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**National defence and Lillafüred during and after the Second
World War**

**The relationship between the 1942 Lillafüred Conference and national
defence**

Thesis of Doctoral (PhD) Dissertation

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1. The topic and objectives of the doctoral thesis

The aim of this doctoral dissertation is to provide a comprehensive analysis of the writer-politician-soldier meeting held in November 1942 at the Palace Hotel in Lillafüred. This includes an examination of the governmental institutions and individuals involved in the organisation of the event, as well as an exploration of its antecedents and the concept of national defence. The few historical, literary historical or retrospective writings that have addressed the conference in Lillafüred have uniformly treated the meeting as an isolated event, focusing primarily on the perspective of the invited writers. In contrast, this dissertation seeks to demonstrate that the meeting represented a stage within a broader, systematic process aligned with the spirit of governmental national defence. To support this argument, the thesis presents all the organisational and conceptual antecedents and factors that led to the convening of the 1942 conference.

An important aspect of this dissertation is the examination of the concept of national defence, one of the frequently used but less thoroughly analysed concepts of the Horthy era, along with the closely related concept of national education. The Great Depression also had significant social, economic, and political consequences in Hungary. In response, from 1932 onwards, ideas related to national defence began to appear at the governmental level as part of the Prime Minister's Office. Initially, these responsibilities were carried out by the Department of Social Policy. As Soviet and German imperial ambitions became increasingly threatening to Hungary, the tasks expanded and were subsequently managed by Department V of the Prime Minister's Office, and later by the National Policy Service. By early 1942, Hungary's political leadership sought to avoid involvement in the world war. Consequently, a new government was formed in the spring of that year under the leadership of Prime Minister Miklós Kállay, with its primary objective being to facilitate

the exit from the war. A few weeks after the formation of the new government, István Antal, former state secretary of the Ministry of Justice, was appointed Minister of National Defence and Propaganda. His ministerial duties were supported by the former National Policy Service, which had been restructured from a department within the Prime Minister's Office into an independent office. The meeting in Lillafüred was organised by the Office of the Minister of National Defence and Propaganda. This was undoubtedly the most visible activity of the Office, but not its only one. The doctoral dissertation examines several activities that were in some way connected to literature and the organization of the meeting.

In the second half of the dissertation, I examine the preparations for the organization of the meeting, the cultural significance of the Palace Hotel as the venue, and the main themes that emerged during the meeting. The analysis was not intended to remain at the level of simple description; therefore, it was necessary to discuss the historical background and context of the meeting in detail. The objective of this study was to explore the historical and social context of the meeting in Lillafüred and to critically examine the prevailing narrative, promoted by the communist authorities established after 1945, which claimed that the political leadership—specifically Ferenc Szombathelyi, Chief of the General Staff, and István Antal, Minister of National Defence and Propaganda—sought only to persuade writers to continue promoting the war. In the conclusion of the dissertation, I examine the historical memory of the meeting and compare it with other meetings organized during the war.

2. Methodology of the dissertation

In my view, the exploration and analysis of the history of governmental national defence is essential for a more comprehensive

understanding of the Horthy era; however, from 1942 onwards, primary sources are significantly limited. The minutes of the Lillafüred conference, which constitute the only surviving document, are therefore of particular importance. Just as the Lillafüred meeting contributes to a better understanding of governmental national defence, I also deemed it necessary to present the institutions responsible for organising the event, as well as the intellectual concepts discussed at the meeting (national defence and national education), in order to position the Lillafüred conference within historical memory.

The various narratives that have influenced the historical memory of the Lillafüred conference complicate the description and analysis of the event. In evaluating the meeting, it appears that many have erred by assessing both its success and the legitimacy of its convening in light of subsequent events and the atrocities of the Second World War. In order to avoid this misinterpretation, I have sought to examine the broader historical context in which the meeting was organised. Accordingly, the dissertation is divided into two main sections: the first provides a conceptual framework and an overview of the history and practical activities of the relevant institutions, while the second examines the circumstances surrounding the convening of the Lillafüred conference and offers an analysis of the event.

I have introduced the concepts of national defence and national education primarily through the most significant works of the period. Several theoretical studies were produced during this time, among which the works of Dr. Dániel Fábry, “Statistics in the Service of National Defence,” and Tivadar Kováts, “National Defence in Self-Defence,” are particularly notable. The ideas presented in these works, supplemented by the views of István Antal, contribute to a better understanding not only of the organisation of the Lillafüred meeting but also of other measures related to national defence, particularly the establishment and operation of the system of national liaison officers.

The lack of available sources significantly complicated the overview of the institutional history. Until mid-1941, documents from the Social Policy Department and the National Policy Service were still accessible; however, after this period, records from the Office of the Minister of National Defence and Propaganda were largely unavailable. Tibor Fery, a department head at the Office, later stated that the Arrow Cross Party had removed the materials. Béla Kerekes, a pro-Arrow Cross activist who was referred to as the Office's "state secretary," claimed during his trial that a bomb strike had destroyed the documents. Consequently, the history of the Office had to be reconstructed primarily from contemporary printed records, press reports, interviews, memoirs, and trial materials.

The transcript of the meeting in Lillafüred was preserved due to the state security activities of the Kádár regime. Some volumes of the minutes were discovered during a 1962 search of the home of publisher Sándor Püski. Following a brief investigation by the State Security, the complete material was transferred to the Ministry of the Interior, which reproduced it. Another version of the minutes, which has also been published, is incomplete, and some speeches remain housed in archives.

Based on these materials, which often lack complete documentation, it was possible to reconstruct the relationship between national defence and the Lillafüred meeting through detailed analysis.

3. Results of the doctoral thesis

Until recently, national defence received limited attention in historiography, despite being a commonly used term in Hungary during the Horthy era. Writings produced before 1945 were characterised by varying interpretations of the concept of national

defence. Consequently, there is no single, uniform definition of the term. Nevertheless, in my doctoral thesis, I have sought to provide a coherent summary based on selected works.

Three major forms of national defence can be distinguished: military, civic, and “racial defence,” the latter of which promoted a healthy, abstinent lifestyle. This study focuses primarily on the first two forms.

The historical background to the emergence of the term “national defence” includes the First World War, the peace treaties that concluded it, and the Great Depression. One lesson drawn from the First World War was that preparation for future conflicts required the mobilisation of the entire population, including legislative initiatives, the employment of women in factories, and first aid training for young people.

Comprehensive information gathering was necessary for both preparing for war and organising defence efforts; therefore, the interpretation of statistical indicators and the protection of confidential data became central tasks of national defence. Defence efforts also encompassed protecting society from both external and internal threats and their harmful effects.

The external threat primarily consisted of spies, while the internal threat was represented by extremist movements, such as the communist and Arrow Cross groups. These threats were countered through active defence measures, including counter-espionage activities and sanctions against communists, as well as through propaganda and social initiatives.

The collection of important information and the effective transmission of messages were also considered essential components of national defence. To protect society, particularly the peasantry and working classes, from extremism, it was necessary to understand their everyday living conditions, as well as the real concerns and disruptive factors affecting them.

An information network was established to facilitate the two-way flow of information: identifying problems on one hand, and informing society about the significance of various state and government measures on the other. This approach was evident both in the development of the national liaison officers' system and in the organisation of the Lillafüred meeting. The promotion of national unity, which contributed to both wartime efforts and the effective handling of extremism, was also a central aspect of national defence.

The issue of the Treaty of Trianon was closely associated with the concept of national defence, as the protection of ethnic Hungarians living beyond the national borders and the pursuit of treaty revision were key elements. In the short term, these objectives were to be pursued through propaganda and the organisation of various actions, while in the long term they were to be achieved through national education. This effort required not only the establishment of an institutional framework—including people's schools, social associations, and Levente and Scout organisations—but also a government office responsible for processing information and implementing actions.

From 1932 onwards, a separate department was established within the government to pursue national defence objectives. This was the Social Policy Department within the Prime Minister's Office. The department's primary tasks included monitoring the general situation in the country—particularly in matters of social policy—and directing and coordinating the activities of public administration in this field. In addition to handling association-related matters, the department was responsible for monitoring social movements, drafting policy statements concerning them, and paying particular attention to anti-state and anti-social movements. The department also supervised the Central Statistical Office and the National Statistical Council. In this form, it operated with a gradually decreasing staff until 1938.

As German imperialist ambitions intensified and the Arrow Cross threat increased, the Social Policy Department underwent restructuring. Under the premiership of Béla Imrédy, it became Department V of the Prime Minister's Office, assuming several responsibilities from its predecessor. Béla Kovrig, a leading authority on social issues at the time, was appointed head of the department.

Its areas of responsibility included films, social associations, phenomena disrupting social cooperation, the organisation of mass events, and economic propaganda. Additionally, its activities included what was termed "whispering propaganda", referring to matters communicated verbally, in the course of which anti-German, anti-Arrow Cross, and anti-Volksbund material was secretly distributed.

In the 1940s, there were several proposals to reorganise the department or to place it under the Ministry of Religion and Public Education; however, this did not occur.

In November 1940, the National Policy Service was reorganised. According to a circular issued at the time, the aim was to "counteract the unrest and lack of information in public opinion." Subsequently, a shift towards more public activity took place, including the launch of the Service's own newspaper, *Nation Building*.

Shortly after Miklós Kállay's appointment as Prime Minister, István Antal was appointed Minister of National Defence and Propaganda. To support his work, the National Policy Service of the Prime Minister's Office was reorganised into an independent office, thereby removing governmental national defence from the direct supervision of the Prime Minister's Office for the first time since 1932.

The Office of the Minister of National Defence and Propaganda operated under István Antal's supervision until August 1944, with an expanding apparatus and growing responsibilities.

Following the German occupation, the Office did not engage in any visible activities apart from the publication of books and journals. After the appointment of Géza Lakatos as Prime Minister, Endre Hlatky, the Director of Hungarian Radio, assumed leadership of the Office, but he was unable to carry out substantial work due to the limited time available.

After the Arrow Cross Party seized power, Ferenc Kassai-Schallmayer assumed control of the remaining apparatus. The staff was then largely filled with members of the Arrow Cross Party, and although plans were made to elevate the Office to ministerial status, these were not realised due to the proximity of the front.

Governmental national defence employed a system of national liaison offices throughout the country to fulfil one of its primary tasks: gathering information about society and communicating governmental actions to the public. Archival records indicate that reports were being sent by social contacts to the National Policy Service as early as 1940.

Information was exchanged through personal contacts and social associations, which also utilised existing similar networks to achieve their objectives. By May 1941, more than one thousand associations were involved in these activities, and in June 1942, István Antal reported at a meeting of the Council of Ministers that a network of 4,500 individuals was engaged in using personal persuasion to foster spiritual and social unity.

Lectures—hundreds of which were delivered throughout the country—and the distribution of governmental publications and fiction books to settlements lacking library facilities were important components of the work conducted through the associations.

The three-day meeting of writers and military-political figures held in Lillafüred in November 1942 was organised around the themes of national education, national defence, and the everyday concerns of

writers. The event was arranged by the Office of the Minister of National Defence and Propaganda, with the active participation and approval of Ferenc Szombathelyi, Chief of the General Staff, and Prime Minister Miklós Kállay, alongside István Antal.

The event adhered to the principles of national defence, as the participating writers, many of whom were also journalists and magazine editors, served as channels of information to society.

The main messages conveyed during the meeting were, firstly, that the government had developed a plan to enable the nation to navigate the world war with the most favourable outcome, intending to engage in its own military actions at a later stage if circumstances permitted. Secondly, efforts were made to prepare society for possible adverse developments.

Gyula Kádár, head of the Department VI of the General Staff, emphasised the possibility of an invasion, stating that Hungary faced an equal probability of occupation by German, Soviet, or British forces. He stressed that regardless of the occupying power, Hungary must preserve its national identity. This message was directed not only at the writers but also at the wider society.

Contrary to the claims made by the post-1945 authorities regarding the Lillafüred meeting, the aim was not to persuade writers to promote support for the war. Ferenc Szombathelyi explained this position on aesthetic grounds, asserting that a writer who produces work on command cannot maintain authenticity. The request made to the writers was to avoid a situation similar to that of the First World War, when the literary community had, by advocating for peace, weakened national unity and morale both on the home front and at the front lines.

At the conclusion of my doctoral thesis, I conducted a comparative analysis between the Lillafüred meeting and other conferences held during the Second World War. These included the first and second meetings in Balatonszárszó in 1942 and 1943, the youth meetings in

Lillafüred in 1943, the meetings in Győr in 1943, and the meeting in Hódmezővásárhely in 1944. These events were closely connected to the 1942 conference in Lillafüred. The youth meeting in Lillafüred was also organised by the Office of the Minister of National Defence and Propaganda, and the 1943 event was led by Béla Kovrig, the former head of Department V and the National Policy Service. Several participants of the 1942 and 1943 meetings in Balatonszárszó also attended the Lillafüred conference. The 1944 meeting in Hódmezővásárhely was organised by István Kristó Nagy, who was a staff member of the Office of the Minister of National Defence and Propaganda.

4. Publications and presentations related to the dissertation and its broader topic

Publications:

A kard és a lant találkozása – az 1942-es lillafüredi tanácskozás. In: *Társadalom térben és időben: Tanulmányok az új- és modernkori Magyarország eszme-, művelődés- és társadalomtörténetéről*. Szerk.: Szuly Rita, Kránitz Péter Pál. Magyar Napló, Budapest-Piliscsaba, 2015 (Doktoriskolai konferenciák 2.) 365–375.

Keresztény gondolkodók az 1942-es lillafüredi konferencián. In. *Állam és egyház a modern magyar történelemben*. Szerk. Gulyás Martin. Studia Vincentiana Történelmi- Ismeretterjesztő folyóirat 1/2015, Piliscsaba, 2015. 143–156.

Nemzetnevelés a két világháború közötti Magyarországon. In. *„Múlt nélkül nincs jövő”. Doktorandusz-konferenciák 2019-2020*. Szerk. Bank Barbara, Berek Patrícia, Domján Dániel, J. Újváry Zsuzsanna. Szent István Társulat, Budapest, 2022. 263–271.

Az ellenségkép megváltozott természete. Kristó Nagy István három írása. (Before publication).

Selected conference presentations:

A nemzetvédelem fogalma és értelmezései a Horthy-korszakban. Előadás a X. Történettudományi Találkozón, a Vásárhelyi Történelmi Kör szervezésében. Hódmezővásárhely, 2017. augusztus 15.

Az 1942-es lillafüredi konferencia társadalompolitikai összefüggései. Előadás az Életmód-történeti pillanatképek II. konferencián, a

Pázmány Péter Katolikus Egyetem Bölcsészet– és Társadalomtudományi Kar Történettudományi Doktori Iskola szervezésében. Budapest, 2018. január 12.

Az 1939. évi, Szegeden tartott ellenforradalmi ünnepség megszervezése. Előadás a XI. Történettudomány Találkozó alkalmával, a Vásárhelyi Történelmi Kör szervezésében. Hódmezővásárhely, 2018. július 31.

A Magyar Királyi Miniszterelnökség V. Osztályának működése. Előadás a Társadalom– és Életmód–történeti konferencián, a Pázmány Péter Katolikus Egyetem Bölcsészet– és Társadalomtudományi Kar Történettudományi Doktori Iskola szervezésében. Budapest, 2019. január 24.

Antal István életútja. Előadás a Vásárhelyi Történelmi Kör XII. Történettudomány Találkozóján. Hódmezővásárhely, 2019. július 27.

Nemzetnevelés a nemzetvédelem szolgálatában. Előadás a Vásárhelyi Történelmi Kör XIII. Történettudomány Találkozóján. Hódmezővásárhely, 2020. augusztus 18.

A Nemzetvédelmi és Propagandaminiszter Hivatalához köthető személyek felelőssége vonása 1945 után. Előadás Az 1945 és 1956 közötti magyar Politikai Elítéltek Közössége szakmai tanácskozásán, Budapesten, 2022. szeptember 28-án.