https://avalon.law.yale.edu/wwii/hungary.asp.

8 Wallinger, the new British Ambassador in Budapest, reported the denunciation in his telegram of 20 June. Among the reasons for the denunciation of the agreement, the cited from the article published in the Hungarian party daily newspaper *Szabad Nép* on 18 June 1949 that the Yugoslavs had withheld economic data and suspended shipments of iron ore to Hungary. From Budapest to Foreign Office, 20 June 1949. PRO FO 371/78728B R6065/11321/92.

9 From Belgrade to Foreign Office, 22 June 1949. PRO FO 371/78728B R6546/11321/92.

Yugoslavia should waive its right to lodge a complaint in the event of non-compliance, and secondly, that it should change the legal status of Hungarian property nationalised in August 1948. Since the Yugoslav side considered it impossible to settle the issue through direct negotiations with the Hungarians, the Soviets, the Americans and the British were asked to help.[10]

The British showed themselves ready to comply with the Yugoslav request. After some persuasion, they managed to persuade the Americans to do the same, but they did not receive a positive reply to the note sent to the Soviets with the same content than the British and American notes. The Soviet Union, in its reply to the British and American requests on 15 November and again on 3 December, refused to allow the three victorious powers to deal with the matter. Thus, even though the British and American ambassadors accredited to Budapest had consulted on the steps to be taken on 28 November 1949,[11] the joint action of the three Great Powers did not lead to a result because of the blatantly different Soviet position. The issue was quietly dropped from the British diplomatic agenda. Not so the role of Hungary in the "war of nerves", on which several British reports and analyses had already been produced.

Border Incidents on the Hungarian – Yugoslav Border

The earliest incidents reported in British reports, apart from the Romanian–Yugoslav border, were on the Hungarian–Yugoslav border, on 29 January 1949. The first border incidents had in fact taken place much earlier, in July 1948. According to Yugoslav sources, in 1948 33 border incidents took place on the Albanian–Yugoslav border, 30 on the Yugoslav–Bulgarian border, 11 on the Yugoslav–Hungarian border, and none on the Yugoslav–Romanian border. In the first half of the following year, from January to July 1949, a total of 215 border incidents happened: 84 on the Yugoslav–Bulgarian, 56 border on the Albanian–Yugoslav, 55 on the Yugoslav–Hungarian, and "only" 20 on the Yugoslav–Romanian border.[12] It is clear from the above data that until the late summer of 1949 the Hungarian–Yugoslav border section was not the one with the highest number of border incidents. The number of incidents was still significant, and the statistics do not reveal the actual intensity of each incident.[13]

According to the official Yugoslav version, hundreds of border incidents of one kind or another took place between August 1949 and the end of June 1950, the outbreak of the Korean War. The number of incidents on the Hungarian–Yugoslavian border was extremely high at that time: In total, 234 border incidents took place. In contrast, there were 161 incidents on the Yugoslav–Bulgarian border, 122 on the Yugoslav–Romanian border and 92 on the Yugoslav–Albanian border. It is worth mentioning here that the Soviet Union's note to Yugoslavia on 18 August 1949, in which the Soviet leadership threatened to take "more effective steps" under the pretext of the fate of the post-World War One White Guard emigration, was feared by the Yugoslavs as an ultimatum. Propaganda campaign and the number of incidents has therefore increased significantly in all border sections compared to the previous period.[14]

Even though British diplomats first reported a Hungarian–Yugoslav border incident on 29 January 1949, they were not discussed in detail until a telegram from British Ambassador in Belgrade Charles Peake on 8 March. In this telegram, the British Ambassador in Belgrade reported that *Borba*, the official newspaper of the Yugoslav communist party, had published several Hungarian and Yugoslavian lists of border incidents and the subsequent notes of protests of the Hungarian and Yugoslav ministries of

10 From Belgrade to Foreign Office, 28 September 1949. PRO FO 371/78764 R9301/1493/92.

11 From Budapest to Foreign Offive, 28 November 1949. PRO FO 371/78764 R11170/1493/92.

12 *White Book on Aggressive Activities by the Governments of the USSR, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Rumania, Bulgaria and Albania towards Yugoslvia*, (Beograd: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia, 1951), 472–75.

13 Hungarian archival sources report far fewer border incidents than the Yugoslav data. In 1948, the relevant foreign affairs documents mention only 9 border incidents, while in 1949, according to the Political Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, there were 23 cases of border violations. MNL OL XIX-J-1-k-Jugoszlávia-29/f- A politikai osztályon nyilvántartott jugoszláv határincidensek-ikt.sz.n./1949 (46d.).

14 *White Book*, 472-475.The Hungarian figures again show far fewer cases: in the first six months of 1950 there were only 46 border incidents. MNL OL XIX-J-1-k-Jugoszlávia-29/f-002491/1951 (46d.).

foreign affairs.[15] On 4 May 1949, Geoffrey Wallinger, the newly accredited British Ambassador to Hungary (1949–51), telegraphed from Budapest to London about another list of Hungarian notes of protest, in which, the Hungarian government protested against the deaths of two border guards, József Salga and József Molnár, who had been shot dead by the Yugoslavs on 25 April at Felsőszölnök (Vas County). According to the Hungarian version, the Hungarians acknowledged that the Hungarian border guards had crossed the border line a few metres away but spotted the Yugoslav border guards and immediately turned back towards the border on their signals. Still, the Yugoslavs fired at them from a close range.[16] The incident was also cabled by Peake on 6 May; in his report he pointed out that *Politika*, the daily paper of the Yugoslav government, was the only Yugoslav newspaper to report the incident. According to this report, the two Hungarian border guards had deeply entered Yugoslav territory and ignored repeated warnings from Yugoslav border guards. According to the article, the joint Yugoslav-Hungarian committee that investigated the incident also confirmed the Yugoslav version. Peake also pointed out that the incidents had intensified since the Yugoslav note of 23 February.[17]

However, the series of border incidents and the subsequent exchanges of notes and slanderous rumours could easily have led to further escalation, which was presumably not in the interests of either party. Therefore, on 3 August, the Yugoslav and Hungarian governments signed a memorandum in Subotica in which they decided to set up a joint committee to investigate further border incidents. Peake had a similar evaluation: In his telegram of 6 August the British ambassador thought that the agreement was aimed at restoring normal relations at the Hungarian–Yugoslav border.[18]

By October 1949, border incidents were recurring almost periodically, linked to the Rajk trial and the accompanying anti-Yugoslav propaganda campaign in Hungary. Of these, the Foreign Office was particularly concerned with the border incident of 27 October and its aftermath. According to the Yugoslav version, at around 7 p.m. the Hungarians opened fire from automatic weapons and threw grenades fire from Hungarian territory on the border section east of Donji Miholjac. The provocation continued intermittently until 3 a.m.[19] The Hungarian version differs sharply from the above. According to it, some 30–40 Yugoslav soldiers from Donji Miholjac entered Hungary, but, under fire from Hungarian border guards, they retreated into Yugoslav territory.[20] Although the first reaction on the Yugoslav side was to take the matter to the United Nations, this was eventually abandoned.[21] Peake saw no point in doing so either, calling the incident *childish* and considered an investigation to be completely unnecessary.[22] The incident, however, provided a sufficient pretext for Hungary to denounce the Subotica Convention on 31 October 1949.[23] The British Embassy in Belgrade was informed of this on 5 November. The embassy was, moreover, always uncertain about the real purpose of the treaty as it had never been clear to them why the Hungarian government agreed to the setting up of such a committee at all. As the committee had never functioned in practice, the denunciation of the convention was presumably not considered particularly significant.[24]

[15] From Belgrade to Foreign Office, 8 March 1949. PRO FO 371/78702 R2703/10321/92.

[16] From Budapest to Foreign Office, 4 May 1949. PRO FO 371/78702 R4620/10321/92. The relevant Hungarian protest note of 25 April 1949: MNL OL XIX-J-1-k-Jugoszlávia-29/f-3658/1949 (46d.).

[17] From Belgrade to Foreign Officce, 6 May 1949. PRO FO 371/78702 R4701/10321/92.

[18] From Belgrade to Foreign Office, 6 August 1949. PRO FO 371/78703 R7619/10321/92.

[19] From Belgrade to Foreign Office, 31 October 1949. PRO FO 371/78704 R10361/10321/92.

[20] From Budapest to UK Delegation, New York, 1 November 1949. PRO FO 371/78704 R10466/10321/92. The corresponding Hungarian note: MNL OL XIX-J-1-k-Jugoszlávia-29/f-12895/1949 (47d.).

[21] From New York to Foreign Office, 29 October 1949. PRO FO 371/78704 R10294/10321/92 and From Belgrade to Foreign Office, 31 October 1949.PRO FO 371/78704 R10362/10321/92.

[22] From Belgrade to Foreign Office, 3 November 1949. PRO FO 371/78704 R10479/10321/92.

[23] MNL OL XIX-J-1-k-Jugoszlávia-29/f-ikt. n. (47d.). The Yugoslav reply note: MNL OL XIX-J-1-k-Jugoszlávia- 29/f- 12895/1949 (47d.).

[24] From Belgrade to Foreign Office, 9 November1949. PRO FO 371/78704 R10782/10321/92.

The situation on the Mura River was an interesting contrast to the usual accusations of border incidents. The river, coming down from the mountains, has deposited its sediment and created small islands. However, this changed the main course of the Mura, which altered the border between Hungary and Yugoslavia. In a such tense atmosphere, a "war of exchange of notes" immediately broke out over the status of the island formed by the river in 1951. The Foreign Office was first informed of this was by the British Embassy in Belgrade on 31 December 1951.[25] After discussions with the Yugoslavs, the British diplomats felt that a narrow causeway on the Yugoslav side could easily link the island to the mainland. But it was also thought possible that the spring tide would simply wash it away.[26] A similar view was expressed by Robert Maurice Hankey, British Ambassador in Budapest (1951–1953), in a letter to British Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden dated 15 February 1952. After a conversation with the Yugoslav Chargé d'Affaires, he reported that the Hungarians expected that the Yugoslavs would occupy the island in the autumn, at which time the Hungarians would bomb it and cause serious incidents. The British envoy at Budapest also thought it possible that the island would simply be submerged by spring or summer floods. It is likely that the Yugoslavs had similar ideas. Indeed, the Yugoslav spokesman on the issue explained that the Yugoslav government was obliged to protest in principle, but it was not their intention to get involved in serious incidents."[27] The Hungarian government, as usual, regarded the blowing up of the bridge at the Letenye border crossing over the Mura in August 1952 as an unprecedented provocation.[28] The British telegram from Belgrade on 19 August provided the Foreign Office the Yugoslav version of the story: the bridge at Letenye was of course blown up by the Hungarians.[29]

Altogether, according to the available Yugoslav statistics, there were 36 border incidents on the Hungarian–Yugoslav border, 35 on the Yugoslav–Bulgarian border, 29 on the Yugoslav–Albanian border, and slightly more, 48 on the Yugoslav–Romanian border between the outbreak of the Korean War and September 1950.[30] According to Hungarian Foreign Ministry records, there were 110 border incidents between July 1950 and the end of the year, 212 between January 1951 and the end of September, and 77 in 1952.[31] Given the political circumstances of the time, both sets of figures may contain deliberate distortions. While the Yugoslavs had an interest in exaggerating the danger posed by border incidents, the Hungarian side was interested in reducing the Yugoslav figures and in blaming the Yugoslavs for as many border incidents as possible.

The number of border incidents rose further after the outbreak of the Korean War. This was linked to the intensive propaganda campaign of the Soviet Union and its Eastern European satellites (the so-called people's democracies) against Yugoslavia and the possibility of a Soviet and/or Eastern European military aggression. However, the possibility of an attack could not be ruled out by the contemporaries. It is therefore understandable that contemporary analyses linked border incidents to the preparation of a military attack.

Military Manoeuvres, the Possibility of a Military Attack on Yugoslavia and the Strengthening of the Hungarian–Yugoslav Border

The outbreak of the Korean War was a major psychological shock in Western Europe, where it was feared that the Soviet Union would launch a similar surprise military offensive in Europe. Their fears were not without

[25] The British Embassy to Foreign Office, 31 December 1951. PRO FO 371/100559 NH10392/1.

[26] The British Embassy, Belgrade to British Legation, Budapest, 25 January 1952. PRO FO 371/100559 NH10392/4.

[27] R.M.A. Hankey to Anthony Eden, 7 February 1952. PRO FO 371/100559 NH10392/7. The Mura river floodplain was the subject of several Hungarian and Yugoslav notes of protest until 26 August 1953. These notes can be found: MNL OL XIX-J-1-k-Jugoszlávia-29/f-Dokumentáció III-ikt. sz. n. (47d.).

[28] From Budapest to Foreign Office, 18 August 1952. PRO FO 371/100559 NH10392/16. The relevant notes: MNL OL XIX-J-1-k-Jugoszlávia-29/f-Dokumentáció IV-ikt. sz. n. (47d.).

[29] From Belgrade to Foreign Office, 19 August 1952. PRO FO 371/100559 NH10392/18.

[30] *White Book*, 472–75.

[31] MNL OL XIX-J-1-k-Jugoszlávia-29/f-002491/1951 (46d.)., MNL OL XIX-J-1-k-Jugoszlávia-29/f-Az 1952-ben és 1953-ban jugoszláv részről elkövetett határincidensek és provokációk-iksz.n./1953 (46d.).

foundation. At a meeting with the military and party leaders of Eastern Europe on 9–12 January, Stalin gave orders to increase the size of the Eastern European armed forces to a level that would allow an attack within two to three years. The change in the Soviet Union's position was partly due to the successful Chinese offensive on the Korean peninsula. Another factor was the unconfirmed Soviet intelligence report that the Americans wanted to provoke a European conflict in the summer of 1951, using Yugoslavia as a springboard. (It also mentioned that the United States was prepared to use the atomic bomb against the Soviet satellites.[32]) The stalling of the Chinese offensive and the exposure of Soviet spies led to a further change in Soviet policy and Stalin abandoned his plan in May 1951.[33] Stalin's plans were also influenced by his fear of an attack from the West. His move could therefore be seen as a defensive one. Since the development of the army and the preparation for an attack could not happen overnight, this did not mean that a Soviet attack was to be expected in 1951.

Two different views have emerged in Hungarian historiography on the possibility of a Soviet and/or a Soviet satellites military attack against Yugoslavia. According to Béla Király, whose view is most often quoted in Western historiography, the Soviet camp would have launched a joint attack against Yugoslavia, in which Hungary would have played an active part. According to this view, the Hungarians would have launched a diversionary attack in the Transdanubian region, while the main forces would have been massed on the Great Hungarian Plain, between the rivers Danube and Tisza. Three corps were to break through the defensive line at Subotica and move from Fruška Gora to the Soviet-led "liberation" of Belgrade, the Yugoslav capital. According to Király, by the summer of 1950 everything was ready for the invasion of Yugoslavia. However, his view is not without contradictions, as pointed out by László Ritter. During his research, Ritter has not found any document that can credibly prove that there was a concrete offensive plan to invade Yugoslavia. In fact, he believes that the mobilisation of the Hungarian army was not part of the offensive, but of the defensive preparations. Based on a detailed examination of the pace of development of the Hungarian armed forces, he concludes that the Hungarian army would not have been able to participate in an attack on Yugoslavia between 1951 and 1953, despite the significant developments in rearmament. In fact, the Hungarian military exercise in 1951, to which Király refers in his memoirs, simulated not an offensive, but a counter-offensive against a Western attack from Yugoslavia.[34]

In addition to the increasing border incidents, rumours of Soviet troop movements also pointed to the escalation of the "war of nerves". The Foreign Office first reported on this on 10 March 1949, but at that time nothing abnormal were seen about the distribution of Soviet troops in Hungary.[35] However, reports of Soviet troop movements continued. Wallinger reported as early as 17 August (the day before the Soviet Union's note of 18 August 1949) that rail traffic at Záhony, the Hungarian–Soviet border crossing, had been steadily increasing since the beginning of the month. At the same time, the British military attaché reported that some 200-300 tanks had started to move from around Arad, Southwestern Romania, via Szeged to Baja and Budapest. He also learned that Soviet barracks were being constructed in Veszprém, and the construction of Soviet military airfields were underway in Pápa, Tököl

[32] Okváth Imre, ˝A magyar hadsereg háborús haditervei, 1948–1962,˝ *Hadtörténelmi Közlemények*, 119, no. 1 (2006): 35.

[33] Vojtech Mastny, *NATO in the Beholder's Eye: Soviet Perceptions and Policies, 1949-1956* (Washington: Cold War International History Project, Working Papers, 2002), 29–31. The Hungarian delegation attending the Moscow meeting was almost shocked by the Soviet announcements, but they obeyed in their implementation. Borhi László, *Magyarország a hidegháborúban. A Szovjetunió és az Egyesült Államok között, 1945–1956* (Budapest: Corvina, 2005), 239–40. On the background and the causes of the Korean War see: Vojtech Mastny, *The Cold War and Soviet Insecurity* (New York – Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 91–115., John Lewis Gaddis, *Most már tudjuk. A hidegháború történetének újraértékelése* (Budapest: Európa, 2001), 135–61.; Kathryn Weathersby, *"Should We Fear This?" Stalin and the Danger of War with America*, (Washington: Cold War International History Project, Working Paper, 2002) and Vlaldislav Zubok – Constantine Pleshakov, *Inside the Kremlin's Cold War. From Stalin to Khrushchev* (Cambridge, Massachusetts – London: Harvard University Press, 1996), 54–72., Mastny, *NATO in the Beholder's Eye*, 18–36.

[34] Király Béla, *Honvédségből néphadsereg* (Budapest: Co-Nexus, 1989), 165–67., Király Béla, ˝A magyar hadsereg szovjet ellenőrzés alatt,˝ in *Magyarország és a nagyhatalmak a 20. században*, ed. Romsics Ignác (Budapest: Teleki László Alapítvány, 1995), 233–35., László Ritter, ˝The Hungarian Army in Early Cold War Soviet Strategies,˝ Parallel History Project on Cooperative Security, accessed January 31, 2025, https:phpisn.ethz.ch>introduction_ritter, Okváth Imre, *Bástya a béke frontján. Magyar haderő és katonapolitika 1945–1956* (Budapest: Aquila, 1998), 117–39.

[35] From Budapest to Foreign Office, 10 March 1949. PRO FO 371/78702 R2840/10321/92G.

and Kaposvár (probably Taszár).[36] On 23 August he clarified that Soviet troops were divided into three parts. One was stationed 20 kilometres south of Budapest, another at Szeged and the third at Baja, but he found no reliable signs of troop movements or mobilisation in the Transdanubian region.[37] However, the British military attaché who had travelled to the Szeged area saw several tanks, trucks and soldiers in and around Kecskemét. Although he did not encounter any Soviet units in Szeged, Wallinger was aware of the panic among its inhabitants: a few hours after the Soviet soldiers had passed through Szeged, it was reportedly impossible to buy salt and safety matches in the town.[38] On 2 September, the British diplomat again telegraphed from Szeged, this time referring to what he considered reliable reports from Italian diplomats. According to these, several large buildings near Szeged and Bata (possibly Báta, Tolna County) had been requisitioned (presumably for Soviet barracks) with an evacuation date of 1 September to 1 October, and more Soviet troops had arrived in the area. Wallinger was surprised to hear a third reference to Soviet troop movements from the area in such a short space of time but had not personally experienced anything similar on his visits.[39] The troop movements were probably not aimed at attacking Yugoslavia, but to reinforce the Soviet Union's note of 18 August 1949 and to intensify the war of nerves. The British Embassy in Budapest understood this. In the top-secret telegram of 23 August, described above, Wallinger considered that the rumours gave a new colour to the escalation of ongoing the war of nerves.[40]

In addition to the persistent border incidents and rumours of Soviet troop movements, the technical reinforcement of the Hungarian–Yugoslav border was carried out as an intensification of the "war of nerves". The plans for this were drawn up as early as November 1948. As part of the first phase, the single-row wire fence was replaced by a double-row wire fence along the entire Yugoslav border from the beginning of 1949. In addition, a 10- to 15-metre-wide border strip was ploughed to facilitate border crossing controls. However, the full implementation of this phase did not take place until August 1950.[41] Border reinforcement continued in 1950. At the meeting of the Secretariat of the Hungarian Workers' Party on 12 April, János Kádár presented a 24-point plan which stressed the need to create a 15 km-wide border zone. This covered some 15 districts and 310 settlements with 290,000 inhabitants, although towns of more than 50,000 inhabitants were excluded. The proposal also suggested that from 1 July a special pass would be required to enter the area, it banned hunting within 1 km of the border and made the cultivation of land within 500 metres of the border subject to a special permit, which could only be used from sunrise to sunset.[42]

The reinforcement of the border was repeatedly discussed by the British Embassy in Budapest. On 31 May, for example, a telegram was sent to London informing them that entry had been banned within 15 km of the Yugoslav border.[43] However, in the subsequent analysis, no military significance was attributed to this, and it was pointed out that it was precisely the towns with a significant military presence (such as Szeged or Nagykanizsa) that were excluded from the border zone. The reason for the move was therefore thought to be more to prevent illegal border crossing, but the possibility of propaganda and escalating the war of nerves was not considered.[44]

In addition to regularly reporting on incidents on and the reinforcement of the Hungarian–Yugoslav border, the British embassies were closely monitoring the development of the Hungarian armed forces. British estimates of army numbers showed a gradual increase. On 21 July 1951, the War Office estimated the number of conscripts in the Hungarian army at 112,000, including the border guards. This was supplemented by a further 40,000 police and security forces, which represented a 50 per cent overrun of the provisions of the 1947 Paris peace treaty.[45]

[36] From Budapest to Foreign Office, 17 August 1949. PRO FO 371/78691 R7987/1023/92.

[37] From Budapest to Foreign Office, 23 August 1949. PRO FO 371/78692 R8148/1023/92G.

[38] Geoffrey Wallinger to Sir Anthony Rumbold, 24 August 1949. PRO FO 371/78692 R8389/1023/92.

[39] From Budapest to Foreign Office, 2 September 1949. PRO FO 371/78693 R8533/1023/92.

[40] From Budapest to Foreign Office, 23 August 1949. PRO FO 371/78692 R8148/1023/92G.

[41] Okváth, *Bástya a béke frontján*, 113–14., Kovács Imre, ˝Déli határunk műszaki-zárási és erődítési munkái 1950–1955-ben,˝ *Új Honvédségi Szemle* 120, no 1 (1992): 34–6., Orgoványi István, ˝A déli határsáv 1948 és 1956 között,˝ *Bács-Kiskun megye múltjából* 17 (2001): 253–85.

[42] Orgoványi, ˝A déli határsáv,˝ 253–63.

[43] From Budapest to Foreign Office, 31 May 1950. PRO FO 371/87865 RH1194/1.

[44] From Budapest to Foreign Office, 2 June 1950. PRO FO 371/87865 RH1194/2.

[45] The War Office to Southern Deparment, Foreign Office, 21 June 1951. PRO FO 371/95009 R1193/21G. Chapter 12 of the Paris Peace Treaty, entitled *Military and Air Clauses* states that "Hungary has been authorized to have armed forces consisting of not more than: (a) A land army, including frontier troops, anti-aircraft and river flotilla personnel, with a total strength of 65,000 personnel; (b) An air force of 90 aircraft, including

As Hungary was in clear breach of the peace treaty, it seemed obvious that a Western protest should be made. By mid-February 1951, the United States had mooted the idea of a joint note with Britain protesting the increase in the number of troops. A similar protest on the expansion of the Romanian army was to be made, too. The British were expected to protest in a separate note in the case of Bulgaria. However, in a telegram dated 6 March, the Foreign Office considered this to be prejudicial to the negotiations between the four powers (the United States, Great Britain, France and Yugoslavia). It was therefore thought most useful to raise the whole problem inadvertently.[46] The United States was, however, still considering condemning in a note the military build-up of the Soviet satellite countries, which could also be part of a more spectacular US policy towards Yugoslavia. However, this this was again rejected by the Foreign Office in its reply of 8 June in connection with the Four Power Conference, reiterated its earlier position: during the four power talks (between the United States, Britain, France and Yugoslavia), Britain did do not wish to raise the question of the military build-up and level of armament in the Soviet satellite states.[47]

Moreover, despite a series of improvements, Wallinger himself did not consider the Hungarian army to be financially or morally capable of attacking Yugoslavia in the summer of 1950, either.[48] On 31 August 1951, Hankey, the new British ambassador in Budapest (appointed in 1951), produced a detailed summary of Hungarian preparations for war. According to this, there was a constant propagandistic reference in Hungary and the other Soviet satellites to the possibility of partisans being thrown into Yugoslavia to overthrow Tito's regime. The deportation of untrustworthy elements from the border zone in 1950 could also be seen as an offensive move. He also noted that improvements had been made in the Hungarian air force: the commercial airport at Nagykanizsa had been handed over to the military and Soviet soldiers were already stationed at Taszár (a military base near Kaposvár in Somogy County). Still, he did not see any other moves that would have indicated any direct preparations for an attack against Yugoslavia.[49]

The above reports from British missions and consulates illustrate that the intensity of the "war of nerves" did not diminish in the period following the outbreak of the Korean War. The outbreak of the war did not mean a break of a sudden escalation, but that the actions that had been started earlier continued and intensified. The development of the Soviet satellite forces, including the Hungarian People's Army, continued in the following years, and British intelligence officers and strategists produced new analyses of this. However, these analyses were more concerned with how Yugoslavia could be integrated into Western defence plans. It was only after Stalin's death on 5 March 1953 that the policy of the Soviet Union and the Eastern European people's democracies started to change, with the new Soviet leadership setting itself the goal of normalising Soviet-Yugoslav relations.[50]

Conclusion

This study examined how British diplomacy saw Hungary's role in the economic blockade of Yugoslavia and the "war of nerves" during the Soviet-Yugoslav conflict. The British documents reveal that the Foreign Office was deeply concerned about the border incidents on the Hungarian-Yugoslav border, which were becoming commonplace, and the strengthening of the Hungarian armed forces. The latter, a general trend in the Soviet camp, had the effect of upsetting the strategic balance between Yugoslav and neighbouring forces, therefore it was examined in the context of a possible Soviet and/or Soviet satellite military attack on Yugoslavia. Incidents on the Hungarian–Yugoslav border, however, were not given such importance, but were always considered as a normal part of "war of nerves" and propaganda warfare.

reserves, of which not more than 70 may be combat types of aircraft, with a total personnel strength of 5,000. Hungary shall not posess or acquire any aircraft designed primary as bombers with internal bomb-carrying facilities." ˝Treaty of Peace with Hungary,¨ Library of Congress, accessed January 30, 2025, https: maint.loc.gov>bevans>m-ust000004-0453.

[46] From Foreign Office to Washington, 6 March 1951. PRO FO 371/95009 R1193/13.

[47] From Foreign Office to Washington, 8 June 1951. PRO FO 371/95009 R1193/19.

[48] Review of the Military Situation in Hungary, 11 August 1950. PRO FO 371/87865 RH1194/8.

[49] The British Legation, Budapest to Paul Mason, Foreign Office, 31 August 1951. PRO FO 371/95192 RH10392/22.

[50] On the normalization of Hungarian–Yugoslav relations: Marelyin Kiss József – Ripp Zoltán – Vida István, ˝A szovjet–jugoszláv és a magyar–jugoszláv kapcsolatok a diplomáciai levelezés tükrében,˝ *Múltunk* 46, no. 1 (2001): 233–84., A. Sz. Sztikalin, ˝A szovjet–jugoszláv közeledés és a magyar belpolitikai helyzet (1954–1956 nyara), *Múltunk* 48, no. 1 (2003): 208–34., Vukman Péter, *Harcban Tito és Rankovics klikkje ellen". Jugoszláv politikai emigránsok Magyarországon (1948–1980)* (Budapest – Pécs: ÁBTL – Kronosz, 2017), 173–98.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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Submitted: 31 January 2025 **Accepted: 05 July 2025** **Published: 09 July 2025**

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Vukman, P. 2025. Economic Blockade, Border Incidents, Military Manoeuvres Against Yugoslavia During the Soviet-Yugoslav Conflict (1948–1953). *Balkans Legal, Economic and Social Studies* 2(1):1–11. DOI: https://doi.org/10.14232/bless.2025.1.25-35

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