

Károly Eszterházy Catholic University
Doctoral School of History

Gergely Péterffy:
Rebuilding the Hungarian State Railways, 1944–1949

Thesis of doctoral (PhD) dissertation

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The aim of my dissertation is to explore in a complex way the reconstruction of the Hungarian State Railways (Magyar Államvasutak, hereinafter MÁV) after World War II, from the autumn of 1944 until the reorganisation of 15 March 1949. The Red Army appeared at the Trianon-Hungarian borders at the end of September 1944, and less than five years later the Hungarian State Railways were reorganised and integrated into the Ministry of Transport. Although the reconstruction was not fully completed by 1949, with the major river bridges in particular still missed from the network, the infrastructure was sufficiently stable for the management, socialised under the old system, to be replaced by people trusted by the Communist Party, which by that time had taken the power.

The railways should be examined from four main points of view.

1. The railways as a means of transport and service and its economic performance. Railway historians (especially the amateur ones), focus primarily on this: on rolling stock, buildings, safety equipment, bridges and other track installations.
2. The railways as a transport partner and its commercial role in the country's economy. This includes the timetables, fares and freight tariffs, as well as the various passenger and freight discounts that have been offered to stimulate the economy of a region.
3. The railways as an employer. From the salary and pension scheme, through accident and sickness insurance, to the strict hierarchy of living and working conditions laid down in the Staff Regulations and the various instructions, to the life of the railwaymen's associations.
4. The railways as a customer can also be examined. Its operation already required a large quantity of raw materials, semi-finished products and manufactured goods, and the huge material requirements and contractor workload of the reconstruction work also placed considerable demands on heavy industry, commercial firms and artisans alike. However, because of the difficulties of access to the sources, the latter is the most difficult to analyse, and indeed impossible to do so in more depth than at a general level, as the railways advertised and selected partners for several supplier and contractor tenders each month, not to mention the countless smaller orders and manual purchases. But a deeper analysis is not necessary, as the summary accounts are still a convincing illustration of the economic impact and position of the State Railways' role as a buyer - and the often problematic circumstances in which it operates.

Based on the above four aspects, my dissertation attempts to present the Hungarian State Railways and its employees with an economic and social history, and partly with a cultural

and technical history focus, and to describe the efforts of the state railway company and the railwaymen in the reconstruction of the country. The research draws mainly on the documents of the Hungarian State Railways, the Ministry of Transport, the economic affairs units of the governing parties, and the trade union, supplemented by the sources of the 1st Engineering Division of the Hungarian Army. The battalions of the division were involved in the railway reconstruction until the end of summer 1946.

The Second World War caused extremely serious damage to Hungary, and there was not a single area of life in which performance did not decline dramatically. This was no different in the railway infrastructure. Not only did the destruction caused by the war, and the removal of rolling stock, equipment and materials to the West, but the violence and pillage of the occupation troops made matters worse.

With reparations and reconstruction tying up the vast majority of existing industrial capacity, there was little left to maintain and repair the railways' specialised equipment, to keep the railways running. No wonder that the Hungarian State Railways seized every opportunity – for example the purchase of American warlocomotives on commodity credit provided by the United States of America, or the leasework for the Soviet Railways to convert carriages to Soviet standards – to obtain some materials. If there were no other ways, by taking over leftover goods from reparations. This, of course, could only be done with ministerial approval, and after the economic stabilisation August 1946, the government was keen to keep the state-owned companies, as well as the budget on a tight rein to prevent inflation from running out of control again.

Consolidation of the economy was unthinkable without the restoration of the MÁV, and vice versa. If there is no goods to transport, there is no revenue to cover operating costs. If there is no transport, no production, no (raw) material from the mines, or the factories, there is no income to cover operating costs. Without jobs, workplaces going to disappear, ruined the economy of a region and the country.

It can be said without exaggeration that the management and the executive branches of the Hungarian State Railways - as well as the entire Hungarian population and the factories - had to cope with extraordinary conditions. Despite the extremely poor financial, material and operational conditions, the crisis management of MÁV was basically successful. This was due partly to the fact that some of the members of the management, such as the MÁV-president László Varga, and his close colleague Ernő Lux, had already experienced crisis management after the First World War, and using the

experience of that time, they managed to recover the railway more quickly than after the much less devastating First World War and the turbulent years of 1918–1919. The ministry and the Communist Party minister himself played a major role in resolving the crisis, and without Ernő Gerő's advocacy skills, recovery would probably have been slower. Gerő's "Face the Railways!" programme was successful in channelling some of the country's scarce resources into rebuilding the railways. Of course, it also took the realisation that ideological enthusiasm alone is not enough to rebuild a shattered transport system, and that expertise is more important than political commitment.

Three years after the war, the railways not only matched but even surpassed the results of the last peace year in some key indicators, even if some operational indicators and statistics were still below the level of 1938, especially in terms of the number of vehicles and technical quality.

During the socialist era, especially until the early 1970s, this period was seen as a kind of heroic epic, and if we blow the „red dust” off the photographs, we can see a truly heroic struggle as not only the Hungarian State Railways, but the whole country recovered. To put it briefly and concisely: the railways and the Ministry of Transport have used every means at their disposal to get the country's blood circulating as quickly as possible, and to meet the needs of the moment, even if at the cost of compromises.