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Sopronkőhida, 1944–1951

**Crises and Spatiality: The National Penitentiary in Sopron
during Hungary's Theater of War Period and after the Soviet
Occupation**

PhD thesis

Thesis booklet

Doctoral School of History

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1. Background of the Research, Problem Statement

My interest in the history of Sopronkőhida stems from a curiosity about transitional periods and crises, as well as phenomena of resistance and retaliation. Since 2014, as a research fellow at the Office of the Committee of National Remembrance, I have delved into the post-war history of Sopron County, uncovering valuable documents for my doctoral dissertation. István Berényi's teachings at the Economic, Regional, and Political History Workshop furthered my interest in the connection between history and spatiality. This interest was heightened when I presented at the Hungarian Prison Society conference within the Sopronkőhida penitentiary on May 26, 2016.

The research aims to scrutinize the history of crisis and transitional periods. The challenge lies in capturing events and processes during crises, such as Hungary's tumultuous period during the Second World War, which are inherently complex to discern compared to times of peace. The occupation of the country, the clash of military interests, and the breakdown of state and societal structures present the researcher with a picture of unpredictability and chaos. However, must history necessarily be fragmented in such times, or can we uncover continuities through examination? Therefore, the central question of the research is: Is it feasible to identify a geographically specific space amidst this tumult, where history is condensed and capable of offering a cross-sectional view of an epochal shift?

The selection of Sopronkőida penitentiary offers several advantages, facilitating the examination of multiple historical strata. Positioned on the outskirts of Sopron city, the penitentiary served as a locus of punishment and discipline, symbolically representing Hungarian society. Furthermore, Sopronkőida can be viewed as a manifestation of 19th-century penal law. Amidst the wartime upheaval, an additional layer emerged with the establishment of the Court of the Chief of the General Staff of the Hungarian Royal Army within the institution in 1944-1945.

The establishment of the special court marked a shift in military criminal law during the 1930s and World War II, characterized by a stringent emphasis on state protection regarding treason offenses. This approach starkly contrasted with the former century's individualistic, liberal ethos, deliberately positioning itself as its antithesis.

Sopronkőhida serves as the symbolic stage for the conclusion of the Horthy era: it was the initial site where a substantial number of political prisoners were detained during the closing phase of the World War II, and it was also where executions took place. Around 600 individuals were held in the prison for political reasons. Their social makeup mirrored the entirety of Hungarian society at the time. Among the detainees were numerous members of the social elite who had recently vanished from the historical scene, as well as individuals perceived as future leaders in post-1945 public life.

As the front progressed, the institution fell under the control of the occupying Red Army, and a prisoner-of-war camp was established in the vicinity. Subsequently, Sopronkőhida's circumstances were dictated by the Soviet military in the ensuing years, regardless of Hungary's national borders. The POW camp evolved into a regional assembly point and became integrated into the extensive Soviet (forced labor) camp network. Later, the facility operated as a prison for the Soviet military court situated in Baden bei Wien.

In Sopronkőhida, stories from various institutions, social strata, and individuals deported for various reasons intersected and intertwined. Thus, the methodological query of the research arises: how can we delineate the timeframe during which these diverse historical layers converged? Furthermore, how can Sopronkőhida serve as a prism to apprehend a pivotal juncture in Hungarian history, and how can this pivotal moment be scrutinized utilizing the existing sources? Methodologically, this research seeks to define the period of overlapping historical layers and understand Sopronkőhida's role as a turning point in Hungarian history. The analysis will utilize available sources to examine this pivotal moment.

2. Theoretical and Methodological Framework

This research initially delves into the conceptual frameworks of crises and the challenges of periodization within the examined timeframe. It is imperative to explore the spatial and geographical implications evident in the sources related to Sopronkőhida.

A crisis is characterized by the emergence of an unstable and perilous situation, with the potential to impact individuals, communities, and society at large. Alternatively, a crisis can be perceived as a pivotal phase within a sequence of events, a turning

point that shapes the trajectory of future developments. In Hungarian history, this timeframe encompasses the tumultuous years of 1944-1945 and the establishment of communist rule, which profoundly altered Hungarian society for decades, leaving an enduring impact to this day.

Regarding periodization, this dissertation posits that Hungary entered a *theater of war period* with the German occupation and the entry of the Red Army into Hungarian territory. This framework serves to contextualize Hungary's fragmentation due to war into a cohesive interpretive framework. Sopronkőhida symbolizes the end of the Horthy era and offers insight into the policies of the Szálasi government. The subsequent Soviet occupation and the establishment of the Provisional National Assembly ushered in a purportedly democratic period, albeit one marked by Soviet and communist influence. This period, though not yet defined as the era of communist dictatorship, witnessed efforts by the USSR and the Hungarian Communist Party to consolidate power, imposing Eastern political, economic, and social integration on the region for four decades.

The thesis's time frame, spanning from 1944 to 1951, is substantiated by the layers of historical significance added to Sopronkőhida, although certain instances within the study also encompassed earlier events. The appearance of political prisoners in the penitentiary marked a pivotal juncture in Sopronkőhida's history. Initially, in November 1944, the prison received individuals termed "protective detainees," followed by the occupation of the penitentiary by of the Court of the Chief of the General Staff III. in December 1944. This court functioned within Sopronkőhida until March 29, 1945, when it was relocated to Germany along with the prisoners.

Shortly after the Red Army's occupation of Sopronkőhida, a prisoner-of-war camp was swiftly established in the penitentiary and its surrounding areas. Meanwhile, the administration, and the staff of the penitentiary continued its operations temporarily in Sopron, specifically in Barracks '48. Following the closure of the POW in early fall of 1945, the penitentiary building remained under Soviet control until January 22, 1948. Subsequently, after the withdrawal of Soviet authorities, the facility reverted to the jurisdiction of the Ministry of

Justice, facilitating the return of the Sopron National Prison. The prison functioned until its dissolution in 1951 (it was subsequently reopened in 1955).

The dissertation's approach is rooted in spatial theory literature, which posits that human existence can be comprehended within the framework of an ontological trinity encompassing sociality, historicity, and spatiality. Scholars like Edward Soja and Henri Lefebvre have explored this premise extensively. In this vein, Sopronkőhida is not merely a static arrangement of physical elements, but rather a space shaped by human interaction, embodying modern social, power, and political dynamics. To borrow from Michel Foucault's terminology, it can be conceived as a heterotopia. Sopronkőhida, functioning as a prison, transcends mere physicality to become an imagined and experiential domain of punishment and discipline. Furthermore, the prison serves as both a locus of violence, as argued by Jörg Baberowski, and a site for the construction of collective memory, as delineated by Pierre Nora.

The dissertation also delved into the genesis of Sopronkőhida as a space and its pivotal contexts. This encompassed the transformations in criminal law and penitentiary legislation during the 19th century that facilitated the establishment of the penitentiary, along with the shifts in military criminal law during the 1930s and the wartime crisis that precipitated the formation of the Court of the Chief of the General Staff. Where feasible, the dissertation strived to offer insights into the internal mechanisms and regulations of the penitentiary, elucidating the living conditions of the inmates and their avenues for agency and resistance. Special emphasis was placed on exploring the interior spaces of the prison, including the hospital, cell block, church, school, and the history of the cemetery.

The dissertation constitutes a qualitative research endeavor, predominantly relying on textual sources with a minor inclusion of visual materials. The textual sources exhibit considerable diversity in terms of format, provenance, and genre, encompassing diaries, memoirs, newspaper articles, and assorted documents from administrative, investigative, and judicial entities. Availability of these sources varies significantly, spanning from family archives to public

and digital collections. Diaries hold a particularly significant role, with the research unearthing a novel and previously undiscovered source, namely Miklós Tix's diary. Additionally, memoirs play a pivotal role in the source corpus pertaining to Sopronkőhida. Through diligent exploration of newly discovered sources, such as Géza Nika's memoirs, the research has expanded and enriched its informational framework.

The methodological approach adopted in this dissertation follows the contextual positioning method developed by Nicholas Ralph, Melanie Birks, and Ysanne Chapman. Primarily relying on written sources, the method involves positioning and analyzing these sources through a series of inquiries. These inquiries encompass identifying the authors or contributors of the sources, which could be individuals, institutions, or entities involved in editing and verifying the source. Once the creators of the source are established, the examination extends to discerning the authors' intentions behind crafting the source or text. It may also involve understanding the process and methodology employed in producing the text, including the sources and data utilized as its foundation. Furthermore, questions may arise regarding the manner in which the source was written, its intended audience, and the extent to which it achieved its objectives or why those objectives might not have been realized. The subsequent inquiries pertain to the identification and utilization of resources. These include determining the nature of the resource, its intended or stated purpose, and the reasons behind its utilization. It is crucial to assess why the content of the resource is deemed reliable or consistent, as well as its significance compared to other sources and its relevance to the research. Temporality is also a key aspect to consider, encompassing not only the time of its creation but also its intended and actual "lifespan" as an official document, whether it was intended for preservation or archived inadvertently. The origin and intended use of the document or source are also pertinent considerations.

In addition, the dissertation provides a historiography of Sopronkőhida, which extends beyond academic studies on the prison's history to encompass memoirs, diaries, and even fictional works.

3. Results

A comprehensive historical study of Sopronkőhida for the period in question has not yet been undertaken before. This dissertation has endeavored to explore what may be the most intricate phase in Sopronkőhida's history, spanning the transition of 1944-1945 and the subsequent years. To achieve this, a diverse array of primary sources and firsthand accounts were utilized. Additionally, insights from historiographical, prison studies, legal history, and local history literature were incorporated, aiming to integrate findings across disciplinary boundaries.

The dissertation highlighted the challenges of periodizing Hungarian history in the 20th century. On one hand, within the broader European and global context, our historical narrative often revolves around wars or international conflicts. Conversely, in terms of internal political and social development, our major epochs are often demarcated by the names of the governing authoritarian individuals. However, we lack precise terms for periods of crisis and transition, as they lack internal coherence. Therefore, in this dissertation, the concepts of the *theater of war period* and the era of *Eastern sphere of power* have been introduced to delineate the period under examination.

The establishment of the penitentiary was intricately linked to the evolution of modern society and the advent of civil criminal law. It is noteworthy that the government deemed the location of the (sugar) factory, symbolizing 19th-century capitalist society, suitable for erecting the Royal National Penitentiary of Sopron, preserving some of its original structures. As state and societal developments progressed in the 19th century, there was a shift in attitudes towards punishment compared to medieval norms. Sopronkőhida emerged as a result of the Csemegi Codex and later during the "golden age" of the prison system.

The primary focus of the thesis was on the period when the space of Sopronkőhida was "invaded by history," signifying the partial or complete occupation of the penitentiary by external institutions. A notable characteristic of this occupation was the overshadowing of the penitentiary's intrinsic history. The dissertation revealed a recurring

pattern, indicating similar events occurring in Sopronkőhida during previous world wars and post-war crises. In fact, during 1918-1919, military authorities had previously occupied the Sopronkőhida penitentiary. For various historical reasons, and also following the war, the definitive ownership and status of the penitentiary's territory remained uncertain until 1921.

The dissertation delved into the establishment and functioning of the Court of the Chief of the General Staff. It revealed that a significant portion of the court's shortcomings stemmed from the authority wielded by the overseeing commander, the Chief of the General Staff, leading to inconsistent institutional performance. In certain instances, this allowed for the exploitation of legal loopholes, facilitated adjustments in procedural conduct to suit prevailing political agendas, and ultimately influenced verdicts. The court was susceptible to power abuse, blending informal, trust-based elements with institutional authority. Changes in leadership within the Chief of General Staff position impacted the trajectory of the court's operations. Notably, the court's significance peaked after October 16, 1944, when Ferenc Szálasi and the Arrow Cross Party, aided by Germany, toppled the political establishment of the Horthy era, leading to the trial of members from the previous regime. The study elucidated the roles of the Court of the Chief of the General Staff III and the Court under the authority of the Minister Responsible for Total Mobilization of the Nation.

A notable achievement of the dissertation lies in its utilization of previously undiscovered sources, such as the prison diary of Miklós Tix and the memoir of military judge Géza Nika, significantly enriching our understanding of the subject matter. Through two detailed case studies, the dissertation delved into the imprisonment histories of József Mindszenty and László Rajk in Sopronkőhida, shedding light on and sometimes reevaluating topics that have garnered interest from other historians. Additionally, a novel aspect of the dissertation is its exploration of the court's history and the fate of its prisoners deported to Germany, incorporating primary sources from documents originating in Oberaudorf.

The history of the Soviet POW camp and military prison was primarily reconstructed through memoirs, with additional insights drawn from research into local party documents and personal papers. For instance, the report of the Communist Party of Fertőrákos provided valuable information, allowing for the compilation of a list of names of some members of the Soviet camp leadership. A significant characteristic of the POW camp was the classification of prisoners based on their physical condition due to labor allocation being central to the Soviet forced labor system. Examination of the Sopronkőhida's interior revealed overcrowded and deteriorating conditions reminiscent of the gulag as early as 1945.

A noteworthy contribution of this dissertation is its pioneering review of literature and sources available in Sopron pertaining to the post-Soviet POW camp and military prison, marking an important addition to the existing scholarship on the subject.

We have also provided a summary of the findings related to the János-telep cemetery. The research reconstructed the fate of the deceased during the period of the Court of the Chief of the General Staff III. Additionally, we have compiled data on prisoners of war and detainees who died or were executed during the Soviet occupation period – however, we have been unable to determine where the Soviet authorities buried the deceased.

The dissertation aimed to explore the crisis that significantly influenced the trajectory of Hungarian history by delving into the history of a specific location, the Sopronkőhida penitentiary. The history of Sopronkőhida mirrors the pivotal historical moment of Hungary in 1944-1945 and symbolically represents all subsequent events that unfolded in the country.

4. Publications and Appearances in Connection with the Thesis, Its Broader Topic, and the Era:

Studies

Szokolay, Domokos. „Political Justice and People’s Courts in Post-War Hungary (1945–1950) in the Research of Hungarian Historians”. *Totalitarian and 20th Century Studies*, Vol. 6. (2022): 200–227.

———. „Krisis és térbeliség: A sopronkőhidai fegyintézet 1944–1945-ben”. In *Út(elágazások): Magyarország 1944–1945*, szerk. Virányi Péter, 59–92. Budapest: MTA II. világháború története albizottság, 2022.

———. „Emlékezés és oral history: Adalékok az 1944-es nemzeti ifjúsági ellenállás előtörténetéhez és kutatási lehetőségeihez”. In *Studia Varia*, szerk. Balázs József, Bojtos Anita, Paár Tamás, Tompa Zsófia, Turi Gergő, és Vadász Noémi, 470–81. Budapest: PPKE-BTK, 2016.

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Articles

Szokolay Domokos. „Nyolcszázezer mozaik. Emlékezés a Szovjetunióba elhurcolt magyar politikai rabokra és kényszermunkásokra”. *Magyar Nemzet*, 2021. november 26., 84. évf. 204. sz. kiadás.

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Source Publication

Szokolay Domokos. „Mentesítés és igazolás »két tragikus kor árnyékában«: Mester Miklós és Heltai Jenő levelei, 1944–1948.” In *Studia Vincentiana: A Szent Vince Szakkollégium válogatott tanulmányai*, szerk. Martin Gulyás, 271–82. Piliscsaba: Szent Vince Szakkollégium, 2015.

Reviews

Szokolay Domokos. „A túlélők megszólalnak: Tatár Rózsa: Túléltük! Emlékezések a malenkij robotra, Aposztróf Kiadó, 2017.” *Magyar Napló*, sz. 2 (február) (2019): 65.

———. „Akikkel többen lehetnénk – magyarok szovjet fogságban: Bognár Zsolt: GULAG, GUPVI, »malenkij robot«, Magyar Napló Kiadó, 2017.” *Magyar Napló*, sz. 2 (február) (2019): 63–64.

Selected Conference Presentations

International Conferences

Szokolay, Domokos. *Fates and Heterotopias: Resistance, Retaliation and a Historic Turning Point in the Sopronkőhida Prison 1944–1945*.

46th Annual Conference (American Hungarian Educators Association). Online, 2022. április 7.

———. *Resistance, Courts-Martial and Retaliation in Hungary 1944–1945*. Cracovian Congress of History Students (Jagiellonian University). Kraków, Lengyelország, 2019. május 25.

———. “*Only the tyrant and the servant. These two are against me.*” *The Görgey Battalion and the national youth resistance movement in Hungary in 1944–1945*. 26th Historian Students Congress in Łódź (University of Łódź). Łódź, Lengyelország, 2018. április 19.

———. *Overview of the 1944 Hungarian Youth Resistance Movement*. International Conference of Young Historians. Middle-East Europe in historical research of PhD students (Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań). Poznań, Lengyelország, 2017. május 27.

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Domestic Conferences

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