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The Hungarian press and the invasion of Poland by the Third Reich and USSR in September 1939

The times of World War II were one of the greatest tests of Polish-Hungarian brotherhood; this was because of the fact that after the outbreak of the war, Poland and Hungary found themselves on opposing sides of the conflict.



The Third Reich attacked the Second Polish Republic, and the Kingdom of Hungary, hoping for a review of the provisions of the Treaty of

Trianon of 1920, was ever more closely tied to the Reich; following the attack on Yugoslavia in 1941, it was fully engaged in the war on Hitler's side.

A friendship against unions

However, these two mutually friendly countries did not only enter a state of war between them, but Hungarians sheltered thousands of Polish civilian and military refugees. In addition – due to the policy of balancing ever more strongly adopted by the Hungarian government (to seek arrangements with the Allies despite the union with the Third Reich) – the role of the relationships between Budapest and the underground structures of the Polish Underground State and the Polish government in exile, which acted as intermediary in the contacts between Hungary and the Allies, gained importance.

As the year 1939 saw an attack of Poland by Hitler becoming an ever more probable reality, the Hungarian government, even before the outbreak of the war, put it to Berlin very clearly: In case of a German-Polish military conflict, Hungary seeks to operate at its liberty and not support the aggression by Hitler. The Hungarian Minister of Foreign Affairs in 1938-1941, István Csáky, stated:

„In no case will Hungary take arms against Poland”¹.

Soon, the Hungarians denied the German submission to cross the Hungarian-Polish border to attack Poland from the south in this way.

It is worth taking a look at just how the information about the brewing

German-Polish conflict, the ever more staunch demands by Hitler, and finally the attack by the Third Reich (and Stalin soon thereafter) on Poland was conveyed to Hungarian society in then-contemporary press of the Kingdom of Hungary.

In light of the crisis between Berlin and Warsaw

The military events of September 1939 were broadly reported on by the press on the Danube shores. Some papers – like the conservative „Magyar Nemzet” – kept special columns on events related to Poland. Broad articles were published from the Polish centre for information on how the Poles see the aggressive policies by Hitler and what actions do they undertake in light of preparations by Slovakia. Budapest considered just how decisive Poland’s reaction would be². August 1939 saw reports in Hungarian press spell out Hitler’s demands against the Second Polish Republic, with the dispute over the Free City of Danzig being of key importance. The conflict between the Polish government and the Senate of Danzig was called a diplomatic issue by the paper „Ellenzek”³. At the same time, the entire spectrum of complexity of the dispute surrounding this city was presented, stressing the anti-Polish attitude of Hitler’s viceroy in Danzig – *gauleiter* Forster. Some papers friendly to the Reich presented the problem of Danzig from Berlin’s perspective, in their rhetoric blaming the Polish government for inflaming the conflict surrounding the city. The majority of dailies, however, tried to show the varied positions of all interested parties. One of the most read papers in Hungary, „Magyar Nemzet”, wrote in August 1939 about the political police of Danzig transforming into a

unit that was independent of ordinary Police – the *Danziger Gestapo* – in order to adapt to the current situation⁴.

The Hungarian press also reported closer relations between Berlin and Rome in August 1939, seeing this as an international-scale event⁵.

German-Polish war breaks out!

The „news” columns added after the main issue of September 1st, 1939, was readied for printing informed about the German-Polish border being violated by Hitler’s military at several points, and about bombings of Polish cities. Titles in 2nd September issues left no illusions: *German-Polish war breaks out!*⁷. The reports of the Hungarian Information Agency (MTI) quoted statements by the Polish Telegraphic Agency:

„In the Morning of September 1st, the military of the Reich crossed the Polish border (...) attaching the Polish garrison at Westerplatte in Danzig, which repelled the attack. German planes made several bombing raids on Kraków and cities in Upper Silesia (...)”⁸.

On this day, the call made by prime minister Teleki *To the Hungarian people!* was published, announcing the introduction of a state of emergency in the country due to the situation in Europe. The Hungarian prime minister informed that the Hungarian government made special efforts, such as: general mobilisation, price control, reduction of the right to gatherings and most importantly – censorship of the press. What is important is that the MTI stressed in its reports that Poland was not the attacking side⁹.

In the first September issues of the papers on the Danube shores, information was also published about the reactions of Powers on the Reich's invasion of Poland, which, according to Hungarian dailies, could be decisive for bringing peace about quickly or the situation transforming into a world-scale military conflict. Already during the second decade of August, Hungarian papers started to publish articles analysing the possible course of Europe and world history: *Peace or war?*¹⁰. „Kecsekeméti Ellenőr” described the feelings and fears in Polish society, which still hoped for Hitler to come to his senses, very aptly:

„the people cannot abandon the hope that still shines in the sky as various peace options”¹¹.

Most papers presented Hitler's 16 demand options with claims towards Pomerania and the German minority of Poland. The Polish announcement from the end of August 1939, the answer to the aggressive policies and revisionist propaganda of Germany, was also published, stressing that this all this creates a direct threat to the borders and independence of Poland¹².

Just like in all of the world's press, the beginning of September did not only see current news from the battlefields, but also analyses of whether Hitler's demands and the invasion of Poland would grow into a Europe- or even world-wide military conflict. Much space was devoted to the Ribbentrop-Molotov pact. Hungarian press did not speculate about its significance, rather stressing the official language of the non-aggression pact between these two states. As for the events at the front, Hungarian papers reported that

„the taking of Częstochowa was Germany’s first great military success”,

stressing hopefully at the same time that Westerplatte was still in Polish hands. Reports of the English correspondent of MTI from September 6th, 1939, presented the position of the Polish soldier as „very worrying, but not desperate yet”¹⁴.

Under September 7th, 1939, the article *The people are fleeing Warsaw*, „Magyar Elet” stated in the article’s lead that some residents and the government, which moved towards Lublin, left bombarded Warsaw. The defence of Warsaw constitutes a significant point of interest in press reports in Hungarian press. It was considered a very significant point of resistance, with the further military efforts of the Reich and of Poland being dependent on it. „Kecskeméti Ellenőr” stated on September 12th that:

„(...) the war is starting to take a very serious course. On Friday, the official report indicated that German mechanised units entered Warsaw. This does not immediately mean occupation of Poland’s enormous capital. Warsaw is spread out over such a large area that it is impossible to conquer it over a short period of time. In addition, Polish military command called upon Polish civilians to resist, with these immediately starting to build trenches”¹⁵.

Describing the military struggle of the Polish army with the German invaders, the Hungarian Information Agency, not being guided by German propaganda, noted the reasons for Polish military losses:

„Thanks to modern arms and state-of-the-art training, the losses of the German army are relatively limited compared to the losses incurred by the Poles”¹⁶.

The articles frequently noted the heroic fight of the Polish soldiers. In the first decade of September, articles were also published on the defence of Gdańsk and Gdynia by Poles, and on the triple attack of Poland by Germany, with German aircraft destroying Polish transport infrastructure. Hungarian press also devoted much attention to the defence of Lviv.

... *the Soviet army invades Poland*

The September 17th, 1939, evening issues, and papers from the subsequent day actively informed about the Red Army crossing the Polish border (example headline: *On Sunday morning, the Soviet army invaded Poland*¹⁷), including reports on the position of the Polish ambassador of Poland in Moscow, Grzybowski both quoting world press agencies as well as own reports. Hungary's MTI reported of the struggle being undertaken by the Polish units in relation to the Soviet invasion. On the basis of German propaganda, it was indicated that Soviet actions would mean Poland's liberation, which did not, in fact, exist – due to the failures of the Polish government. As the attitude of the neighbours was so important to Hungary, frequent references were made to the attitude of Romania, which was derided for failing to aid Poland militarily¹⁸. The articles by the regional „Kecskemét és Vidéke” were pessimistic and realistic:

„The tragedy in Poland is over. Intense struggles in Polish lowlands have been going on for two weeks now, the Polish-German war has been going on for two weeks, with Poland expected to fall any minute. The fate of Poles culminated with the Polish border being crossed by the Soviet army at three in the morning on Sunday, with the eastern part of Poland being invaded to protect the Ukrainian and Belarussian minorities”¹⁹.

Articles dispelling foreign reports about the Hungarian army crossing the Polish border are interesting; it is noted that Hungary is not performing any military intervention in Poland, as these are the „stern orders of the Hungarian government”²⁰.

The end of the Polish campaign

The beginning of the third decade of September sees Hungarian press publish e. g. information about the Polish government fleeing to Romania, and the Romanian authorities making demands against the Polish government, with the latter finally making its way to France. An issue of the weekly „Hetfő” from Monday, September 25th, 1939, was entitled *The end of the Polish campaign*, summarising the month-long struggle and the takeover of the land by the Wehrmacht. Reporting from Berlin, MTI noted on September 24th, 1939, that

„Poland does not have one main line of defence any more (...) with the last eight days being decisive for the fate of the campaign and the Polish army”²¹.

The first issue in October described with surprise the decision of the

President of Poland, Ignacy Mościcki, to leave office – causing a surprise in Romania as well – as MTI reported from Paris²². October issues of newspapers indicated that a new president of Poland – Raczkiewicz – was sworn in in France. A grand report from the events at the Polish Church in Paris indicated that the assembled „gave an oath of fidelity to the new president of Poland and vowed to resurrect Poland”²³.

The paper „Függetlenség” wrote on its title page of 03.10.1939 about the heroic defenders of Hel who fought for many days to retain it, but finally „laid down their arms” and that „with the capitulation of the Hel Peninsula, the last Polish defence stronghold fell” with „the German army entering Warsaw”²⁴. The Hungarian papers stressed that the fate of the state and Polish society are now at the hands of Hitler and Stalin.

Notes

¹ W. Felczak, A. Fischinger, *Polska – Węgry. Tysiąc lat przyjaźni*, Budapeszt-Warszawa 1979, p. 71.

² *Hivatalos jelentések a lengyel mozgósításról*, „Magyar Nemzet” 31.08.1939., no. 198, p. 3.

³ *A danzigi szenátus békülékny hangon válaszolt a lengyel kormány jegyzekre*, „Ellenzek” 9.08.1939., no. 180, p. 1.

⁴ *Megalakult a danzigi Gestapo*, „Magyar Nemzet” 35.08.1939., no.

193, p. 4.

⁵ Conf. „HITLER ÉS MUSSOLINI TALÁLKOZIK!”, „Hetfő Reggel”
14.08.1939., no. 32, p. 1.

⁶ „Kecskeméti Ellenőr” no. 198, 2.09.1939., p. 4.

⁷ *Kitört a német-lengyel háború!*, „Kecskeméti Ellenőr” 2.09.1939, no.
198, p. 1.

⁸ „Magyar Élet” 2.09.1939 no. 160, p. 2.

⁹ *Bombák robbanása közben ülésezett a lengyel parlament*, „Magyar
Élet” 3.09.1939., no. 161, p. 2

¹⁰ *Béke vagy háború?*, „Magyar Élet” 20.08.1939 no. 149, p. 1.

¹¹ „Kecskeméti Ellenőr” 1.09.1939, no. 197, p. 1.

¹² „Ellenzek” 1.09.1939., no. 200, p. 1.

¹³ „Kecskeméti Ellenőr” 3.09.1939, no. 199, p. 1.

¹⁴ *A Times jelenti: A lengyel haderő helyzete tarthatatlan*, „Magyar Élet”
7.09.1939, no. 164, s.

¹⁵ *Varsóból menekül a lakosság*, „Magyar Élet” 7.09.1939., no. 164, p.
1.

¹⁶ *Varsóból a lengyel lakosság kiűzte a gépesített német csapatokat*,
„Kecskeméti Ellenőr” 12.09.1939, no. 205, p. 1.

¹⁷ „Magyarság” 24.09.1939, no. 84.

¹⁸ *A Szovjet vasárnap hajnalban behatolt Lengyelországba*, „Kecskemét és Vidéke” 18.09.1939, no. 38, p. 1.

¹⁹ Conf. „Esti Ujság” 19.09.1939, no. 213, p. 3.

²⁰ *A Szovjet vasárnap hajnalban behatolt Lengyelországba*, „Kecskemét és Vidéke” 18.09.1939, no. 38, p. 1.

²¹ *Magyar csapatok nem lépték át a lengyel határt*, „Magyar Élet” 23.09.1939. no. 177, p. 5.

²¹ „Hetfő” 25.09.1939, no. 39, p. 3.

²² *Romániában meglepetést keltett Moscicki lemondása*, „Hetfő” 2.10.1939, no. 40, p. 3.

²³ „Hetfő Reggel” 2.10.1939, no. 39, p. 2.

²⁴ „Függetlenség” 3.10.1939, no. 225.

Excerpts

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By Maria Zima

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