

Chapter 9

Hungary's Role in the Holocaust

*What connects two thousand years of genocide? Too much power in too few hands.*³¹⁴ – Simon Wiesenthal

*The expulsion was executed swiftly and persistently. An indispensable element for its success was the acceptance of measures against the Jews by the majority of the Hungarian people.*³¹⁵
– Joseph Goebbels

Hungary was ruled by Admiral Miklos Horthy from March 1, 1920, until his removal by Nazi Germany on October 15, 1944. During his tenure, he led Hungary through significant political and social changes, including the interwar period and World War II. His authoritarian and aristocratic regime had shown its sympathy for Italian fascism and German Nazism. Antisemitism targeted Jews, defining them as a race, with various restrictive clauses operating in universities until 1928, and it was growing.³¹⁶ In Chapter 4, the study delves into the anti-Semitism that was prevalent in Hungary before its alliance with the Nazis. During the war, Hungary first preserved non-combatant status but retained close ideological, military, and political contact with the Axis.³¹⁷ Hungary's ties to Germany and Italy grew closer after August 30, 1940, when those countries orchestrated the Second Vienna Award, allotting northern Transylvania and its estimated 149,000 Jews to Hungary. After the acquisition of northern Transylvania, Hungary's anti-Jewish laws were extended to Transylvania.³¹⁸ Then, on April 11, 1941, Hungary joined Hitler's military operations against Yugoslavia, its former ally. Hungary then annexed the Backa, Baranja, and Mura regions of Yugoslavia on December 27, and renamed them the Delvidek, or southern region, bringing 18,500 more Jews under Hungarian authority. These Jews, too, were immediately subject to anti-Jewish measures that included forced labor, property confiscations, expulsions, and summary executions.³¹⁹

³¹⁴ This quote is commonly attributed to Simon Wiesenthal.

³¹⁵ Da'at Website, *Pirkei Edut: Hungary*, <https://www.daat.ac.il/daat/hungary/pirkey/04.htm>.

³¹⁶ Bauer, Yehuda, *A History of the Holocaust*, p. 342.

³¹⁷ Liechtenstein, Ruth, p. 292. Lichtenstein discussed two distinct stages of Hungary's role during the war and how it affected the local Jews.

³¹⁸ Ibid. Hungary further sought the German-controlled areas of Yugoslavia, home to a large Magyar population. Formerly part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, these territories had been lost after World War I.

³¹⁹ Ibid.

It is crucial to acknowledge that in the years leading up to the Nazi occupation of Hungary, the Hungarian parliament and society engaged in several actions that reflected their antisemitism. The manifestation of their antisemitism was evident in three primary actions: the implementation of laws that discriminated against Jews, their forced recruitment into labor companies serving the army, and their deportation from Hungary to the location of mass murder in Kamenetz Podolsk.³²⁰ Throughout history, Hungary has witnessed instances of antisemitism, manifested through discriminatory government policies targeting Jewish people. Yehudah Bauer contends that antisemitism was built into the regime.³²¹

From the end of the 1930s, the Hungarian government adopted an anti-Semitic policy that became more and more severe. In the 1930s, the Hungarian government passed laws that restricted the rights and freedoms of Jewish citizens.³²² The equal rights of the Jews gradually disappeared until it was completely eroded by a series of laws enacted against them. Jews were defined as a race, and *numerous clauses* operated in universities that allowed only 6 percent of the student body to be Jewish.³²³ In doing so, Hungary was ahead of all Western and Central European countries in enacting this racist law. In 1938 and 1939, new laws restricted Jews in various economic sectors. Subsequently, mixed marriages were banned, the Jewish religion was de-recognized, and Jews were ousted from the military.³²⁴ The first law, enacted in 1938, was intended, according to its legislators, to ensure an 'over-assurance of balance in social and economic life' by limiting the number of Jews in liberal professions to 20%. This law was based on the assumption that the significant presence of Jews in the economy and professional fields was detrimental from a national perspective. It affected around 15,000 families, primarily targeting doctors, lawyers, engineers, journalists, and those in theater and cinema. The second law, introduced in 1939, expanded these restrictions, impacting an estimated 200,000 Jewish breadwinners and their dependents. By the time the third law was enacted in 1941, the exclusion of Jews from Hungarian national life had reached its extreme. Legislators claimed the law aimed to 'protect the Hungarian race' and effectively nullify the Jewish religion by regulating mixed marriages, citing the 'failure of assimilation' as justification. A Jew was defined in this law according to the criteria of the Nuremberg Laws, and they included about one hundred thousand Christians as "Jews". The Jews were deprived of all the civil and

³²⁰ Bauer, Yehuda. *A History of the Holocaust*, pp. 341–342. Additional material in Hebrew can be found at: <https://zachor.michlala.edu/files/gmar1.pdf>.

³²¹ Ibid.

³²² Ibid.

³²³ Ibid., p. 342.

³²⁴ Ibid.

religious rights they had received at the end of the 19th century and were economically impoverished. A wave of nationalism swept through Hungary and placed the Jews as a foreign and dangerous entity taking over the political, economic, and spiritual life.

With regards to the second and third actions, before Hungary aligned with Germany and entered the war in June 1941, Jews were expelled from the military and subsequently forced to join labor battalions. The Hungarians created slave labor battalions that numbered about 52,000 Jews. More Jews were recruited later. At least 30,000 Jews died from maltreatment and execution. During this period, the Jewish community was predominantly led by influential Jewish individuals who sought to assimilate into Hungarian society. Despite their attempts to mitigate the harmful effects of government policies through private interventions and appeals, their efforts were only marginally effective. Then, in July-August 1941, about 18,000 Jews from Hungarian-occupied Carpatho-Ukraine, who were considered by the authorities to be foreign citizens, were sent for "resettlement in the East," although many had lived in Hungary for generations and, for various reasons, were unable to prove their citizenship at the time.³²⁵ They were handed over by Hungarian authorities to the Germans, who carried out the mass murder. The killings occurred on August 27 and 28, 1941, in the Soviet city of Kamianets-Podilskyi (now part of Ukraine), which had been occupied by German forces on July 11, 1941. During this atrocity, 16,000 people were murdered by SS General Franz Jäckeln's *Einsatzgruppe* troops and Hungarian auxiliaries.³²⁶ In that case, the Hungarian authorities took the initiative to send Jews to their deaths, setting a tragic precedent that demonstrated their willingness to persecute the Jewish population. It is not surprising that Eichmann saw an opportunity to implement his genocidal plan with their cooperation.

Although this study examines Hungarian antisemitism and references scholars such as Raz Segal, it attributes the initiation of the Holocaust in Hungary primarily to the Germans, and specifically to one man—Eichmann. As previously discussed, significant differences existed between Nazi anti-Semitism and that of the Hungarians or other groups. While Nazi propaganda and ideology were extraordinarily extreme, driven by a premeditated plan to annihilate all Jews globally, Hungarian authorities focused more on discrimination and the desire to remove Jews from their land. Additionally, as Raz Segal demonstrates, Hungarian anti-Jewish actions were part of a broader effort to eliminate other minorities as well, aligning with a

³²⁵ Ibid. Figure 6 on page 72 depicts a column of Jewish forced laborers being marched, reflecting the harsh conditions they endured

³²⁶ Ibid. See also Randolph L. Braham, *The Politics of Genocide*, Wayne State University Press, 2000, p. 34. Additional killings took place in the following days, bringing the total number of Jews murdered to 23,600, including 16,000 who had been previously expelled from Hungary.

nation-state-building project rather than a singular focus on Jews.³²⁷ This distinction is significant. Furthermore, until March 1944, the Hungarians refrained from actively pursuing the Final Solution alongside the Nazis, although they engaged in various antisemitic acts. It was only after the Nazis took control that Eichmann seized the opportunity to orchestrate the systematic deportation and extermination of most Hungarian Jews, executing this plan via trains within just two months. Thus, Eichmann stands out as the primary initiator, with Hungarian authorities laying the groundwork for the impending annihilation.

In the initial phase of annihilation, when the Nazis gathered and transported Jews to Auschwitz from May to July 1944, they were skilled in exploiting the Hungarians. As part of their strategy, they installed a new government with strong antisemitic views that aligned with their objectives.³²⁸ The new leadership of the Nazis and the antisemitic Hungarian authorities leveraged collaboration from the Hungarian populace. Drawing on Milgram's experiments on obedience (discussed earlier in Chapter 3), it is evident that even if a regular soldier found it difficult to participate directly in killings, their collaboration often occurred from a distance. This included roles such as assisting in the gathering of Jews for transportation to Auschwitz.

Christopher Browning came to a similar conclusion in his book *Ordinary Men*, based on the experiment Philip Zimbardo had run in Stanford Prison. Zimbardo had divided a test group into guards and prisoners and placed them in a simulated prison. On the basis of their behavior, he divided the guards into three groups. Browning's research results harmonized with Zimbardo's conclusions: "Zimbardo's spectrum of guards bears an uncanny resemblance to the groupings that emerged within Reserve Police Battalion 101: a nucleus of increasingly enthusiastic killers who volunteered for the firing squads and 'Jew hunts'; a larger group of policemen who performed as shooters and ghetto clearers when assigned but who did not seek opportunities to kill (and in some cases refrained from killing, contrary to standing orders, when no one was monitoring their actions); and a small group (less than 20 percent) of refusers and evaders."³²⁹

Judit Molnar further examined the Hungarian gendarmerie (a militarized police force that played a key role in enforcing anti-Jewish measures), noting that

³²⁷ See Chapter 4 for a more detailed discussion on this topic.

³²⁸ It's also possible that these Hungarians saw it as an opportunity to get rid of the Jews, and for them, it was a redemptive war, that would lead to creating a better Hungary.

³²⁹ Judith Molnar, "Crime and Punishment? The Hungarian Gendarmerie During and After the Holocaust" (Wiener Wiesenthal Institut für Holocaust-Studien, April 2017), p. 71. Available at: https://simon-previous-issues.vwi.ac.at/images/Documents/Articles/2017-1/2017-1_ART_Molnar/ART_Molnar01.pdf.

research indicates most strictly followed decrees and orders without exceeding them. However, a portion of them consisted of enthusiastic and explicitly cruel gendarmes. Finally, an extremely small group, a mere fraction of three to four percent of gendarmes helped Jews out of compassion or for money. This ratio is far below Browning's 20 percent. Most of the gendarmes certainly did not know about the gas chambers of Auschwitz. Naturally, however, just as the persecuted received the news from forced military laborers or soldiers coming home from the front on leave, from refugees who had fled to Hungary, or from reading between the lines in newspapers, that Jews were being massacred by Nazi Germany, gendarmes could similarly have acquired knowledge of these horrors. It is a fact, in any case, that they did not expect the unfortunate women, children, and old people they 'escorted' to Kassa (Košice, Slovakia) and there handed over to the Germans ever to return. In more than one place, gendarme officers submitted claims for Jewish apartments and houses for themselves and their families, or for accommodating gendarme guardhouses.³³⁰

Gabor Faragho, former Superintendent of the Gendarmerie on the other hand, had heard about the gas chambers in June 1944, yet he did not propose to have the deportations stopped at the meeting of the Council of Ministers on June 21. At the same time, he downplayed the cruelty of the gendarmerie, dismissing complaints against some of the 20,000 Hungarian gendarmes as "irrelevant". Molnar adds that in mid-June, László Ferenczy, a lieutenant colonel in the Hungarian Royal Gendarmerie (later executed after the war), received the Auschwitz Protocols detailing the fate of deportees. However, he only informed Prime Minister Dóme Sztójay in early July – and later Regent Miklós Horthy – that the protocols' contents required verification. By late May, however, Horthy had already been informed about the gendarmes' brutality. In his letter to Prime Minister Sztójay in early June 1944, he wrote: "[. . .] lately I have received information that in that field [that of the 'solution of the Jewish question'], in several respects, much more has happened here than with the Germans themselves, and that in such brutal, indeed, sometimes inhumane manner that even the Germans themselves would not resort to carrying out these measures." Although he mentioned more than once that the gendarmerie should not be involved, it took him another month to decide to suspend the deportations in July. By then, however, over 430,000 people had already been deported.³³¹ This aligns with Doris Bergen's perspective on Horthy, highlighting his displayed

³³⁰ Ibid. It means that, according to Molnar, these Hungarians either knew or were unaware of the gas chambers (likely most were unaware). However, they did not expect the victims to return and sought to claim their properties.

³³¹ Molnar, "Crime and Punishment? The Hungarian Gendarmerie During and After the Holocaust," pp. 71–72.

double standard that the Nazis exploited. In this context, Horthy bore responsibility for not halting deportations promptly; even when he did intervene, it was largely due to pressure from FDR.

This chapter highlights Hungarian responsibility by emphasizing their crucial role in laying the groundwork for the Jewish genocide. It details how the Hungarians set the stage for the mass murder of Jews, a fact Eichmann recognized and skillfully exploited to further advance the Final Solution. Judit Molnar further sought to understand why Adolf Eichmann and his 'specialists' primarily trusted the Hungarian gendarmerie during the spring and summer of 1944. This inquiry delves into the gendarmerie's significant role in the deportation of Jews in Hungary during the Holocaust.³³²

The Royal Hungarian Gendarmerie, a type of national guard, was one of the most important state institutions between 1881 and 1945. Its task was to preserve law and order in the countryside and prevent uprisings and socialist agitation. In 1944, it also became the task of the gendarmerie to concentrate and deport the Hungarian Jews to Auschwitz. They readily took part in the collection and then the deportation of Jews. If deemed necessary, the trainees of the gendarmerie schools and training battalions assisted in the detection and collection. Molnar writes that according to one claim (Historian of law enforcement J. Paradi), "the great majority" of the gendarmes "were unlikely to have gone beyond their orders, and that brutality on their part must have been rare like white ravens". However, another claim is that the brutal procedure of the gendarmerie was not an isolated phenomenon, but a general and commonly known tendency". Catholic Bishop Endre Hamvas further describes the brutality of the Hungarian authorities in the summer of 1944: "The Prime Minister regards the news about the cruel and merciless procedures as exaggerated. But how can one without cruelty make people be dragged from their home, have 70–75 people crowded into a boxcar, and be transported for 4–5 days, locked, without food and water supply"?³³³

Molnar then cites an interesting view, mentioned by Honorary Gendarme Zoltán Kőrössy, the editor of the website for emigrant gendarmes. Discussing the gendarmerie's role during the Holocaust and their post-war punishment, he mentioned that he considered the Jews partially responsible for their own fate: "The complete cooperation of Jews undoubtedly contributed to the rapid execution of the deportations. [...] They did not put-up physical resistance at all". Kőrössy

³³² Ibid., p. 59.

³³³ Ibid., p. 60. Molnar writes that for decades, Hungarian literature on the subject emphasized the brutality of the gendarmes against members of left-wing, Communist, and Social Democratic movements, as well as the role they played in 1944 in the deportation of Jews. Molnar mentioned other viewpoints as well, but they are beyond the scope of the study.

repeatedly returned to this assertion in several of his publications. According to him, the gendarmerie protested against being involved in the deportations, but they were forced to do it. He claimed that although perhaps a few gendarmes might have committed brutalities, all the gendarmes were persecuted after the Second World War.³³⁴

Molnar claims that determining the exact number of gendarmes serving in 1944, and those involved in the deportation of Jews, is presently impossible. It is evident from the Hungarian literature on this topic that some individuals seek to mitigate the gendarmerie's responsibility by asserting, without citation, that only a fraction participated in ghettoization and deportation. While this may represent an attempt to conceal the actions of gendarme officers, it falls beyond the research's scope. Nevertheless, Molnar notes that high-ranking gendarme officers remembered differently in the statements they made at the people's court trials, with figures ranging from 16,000 to 32,000.³³⁵

Molnar further notes that, while Eichmann did set a new deportation record, he could have surpassed even that if he had gained the full cooperation of the gendarmerie, police force, public administration, and other public servants, including teachers, doctors, and railway personnel, to make Hungary "clean" of Jews. In any case, it was not a coincidence that first and foremost he relied on the militarily disciplined gendarmerie, for the larger part of the country was policed by them. They assisted the police in the remaining places, in the towns, in the deprivation, collection, and deportation of Jews. Its members did not ask questions, but executed orders: They conducted body searches, made lists of (corpus delicti) Jewish valuables, herded Jews into brick factories and pigsties, and then crammed seventy, eighty, or ninety people at a time into grain wagons or cattle cars. They did all this in a disciplined manner, firmly, mercilessly, and extremely fast. Eichmann, with the two State Secretaries of the Ministry of the Interior, László Endre and László

³³⁴ According to Körössy, the gendarmerie was mercilessly eliminated as a body which was 'the enemy of the people', and later, "this decision, made for political reasons, was justified by the gendarmerie having taken part in the deportations". Mordecai Paldiel notes in *Saving One's Own: Jewish Rescuers During the Holocaust* (p. 141) that the Hungarian gendarmerie – a type of national guard responsible for carrying out the deportations – was led by Lieutenant Colonel László Ferenczy and consisted of approximately 3,000–5,000 men who conducted the deportations swiftly and brutally. Although this figure appears lower than those cited by Molnar, it is possible that this initial core group of gendarmes was later supplemented with additional personnel to assist in gathering Jews for deportation, or perhaps the lower estimate reflects sources seeking to downplay the number involved in this process. Ultimately, determining the exact number of gendarmes falls outside the scope of this study.

³³⁵ Molnar, "Crime and Punishment? The Hungarian Gendarmerie During and After the Holocaust," pp. 65–66.

Baky, as well as with Gendarme Lieutenant-Colonel László Ferenczy, worked out the schedule of the annihilation of the Jews, which in the end divided the ten gendarmerie districts into six deportation zones following the gendarmerie district division.³³⁶

Anna Porter describes that upon Eichmann's arrival in Hungary, he anticipated resistance from the new Hungarian authorities. However, he was met with immediate and enthusiastic assistance instead. A week after his arrival, he had a friendly meeting with the two new state secretaries, László Endre and László Baky, where bottles of wine and pretzels were enjoyed. Many years later, in an interview with Sassen in Argentina, Eichmann recalled that meeting, stating, *“On that evening, the fate of the Jews of Hungary was sealed”*.³³⁷ This further supports the argument presented in the study that a single individual, Eichmann, seizing an opportunity, played a crucial role, and it underscores the significance of Hungarian collaboration, which also influenced his decision.

This can give us a better understanding why Eichmann trusted the Hungarian gendarmerie in doing these crimes. He knew how to choose antisemitic leaders, or Nazi sympathizers, who will comply with him.³³⁸ He also recognized their self-interests, including borders and other factors mentioned earlier. Then, the soldiers, or militia personnel, just followed orders. This fits well with Stanley Milgram's experiment and obedience, especially that most of the time they collaborated from far. They were just assisting the Nazis in the deportation, not actually killing. Eichmann relied on the well-disciplined gendarmerie, who policed the majority of the country. They diligently executed their mission, aiding in the collection and deportation of Jews without questioning orders.³³⁹ Joseph Goebbels

³³⁶ Ibid., p. 68.

³³⁷ Porter, *Kastner's Train*, pp. 96–97. See more on pp. 102–103. In December 1945, Endre, Baky, and another Hungarian politician who collaborated with the Nazis, Andor Jaross, were tried in Budapest and found guilty of the murder of Jews and acting against the national interests of Hungary. All three (now known as “the deportation trio”) were executed, as were no fewer than four of Hungary's wartime prime ministers, including Bela Imredy and Ferenc Szálasi. They were hanged using the Austro-Hungarian pole method in March 1946. For further details on justice after the war, see Appendix E.

³³⁸ See also Frenec Laczo, *Hungarian Jews in the Age of Genocide*, Brill, Boston, 2016, pp. 175, 184–185. He mentioned that Jeno Levai argues that Eichmann prioritized the physical annihilation of Jewry over military interests and that the Hungarian leaders Laszlo Endre and Laszlo Baky were fully committed to the program of genocide too, whereas other members of Sztojay's government seemed barely interested in the fate of the Jews (p. 185). It seems that they became friends and Eichmann knew he could rely on their assistance. They were also greedy.

³³⁹ Molnar, “Crime and Punishment? The Hungarian Gendarmerie During and After the Holocaust,” p. 68.

summarized the Jewish annihilation in Hungary in an internal message sent to Nazi Party activists on August 2, 1944. In it, he wrote: "The expulsion was executed swiftly and persistently. An indispensable element for its success was the acceptance of measures against the Jews by the majority of the Hungarian people".³⁴⁰

This quote underscores the essential role that the Hungarians played in the Holocaust of Hungarian Jews—a role Eichmann skillfully manipulated to his advantage. The next chapter will examine another key element Eichmann exploited for this purpose: Dr. Rudolf Kasztner and the Jewish Council. Figures 13 and 14 include a photo of Kasztner and images of Jews who were selected for the train he arranged, eventually reaching safety in Switzerland.



Figure 13: Jews from the "Kasztner train" arrive in Switzerland. This group of Jews was released from Bergen-Belsen as a result of negotiations between the Germans and Hungarian Jewish leaders Joel Brand and Rezso Kasztner. Switzerland, August 1944. Credit: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Yad Vashem Photo Archives.

³⁴⁰ Da'at Website, *Pirkei Edut: Hungary* (in Hebrew), <https://www.daat.ac.il/daat/hungary/pirkey/04.htm>.



Figure 14: Rezső Kasztner at the Ministries Trial (January 6, 1948 – April 13, 1949) of the Subsequent Nuremberg trials. Credit: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Rudolf_Kastner_at_Kol_Yisrael,_early_1950s.jpg.