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Nové Zámky on the threshold of two eras. The events and characteristics of the state transformation of 1918/1919 in Nové Zámky and its surroundings

Thesis of doctoral (PhD) dissertation

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My PhD. thesis focuses on examining the historical events that took place between 1918 and 1919 at a regional level. During my research, I investigated the processes related to the state change in the town of Nové Zámky, as well as those that occurred in the surrounding villages. In addition, I compared these processes with the characteristics that occurred at the national and larger regional level, particularly in Upper Hungary. Throughout the investigation and analysis, I presented the collected results in a total of seven chapters in my work, which included a comprehensive historiographical introduction and comparative chapters, alongside practical analyses of the processes in Nové Zámky and its vicinity.

In the introduction, I point out some practical and methodological characteristics of my work, as well as the nature of the research related to Trianon and the imperial changes of 1918-1919. Here, I express that the individual chapters differ naturally in terms of content and scale, and they work with varying amounts and qualities of source material. The reason for this is that we're dealing

with a relatively new and unexplored topic-at least for this particular region. Secondly, the nature of the examined chapters, whether they are researched or not, has sometimes dictated that I rely solely on the primary archival sources I have investigated. Thirdly, which also showcases a kind of uniqueness, I have simultaneously compared local and national contexts. Essentially, this allows for a two-dimensional comparison: at the Slovak-Hungarian level and the national-microhistorical level. While there have been many cases in the past where a mixed-inhabited town has caught researchers' attention, so far, hardly ever, or maybe never has our focus been on a region that suddenly transformed from being “purely Hungarian” to a mixed community in just a little over a year.

The second chapter essentially presents the historiography of Trianon and the circumstances surrounding the birth of the Czechoslovak state, relying not on primary sources but on existing literature. The uniqueness of this part of my work is that it can hopefully create a sort of precedent for examining a topic

specifically from the perspective of Hungarian literature in Slovakia. Therefore, during the historiographical presentation, I aimed to showcase not only the historical narratives related to the topic in Slovak and Hungarian languages but also the "interpretation from the Felvidék."

While dealing with Nové Zámky and its surroundings, I visited several archival institutions—the main support came from the Nové Zámky Branch Archive of the Slovak National Archive in Nitra County—along with utilizing resources from the "Nitra Archive" and the collections of the Fórum Institute. In the context of Hungary, I studied documents from the Manuscript Archive of the National Széchényi Library and the National Archives. Above all, however, I consider the most valuable to be those memoirs and commented urban chronicles, which, while they may serve as supplements to an archival source, in our case represent experiential accounts that go beyond merely subjective, lived notes. Additionally, I also made use of various statistical sources necessary for the orientation.

In the historiographical chapter, I found, similar to several of my predecessors, that the Trianon narrative between the two world wars was limited to searching for culprits, meaning it mainly revolved around finding scapegoats, while the discourse about Trianon after 1945 was completely subdued by the influence and nature of party-state ideology. The year 1965 stands out as a significant turning point because here, instead of ideology, the usage of professional and source-based reasoning began to emerge.

The change of regime brought a real renaissance in terms of reinterpreting the topic, as the liberalized society opened up the possibility for a wider audience to research various previously non-public sources. Furthermore, I believe it also represented a sort of new momentum, as representatives of the grievance narrative presented reinterpetative, authoritative, or national perspective stories, among whom were historians delivering outstanding works, as well as those who either directly or shortly after sought only emotional impacts or served propagandistic goals in their writings. Thus, naturally,

this had the effect that so-called academic historians and representatives of "sterile historiography" responded with their works. Standing out among them are the contributions of Miklós Zeidler, Balázs Ablonczy, and Ignác Romsics, whom I believe we might not find a more defining figure than him not only for our present but also in the long term in the future. Most recently, in the topic of Trianon, the already mentioned Ablonczy has also made invaluable contributions and can undoubtedly boast of enormous significance in relation to the Trianon 100 project, the results of which I have tried to present.

In this chapter, I also reviewed the historiographical overview related to our topic in Slovakia, summarizing through various perspectives that essentially the circle of historians in the country can be divided into two narrative groups: the "Czechoslovakists" and the "ľudáks," or those who identify against Hungarians and Czechs. Their common ground is that they interpret the Treaty of Trianon as a positive process, which, thanks to the decision, managed to avoid the death of the Slovak nation. The difference between the two schools can be

seen in the different nuances; while the “Czechoslovakist” trend represents the inevitable breakdown of the Monarchy, the autonomy school emphasizes Hungarian oppression, running a sort of competition with history by insisting on the continuous Slovak existence in the Carpathian Basin, reaching back to earlier times.

Examining Slovak historiography, I found that after 1945, in Czechoslovak historiography, similar to the Hungarian context, ideological influences prevailed here as well. The difference, however, is that the starting points remained significantly determinant with similar or even the same intensity, which were established in the interwar period. In the 1970s and 1980s, Slovak historiography somewhat managed to move in a professional direction, largely thanks to comparisons being made with foreign, particularly Hungarian contexts. Not to mention the incorporation of international sources. Following the regime change, a “sterile” perspective emerged in the Slovak Trianon narrative, thanks to the works of historians like Miroslav

Michela and Roman Holec. However, the anniversaries of 18 and 20 only refined the entrenched narratives.

A breakthrough in the Hungarian narrative in Slovakia might come precisely because of this topic, which could have great potential for international comparison and professional collaboration as well. I decided to present this, as up until now, colleagues have only dealt with Hungarian and international historiography or Hungarian and other nationalities' historiography; in other words, there hasn't been a presentation of the Hungarian minority across the border on this topic yet. In terms of Slovak Hungarian historiography, I consider the works of Gyula Popély, László Szarka, and Attila Simon to be defining. Although there were local historical works and memoirs written both between the two world wars and since then, I utilized these not only in the historiographical section.

In the following chapter, I presented the state of Nové Zámky before 1918. I mainly focused on how it became a railway junction and what impact that had on the society living there. In this chapter, I used the studies of Lajos

Jócsik, who was also a witness to the events during the examined period. I elaborated in the chapter that the emergence of industry transformed both the society and the appearance of Nové Zámky. Before the second industrial revolution, the population had a peasant character. The emergence of the railway played a central role in this change, as it brought with it modern forms of market economy, the establishment of state institutions, and infrastructure development alike. Their stimulating effects also spread to modern bureaucratic administration, education, and the emergence of cultural institutions. Naturally, bank branches and savings banks appeared gradually, retail and wholesale businesses developed, as well as large enterprises. All of this had a reverse effect too, as the mechanization of agriculture also took place. Overall, it can be said that the conditions for the city's growing and flourishing development were caused by the railway lines and their transformation into a junction. At the same time, the number of people working in the railways also increased, leading to the emergence of a new middle class.

The following chapter deals with the birth of Czechoslovakia and the course of the state transformation. It approaches the topic from a broad perspective, essentially presenting the Czechoslovak idea and showcasing the most important events and connections from the formation of the country to its territorial acquisition.

The chapter titled "On the Border of Two Eras: Nové Zámky and Its Surroundings" forms the backbone of the dissertation. This large chapter contains archival sources that allow us to speak of fundamental research. Along with sub-section divisions, it presents the research findings from the end of 1918 until the city's final occupation.

We get a glimpse into the unpredictable and chaotic nature of the mass movements at the end of 1918, which had no political goals behind them. Rather, it was the end of the war and the call for social change that brought people to the streets. Thus, the population of Nové Zámky was not particularly agitated by the simultaneous fact that the Czechoslovak army—a militia mostly made

up of volunteers and former soldiers—began to take control of their "Slovak territories." However, a significant change can be noted on January 1, 1919, as the newly formed, professionally established Czechoslovak army, supported by the Allies, successfully occupied the city of Bratislava, which was a matter of concern for the people of Nové Zámky.

The chaotic situation at the end of 1918 and the beginning of 1919 was much more palpable. The chaos was exacerbated by the fact that the units of the Hungarian army, returning home, envisioned their future plans alongside looting and the disruption of order, finding little opportunity otherwise. In other words, they engaged in arbitrary, lawless activities, making it seem more practical to call in the Czechoslovak army rather than letting the civilian population become a target. Despite this, a resistance movement emerged in the city against the Czechoslovak units, initially fueled by huge enthusiasm, since those who volunteered for the resistance had no idea what kind of army they would be fighting against. The reasons for the failure were clearly

visible; when the army reached the defenses set up above the village of Tornóc, the resolve of the defenders had already waned, and only a handful remained for armed defense. After all, by this point, everyone had already heard about the horrors of the four-year war, and in this case, war was already knocking at the door. Thus, instead of unnecessary bloodshed, they chose to surrender, hoping that the peace conference would ultimately award the city and its surroundings to Hungary as a predominantly Hungarian-inhabited area, meaning that Czechoslovak rule would merely be temporary.

After agreeing with the Czechoslovak unit, the main task of the occupying troops in Nové Zámky was also to maintain public safety in the city. They managed to eliminate the subversive elements and then clearly focused on upholding the law and restoring public safety. From this perspective, it's important to note that the presence of the Czechoslovak army brought a certain stability. Unfortunately, this cannot be said about the former city leadership, as the mayor and his entourage left the city along with its cash reserves.

Given the ongoing situation, it's no surprise that grievances among the residents in the occupied areas grew over time: unemployment, food shortages, the failure to deliver promised allowances, and the increasingly arrogant behavior of the Czechoslovak authorities provided enough reasons for resistance. However, behind the events that unfolded in February 1919 lay the intention for the Hungarian population annexed to Czechoslovakia to make it known to the authorities and the world that they did not want to belong to Czechoslovakia. The most striking manifestation of this was the railway workers' strike that began on February 3, 1919. It was at this point that the urban population realized that the Czechoslovak army was not just a temporary presence but was preparing for a long-term establishment. The two-day strike, which largely stemmed from Nové Zámky, later spread throughout the entire region. The main motivation for the strikers was rooted in social grievances. Nonetheless, the less than a month of Czechoslovak presence in the city created negative experiences, so the strike automatically became associated with protests against the occupation. The

short-term consequence of the strike was that the Czechoslovak leadership ordered the dismissal of Hungarian nationality employees deemed unreliable in other state sectors as well.

With the change in power, a symbolic territorial claim also took place in Nové Zámky. This was most notably manifested in the Kossuth statue and its demolition. After the railway workers' strike, it led to a relatively short period without conflict, which was precisely brought about by the statue's toppling. The reason behind the demolition of the Kossuth statue was initiated by the proclamation of the Soviet Republic. Consequently, an extremely tense situation developed in Nové Zámky, as this political turnaround represented both an ideological affinity and a national resistance for the Czechoslovak military stationed here. For this reason, on the night of May 22, 1919, a still unidentified group of Czechoslovak legionnaires and Czech railway workers toppled the statue of Kossuth Lajos standing in the main square, dragged it to the train station, and most likely had it dismantled and taken away.

The establishment of Czechoslovak rule came to an end on June 1, 1919, with the arrival of the Red Army units advancing throughout Northern Hungary. It is characteristic of the relationship between the population and the withdrawing Czechoslovak military that the new change in state was accompanied by clashes and casualties. A tense situation escalated to the brink of explosion between the gathered crowd in the main square and the gradually withdrawing army due to the appearance of a compromising figure at the nearby town hall, where soldiers opened fire on the murmuring crowd. However, the reception of the Hungarian Red soldiers was also not problem-free. The far-left ideas only attracted a certain segment, while the majority were enthusiastic about Hungarian national existence. Thus, a series of measures, such as the removal of national flags and the prohibition of Hungarian religious services and processions, were met with bewilderment by everyone; moreover, the subsequent actions of the council's authority were stricter than the Czechoslovak calls.

From June 7, 1919, the strategic importance of Nové Zámky increased as the Czechoslovak forces began their counteroffensive. Accompanied by airstrikes, the Czechoslovak army easily retook the city. However, it made a big difference that this time, the Czechoslovak army was organized under French officers instead of Italian ones. Under heightened and strict measures, martial law was enforced, and local leaders as well as those deemed potentially dangerous were interned. The Red Army aimed to capture the bridge over the Nitra River, which would have allowed them to easily access the train station. However, thanks to organized defense, they couldn't execute this plan, leading to fierce fighting for the city in nearby towns and along the bordering areas, which ultimately concluded with a victory for the Czechoslovak army on June 24. However, the efforts to eliminate the unreliable Hungarians continued. Interrogations lasted until late autumn, targeting residents who assisted the Bolshevik forces, previously protesting railway workers, and other individuals considered dangerous. Many Hungarians were taken to military prisons in Czech and Moravian territories, including the

facilities in Leopoldov and Ilava, from which some were not released for months or even years.

Order was quickly restored. The vacant positions were filled by legionnaires, their family members, or Czechoslovak officials from elsewhere. In the case of Hungarian-speaking residents, the loyalty oath was still expected. On October 28, 1919, when the first anniversary of the establishment of the Czechoslovak Republic was celebrated, the disruptions caused by the legionnaires—who vandalized Hungarian-related memorials—showed that tensions were still very much present in the city. So, integration didn't go smoothly even after the first year. Beyond the language barriers, the regime changes completely transformed the local landscape and created an entirely new situation for everyone. The Hungarian community in Czechoslovakia, which had previously lacked any historical or cultural foundations, had to organize itself.

That's why the penultimate chapter summarizes the consequences of the state change. It should be noted that the minority status led to a decrease in the number of

Hungarians in Czechoslovakia. This trend was also evident in the data for Nové Zámky and its surrounding areas. Alongside the natural processes of assimilation, the emigration of refugees, the identity shifts of residents, the methodology of population censuses, the treatment of the Jewish community as a separate nation, and negative indicators of natural growth all contributed to a gradual decline that was statistically measurable. During the examined period, we can primarily discuss identity shifts, the loss of territory for Hungarian administration, the exodus, and significant Czechoslovak immigration. Additionally, it's interesting to note that during the surveys, some individuals of Hungarian descent identified themselves as Czechoslovak in hopes that this would improve their fortunes.

Alongside demographic data, this chapter offers a glimpse into the educational, cultural, and political daily life of the city. It's important to highlight that in terms of education, the Czechoslovak leadership sought to consider not only its liberalization but also the initiation of natural Slovakization. This was how new Slovak

institutions emerged, and alongside Hungarian classes in high schools, Czechoslovak classes were introduced.

Politically, there was an oversupply of parties, with influence coming from every direction on the political spectrum. However, it was also true that only a few Hungarian parties had any real say in public life. In Nové Zámky, there was thus a massive struggle for the favor of voters, at least at the national level. This cannot be said for local elections, where Hungarian parties collaborated exemplarily and ran their candidates on a joint list. The coordinated efforts of the parties were also essential for the city to maintain its Hungarian character during the interwar period.

Thanks to a vibrant cultural life, Nové Zámky became the third regional center of Hungarian territories alongside Bratislava and Košice in these years, and it was here that the Sarló movement found one of its cores among local young scouts. This was the generation that, instead of reviving old Hungary, began organizing their own community, contributing to the foundation of a distinct Hungarian identity in Slovakia. The community

experienced the effects of the events discussed in my
work through their socialization...