

Migration and Population Politics during War(time) and Peace(time)

Central and Eastern Europe from the
Dawn of Modernity to the Twentieth Century



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Edited by
Andrei Cușco
Flavius Solomon
Konrad Clewing

**MIGRATION AND POPULATION POLITICS
DURING WAR(TIME) AND PEACE(TIME)
CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE FROM THE DAWN
OF MODERNITY TO THE TWENTIETH CENTURY**

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e-mail: mega@edituramega.ro

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Magyar Returnees and Political Radicalization in Post-World War I Hungary

Gábor Egry

One of the often-mentioned aftereffects of post-WWI reorganization of the post-Habsburg space is the high number of migrants – refugees, optants, political exiles, etc. – who ended up in a new country far from their last wartime place of residence. While the factors behind this wave of migration were complex and numerous, and while the phenomena impacted hundreds of thousands, at least in Hungary’s case, it did not receive too much attention until the last few years. Even with the new wave of research discussing various aspects of refugeedom, basic theses regarding their number, social composition and impact on the Hungarian society were set in stone in the sole classic work on the topic, István I. Mócsy’s “The Uprooted”, published 38 years ago.¹

Mócsy’s work at that time proposed a well-documented and critical approach that looked for the roots of radicalization of interwar Hungarian society and found one of its reasons in the significance of refugees originating from the detached territories. Accordingly, the high number of middle-class and politically active migrants, who experienced a traumatic fate not just precluded the moderation of the political stance vis-à-vis the successor states and contributed to the formulation of revisionist goals. Their leaders’ presence in high politics during the early 1920s and their activity, which stemmed from the group’s originally problematic social integration, fueled both irredentism and anti-Semitism.

Thus, Hungarian historiography, even today, is mostly repeating and refining Mócsy’s basic claims regarding the number of refugees, their social composition, living conditions and political influence. Mócsy adjusted

¹ István I. Mócsy, *The Uprooted. Hungarian Refugees and Their Impact on Hungary’s Domestic Politics, 1918–1921* (New York: Social Science Monographs, Brooklyn College Press, 1983), (East European Monographs CXLVII).

the official refugee figures – 350,000 persons – and suggested that the real number was around 450,000 instead. He emphasized the importance of the middle-class and state employees among the arrivals, a view that stemmed from the contemporary discourse, which persists even today. The harsh living conditions – he argued – were crucial for the radicalization of both this group, in particular, and of Hungarian society, in general, as the status loss for the “backbone of the nation” was easily connected with the persecution of Hungarians then living as minorities and the push against supposed non-Hungarian ethnics, mainly Jews, within Hungarian society, whose presence supposedly prevented Hungarian middle-classes from retaining their appropriate social position and lifestyle.² Finally, the echo of the plight of the refugees and their exclusionary radical nationalism were enhanced by their strong presence within politics and public life, testified to and proven by the high share of refugees among MPs and within the leadership of irredentist and anti-Semitic associations, such as Awakeners (Ébredők), the Hungarian National Defense Association (MOVE) and the Territorial Defense Association (Területvédő Szövetség).³

While the main theses remain unquestioned, the research wave of the last one and a half decade – partly driven by the WWI anniversary – provided significant corrections to all these four aspects. The most important among these new trends are local histories of the refugees and studies on the practices of citizenship options,⁴ the humanitarian efforts and relief of

² See Mária M. Kovács, *Liberal Professions and Illiberal Politics: Hungary from the Habsburgs to the Holocaust* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 1994); Mária M. Kovács, Viktor Karády, “The Hungarian Numerus Clausus Law and Academic Anti-Semitism in Interwar Central Europe,” *Research Reports, Studies and Documents in East-Central European Social History* (2011).

³ See Paksa Rudolf, *A magyar szélsőjobboldal története* (Budapest: Jaffa Kiadó, 2012); Paul Hanebrink, *In Defense of Christian Hungary. Religion, Nationalism, Antisemitism, 1890–1944* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2007); Mócsy, *The Uprooted*, 158–64.

⁴ István Gergely, Szűts, „Barakkok es tisztviselővillák. A trianoni menekülteket befogadó miskolci telepek helyzete az 1920-as években”, *Kisebbségkutatás* 18, no 3. (2009): 434–452; István Gergely Szűts, „Sikerek, kompromisszumok es kudarcok a felvidéki menekültek integrációs folyamataiban”, *Forum Társadalomtudományi Szemle*, 12, no. 4 (2010): 3–24; István Gergely, Szűts, „A szükséglakások felét menekültek kapják...”. Érdekkonfliktusok es előítéletek az 1920-as évek első felének lakásügyeiben Miskolcon”. *Korall* 11, no. 4 (2010): 114–33; Gábor Aradi, „Az optálás kérdése Tolna megyében”, in *Tolna Megyei Levéltári füzetek* 10, ed. Dobos Gyula (Szekszárd: Tolna Megyei Levéltár, 2002), 155–200; Balázs Ablonczy, „Menni vagy maradni? Az 1918 utáni távozás és helyben maradás motívumai az emlékiratokban”, *Pro Minoritate*, 27, no. 4 (2018): 77–99; Balázs Ablonczy, „Lesz még kikelet a Szepesség felett”. Kormányzati és a menekült hálózatok társadalma a két világháború közti Magyarországon,” in *Nyombiztosítás. Letűnt magyarok*, ed. Balázs Ablonczy (Pozsony: Kalligram, 2011), 122–158; Béni L. Balogh, et. al. (eds.), *Trianon arcai. Naplók, visszaemlékezések, levelek* (Budapest: Libri, 2018); Annamarie Sammartino, *The Impossible Border. Germany and the East, 1914–1922* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2010), 96–119.

social grievances among refugees,⁵ attitudes towards minority Hungarians in general and refugees in particular,⁶ and studies on the conscious building of an amorphous and all-encompassing irredentist cult, as a form of fostering cultural trauma.⁷

In this essay, I attempt to bring these trends together and recast the importance of the refugees for interwar Hungarian politics, building on new results. I will argue that, notwithstanding the direct influence of refugee middle-class figures on politics in interwar Hungary, the dominant picture of this group as middle-class and persecuted, bearing the burden of the loss of territories, reflects the conscious creation of a cultural trauma that also served to stave off political challenges from the left and lower social strata rather than the realities of refugeedom. Thus, Mócsy's work and the subsequent historiography is also very much a product of this discourse, while some elements of the new research point to a questioning of its important arguments and, sometimes, even of its basic assumptions.

For laying out my argument I will first show that the prevailing idea of refugees having been undercounted neglects those indices that suggest potential overcounting around 1920, and some of these indices testified to a much more lenient treatment of Hungarians than generally assumed in the refugee imagery of the past and present. I will continue with presenting a somewhat revised social composition of the refugees (albeit one that rather places emphasis elsewhere in comparison with recent historiography, instead of completely refuting its claims of middle-class domination). Subsequently, I argue that refugee life and the success of integration strategies were diverse. I also show how irredentist propaganda was instrumental in simplifying their portrayal and painting the picture of a homogeneous and uniformly suffering group, as an avatar of the so-called Trianon trauma. While such reinterpretation certainly will not diminish the real suffering of people during that time, it posits their history rather as one defined by individual agency and various attitudes towards notions of homeland, nationality, citizenship, or loyalty.

⁵ Friederike Kind-Kovács, "The Great War, the Child's Body and the 'American Red Cross', *European Review of History* 23, no. 1–2 (2016): 33–62. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13507486.2015.1121971>; Balázs Juhász et. al, „Nemzetközi segély- és segítőakciók a volt Osztrák–Magyar Monarchia területén (1918–1923)”, *Századok* 152, no. 6 (2018): 1321–52.

⁶ Gábor Egry, *Etnicitás, identitás, politika. Magyar kisebbségek nacionalizmus és regionalizmus között Romániában és Csehszlovákiában 1918–1944* (Budapest: Napvilág, 2015); Balázs Ablonczy, *Az ismeretlen Trianon* (Budapest: Jaffa, 2020), 183–204.

⁷ Miklós Zeidler, *A revíziós gondolat* (Budapest: Osiris, 2001); Éva Kovács, „Trianon, avagy „traumatikus fordulat” a magyar történetírásban”, *Korall* 16, no. 1 (2015): 82–107; Gábor Egry, „Etnicitás, identitás, politika: Magyar kisebbségek nacionalizmus és regionalizmus között Romániában és Csehszlovákiában 1918–1944”, *Regio* 26, no. 2 (2018): 60–90. <http://dx.doi.org/10.17355/rkkpt.v26i2.209>.

How Many and Whom? Refugees and Refugee Statistics

The first unresolved question regarding Hungarian returnees is the actual number of those who left the territories annexed to successor states after WWI. It entails statistical and conceptual issues, the latter being crucial for interpreting the reasons for migration, but less significant for the scale of the migration wave. Still, it is worth to note that the term *refugee* is and was applied often very vaguely by both contemporaries and the posterity, while those forced to move to Hungary and those who tried to make sense of this movement were often unaware of the fine but important legal and social distinction between refugees, repatriates, migrants and optants, easily placing them under the same umbrella term of refugees.⁸ It was obviously a loaded and polemical term, with implications concerning the reason of movement, interpreted as the result of some open or implicit pressure. As such, it very much suited the dominant and highly propagandistic portrayal of minorities' fate in the successor states, which emphasized strong and hardly limited oppression. But for those, who wished to find a stable place amidst upheaval, those distinctions meant quite different paths to a new legal status, and they also signaled the often not so slight differences between the various reasons for why people moved away from home. Behind the inaccurate term of refugee, there were people who left their dwelling places almost immediately at the end of the war, and others who postponed the decision about their future until the signing or ratification of the treaties. Some people left their new countries based on material factors, while others were really victims of state abuse or pressure from the new majorities. Furthermore, some of these categories, like the optants – people who were entitled to be granted the citizenship of the country where their co-ethnics were a majority by virtue of the peace treaties' citizenship option clauses⁹ – included people who had moved to the territory which was to remain under Hungarian sovereignty before the end of the war, but previously had not considered acquiring citizenship.¹⁰ Finally, leaving a successor country could have been the result of mundane considerations, but also the consequence of expulsion, an administrative act of the new sovereign states. Still, even

⁸ István Gergely Szűts, „Optálási jegyzőkönyvek mint a trianoni menekültkérdés forrásai,” *Századok* 152, no. 6 (2018): 1237–1240.

⁹ Sammartino, *The Impossible*, 96–119.; Theodora Dragostinova, *Between Two Motherlands. Nationality and Emigration among the Greeks of Bulgaria, 1900–1949* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2011), 77–117.

¹⁰ Aradi, „Az optálás kérdése”; Mónika Ganczer, „Az első világháború utáni magyar és osztrák illetőségről,” in *Tanulmányok a 70 éves Bihari Mihály tiszteletére*, eds. Katalin Szoboszlai-Kis and Gergely Deli (Győr: Universitas Győr, 2013), 183–193.

such a seemingly clear-cut case is again complicated by the stance of the Hungarian authorities, who were afraid of depriving the Hungarian communities of their middle-class and therefore imposed strict administrative limitations on immigration by the end of 1920. One of the few exceptions included those officially expelled, a rule that probably created incentives for seeking proof of expulsion instead of simply applying for emigration/repatriation.¹¹ But, while it is indispensable for an analysis of migration patterns, reasons and methods to focus on these distinctions and the social realities hidden behind those legal terms, for the analysis of the political effects of post-WWI immigration on Hungary it is sufficient to take these groups together, mostly because the contemporary discourse, which was embedded in that very impact of the population movement on Hungarian society, did the same.

Legal confusion is part of the problems surrounding the numbers. This issue goes back to two key problems: the late start of registration and the loss of official documentation. The state authority dealing with refugees – their registration, social assistance, implementation of refugee policies – the National Office of Refugees (Országos Menekültügyi Hivatal) was only established in 1920, almost two years after the surge of migration had started at the end of 1918. It is telling that the concluding report of this body, published upon its dissolution in 1924, showcased the highest immigration figures for 1919 and 1920, the two years not covered or only partially covered by the registration activity of the Office. Since the documentary material was lost, it is also impossible to know how the Office reconstructed refugee numbers for this period, even though we know that the state apparatus was trying to get a grasp of the situation even earlier, while the refugees also had incentives to report to the authorities, as they could not otherwise claim assistance.¹²

What we know about the registration process – and it most likely goes back to before the founding of the Office of the Refugees – is that the local state administration (county sub-prefects, district chiefs and notaries) was required to take care of it.¹³ They were also responsible for registering citizenship options after those clauses of the peace treaty came into force on July 26, 1921. However, without the complete materials of these lower state authorities – as only a fragment of it has survived – we still have a blurry picture of this process. Alongside Mócsy's calculations derived from the census data collected in 1920 and 1930 – of which more later – the

¹¹ Balázs Pálvölgyi, „Lehetlen küldetés. A magyar migrációs politika kihívásai”, *Századok* 152, no. 1 (2018): 127–144; Mócsy, *The Uprooted*, 180.

¹² Szűts, „Optálási jegyzőkönyvek,” 1238.

¹³ Csaba Csóti, „A menekült köztisztviselők társadalmi integrációjának keretei 1920–1924 között”, *Limes* 15, no. 2 (2002): 25–39.

incomplete knowledge of registration is the most important argument in favor of inflating the registered numbers – 350,000 persons – published in the concluding report. Thus, most authors estimate the real number of refugees at between 425,000 and 450,000 persons.¹⁴

It is not that there was no chance of undercounting migration, and Mócsy pointed rightly to a gap between refugee numbers and the census data from the 1920s and the 1930s concerning figures for people born outside of Hungary.¹⁵ However, it is important to emphasize those factors too that could have facilitated overcounting, alongside the inherent problems with Mócsy's calculations based on census data that Mócsy was reluctant to consider, but that still could account for part of the gap between the two types of sources. Regarding the first problem, the authorities entrusted with the task of registering and assisting refugees worked according to a hierarchical system, in which they did not have to horizontally communicate with each other and seldom actually did so. It is plausible to think that people could move around, reregister without being double checked for dual registration etc. Furthermore, people had incentives to register as refugees and conceal more regular migration, even if they arrived in the territory of post-WWI Hungary earlier because, during the extreme hardships specific to those years, the meager social assistance they were entitled to was important for survival. Later, being an optant, even if the actual migration occurred well before 1921–1923, i.e., before the period reserved for citizenship choices and actual repatriation, entitled migrants to retain their assets and property in the successor state. Although, ultimately, land reform and other confiscation measures applied to optants' property, too, they still had some hope to reclaim it or get compensation for their losses by appealing to courts of law, a route not open to other migrants.¹⁶ Thus, material incentives were present in order to obscure the date of migration.

Obviously, the lack of material makes it impossible to verify the data in its entirety in either direction, but factors that would have induced overcounting are rarely taken into account, even if some works had demonstrated their existence. Simultaneously, the existing documentation – for example, citizenship choice applications submitted in Miskolc or Gyula – often covers much smaller numbers than it should if we want to extrapolate to the overall numbers.¹⁷ The same approach is true for Mócsy's recalculation of refugee numbers starting from census data. Again, it is true that official figures show a much higher number of inhabitants born

¹⁴ Ablonczy, *Ismeretlen Trianon*, 189–190. Szűts, "Optálási jegyzőkönyvek," 1244–48.

¹⁵ Mócsy, *The Uprooted*, 10–14, 176–195.

¹⁶ Szűts, "Optálási jegyzőkönyvek" 1246–47; Aradi, "Az optálás kérdése," 156–161.

¹⁷ Szűts, "Optálási jegyzőkönyvek," 1248–50.

outside Hungary than the supposed number of refugees at the officially chosen census date, on December 31, 1920, would suggest.¹⁸ It is plausible to presume that some of this discrepancy is really explained by the under-registration of refugees, but there is hardly any evidence within the census data for a credible estimate, and Mócsy's calculations again dismiss other factors that could have affected the census figures in the opposite direction.

Most importantly, the period of WWI and its immediate aftermath was a time of extreme mobility, including military mobilization, release of POWs, subsequent refugee waves from temporarily occupied areas (Galicia,¹⁹ Transylvania). All of this brought people far from their homes, and it is difficult to estimate how long it took them to return, if they returned at all. Displacement was a mass phenomenon for a long time, and not a one-off event.²⁰ However, all these phenomena that certainly was registered in the census were not part of what the public understood as the refugee wave of minority Hungarians trying to escape from persecution in the successor states.

Such problems warrant caution regarding the arguments that insist on a much higher real number of refugees than those registered, but it is hard to find a suitable method for verifying the figures. One possibility, neglected so far due to the lack of published sources, is using mirror statistics concerning certain occupational categories that were registered separately by the Office of Refugees, most importantly, state officials. The Office of Refugees provided a breakdown of broad employment categories of refugees, of which 44,253 fell into the broad category of public employees: 15,835 were classified as state employees, 5,772 – as municipal and village employees, while 19,092 were categorized as railroad employees and 3,554 – as 'other'.²¹ Statistics provided for the 1920 peace conference claimed that out of these numbers, 1,403 county officials came from Romania and 493 judges and prosecutors came from Czechoslovakia.²² The most important problem is, however, that even these published numbers – and Mócsy actually suggests they were still undercounted by 20–25% – already meant

¹⁸ Mócsy, *The Uprooted*, 10–14; Gábor Rózsa, „A hivatalos magyar népszámlálások és más nagy népességsszeírások, 1870–2016 – I. rész (1870–1949)”, *Statisztikai Szemle* 92, nr. 11–12 (2017): 1159–1180.

¹⁹ Walter Mentzel, „Die Flüchtlingspolitik der Habsburgermonarchie während des Ersten Weltkrieges,” in *Aufnahmeland Österreich. Über den Umgang mit Massenflucht seit dem 18. Jahrhundert*, eds. Börries Kuzmany and Rita Garstenauer (Vienna: Mandelbaum Verlag, 2017), 126–155.

²⁰ Nick Baron and Peter Gatrell (eds.), *Homelands. War, Population and Statehood in Eastern Europe and Russia, 1918–1924* (London: Anthem Press, 2004).

²¹ Mócsy, *The Uprooted*, 178.

²² Mócsy, *The Uprooted*, 54.

that more people than the actual number of county officials or judges and prosecutors who served on these territories at the end of 1918 were registered by Hungarian authorities as refugees.²³ According to the 1910 census, there were 528 active judges and prosecutors registered in counties that were partly or entirely annexed to Czechoslovakia. The 1918 issue of the Hungarian official *schematismus* (Magyarország Tiszti Cím- és Névtára) listed 69 active judges and prosecutors at courts or prosecutors' offices located in cities retained by Hungary. Therefore, if no new positions were created between 1910 and 1918, the possible maximum of émigré judges and prosecutors was only 459, i.e., 24 persons lower than the actual number reported. It is possible that new posts were created, but even in that case, the *schematismus* should have reflected these new posts too, while the number of persons listed as judges and prosecutors working at courts in cities annexed to Czechoslovakia was only 489, still leaving a 4-person gap between the reported figure and the potential maximal number of refugees – assuming that by 1924 everyone was laid off and emigrated. However, the latter contention is obviously untrue, as, for example, the judge presiding over the famous trial of Vojtech Tuka in 1929 was one of those who served in the pre-1918 Hungarian judiciary.

A similar analysis regarding county officials from territories annexed to Romania reveals the same pattern. According to the 1910 census, 1488 people served in such a position in counties partly or entirely annexed to Romania. It is possible that the number was again higher due to subsequent creation of positions, although it is less probable than in the courts' case, as county administrations had a relatively strict nomenclature and more budgetary constraints than the state had to raise the number of judges, if the ministry deemed it necessary. Using lists of officials from Romanian counties between 1921 and 1924 and a publication that listed a part of the county administration from 1925,²⁴ I attempted to identify people who figured both in the 1918 Hungarian *schematismus* and on these lists, adding those persons whose presence in Romania was obvious due to their public activity, even if they had left state service by 1925.²⁵ The number of persons thus identified was 105, bringing down the number

²³ The overall number of state officials who moved from the successor states to Hungary in this period is also suspiciously high, higher than the number of state officials on these territories according to the 1910 census and subsequently published statistical data. However, I limited my check of the data to these two cases.

²⁴ *Calendarul Administrativ 1925* (Cluj: Cartea Românească, 1925).

²⁵ The depth of the Hungarian *schematismus* and the *Calendarul administrativ* is different, and there is some mismatch between the used categories. However, for this analysis I only needed to identify people who were county officials in 1918, as opposed to employees, and who remained in Romania in whichever capacity, irrespective of whether they continued to serve, and, if they did, of whether their rank and position remained the same.

of potential migrants to 1,383. This does not include the 12 persons who served in county districts not annexed to Romania, and therefore we may safely assume that their staff did not have to migrate to Hungary. Some of these were not Hungarians, but Germans and Romanians. Still, their ethnicity does not alter the fact that they did not leave Romania for Hungary, and therefore they could not have been counted by the Office of Refugees. It should be noted that Mócsy actually estimates that 20–25% of refugee state officials were not counted,²⁶ bringing the supposed number of refugee state officials from Romania to around 1,750–1,800 persons and leading to the absurd and easily refutable implicit claim that significantly more state officials left these areas than served there by the end of the war.²⁷

Using the mirror statistics in this manner does not answer the question of who left and who was registered in Hungary, and the unclear content of the categories used during the registration process complicates data evaluation. For example, it is unclear whether retirees were registered according to their profession (appearing under the label of county officials or judges) or if they were assigned to another category (dependents). But, taken together with the fact there was re-migration from Hungary to the successor states (a phenomenon again not discussed by historiography so far²⁸), there are significant reasons to believe that a set of factors weighed down on the statistics in the opposite direction, i.e., resulting in over-counting instead of undercounting. Most likely, it does not affect the magnitude of refugees (hundreds of thousands). The accurate number would still matter and knowing more about the registration process and its pitfalls, but also its gaps, would help to grasp individual agency better.

However, mirror statistics – or rather data fragments that still may be used as such – suggest another important conclusion: minorities were treated much more leniently by the successor states than it is generally thought and portrayed in Hungarian propaganda and political discourse. While this does not affect the numbers directly, it is still important to note, as it points to a significant distortion used to establish a specific imagery of the Hungarian minorities.²⁹

²⁶ Mócsy, *The Uprooted*, 178–179.

²⁷ Gábor Egry, „Unholy Alliances? Language Exams, Loyalty, and Identification in Inter-war Romania”, *Slavic Review* 76, no. 4 (2017): 959–982.

²⁸ István Gergely Szűts, „Egy káplán patriálásai, 1919–1922”, *Pro Minoritate* 26, no. 3 (2017): 32–43.

²⁹ Egry, “Unholy Alliances?”: 966–67; Judit Pál, Vlad Popvici, „The Transformation of the Mid-level Civil Servants’ Corps in Transylvania in the Aftermath of the First World War: The High Sheriffs between 1918 and 1925” in *Hofratsdämmerung; Verwaltung und ihr Personal in den Nachfolgestaaten der Habsburgermonarchie 1918 bis 1920*, ed Peter Becker et al. (Wien: Böhlau 2020), 155–78.

Social Composition, Portrayal, Radicalization

While the number of refugees is difficult to accurately determine, it is unquestionable that at that scale and after a war that devastated Austria-Hungary's economy and resulted in extreme hardships for the hinterland³⁰, their presence was more than enough to overburden the state.³¹ But their contribution to radicalization was not directly linked with the problems they caused to the state and local budgets, it was rather indirect. As Mócsy argues, it was the dominant presence of the middle-class, especially of state employees in a broad sense, coupled with the problems of social integration that generated resentment, while their influence on politics fueled radical right-wing politics. Some of Mócsy's assumptions are still shared by historiography, especially those concerning the direct involvement of people from the lost territories in politics. At one point, not only one-third of all MPs belonged to this group (79 out of 239), but it represented almost half (47 out of 99 MPs) of the more radical, anti-Semitic Party of Christian National Unity (Keresztény Nemzeti Egység Pártja).³² This meant even more influence on the governments of the first legislative period after WWI.³³ The social profile of this group of MPs was also important. It was dominated by lawyers and freelance professionals to a much larger degree than the group of MPs from the remaining territories. As such, their precarious situation stemmed from a concrete experience of status loss. They also faced the problem of job shortage, especially regarding jobs considered appropriate for these social groups. A general result of such resentment was anti-Jewish legislation, including the infamous *Numerus Clausus*, reducing the Jewish presence in higher education.³⁴ It is also not surprising that refugees were present at all levels of the secret and irredentist right-wing associations, such as the MOVE (Hungarian National Defense Society), ÉME (Association of Awakening Hungarians) or EKSZ (Etelköz Alliance), all of which had close ties with the paramilitary groups linked to white terror and the student associations committing violence against Jews on a daily basis.³⁵ However, along with its successful

³⁰ Zsombor Bódy, „Élelmiszer ellátás piac és kötött gazdálkodás között a háború és az összeomlás idején,” in *Háborúból békébe: a magyar társadalom 1918 után*, ed. Zsombor Bódy (Budapest: MTA BTK Történettudományi Intézet, 2018), 151–94.

³¹ Kind-Kovács, “The Great War”: 34–7; Juhász et. al., „Nemzetközi segély.” 1328, 1330–31.

³² Hanebrink, *In Defense of Christian Hungary*, 77–83.

³³ Mócsy, *The Uprooted*, 172–3.

³⁴ Kovács and Karády, “The Hungarian Numerus Clausus Law.”

³⁵ Mócsy, *The Uprooted*, 158–64; Kerepeszki, Róbert, *A Turul Szövetség 1919–1945: Egyetemi ifjúság és jobboldali radikalizmus a Horthy-korszakban* (Máriabesenyő: Attraktor 2012); Szécsényi András, „Végváry József pályája: a Turul Szövetségtől az ÁVH-ig”, *Múltunk* 56, no. 3 (2011): 7–35.

integration during the mid- and late 1920s, the group itself dissolved gradually and lost its coherence (if it had any before).

Yet again, some of these arguments were nuanced by recent research, while others seem questionable in the light of a more thorough analysis of the refugees' fate in Hungary. It appears that the influence of this group on radicalization was less direct. Its role was more significant in the establishment of a discourse focusing on Hungary's victimhood as an avatar of Hungarian suffering. To dissect these issues, I will start with a brief overview of the social composition of the group. I will then look at how it was related to the imagery created during the early 1920s and later in the interwar period. I will conclude by showing how their political influence was limited and tamed quite soon.

Given the uncertainty surrounding the number of refugees and the method of their registration, it should not surprise anyone that their social composition is unclear as well. As we have seen, it is the dominance of the middle-class and state employees that permeates the previous historiography, while new research tends to emphasize the presence and significance of other social groups, notably the lower-middle classes (craftsmen, elementary schoolteachers, blue collar workers, petty officers of state companies, such as the railways, etc.). In this regard, the official statistics did not attempt to create a false picture. Rather, emphasis shifted since 1920, and especially during the last decade.

Table 1. Social composition of the refugees according to the National Office of Refugees³⁶ data

	number	Ratio (%)
State employees	44,253	12.6
Railways	19,092	5.45
State and County employees	21,607	6.2
Industry and commerce	35,553	10.1
Workers	24,478	7
Agriculture	10,376	3
Pupils, university students	86,375	24.7
Housewives, other dependents	160,371	45.8
Others	13,072	3.7
Together	349,988	

The data quite clearly shows that among the registered refugees it was not the state employees who were the most significant occupational and wage-earning social group, but rather the workers, especially

³⁶ Mócsy, *The Uprooted*, 178.

if we reclassify state railway workers. Taking also the low-ranking state employees, it is plausible to argue that the lower middle-class was more important in numerical terms than the middle-class. However, it is even more crucial that the largest single group among the refugees was the one subsumed under the category of housewives and other dependents, and the second largest was composed of pupils and university students, showing how challenging it was integrating and provisioning these people, all dependent and many of them too young for independent existence.

The only existing database of refugees is incomplete. It represents the collection of an amateur historian, István Dékány, and consists of 15,395 records, about 3–4% of which are duplicate ones.³⁷ Moreover, many of the records only mention the family head or a family member, indicating only the number of those dependents travelling with them, which makes it difficult to calculate how many of the refugees included in the official statistics are covered by these records. Thus, it is certainly not representative (Dékány collected the names from contemporaneous publications and archival sources, without resorting to random sampling) and obviously not exhaustive. However, the impression it gives regarding the occupational and social composition of the refugees corroborates the official statistical data, with one important addition: the high number of widows and single women among the group of housewives and other dependents. Thus, it is safe to assume that the share of young pupils and students and the share of incomplete families is the hitherto most overlooked but important feature of the refugees,³⁸ although it was certainly not surprising in the wake of a war. Still, due to the deficiencies of a nascent welfare system, integration for refugees usually meant lack of housing and jobs. Thus, the discourse surrounding the refugees focused on how to provide them those things. The issue of pupils (underage children) was usually subsumed under the discourse of childcare and child provisioning.³⁹

Provisioning, social assistance and welfare is a field where the recent works have brought a new perspective to our understanding of the refugee history, although the perception of the social structure of this group did not change much with them. People in railway carriages were, from the very beginning, the iconic visual representation of the refugees, as they easily displayed and embodied not only poverty, but also loss of

³⁷ Available online at: <http://trianon100.hu/menekultek>; accessed on June 30, 2020.

³⁸ Csóti, "A menekült köztisztviselők..." 27–9.

³⁹ Ilse Jozefa Lazaroms, "Jewish Railway Car Dwellers in Interwar Hungary: Citizenship and Uprootedness," in Włodzimierz Borodziej and Joachim von Puttkamer (eds.), *Immigrants and Foreigners in Central and Eastern Europe during the Twentieth Century* (London and New York: Routledge, 2020), 53–72; Kind-Kovács, "The Great War," 37–41; Tibor Glant, „Segélyezés és politika: A kétoldalú amerikai–magyar kapcsolatok kialakítása 1919-ben,” *Századok* 154, no. 3 (2020): 495–518.

status. Whole middle-class households, with their socially appropriate multi-room accommodations left behind, furniture and movable household items brought along had to fit into one or two railway carriages, creating a visible contrast between middle-class material environment and culture and housing deprivation that was otherwise readily associated with extreme poverty and low social status. The most important means for alleviating these problems was building new houses and providing the refugees with apartments and new homes. State-level and local efforts were bundled together, and even if first efforts were treated only as provisional solutions (barracks or low quality urban colonies), they often provided the necessary stepping stones towards regaining middle-class life and status, while in the case of lower class groups these solutions seemed often suitable in the eyes of contemporary socially minded politicians.⁴⁰ It is thus not surprising that the population of these colonies changed relatively quickly and refugees were often replaced already in the 1930s. But in general, success of integration efforts hinged on if housing was accompanied by appropriate jobs and wages.⁴¹

Besides state and local government institutions' efforts, a wide range of Hungarian and international humanitarian and civic efforts contributed to this process. The most notable among them was the American Relief Administration (ARA),⁴² but several other international humanitarian associations and initiatives were also active in Hungary (The Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, the Red Cross, The European Children's Fund managed by the ARA, the British Lady Muriel Paget etc.). Usually, they acted under the coordination of the ARA and in cooperation with international political institutions, first the inter-allied commissions and later the League of Nations.⁴³ It was, however, a cornerstone of their activities to mobilize local efforts. This way, the resolution of the refugee issue was made a broad social concern. It was, however, dependent on another significant factor of the integration process: social and professional networks. The refugees often organized local and regional associations, and many of them used family, kinship and professional connections in the search for a solution to their problems.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Ablonczy, *Ismeretlen Trianon*, 200–3; Szűts, „Barakkok és tisztviselők”; Szűts, „A szükséglakások,” 124–132.

⁴¹ Mócsy, *The Uprooted*, 194–195; Ablonczy, *Ismeretlen Trianon*, 200–3.

⁴² Kind-Kovács, “The Great War”, 36–37; Glant, „Seglyezés és politika,” 1322–23; Bruno Cabanes, *The Great War and the Origins of Humanitarianism* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

⁴³ Kind-Kovács, “The Great War,” 36–37.

⁴⁴ Ablonczy, „Lesz még kikelet,” 131–39; Balázs Ablonczy, „Sérelem, jogfolytonosság, frusztráció. Alsó-Fehér vármegye menekült törvényhatósága Budapest 1918–1921”, in *Nyombiztosítás. Letűnt magyarok*, ed. Balázs Ablonczy (Pozsony: Kalligram, 2011), 139–75.

These local and regional associations were not necessarily political, in contrast to those mentioned above as regards to the political impact of refugees. Associations of former inhabitants of small regions like the Spiš/Szepesség/Zips, Banská Stiavnica/Selmecebánya/Schemnitz, or cities like Oradea/Nagyvárad and Arad used these organizations as crucial points of common activities and nurturing connections. They also served as platforms for remembering what they felt had been lost.⁴⁵ But not all were irredentist in the classical sense, even though these associations reminded of the losses Hungary had to suffer in 1920. Furthermore, the existence of such associations did not necessarily mean they had any political significance. Some of the most ominously sounding associations were in fact quite insignificant in political terms (e.g., the Székely Hadosztály Egyesület/Székely Division Association or the Hargitavárlaja Székely Község/Hargitavárlaja Székely Commune), even if the tone of their publications and conventions was markedly anti-Romanian and irredentist. However, their membership was often of modest background, lacking social and political influence, and this way these associations certainly proved the diversity of the refugees in terms of political orientations.

This political diversity was, however, also true for politicians with a refugee background. They held various visions and were represented in all factions of Hungarian right-wing political parties. One of the foremost figures of the nascent irredentist movement, the initiator of the irredentist statues on Szabadság tér, Nándor Urmánczy, was of Transylvanian origin, just as the more moderate István Bethlen or the anti-Semitic, but pragmatic Pál Teleki. The latter was the one who – on behalf of Bethlen, who served as prime minister from 1921 to 1931 – tamed the quickly growing irredentist associations and brought them under direct government control, implementing constraints on their funding and activities.⁴⁶ It is notable that many of the most radical politicians of the early 1920s, like Gyula Gömbös were not of refugee origin neither originated from territories annexed to the successor states. The most notoriously anti-Semitic party, the Christian Socialists, was the strongest in Western Hungary and Budapest, and its strength did not come from the support of refugee voters.⁴⁷ While refugees were among its supporters and prominent politicians, it

⁴⁵ Balázs Ablonczy, "A Klopacska hív." Emlékezésformák Selmecebányára a két világháború között," in *Nyombiztosítás. Letűnt magyarok*, ed. Balázs Ablonczy (Pozsony: Kalligram, 2011), 91–121.

⁴⁶ Nándor Bárdi, *Otthon és haza. Tanulmányok a romániai magyarság történetéből* (Csíkszereda: Pro Print, 2013), 277–86.

⁴⁷ Károly Ignác, *Budapest választ: Parlamenti és törvényhatósági választások a fővárosban, 1920–1945* (Budapest: Napvilág Kiadó, 2013).

was not solely and necessarily their refugee experience that drove these people towards anti-Semitism and radical anti-liberalism.

Thus, the political influence of refugees was rather indirect. They managed to influence politics as most political parties embraced the issue of quick integration of the refugees mainly conceived as middle-class and through the creation and reinforcement of this specific, socially biased representation of this social group they helped to regain the political dominance of the traditional middle-class, threatened by revolution at the wake of WWI. The two aspects came neatly together, as refugees' problems were most strongly associated with the loss of middle-class status and its possible remedies.

However, it would be unfair to claim that only one refugee group, the middle-class, was present in the public imaginary. Most reports mentioned both the middle-class and some other significant groups, usually railway workers. Thus, the very first articles published on this topic appeared in the daily of the Social Democrats, the *Népszava*, and highlighted the condition of the workers. But attention was oscillating, and it was easier to merge the representation of the middle-class with railway men, since these reports emerged with varying frequency, most of them usually during the fall and winter months, when deprivation of the railway carriage population was the worst.⁴⁸ For practical reasons, many of the people living in railway carriages were railway employees, while the railway carriages also constituted the most visible and striking aspect of middle-class refugeedom.⁴⁹

Still, asserting that refugees were mainly of middle-class origin served direct political purposes, both internally and externally.⁵⁰ The most important wartime experience of the middle-class, besides deprivation, was the experience of a rising working class that gained in relative status due to better provisioning (through cooperatives and trade unions) and, finally, also gained political power, overthrowing the existing social order.⁵¹ Acknowled-

⁴⁸ A search for the term *vagonlakók* in the newspapers found in the collection of the *Aranum Digitális Tudástár* database returns 5 results for January 1920, 9 for June, 78 for July, 32 for August, 46 for September, 72 for October, 133 for November and 39 for December.

⁴⁹ "Vagonlakók a pályaudvaron," *Népszava*, November 23, 1919: 6–7; "Vagonlakók," *Pesti Hírlap*, July 16, 1920: 1.

⁵⁰ "A magunk erejéből akarunk boldogulni," *Ország-Világ* 41, nr. 50, December 12, 1920: 603; Csóti, "A menekült köztisztviselők..." 26–7.

⁵¹ Károly Ignác, "A szervezkedés mint csodatévő hatalom? Munkásképviselet az első világháború idején," in *Háborús mindennapok – a mindennapok háborúja. Magyarország és a Nagy Háború – ahogy a sajtó látta (1914–1918)*, eds. Gábor Egry and Eszter Kaba (Budapest: Napvilág, 2018), 157–224; Gábor Egry, "Kukoricakenyér, pacal és vizezett tej – Ellátás és fogyasztás a világháború idején," in *Háborús mindennapok – a mindennapok háborúja. Magyarország és a Nagy Háború – ahogy a sajtó látta (1914–1918)*, eds. Gábor Egry and Eszter Kaba (Budapest: Napvilág, 2018), 289–350.

edgment that workers constituted an even larger part of the refugees than the middle-class seemed self-defeating in this perceived or real political struggle, while the focus on the middle-class represented a symbolic reversal of the real political developments. Foreign visitors were also brought to the refugees' trains to get a sense of their suffering and the absurdity of the situation. These visitors' reflections seemed to reinforce the image that it was primarily the middle-class who bore the brunt of the suffering. Sometimes it was hoped that images like these would open the eyes of peacemakers, convincing them of the impossibility of the newly established borders. Hungarian media were eager to report articles from the foreign press, and in those reports it was emphasized that foreigners were stunned by the conditions of the refugee state employees and of the middle-class, in general.⁵² The image of the destitute intelligentsia was therefore crucial for external consumption, not least because it was easily aligned with the view of the foreign decision-makers, for whom salvaging the Central European intelligentsia was the key to staving off the Bolshevik threat.⁵³

Refugees were most often associated with, and their experience was narrated through the lens of some form of state persecution, expulsions, job losses, arbitrary trials, suffering and the like. A concerted propagandistic effort was also clear in many cases.⁵⁴ True, the road to Hungary was generally full of obstacles, petty abuses that easily proved the inferiority of the successor states, even if their reasons were more practical, not moral deficiencies. For example, railway carriage shortages made state railways reluctant to provide the means of transport to another country, from where the return of the precious railway carriages was uncertain.

It is still important to note, that the image of refugees (including of people living in railway carriages) for internal consumption was only reduced to encompass almost entirely the middle-class only in the thirties, after

⁵² "A trianoni béke francia előadója a vagonlakónál," *Az Est*, October 22, 1920: 6. The article emphasized how stunned the French politician, the rapporteur of the peace treaty in the French parliament, was when he encountered among the railway car dwellers a young lady who spoke impeccable French, or when he met the doctor living there. The February 11, 1921 issue of the *Az Est* published a report on an article printed in the *New York World*, which also described the plight of the railway car dwellers sympathetically and characterized them as middle-class.

⁵³ Glant, „Segélyezés és politika,” 509–512.

⁵⁴ On April 14, 1922, a report was published in several Budapest newspapers with the same text regarding expulsions from Romania, but with a different title: "A genuai konferencián hiányzanak a magyar szaktekintélyek," *Reggeli Hírlap* 31. no. 86. (1922): 3; "Rabmagyarok tiltakoznak Génúában," *Új Nemzedék* 4. no. 86 (1922): 1; "A megszállott területekről 229503 magyart üldöztek ki," *Órai Újság* 8, no. 87 (1922): 2; "A magyarok tulajdonának és személyes szabadságának biztosítását követeljük az utódállamoktól," *Az Est* 13, no. 86 (1922): 3. It was published in the *Budapesti Hírlap*, *Magyar Jövő*, *Kis Újság*, *Szózat*, *Pécsi Lapok*, *Új Barázda*.

the last railway carriage families were provided with housing in 1928.⁵⁵ This coincided with the emergence of their literary portrayals.⁵⁶ It did not necessarily mean a homogenizing of the group in terms of experiences, moral conduct and behavior. For example, some works were quite critical of certain groups of middle-class refugees.⁵⁷ However, refugeedom was still mostly presented as a middle-class experience and as a tragedy.

This is how refugees contributed, probably, the most to the radicalization process in interwar Hungary. While their plight was alleviated and resolved by the end of the 1920s, and radical politicians were brought under control or sidelined even earlier, the image of the refugees and, most notably, the suffering of the railway carriage dwellers was effectively burnt into the consciousness of Hungary. It was a powerful image, mainly because it was a visual experience directly relevant for broad segments of society. This was because the railway carriages and their population were a common sight in most Hungarian cities. But it was also a way of minimizing and reducing cognitive dissonance. The treatment of refugees in Hungary was far from the welcoming image suggested by the propaganda and implied as normative expectation from everyone within the discourse regarding the suffering Hungarians: unconditional acceptance and selfless assistance to the refugees. In reality, quite a few faced rejection, abuse, mistreatment and envy in a society where the goods and means that the refugees aspired to were also the ones that the locals claimed for themselves. To share these goods amidst shortages was not the natural inclination of many. This led to more or less publicized conflicts between the migrants and the locals.⁵⁸ Thus, the emergence of an uncontested image of the refugees together with their acceptance as the faces and symbols of Hungarian suffering made it easier for the locals to gloss over those conflicts. It provided some symbolic compensation for the refugees and, most importantly, it turned the refugees into avatars of the common suffering of the nation – even for those who never encountered the authorities of the successor states and for whom Trianon was not a personal experience.

Hungarian society was always ambiguous towards minority Hungarians arriving in Hungary. The negative experiences of the refugees with Hungarians from Hungary also echoed among Hungarians arriving to the country in the 1930s.⁵⁹ It was definitely against the moral norms imposed

⁵⁵ "Nincsenek már vagonlakók, eltűntek a nyomortanyák," *Nemzeti Újság* 10, no. 292, December 25, 1928: 47–8.

⁵⁶ István Gergely Szűts, „Kiköltözők társadalma.” (A trianoni menekültkérdés ábrázolása két regényben),” *Valóság* 54, no. 1 (2011): 21–36.

⁵⁷ Szűts, „Kiköltözők társadalma,” 30–34.

⁵⁸ Csóti, „A menekült köztisztviselők,” 26–7; Szűts, „Kiköltözők társadalma,” 32.

⁵⁹ Egrý, *Etnicitás, identitás*, 219–272.

on society by the political discourse concerning the peace treaty, which emphasized the common victimhood and the moral obligation of all Hungarians to help those who suffered as minorities in the successor states. In this form, this discourse was a sign that, while what happened to Hungary in 1918–1920 was conceived as a common trauma, the lack of a homogeneous common experience made it difficult to instill the sense of this traumatic experience throughout society. However, this failure made the refugees even more important. In order to foster a feeling of cultural trauma not directly based on traumatic experiences, but rather on the purposeful activities of several social actors, the memory of the refugees was a crucial connecting link between the real experience of loss and the broader social experiences of material deprivation and political upheaval in the aftermath of WWI. Refugees thus became mainstays of a cultural trauma supposed to perpetuate the trope of the common suffering of all Hungarians.

It was exactly this idea, emphasizing the common suffering and impossibility to resolve the worsening situation of Hungarian minorities through means other than territorial revision, which helped to push Hungarian politics towards increasingly radical ideas. This was true not just in terms of re-annexation of the lost territories, but also regarding the issues of internal exclusion and national renewal. While the refugees gradually disappeared from sight and were dissolved into Hungarian society, their image lingered on in the realm of social consciousness. Even though it was not the only factor contributing to the radicalization of certain segments of Hungarian society, it played a major role in the new constellation of political ideas that were used and circulated in the public sphere.