

**Unhidden Holocaust Under Szálasi:  
Racial Persecutions, Violence, and Death in the Annexed  
'Felvidéki' Parts of Hungary  
(October 1944 – March 1945)**

Katarína Ristveyová

**Motivation behind the research topic**

During my PhD. studies, my research focused on the social, political and economic development in the area of Žitný ostrov in 1938-1945. The period is framed by the First Vienna Award and the end of WWII. The main focus, however, was put on the minority policies of the new Hungarian regime exercised in said territory and atrocities committed by both the Horthy and Szálasi regime apparatus on Jewish, Roma and other minorities between 1938 and 1945.

This multi-ethnic area was attached to Czechoslovakia after WWI even though its population identified mainly as Hungarian. During the first decade, lots of Slovak and Czech inhabitants found home here. That is why its population transformed. But when the territory was annexed by Hungary according to the First Vienna Award's verdict, things had started to change. The Czechoslovak state began an evacuation of the most crucial companies and factories. Lots of Czechs and Slovaks left during the first few months after the First Vienna Award. Some of them willingly, but some were exiled or by threat from Hungarian armed units forced to leave their homes they were living in for two decades. The Hungarian armed forces were trying to make the area of Žitný ostrov completely homogeneous.

That is when the persecution of Jewish and Gypsy (Roma) ethnics started in accordance to the state policies of the Hungarian Kingdom. Although Hungary started the transports of these minorities later than Slovakia, the first restrictions concerning them were enacted much earlier. In fact, Hungary was among the first countries to enact the so-called

*numerus clausus* as early as in the 1920s. The Jewish and Roma citizens of this area, therefore, suddenly became a “problem” or an “issue” for the majority population as well as their new state, which was a new experience and a shock to them. Interesting is the reaction from the population of Žitný ostrov. The friends and neighbours turned on each other. This history is often unsaid and this is why I focused my attention on these horrible acts.

My current FMS project thus arises from an extensive previous research dealing with the persecution of Jews and Roma in Komárno County, the town and region I grew up in, and was annexed to Hungary due to the First Vienna Award. The project expands the researched area to the entire annexed multi-ethnic *Felvidéki* territory. The focus is, however, put solely on the anti-Semitic political practice of Ferenc Szálasi’s Arrow Cross Party (*Nyilaskeresztes Párt*) rule at the very end of World War II, when atrocities committed against the Jews and Roma became part of the everyday life of the citizens living in said territory. This era of history, even though short, made a mark and caused a historical trauma in the memories of the population in Hungary and its annexed territories. As unprecedented terror ensued directly on the streets of towns in *Felvidék*, many of the majority population witnessed or participated in these acts of violence. This form of violence I call an “unhidden Holocaust” in my project, since neither the state Arrow Cross Party apparatus, nor the active perpetrators of anti-Semitic crimes tried to hide their brutal acts. On this concept, I would like to demonstrate the mechanisms of racially motivated reprisals and war crimes committed from October 1944 until March 1945, their specific features in *Felvidéki* regions, the escalating policy of anti-Semitism and antiziganism in *Felvidék*, as well as the participation of the Hungarian majority in these processes.

Based on the experience from previous research, I believe that the eradication of the Jews surviving the summer 1944 deportations and the Roma was not only the work of *Nyilas* fanaticism, but also of the *demoralized majority society as a whole*. On the basis of preserved official reports on the situation in the *Felvidéki* regions and based on court protocols from post-war trials, I believe that in the last stage of the war a social background was created in Hungary under Szálasi regime, where the violence and shootings actually became a daily accepted routine. While during the summer 1944, the real purpose of the deportations of Hungarian Jews was kept secret and officially

presented as “evacuation for labour” or into “new homeland”, during the *Nyilas* rule the Holocaust was present directly on Hungarian territory with all its characteristic attributes until then not immediately visible to the Hungarian majority. In addition to uncovering the mechanisms of racially motivated reprisals and their specific cases in *Felvidéki* regions that have not yet been the subject of historical research, I assume that the social atmosphere in Szálasi’s Hungary also played a significant role in authorizing the policy of “unhidden Holocaust”. Therefore, I also focus my attention on research of the wider socio-political context: the ideology of the Arrow Cross Party regime, its propaganda and the reflection of this propaganda at regional and local level, which – in my opinion – helped not only justify racial violence and murder, but also directly or indirectly encouraged and sought to anchor the Holocaust paradigm as something “normal” in the identity of Hungarian majority.

## **State-of-art**

Holocaust (and racial persecutions in general) in the *Felvidéki* territories of the Hungarian Kingdom in 1938 – 1945 did not belong among significant subjects of historian’s interest after World War II. Slovak historiography considered them a “Hungarian topic”, while Hungarian historiography considered them a subject to be dealt with by historians in Slovakia. An important factor of disinterest was the rise of communist regimes in both countries, in which the Holocaust and the persecution of Jews were on the periphery of interest due to the two countries’ complicated relations with Israel, as well as the dominance of communist resistance topics in historiography. Persecutions in Hungary during the Horthy and Szálasi eras were not perceived by historians as a persecution of a racial or national but of social nature (the “terrorist struggle of the reactionary bourgeoisie”). Nevertheless, even during the period of socialism, several works were published that addressed the issue of persecuted minorities in the annexed *Felvidéki* parts of Hungary at least partially, such as Ladislav Olexa’s publications *V tieni šípových krížov* and *Kríza horthyovského fašizmu*, Juraj Fabian’s *Svätoštefanské tiene*, Martin Vietor’s extensive monograph *Dejiny okupácie južného*

*Slovenska*, or the works by Hungarian historian Lóránt Tilkovszky published in both Hungarian and Slovak (e.g. *Južné Slovensko v rokoch 1938 – 1945*).

Situation did not notably change even after the fall of Communism in 1989. The historiographies on both sides of the Danube tried to discuss the controversial issues of Slovak-Hungarian relations in 1938 – 1945, especially their diplomatic aspects, the (un)justice of the First Vienna Award or the situation of the Slovak minority in Hungary and the Hungarian minority in Slovakia (Ladislav Deák, Martin Hetényi, Ferdinand Vrábek, Ján Mitáč, Attila Simon, Gergely Sallai, Miklós Zeidler, István Janek, etc.). Persecutions of Jews and Roma, however, remained outside their attention span and were only partially reflected, mostly by regional historians. And thus the works of Komárom historian Emese Szamadó “*Ezt a hazát tehát elvesztettem*”: *a holokaust komáromi eseményei* and *Komárom 1938 – 1945: A Felvidék visszacsatolása és komáromi következményei a korabeli sajtó és dokumentumok tükrében*, the author duo Tomáš Lang – Sándor Štrba *Holokaust na južnom Slovensku na pozadí histórie novožamockých Židov*, Tibor Kornfeld’s monograph *Bolo raz jedno židovské mesto, Dunajská Streda/ Volt egyszer egy zsidó város, Dunaszerdahely*, the work by Alfréd Engel *A dunaszerdahelyi zsidó hitközség emlékkönyve*, a guide book by Szabolcs Szita and Miroslav Michela on the history of Jewish community in Komárno *Mesto na hranici. Stratené mesto – Lost City – Verlorene Stadt – Elveszett város* and various partial studies or memoirs were published.

Nevertheless, the abovementioned works suffered from several shortcomings: not all of their authors were professional historians with a critical approach to sources, in their interpretations they did not take into account a broader (national or European) comparative context, in many of them a description of events was dominant over their analysis, and, moreover, the “unhidden Holocaust” in the era of the Arrow Cross Party rule was addressed only marginally. At the same time, many works, especially of Hungarian provenance, did not seem to consider this period as part of national history, but rather as “foreign Holocaust”. Crimes perpetrated by members and supporters of Szálasi’s Arrow Cross Party were considered to be crimes committed by supporters of “foreign”, “non-Hungarian” ideology (National Socialism) and, additionally, during the occupation by a “foreign power”, Germany. Such a methodological conception of works, trying to remit the Hungarian majority from co-responsibility, does not contain a critical,

but openly or secretly apologetic nature, supporting the so-called “self-defensive discourse”. Simultaneously, the mentioned works did not make sufficient use of archival fonds in the central national archives (Budapest, Bratislava, Prague), regional Slovak archives, or collections abroad (Germany, France), where many perpetrators of these war crimes fled from prosecution after the war.

The basic line of the history of the Holocaust in Hungary is very well researched thanks to the works of authors such as Randolph L. Braham, László Karsai, István Bibó and Nathaniel Katzburg. Similarly, there is also a quality basis of scholar literature on the history of the fascist Arrow Cross Party, its leader Ferenc Szálasi and aspects of his rule in the final stages of World War II (Rudolf Paksa, Zoltán Paksy, Andrea Pető, László Karsai, Béla Vincellér), as well as general literature on anti-Semitism and the socio-political situation in Hungary during the war (Krisztián Ungváry, Dávid Turbucz, David Cesarini, etc.). Recent works published in the last decade, in particular, are no longer just “filling in the gaps” of historiography, but reflect new trends in Holocaust Studies and seek to perceive the history of the Holocaust in Hungary in a broad transnational context, also opening new approaches to the subject of research of this project (racial violence, death, the impact of propaganda on the radicalization of the majority, the social roles of victims, perpetrators and the so-called bystanders as outlined by Raul Hilberg, etc.). During my research I am thus drawing inspiration from these later works – not trying to imitate them, but perhaps elaborate on them.

## **Premise and research stages**

After the Arrow Cross Party took power in October 1944, Jewish communities, even though decimated by the deportations during the Horthy rule, were still present in the *Felvidéki* region. Almost immediately after seizing power, the Arrow Cross Party began to implement there the “new order” visions based on Szálasi’s notion of a “Hungarian state” (*hungarista állam*), which also included “cleansing” Hungary of Jews and, secondarily, of Roma, who had already had to face various discriminatory measures in the previous regime, unquestionably inspired by their “racial otherness”. The terror that ensued was unprecedented even among other states collaborating with Hitler’s Third Reich. My

research of this “unhidden Holocaust” is divided into three main heuristic categories:

1. Racial policy, Ferenc Szálasi and the Arrow Cross Party regime;
2. Forms of violence during the Arrow Cross Party rule;
3. Death during the Arrow Cross Party rule.

An important part of understanding the (1) *racial policy* and the Holocaust in Szálasi’s Hungary is the comprehension of the general atmosphere, the anti-Semitic “cultural code” of Hungarian society and the laws adopted between October 1944 and March 1945 that allowed Jewish and Roma victims to be murdered.

In the first phase of the research, I worked on decoding the ideological “background” of reprisals and atrocities using the methodological approach of British historian Roger Griffin. Who, while analysing fascism and fascists (which the *Nyilas* undoubtedly were), adopted an “emphatic approach” – that means trying to understand them, to reveal the *essence* of their ideology and goals without approaching them leniently, apologetically or justifying their actions. As I started my research, I focused first on the racial policies of both the Arrow Cross Party and Ferenc Szálasi himself. I also focused on how his personal views changed in different stages of his political career and how they were reflected in the political programme of his party. For this reason, I had to research his views well before he assumed power, even prior to WWII, when his political and racial opinions were being formed.

In this stage, the research required me to identify how much did Szálasi influence the policies of the party he headed and how much was he forced to change its racial policies according to outer influences (to gain voters or, later in 1944, to align to the official policies of the German Third Reich). It also gave me a better idea of why were the members of the Arrow Cross Party and the representatives of its apparatus so eager to commit brutal violence on the persecuted groups in *Felvidék*, whether they “just followed the orders” or were initiative themselves.

Simultaneously, I was trying to reconstruct, based on the preserved situation reports of the Szálasi regime, how this “new spirit” of radicalism was reflected by the majority and to what extent was the majority willing to participate in “cleansing Hungary of its enemies” in order to gain benefits or take revenge. On the example of the *Felvidéki* regions, I focus my attention on the dynamic development of anti-Semitism and anti-

Jewish fanaticism of the majority compared to the period prior to *Nyilas* coup. I am also trying to find an answer to whether and how the Szálasi regime was able to mobilize and motivate the population to authorize anti-Jewish and anti-Roma reprisals, to consider them natural, or to proactively participate in them. In trying to answer this question, I draw inspiration from typologically similar regimes of Hitler's *Neueuropa* at the end of the war.

While researching my first heuristic category, my findings lead to uncovering (2) forms of violence against Jews and Roma in *Felvidéki* regions by the *Nyilas* troops and the state apparatus. Testimonies of survivors deposited in the archives in Slovakia, as well as Hungary, serve as my primary source. I want to focus my attention on a structural analysis of the different types of violence against racially persecuted: What forms of violence had they faced on an ordinary day and what forms had they faced in internment? How did the *victims themselves experience violence*? How did the *methods of violence* used by the *Nyilas* differ from those of the Nazis? And in particular: how did the *awareness of the approaching* front influence the violence against Jewish and Roma prisoners? Did the instinct of self-preservation lead the *Nyilas* to try to approach the prisoners more moderately, or did they intensify their violence just before the arrival of the Soviet army? Being aware of the *Nyilas* practices in Budapest and the surrounding area where the Arrow Cross Party initially concentrated the core of their power, I will try to compare these aspects in a transregional context. I will also assess how the regulations, orders and laws of the Szálasi administration were reflected at the regional and local level based on their comparison. In other words, whether the violence was an immanent part of the regime's policy or if it resulted mainly from the arbitrariness and anarchy of the *Nyilas* at the level of respective *Felvidéki* towns and villages?

This stage mostly uncovered the differences and also similarities of the violence committed on Jews during both the previous Horthy and later Szálasi regimes. While reading some testimonies, I couldn't help but notice the public and the newspapers of that time did not inform on any of these activities even though they were happening directly on the streets of towns. The murders and horrible conditions of persecuted minorities were, according to the testimonies, a public knowledge – so why there were no reports on them? Was it because they were so *ignorant* or *were they forbidden* to comment on them? Were they *accustomed* to such violence by the end of the war? Did *people identify* with

the racial politics of the Szálasi rule? I hope to uncover the answers during my further research and publish the results in my final output – a monograph.

This research framework is directly related, even interconnected, to my last heuristic category (3) *death during the Arrow Cross Party rule* – in which I will research how *the acts of murders* as an outcome of the politics of the Holocaust moved from gas chambers in occupied Poland to the public space of *Felvidéki* towns and their immediate surroundings. From my previous research, I know that in the vicinity of Komárno alone about 600 people were savagely murdered at the turn of 1944/1945. During my research, I want to find out what about elsewhere, in other towns of *Felvidék*?

My intention within this research point is to reveal other, still insufficiently researched mass murders and their circumstances = all the more that the *Felvidéki* territory remained under the Szálasi's Arrow Cross Party's rule for the longest time from all the regions in the Hungarian Kingdom, until late March 1945.

Thanks to the FMS funding, I was able to conduct my research not only in Slovakia (archives – Slovak National Archive, State Archives in Bratislava, Komárno, Nitra, Banská Bystrica, Košice, etc., and libraries – Slovak National Library in Martin, University Libraries in Bratislava and in Ružomberok, State Scientific Libraries in Banská Bystrica, Prešov and Košice), but also in Hungary (National Archives in Hungary, National Széchényi Library, etc.), as well as Czech Republic (National Archives of the Czech Republic in Prague, library and archives of the Military History Institute in Prague, Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic, National Library of the Czech Republic, etc.). Research in the local institutions filled in the gaps of the research conducted in the main Slovak, Czech and Hungarian national archives and libraries. As my research progresses, new questions arise that need to be answered.

## **Key achievements (as of April 2022)**

During the implementation of the project so far, I was able to submit and publish several articles or chapters that are a direct result of my research funded by the Fondation pour la Mémoire de la Shoah despite the ongoing pandemic restrictions that affected my research mostly in winter months. The most notable output so far is the monograph



*Fašizmus náš slovenský [Our Slovak Fascism]*, in which I co-authored a chapter focusing on fascism's influence on Hungarian minority and anti-Semitism to complete an overview of the fascist movement in Slovakia from the 1920s to 1940s, its specific as well as the common features with fascist parties in Europe. The monograph has already received positive feedback and reviews among the professional as well as lay public in Slovakia and Czech Republic.

Besides the collective monograph, I have submitted a research article published in March 2022 in the journal of the Ministry of Defense of the Slovak Republic, *Vojenská osveta*. The article entitled *Deportácie slovenských Židov v priebehu 2. svetovej vojny [Deportations of Slovak Jews during World War II]* contains a summary of the Holocaust in Slovakia during the Second World War. The submitted article doesn't shy away from the extensive persecutions the Slovak Jewry had to go through even before the establishment of the Slovak State, while not omitting the persecutions and deportations from the *Felvidéki* regions awarded to Hungary in the First Vienna Award. The article draws directly from my research in the libraries in Bratislava, Martin, Ružomberok, and Budapest.

Another noteworthy activity I was able to finish thanks to the FMS funding is my part in the script of a new Slovak national exhibition in Auschwitz-Birkenau Holocaust Memorial Museum. I had the honour of being invited to join the team of Slovak historians working on the new exhibition (the current exhibition was opened in 2002 and is outdated) which is set to be installed in the upcoming years. The invitation is a prestigious thing in Slovakia for historians dealing with Holocaust. My part of the script derives specifically from the topic I am focusing on (*Holocaust in the Slovak territory annexed to Hungary due to the First Vienna Award*) and my research conducted in huge part when working on fulfilling my project goals. This activity has a potential to reach international public, since the Auschwitz-Birkenau Holocaust Memorial Museum is one of the most visited Holocaust-themed museums globally.

In the last two years, I have been an executive editor to a peer-viewed journal *Judaica et Holocaustica* – the work I have been able to continue to work on alongside fulfilling my FMS project objectives. The journal is published twice a year in English and focuses on the new perspectives and phenomena in the research of anti-Semitism, anti-Judaism and Holocaust Studies. Besides published articles and studies, it contains memoirs and

documents from various sources and archives – which can help historians dealing with similar topics in their research.

However, the main outcome of my research funded by the FMS will be summarized in a final monograph entitled *Unhidden Holocaust under Szálasi: Racial persecutions, violence and death in the annexed 'Felvidéki' parts of Hungary (October 1944-March 1945)* I hope to be able to publish in the second half of 2023. I believe it has a potential to resonate both in Hungary and Slovakia as well as in broader European comparative framework of the Holocaust Studies.

Since the beginning of the FMS's support, I have attended three conferences/symposiums, one of which I helped to organize, with contributions more or less related to my current research. As a regular participant of the symposium cycle, I am planning to enroll in a 10<sup>th</sup> *European Remembrance and Solidarity Symposium* in Dublin in early June which will host mainly academics from various research and remembrance institutions or researchers dealing with remembrance and memory in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. I have also received an invitation to the joint Slovak-Hungarian conference held on 30<sup>th</sup> and 31<sup>st</sup> May in Banská Bystrica by the Slovak-Hungarian Committee of Historians (under the auspices of both countries' Ministers of Foreign Affairs), which I gladly accepted. The conference deals with the *Collaboration and Resistance* and is aimed at topics interconnecting the Hungarian and Slovak historical experiences – common and well as specific features. As a frequent collaborator with the Museum of the Slovak National Uprising since my student days, I will co-organize an international conference on *Heroism and Violence in the Second World War* planned for some time in November 2022. However, the majority of the results of the research will be presented after the completion of a project.

In case of further interest in my research or its outputs, you can contact me at [ritveyova@gmail.com](mailto:ritveyova@gmail.com) and I will gladly answer any questions that may arise. Articles into the abovementioned peer-viewed journal *Judaica et Holocaustica* will also be gladly accepted at the same email address.