

**The Hungarian Royal Gendarmerie and Political Violence in “Happy Peaceful Times”
(1881-1914)**

This article deals with the social-political tensions in late Habsburg Hungary by exploring the coercive conduct of the Hungarian Royal Gendarmerie from its creation in 1881 up to the First World War. Through an analysis of narrative and statistical primary sources, the paper shows how the gendarmerie protected the dualist system from the perceived threats of nationalist and labour movements. It attempts to establish the situations in which the gendarmes resorted to physical aggression, how its dynamic changed over time, and the regions where the levels of force exercised by the gendarmerie were higher. Altogether, it argues that widespread physical violence was a central feature of social-political conflicts in pre-WWI Hungary, with the gendarmes playing a crucial role.

“Since religion has lost its power, what would keep unrestrained masses from crime? Only the gendarme’s bayonet.”

Alajos Csizmadia, Roman Catholic Vicar of Fadd, central Hungary, and law scholar (1904, LXXXI)

“The fear and hatred with which they [gendarmes] are regarded by the common people throughout Hungary, but especially by the Non-Magyars, is one of the most notorious facts in Hungarian country life; and indeed it is not necessary to travel long in Hungary without obtaining some practical illustration of their brutality. They are at all

times over-ready with sabre and bayonet, and many think nothing of bestowing a kick or a box on the ears or of using the butts of their rifles against the ribs or back of a refractory peasant [...].”

Robert Seton-Watson, British historian (1911, 12)

Peace does not necessarily equal absence of conflict.¹ Nevertheless, many see *fin-de-siècle* Europe as the *Belle Époque*. Two generations, born and raised to adulthood after the Franco-Prussian war of 1870 and before the Great War of 1914, saw no major military engagement. Instead they witnessed economic innovation and the advancement of social justice and general well-being. These quiet years sharply contrast with the following three decades of the pan-European “Civil War”, also labelled the second “Thirty Years War”, of 1914-1945.² The tendency to view the late Habsburg Empire in a positive light has recently become particularly pronounced. Compared to its post-Great War local successors, the Danube monarchy seemed able to keep its polyglot populations in relatively peaceful co-existence and moved towards extending political rights (rather than in the opposite direction) while ensuring the functioning of an efficient economic network.³ Even anti-Semitic sentiment seemed to be at its low level under the Habsburgs. The gravest wave of pogroms in Austria-Hungary, which occurred in 1898, apparently left no fatalities among the Jews.⁴ What could be a better illustration of comparative stability at the dawn of mass murder?

The true picture was, as always, much more nuanced. Retaliation and constraint were significant elements in maintaining order in the Habsburg *Belle Époque*. On the moderate

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² The term « *Belle Époque* » has, as any term, its limitations and counter-argumentation, but it is popularly used by historians across Europe. See the analysis of the first usage in French by Kalifa (2016).

³ Judson (2016).

⁴ Unowsky (2018).

level of anti-Semitism, historian István Deák notes: “True, anti-Semitism was rampant in German and Slavic middle-class circles, but even the most rabid anti-Semite had to think twice in Austria-Hungary before insulting a Jew.” In Deák’s opinion, religious and racial hatred was restrained by a desire to avoid potentially fatal clashes with insulted persons (Deák, 1990, 133). Crime statistics show that Jews were overrepresented among those convicted for duelling, at least in Hungary.⁵ Physical threat, rather than moral appeal to right and justice, seems to have had a decisive function in structuring relations across all spectres of life, including those related to state management. As the conservative journal *Budapesti Hirlap* lamented in 1897: “In our country, the law is not respected by the government, whose guardian it should be; nor by the legislative body, which issues the laws; nor by society, whose experience everywhere is that the law is to be got around; nor by the people, who see in the government only coercion and protect their interests with similar violence — by breaching contracts, and by strikes and revolts.” The journal’s conclusion was that government policy was reduced to “Gendarmerie and Army, weapon and blood, administrative coercion and violence.” (Nyers erő hatalma, *Budapesti Hirlap*, 8 July 1897, 1).

The gendarmerie in Hungary, as in many other places in nineteenth century Europe, was a key institution in bringing state order and authority to the countryside, where the majority of the national population lived. As the former regent of Hungary Miklos Horthy (1920-44) recalled in exile, “the gendarmerie — in my opinion — was Hungary’s finest institution. [...] the head of [the gendarmerie] squad possessed unlimited power in the villages, but, to my knowledge, he never abused it”.⁶ Historian Clive Emsley argues that the early gendarmes were fulfilling tasks similar to the colonial police forces and were expected to “colonise the

⁵ In 1914, 41% (57 out of 139) of those convicted for duelling in Hungary were Jews (*Magyar statisztikai évkönyv 1914*, 350), although Jews represented around 5% of the total population.

⁶ Cited by Rektor (1980, 361).

rural districts of the nation-State, the final areas of Europe to be subjected to surveillance and control”.⁷

While the crucial role that law enforcement agencies played in building nation-states and establishing their monopoly of violence across modern Europe is now recognised, there are still lacunae in this area of research. For example, English-language police historians on the Habsburg monarchy generally concentrate on the Austrian rather than the Hungarian gendarmes.⁸ For some reason, the Hungarian gendarmerie remains the exclusive domain of Magyar-language research, which focusses most of its attention on the gendarmerie’s institutional and legal history, but not on the violence, except for the gendarmerie’s involvement in Second World War atrocities and the Holocaust.⁹ The best comprehensive study of the late Habsburg gendarmerie in Hungary is that of Csaba Csapó, but he gives only a brief overview of how far the gendarmes were able to go in injuring their opponents in their quest for order.¹⁰

This paper aims to take a further step in examining the Hungarian gendarmerie with a research focus on the nexus between nation-state building and law enforcement violence. In a wider sense, the aim of this paper is to shed light on the coercive agency of the Habsburg state in its Hungarian, or so-called Transleithanian, half during the three decades up to 1914. Highlighting the heavily polarised nature of the political process in the Hungarian Kingdom, the paper investigates the violent propensity of the most powerful law enforcement agency under the command of the Budapest government: the Royal Gendarmerie. In a more narrow sense, the paper attempts to answer the following questions: to what extent was the gendarmerie used as a political instrument by the Hungarian government in advancing state supremacy against its alleged opponents? How much violence did the gendarmes use in their

⁷ Emsley (1997b, 153-154).

⁸ Emsley (1997 a, 223-2335); Gebhardt (2019, 157-168).

⁹ Parádi (2012); Molnár (2017).

¹⁰ Csapó (1999).

activities? In what way did gendarmerie violence change in intensity over time and space? The paper is divided into two parts. The first part sketches the main lines of the political context in the period from the establishment of the Hungarian Royal Gendarmerie in 1881 up to the outbreak of the First World War in 1914. The second part investigates the gendarmerie's propensity for violent methods in carrying out its tasks, and also highlights the dynamics and spatial distribution of the gendarmerie's exposure to violence.

Politics in dualist Hungary and establishment of the Royal Gendarmerie (1867/1881-1914)

The Hungarian historiographical tradition coined its own equivalent for the *Belle Époque* — “*Boldog Békeidők*,” which translates literally as “the happy peaceful times.” The term was popularised by János Kodolányi in his 1956 novel, which portrays the final decade up to 1914. However, another understanding of the term traces Hungary's *Belle Époque* back to 1867, when the country was almost separated from Austria and united with Transylvania. The transformation of the Habsburg Empire into the Dual Monarchy of Austria-Hungary in 1867 formally restored the national sovereignty of the Hungarian Crown of Saint Stephen, which had been suspended following the failure of the 1848-1849 revolution. In line with the later *Belle Époque* retrospective view, the post-1867 Budapest political leadership shared a very optimistic vision of Hungary's future. The signs were indeed numerous — the national government administered the country, parliament functioned, the economy was developing with unprecedented speed (GDP per capita grew by 50% during the dualist period),¹¹ railways connected the various provinces, while the multi-ethnic population was becoming increasingly Magyarised. Under Prime Minister Dezső Bánffy (1895-1899), pompous

¹¹ Hungarian GDP per capita was around 1,300 international 1990 dollars following the 1867 reforms, and over 2,000 dollars in the last decade before WWI. The growth in GDP in Hungary was similar to that in Spain, higher than in Russia, Serbia and Romania, but lower than in Austria (where it grew from 2,000 to 3,000), Italy and other Western nations. Broadberry, O'Rourk (2010, 47).

festivities in 1896 in honour of the thousand years of Magyar presence in Central Europe were intended to demonstrate the vitality of Magyar nationalism to the people and to the world.¹² In 1902, Bánffy published a book in which he even predicted that the Habsburg monarchy would soon be re-formed into Hungary-Austria.¹³ However, the First World War brought with it the disintegration of “historical Hungary” with the loss of the territories where the majority of its non-Magyar population live (and significant numbers of ethnic Magyars). The rest of the country was engulfed by civil war, foreign interventions and murderous Jewish pogroms.¹⁴ Even though post-WWI Hungary was recognised as a fully independent state, territorial amputation of three quarters of her pre-war provinces in 1918-1921 heightened the perception of the outcome of the war as a “national catastrophe.” On the other hand, the *fin de siècle* period has been portrayed as the golden age of Magyar national history.

Figure 1. Rates of lethal violence in Hungary per 100,000 persons, 1874-1914.¹⁵

However, when one examines interpersonal lethal aggression in dualist Hungary, then this “peaceful happy” country looks much darker. The official statistics suggest that there were between 5 and 8 killings per 100,000 inhabitants per year over the turn of the century (Figure 1), which was 3-5 times higher than in other European states, such as Germany, France and Britain.¹⁶ As research on the long-term dynamics of homicide suggests, a lowering of social trust in the main political and social institutions may be a major factor in the increase

¹² Varga (2016).

¹³ Romsics (2006, 28), Bánffy (1902).

¹⁴ Bodo (2019).

¹⁵ I have calculated convictions for homicide as the sum of convictions for murder (*gyilkosság*), intentional manslaughter (*szándékos emberölés*), voluntary manslaughter (e.g. loss of control, diminished responsibility) (*felindulásban elkövetett emberölés*), and injury causing death (*halált okozó sértés*). Source: *Magyar statisztikai évkönyv*, Budapest, 1881-1915.

¹⁶ Only in Italy was the homicide rate close to Hungary’s with a fall from 5 to 3 per 100,000 inhabitants between 1890 and 1910. Chesnais (1981, 54-55).

in lethal violence.¹⁷ In this regard, we may well ask whether the peaks in fatal assaults in late Habsburg Hungary were symptoms of an increased general distrust towards her unstable, corrupt government?

Dualist Hungary was governed almost for forty years without interruption by the so-called Liberals (who supported maintaining the 1867 compromise with Austria). Nevertheless, bestowing the regime with an image of deep-rooted stability seems to be misleading. It was built as much upon fear and violence as on social cohesion. The basic foundations of the dualist regime in Hungary were laid in the wake of the severe suppression of the Magyar revolution in 1848-1849, and by the “neo-absolutist” autocracy that followed. Antagonistic interpretations of the outcome of the 1848-1849 revolution created a kind of permanent animosity between the pro-Habsburg loyalists and their adversaries — the “independentists”. Apart from repressing its aristocratic and emerging bourgeois rivals, the dualist regime also used force against other social forces perceived as “internal enemies”: national minorities and socialist activists. It invested huge efforts into culturally homogenising the country’s multi-ethnic population by promoting the Magyar language, restricting the use of other tongues and punishing dissent.¹⁸ The aggressive vision of the political process also spurred the proponents of Magyar superiority into planning the extension of Hungary’s territories further into the Balkans and the colonisation of its “underdeveloped” regions.¹⁹ Altogether, it may be concluded that the late Habsburg governing system in Hungary was cemented as much by economic development as by restricting inter-elite negotiations and violent management of political conflicts.

¹⁷ Roth (2009); Eisner, (2001); Goertzel *et al.* (2013).

¹⁸ The results of this policy were a rapid growth in declared Magyar native speakers from 6.4 million in 1880 to 9.9 million in 1910, and massive emigration of minorities. According to US records, of the 800,000 immigrants arriving in America from Hungary in the two decades up to 1901, more than half were Slovaks and only a quarter Magyars. Sallai (2018, 86).

¹⁹ Romsics (2002, 121-159).

Real or threatened violence accompanied almost all kinds of social-political tensions in Hungary. At the turn of the century, the country saw an escalation in duels as a way of solving “honour causes” among the upper strata of society. Even Prime Ministers, like Sándor Wekerle in 1907 and István Tisza in 1913, were ready to take up arms against their political rivals. Some encounters were resolved in a less chivalrous way. The peasant movement leader MP András L. Achim was shot by the right wing Zsilinsky brothers in his house in 1911. Violence also penetrated the Budapest parliament, whose radical members attended sessions with revolvers and knives.²⁰ However, violence on the part of the Hungarian elite may be regarded as the tip of the iceberg of the unrecorded bloody incidents that took place across the country. The press and opposition MPs regularly brought the people’s attention to the killings and beatings taking place during public demonstrations, strikes and national elections.

Floating above the sea of violence of late Habsburg Hungary, the government was ready to use brute force to retain power. When the opposition threatened the dualist balance, the government resorted to the armed forces. And if they were insufficient, support could be expected from outside: after the 1905 elections, when the independentists defeated the Liberals, the elderly monarch Franz Joseph even considered sending imperial troops to occupy Hungary, before a less radical solution was found.²¹ Nevertheless, as the army was not subordinate to the Budapest government but to the War Ministry at Vienna, it generally remained outside the political struggle. The Liberal cabinet therefore relied on its own law enforcement agencies for assistance. For example, from 1904 it allowed Hungarian gendarmes and police officers to intervene in the Hungarian Parliament to maintain order and remove obstructing deputies from sessions. After the attempted murder of the speaker of the

²⁰ Hungarian MPs also threw chairs and inkwells at their opponents in some legislative debates. Despite being protected by parliamentary immunity, MPs were nevertheless regularly charged with a wide range of offences, from insults to duels, anti-state violence and murder. Most of the duels involving deputies that were then investigated occurred during the parliamentary terms of 1896-1899 and 1905-1910, which seem to be periods of high tension in government-opposition relations. Cieger (2016).

²¹ Deák (1990, 70).

lower chamber, István Tisza, at the National Assembly doors in 1912, a special security guard was established inside the building.²² Conceived with the aim of protecting MPs, but also of keeping an eye on them, the guard infuriated the opposition. Deputies viewed the presence of military outsiders as a direct, anti-constitutional threat.²³ Nevertheless, the spiral of violence in Hungary's higher political spheres was broken in the First World War, when the so-called “*treuga dei*” between the government and the opposition was declared.

The Royal Gendarmerie (*Magyar Királyi Csendőrség*) was the biggest stick the Budapest government held in its hands. Officially created in 1881, this institution was not a completely new phenomenon on Hungarian soil. It had a mighty predecessor — the Imperial Gendarmerie, which was established in the eastern part of the Habsburg Empire after the suppression of the 1848-1849 revolutions.²⁴ Its main purpose was to carry out surveillance of former insurgents and restrain the population's hostile attitude towards their ruling dynasty.²⁵ Paradoxically, as the post-1849 years witnessed “the extension of the police and spy system over the whole country,” non-political banditry drew little official attention.²⁶ The 1860s were the heyday of the so-called “*betyárs*”, or brigands, who operated in bands totalling as many as a hundred men on the Great Hungarian Plain.²⁷ At the same time, most of the Imperial Gendarmerie units were withdrawn following the Compromise of 1867. A temporary exception was made for Transylvania and Croatia-Slavonia, but the complete removal of Imperial Gendarmes became one of the key demands of the Magyar political establishment.²⁸

²² Cieger (2016).

²³ Centre des Archives diplomatiques du ministère des Affaires étrangères (Paris, Courneuve), Reports No. 91 and No. 147 from the First Secretary of Embassy heading the Consulate General of France in Budapest to the Foreign Minister, 17 June and 15 October 1913.

²⁴ Csapó (1999, 11-12).

²⁵ Rosenberg (1998, 46).

²⁶ Jaszi (1929, 112).

²⁷ Freifeld (2000, 81).

²⁸ Especially vigorous criticism came from the independentist parties, who argued that the gendarmes undermined the 1867 Compromise in Hungary. In their understanding, the presence of the gendarmerie called into question the integration of Transylvania and Croatia into Hungary; they complained of its interference in Hungary's internal affairs, that its working language was still German (and not Magyar), and that it was an expensive institution, etc. Csapó (1999, 13-15).

Finally, in 1876, the gendarmerie troops in Transylvania and Croatia were reorganised, and brought under the command of the Hungarian state.²⁹ The other side of the coin was that the Budapest government had no effective instruments to ensure public security for the rest of the country.

The ability to “maintain order and to counter unrest” was perceived by the Hungarian political establishment as a precondition for preserving the trust of Franz Joseph and upholding the freedoms obtained by the 1867 Compromise.³⁰ However, public security was understood not so much as fighting crime as controlling society and political opposition. Even though the Hungarian cabinet had already started drafting a project for the creation of its own gendarmerie in the late 1860s, they waited more than a decade before submitting it for parliamentary approval. As historian András Cieger argues, the project was delayed partly in order to shape public opinion and the opposition into more easily accepting the law on the gendarmerie, from which guarantees of civil rights would be almost non-existent.³¹

Parliament was presented with the law project for the creation of the gendarmerie in late 1880, and started discussing it on 17 January 1881. As the project exempted the gendarmerie from civil legal control and direct subordination to the government, the opposition feared that this would drastically strengthen the power of the “anti-national” government. MPs accused PM Kalmán Tisza, the father of István Tisza, of despotic aspirations; others of building a “police state” (*rendőri állam*) and a “spy system” (*kém-rendszer*), of destroying local self-government, putting the country under Austrian control or of creating “a suitable tool for political espionage.” The project was approved the next day by a tiny majority (149 for, 139 against, 134 abstentions). To sweeten the pill, the opposition MP Count Gedeon Raday Jr. declared that the Magyar gendarmes would undoubtedly follow the example of their countrymen, who had left the imperial troops to join the national Hungarian army in 1848, if

²⁹ Csapó (1999, 17).

³⁰ Cieger (2018, 129).

³¹ Cieger (2018, 130-132).

such a situation were to arise again.³² Furthermore, the Tisza government also succeeded in getting approval for the law on the creation of a state police for Budapest (*állami rendőrség*) in March 1881. Opposition warnings that this “praetorian guard” would keep the capital under “permanent siege” on the bidding of the “despotic” government were not enough for the law project to be rejected.³³

The law establishing the Royal Hungarian Gendarmerie (*Magyar Királyi Csendőrség*) came into force on 14 February 1881. Organised along hierarchical military lines, the Royal Gendarmes were subordinate to the Hungarian Internal Affairs and Defence ministries. The Budapest government took constant pains to strengthen the gendarmerie bodyguard, which grew from year to year: while in 1886 there were 5,500 *csendőrs*, by 1901 this number had gone up to 8,000 and had reached almost 12,000 by the start of the Great War.³⁴ Statistics show that on average one gendarme had authority over 2,500 civilians over 50 square kilometres in 1891; ten years later, his authority was reduced to 1,900 civilians over 35 km²; and by 1911, to 1,500 civilians over 28 km².³⁵ The growth in manpower in Hungary was continuous, but there were substantial jumps in 1894 and 1897, both periods of agrarian unrest, and again in 1905-06 and 1911, in a context of high tension between the opposition and the government.

The government justified the increase in gendarmerie recruitment by the need to improve “public security”, restrain socialist agitation,³⁶ control minority nationalists and strike movements, and stem (illegal) emigration to the West.³⁷ The gendarmerie very rapidly became the most important law enforcement organisation in the country, particularly in rural areas. In 1909, the Hungarian journal “*A közbiztonsági almanachja*” (“The Public Security

³² *Képviselőházi napló. 1878. 26 kötet*, 1881, 155, 173-206.

³³ *Képviselőházi napló. 1878. 27 kötet*, 1881, 300-301.

³⁵ Csapó (1999, 115).

³⁵ Csapó (1999, 115).

³⁶ According to the list of the issues discussed by the government on 9 February and 20 April 1898, and on 18 January 1908. See, adatbazisokonline.hu

³⁷ Lakos (1999, 142); Soós (2018, 278-280).

Almanac”) praised the gendarmerie for being better equipped, better organised and better paid than any other law enforcement institution in Hungary. “Thus”, the review concluded, “(the gendarmerie’s) interventions are always decisive and effective. The best way to see it appears during major disturbances, such as strikes, parliamentary elections and public gatherings”.³⁸

In 1884, the six gendarmerie districts had forces of similar strengths. Each district had between 750 and 950 officers, each of whom had to cover an area of between 50 and 65 km² with a population of 2,500-3,100.³⁹ However, the various forces grew at different rates over the following decades (Figure 2). For example, while the 1st district of Kolozsvár, covering Transylvania, doubled its rank and file from the mid-1880s to the mid-1900s, the 5th district of Pozsony, which covered the Western Felvidék, grew by only 30% over the same period (my calculation basing on *Csendőrség zsebkönyve*, 1887-1906). The numerical disparity between the two districts may be related to their different levels of criminality or the relative strategic importance of those areas. For example, Transylvania had one of the highest homicide rates in Hungary (increasing from 6 to 9 per 100,000 between 1896 and 1912). The Western Felvidék was the less violent region, with a homicide rate that remained under 4/100,000. Another explanation may be related to the geographical positions of the regions: while Transylvania bordered Romania, the Western Felvidék lay next to partner Austria, so the gendarmes needed to supervise transnational traffic in the former region, but not in the latter.

Figure 2. Manpower in the districts of the Hungarian gendarmerie, 1887-1914. Note the changes brought about by the creation of the 7th district in 1903 and the 8th in 1907.⁴⁰

³⁸ Gegus D. et al. (1909, 74).

³⁹ Csapó (1999, 154).

⁴⁰ Statistics on the Hungarian Royal Gendarmerie are derived from data sourced from the *Magyar Királyi Csendőrség zsebkönyve* (issues from 1889 to 1915). Issues of the bulletin are available online: <http://epa.oszk.hu/html/vgi/kardexlap.phtml?id=2994>

The 1881 law tasked the gendarmes with supervising security in all of the Hungarian Crown's territory, except in the municipal or "free royal" towns. The latter still had their own police forces (*rendőrség*), which were organised, armed and paid for by the municipalities⁴¹ Nevertheless, the gendarmerie's reach gradually extended to these areas as well. Some 'free' municipalities, like Baja (Frankentstadt), Nagyvárad (Oradea/Großwardein) and Újvidék (Novi Sad/Neusatz), had already in the late nineteenth century partially renounced their autonomy by inviting the gendarmerie to safeguard their cities. However, relations between the gendarmes and municipal policemen were not always cooperative. In some cases, when tensions rose between the gendarmes and the local populace, even where arms were involved, municipal security officials did not always assist the gendarmes and sometimes even acted against them.⁴² A very particular case of friction between the two law enforcement camps occurred in Kassa in December 1894, when the gendarmes were brought in to arrest the town's policemen, who had gone on strike.⁴³ Another illustrative case occurred in June 1911 during the by-elections in Békéscsaba, when the *csendőrs* arrested local police officers who had refused to join the gendarmerie's operation against the opposition meeting.⁴⁴

The government also viewed the legal restrictions on the gendarmerie's zone of action as a burden. On the one hand, in disregard of the 1881 law, it occasionally dispatched the *csendőrs* to the municipal towns, especially when other local law enforcement bodies had allegedly failed to guarantee public order. For example, on several occasions in 1912-13 gendarmerie units went to Budapest during worker mobilisations and at moments of tension

In the following graphs, a given year x refers to the period from October of year x-1 to September of year x. For example, 1888 refers to the period from October 1887 to September 1888

⁴¹ Parádi (2008).

⁴² Csapó (1999, 61, 113).

⁴³ "A kassai rendőrsztrájk," *Pesti Napló*, 12 December 1894, 6; "A kassai rendőrök sztrájkja," *Pesti Hírlap*, 12 December 1894, 6.

⁴⁴ The 1911 Békéscsaba by-elections were called after the killing of the local MP András Achim, leader of the peasant movement. The new face of local opposition, former Minister of the Interior, József Krystóffy, known for his earlier proposal to introduce a general, secret vote, won the ballot. See, "Kristóffy győzelme. A békéscsabai választás", *Friss Újság*, 3 June 1911, 2.

between the government and the parliamentary opposition.⁴⁵ On the other hand, pro-government circles often criticised the underequipped and low-paid municipal police officers and suggested putting them instead under state control. In the final pre-war years, when the total number of municipal policemen amounted to 12,000 officers, the Ministry of Internal Affairs drafted a law to nationalise the municipal police forces, but parliament rejected the plan just before the Great War.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, in the middle of the July 1914 crisis, the Interior Ministry instructed the *zsandárs* to oversee public order throughout Hungary, including the municipal towns.⁴⁷ It was therefore during the First World War that the government finally obtained the means to swiftly repress social and political protests, whether emanating from the countryside or from urban areas.

The gendarmerie's propensity for violence

The Royal Gendarmerie has received extensive criticism for its brutality against workers', leftist and non-Magyar national movements, but the question of the extent of the violence unleashed by the *csendőrs* still merits deeper research. This part deals in greater detail with the aggressive behaviour of the gendarmes against alleged government opponents. In identifying cases of regular gendarmerie violence, it aims to draw a general picture of state-authorized violence.

Cotemporary Hungarians often viewed the gendarmes as "brutal myrmidons" selected from the army or abroad.⁴⁸ Nonetheless, these popularly-called *zsandárs* were recruited principally from the ethnic Magyars, one of the chief reasons being the obligation for new recruits to have a mastery of spoken and written Hungarian (evidenced by the possession of a

⁴⁵ Csapó (1999, 48, 64).

⁴⁶ Parádi (2008).

⁴⁷ Csapó (1999, 65).

⁴⁸ Freifeld (2000, 81).

selective high school diploma).⁴⁹ Data from the early 1880s suggest that those regions of Hungary where the majority of the population spoke languages other than Magyar had the lowest numbers of ethnic Magyar gendarmes. All in all, Magyars accounted for over half of new recruits throughout the country. On the other side, Serbo-Croat speakers were the least represented language group in the gendarmerie forces.⁵⁰ This should be kept in mind, as some police studies have shown that unequal representation of minorities in law enforcement agencies often correlates with higher ethnic or racial discrimination.⁵¹

Officially, a crucial part of the gendarmerie's duties consisted in patrolling and protection,⁵² sometimes with the use of weapons. Officers had to report every use of arms, be it a firearm or a cold steel weapon, to their superiors. The data collected was supposed to be later transmitted to and published in the yearly bulletin "*A Magyar Királyi Csendőrség zsebkönyve*" ("Hungarian Royal Gendarmerie Pocketbook"). The journal reports 2,743 uses of arms between 1888 and 1914. The overall dynamic seems to be an increasing one, resembling an upturned U-curve (Figure 3). While in 1888-1892 the gendarmes recorded only two hundred cases, in 1893-1898 weapons were used five hundred times. The remaining 2,000 or so armed incidents took place in the early twentieth century. On average, 1,000

⁴⁹ Parádi (2012, 68).

⁵⁰ In 1884, when 45% of Hungary's total population spoke Magyar as their first language, 70% (3,417 out of 4,827) rank-and-file *zsandárs* (outside Croatia-Slavonia) declared Magyar as their mother tongue. Native German speakers were more proportionately represented – they made up 13% (664 persons) of both the gendarmes and the population. Other linguistic groups, however, were underrepresented: only 7% of *csendőrs* (345 individuals) were of a Romanian background, while Romanian speakers accounted for 17% of the population; 5% of *zsandárs* were native Slovak speakers, who made up 13% of the total population. The greatest disproportion was among South-Slav speakers – 4.5% of Hungary's inhabitants were native Serb or Croat speakers, but only 1% of gendarmerie recruits declared these languages as their mother tongue. Among the rank-and-file of the six Hungarian gendarmerie districts, Magyar-speaking *csendőrs* were the most numerous in the 3rd or Budapest district, which covered the Great Plain (*Alföld*). There, 88% of low grade agents declared Magyar as their first language in 1884. The situation was quite different in the 5th or Pressburg (Pozsony) district, where only 53% of *zsandárs* were native Magyar speakers. Csapó (1999, 156), Romsics (2010, 49).

⁵¹For an overview of the discussion and examination of the hypothesis see Sklansky (2006). It may be added that Serbs made up the highest percentage of convicted murderers in Hungary: in 1888, the conviction rate was about 16 per 100,000 Serb speakers, twice that of Magyar speakers. See *Magyar statisztikai évkönyv. 1888, 1890, 112-113*.

⁵² According to gendarmerie statistics, the gendarmes carried out 676,000 services in 1898. The most frequent were "night policing" (*éjjeli őrk ellenőrzése*; 230,000) and "ordinary service" (*rendes szolgálat*; 137,000). Investigation accounted for only 4 per cent of their services in 1898 (my calculation using data reprinted by Parádi (2012, 213).

gendarmes used their weapons 12.5 times a year. Relative peaks in the rate of arms use by gendarmes occurred in 1888-1889, 1894, 1897-1898, 1902, and from 1903 to 1911 (with 1906 and 1909 the absolute peaks).

Figure 3. Use of weapons by gendarmes in Hungary, 1888-1914.

The peaks in the use of weapons in the late 1880s and the mid-1890s may be associated with the gendarmerie's struggles against increased crime and peasant unrest, while the peak in the mid-1900s may be explained by the tense gendarmerie handling of the left-wing and nationalist protest movements. According to some accounts, in the early 1880s one of the main tasks of the newly-organised gendarmerie was to reduce gun crime. The émigré historian and former captain of the Hungarian gendarmerie Béla Rektor (1911-1989) mentions the *csendőrs* engaging in “an armed struggle lasting a couple of months” against Serbian bandits in 1886 and 1887.⁵³ By the end of the 1880s the gendarmes had eliminated armed banditry and henceforth became more and more frequently used for controlling and repressing political mass movements. Rektor paints an interesting picture of the sudden shift in the *csendőr's* “interest” from highwaymen to protesters in *fin de siècle* Hungary. On the one hand, he mentions that in the 1880s, “here and there, the country was burying one or two gendarmes killed” in the fight against armed gangs. On the other hand, in the early 1900s, gendarmes were the victims of confrontations with labour movements and dissident political parties.⁵⁴

There were indeed casualties among the gendarmes almost every year (Figure 4). Between 1887 and 1914, 59 gendarmes were killed in service. One third of them died in the first half of this period, and two thirds in the second. About six times as many officers left the

⁵³ Rektor (1980, 111-112).

⁵⁴ Rektor (1980, 362).

service because of wounds they received. Between 1887 and 1906 (when the bulletin stopped publishing these data), 139 gendarmes retired due to injuries. The highest rates of injured gendarmes were in 1887 (25.4 per 10,000 gendarmes) and in 1905-1906 (21-22), while the highest rates of *csendőrs* killed were in 1888 (7.1) and 1914 (7.5). The statistics on gendarme deserters and suicides can probably be regarded as additional proxy indicators of the tense or conflictual atmosphere in the gendarmes' day-to-day work. The bulletin mentions 89 desertions in 1887-1914 and 80 suicides in 1899 and 1910-1914. Overall, the peaks and troughs of the gendarmerie's exposure to fatal and serious physical violence more or less overlap with each other and with the trend for weapons use. In this regard, the most violent years for the gendarmes seem to be the late 1880s, the mid-1890s, 1901, 1905-1910 and 1914.

Figure 4. The Hungarian Gendarmerie's permanent losses, 1887-1914.

Despite having the highest number of gendarmes, Transylvania was not the most tense area according to the statistics on the use of arms (although these may be underreported), and on casualties among the gendarmes (which were almost certainly more accurately recorded). As the gendarmerie districts changed their boundaries and numbers, in the following section the statistical data are adjusted for before and after 1906 — there were six districts during the former period, and eight during the latter. Until 1906, most of gendarmes who were killed served in the Szeged (9 individuals) and Kassa districts (7), while only one served in the Kolozsvár districts, and two in the other three districts. The highest numbers of gendarmes who retired due to injuries were in the Székesfehérvár (34 individuals) and Pozsony districts (31). There were similar 23, 22 and 21 cases, respectively, in the Kolozsvár, Szeged and Kassa districts, but only 8 in Budapest. Finally, the statistics on the use of arms show the districts of Kassa (328 cases) and Székesfehérvár (312) in first place. Another four districts recorded two hundred uses of weapons in the same period. Putting these data together, we can

see that the *csendőrs* of the Szeged, Kassa and Székesfehérvár districts seemed to be more exposed to physical violence than their colleagues in the Kolozsvár, Pozsony and Budapest districts.

After 1907, when Hungary was reorganised into 8 gendarmerie districts, the situation seems more stratified among the different regions. The highest numbers of gendarmes who were killed or suicided, and the highest arms uses were recorded in the Székesfehérvár district (9, 12 and 246, respectively). These figures were also high in other Pannonian areas: Budapest had 8, 10 and 164 cases; Debrecen, 7, 11 and 144; and Szeged, 5, 7 and 180. The Upper districts had an intermediate level of violence: the Kassa district recorded 3 gendarmes killed and 7 suicided, and 136 uses of arms, the Pozsony district, 3, 5 and 152 cases. The Transylvanian areas had the lowest recorded levels of violence: the Brassó districts had 1, 7 and 107 cases, while the Kolozsvár district had 7 suicides and 118 cases of arms use.⁵⁵

Concluding, it may seem that the Transdanubian area, where the Székesfehérvár district was situated, was on average the most violent gendarmerie zone throughout the *Belle Époque*. This region, inhabited by Magyars and the most ethnically homogeneous area of Hungary, had indeed a relatively high level of peasant and electoral unrest. At the same time, insecurity remained high or increased in the Banat and the Danube-Tisza interfluvium, administered by the Szeged, Budapest and Debrecen districts. However, violence in the north-eastern region (included in the Kassa district) seemed to decline compared to the other regions. Finally, the gendarmerie services were the most peaceable in Transylvania, divided into the Kolozsvár and Brassó districts. The data also show that the pattern of violence was uneven in the

⁵⁵ The average yearly arms use in the Székesfehérvár district was 30.5 (or 20.1 per 1,000 gendarmes), in the Szeged, Budapest and Debrecen districts it ranged between 22.5 and 18 (between 15.1 and 14.3 per 1,000 gendarmes), in the Pozsony district 19 (13.9 per 1,000 gendarmes), the Kassa district 17 (11.9), the Kolozsvár district 13.7 (12.6) and the Brassó district 13.3 (9.8).

different districts. Nevertheless, 1888-1889, 1894-1897, 1905-1906 and 1913-1914 were more violent than other years in most of the districts. Otherwise, there were also sporadic increases in violence in various years between 1907 and 1912.

The official statistics included number of killed gendarmes, but kept in dark how many civilians were killed by the gendarmes. Although the data are incomplete, there were far more civilian fatal victims of gendarmerie violence than vice versa. According to estimates calculated over 105 gendarmerie deployments during the labour mobilisations between 1891 and 1914, these operations left 61 civilians killed, 203 seriously wounded, 665 with minor injuries and 1,443 arrested, as well as 6 gendarmes killed and 35 injured.⁵⁶ The brutal policing of workers' protests gave grounds for anti-government activists to accuse the gendarmes of being politically instrumentalised.

Labour and national minority movements and parliamentary opposition parties were the chief targets of the gendarmerie's brutal law enforcement methods. Sociologist and leftist politician Oszkár Jászi depicted the gendarmes as servants of what he called the "historical classes," which had oppressed the majority of the Hungarian population. In Jászi's analysis of pre-war Austria-Hungary, the ruling elites "let the gendarmerie shoot into masses exasperated by a policy of exploitation".⁵⁷ Some cases of gendarme shootings of mass protesters acquired notoriety: the shooting of twenty miners in Stájerlakanina/Anina on 20 January 1897 (here and in other cases, the total number of persons killed is under question); twenty Social-Democrat sympathisers shot in Elesd/Alesd on 24 April 1904; and the so-called Csernova (Černová) massacre, which claimed the lives of fifteen peasants on 27 October 1907.⁵⁸ Another infamous incident occurred during the combined police-gendarmerie operation against a huge labour demonstration in Budapest on 23 May 1912. The event, known later as

⁵⁶ Szakály, (1990). According to the Hungarian Social Democratic party's account, various military forces, including the gendarmerie, killed 51 and injured 114 workers during the 1897-1899 unrests alone. Romsics (2010, 78).

⁵⁷ Jászi (1929, 338).

⁵⁸ Holec (1997).

“Bloody Thursday”, claimed the lives of 7 civilians and 1 state policeman. These and similar cases created an image of the gendarmerie as an oppressive organisation, more responsive to instructions from state powers than to the letter of the law or to human empathy.

But from the gendarmerie’s point of view, at least according to the discourse of their semi-official publications, their brutal force worked to their advantage and was praised as “heroism”. For example, the *Csendőrség zsebkönyve*, describing the 1897 Stájerlakanina incident, drew attention to the six *csendőrs* who were protecting mining company officials from a mob of 2-3,000 workers and their wives. Infuriated by the proposal to raise the retirement age by 10 years, the protesters allegedly attacked the officials and the gendarmes with stones and sticks. The gendarmes responded with 24 shots, which hit 22 “rebels”, killing 10 of them. After the shooting, an “old man” approached the gendarmes and ineffectively attacked them by throwing a powder of glass and salt into their eyes. He was shot and stabbed.⁵⁹ Newspaper reports immediately after the event corroborate the main features of this story, but report a greater number of victims.

Elections occupy a particular place among the mass events associated with gendarmerie violence.⁶⁰ Tense confrontations on ballot day in the Austrian half of the Habsburg realm, especially in Galicia, are well known to historians, but the parliamentary or municipal elections seem to have been much more violent in Transleithania.⁶¹ There, electoral conditions were even compared to “civil war” by contemporaries.⁶² The Hungarian laws of 1848 and 1874 stipulated that voting was to be open, and that constituents supporting a particular candidate were to assemble before casting their votes. In the end, this practice

⁵⁹ “Az aninai lázadás leverése,” *A Magyar Királyi Csendőrség zsebkönyve*, 1899, 12, 132-136; Panajott (1905, 232-236). According to the *Pesti Napló*, the corpse lay outside the mining office the whole of the next day, while another 4 or 5 injured persons were on the verge of death. The elderly attacker appeared to be the father of one of the dead protesters. See “Az aninai bányász-zendülés,” *Pesti Napló*, 22 January 1898, 8. A similar account was published in the *Budapesti Napló*, which, however, reported 11 dead and 20 seriously injured. See “Egy sztrájk következményei. Az aninai zendülés,” *Budapest Napló*, 25 January 1898, 9.

⁶⁰ For an overview of electoral mismanagement see Cieger (2011).

⁶¹ Judson (2016).

⁶² Cited from R.W. Seton-Watson’s work (*Scotus Viator*, 1908, 266), who refers to the 1892 Memorandum to Franz Jozef 1894 sent by Romanian activists from Transylvania.

probably increased the likelihood of physical confrontation between the assembled opponents and the intervention of the military whose purpose was to maintain law and order. There was a threefold increase in the numbers of military attending parliamentary elections between 1872 and 1910, ultimately reaching 81,000 troops (including the gendarmes).⁶³ However, opposition activists argued that the gendarmes and the military were not impartial in supervising elections. As the widely-travelled British scholar Robert W. Seton-Watson wrote in 1911, “the gendarmerie is one of the most valuable assets of every government in its political campaigns. Doubtful constituencies are overrun by them, free intercourse between Opposition leaders and their adherents is rendered impossible, refractory persons or strangers are summarily arrested, and if necessary, the voters are kept back forcibly from the poll”.⁶⁴ As a later historian concluded, the extent to which the army and the gendarmerie were used during Hungarian elections had taken on a “totalitarian character”.⁶⁵

The gendarmes were severely criticised for their participation in the electoral process. During the 1884 parliamentary campaign, the journal *Politikai Ujdonsagok* mentioned two cases of the gendarmerie firing on columns of voters, killing dozens and injuring about sixty.⁶⁶ However, it was probably the so-called “Bánffy elections,” organised by PM Dezső Bánffy in October-November 1896, that were the most scandalous under the Liberal regime. The newly-established, massive opposition Catholic People’s Party compared the organisation of the election to the devastating Mongol invasion of Hungary in the 1240s and reported dozens of cases of electoral fraud by the state administration and excessive military violence. The bloodiest incident reported in its almost 200-page report occurred in the Felvidék (Upper land) town of Breznóbánya (Brezno), where the gendarmerie shot dead 5 people and seriously injured 11. The victims were part of a crowd that had tried to free from custody Catholic

⁶³ Zsuppán (1989, 49-59).

⁶⁴ Seton-Watson (1911, 12).

⁶⁵ Zsuppán (1989, 58).

⁶⁶ “Hét halott és 45 sebesült” and “A gyergyói véres napok,” in: *Politikai Ujdonságok*, 11 June 1884, 7.

youths who had been arrested for attacking Liberal voters and state officials.⁶⁷ Not far away, in the town of Várna (Varin), bloodshed was prevented by the intervention of the army. When the local gendarmes attacked with bayonets a column of opposition voters near the polling station, the Joint Army battalion threatened to launch a counter-attack on the gendarmes if they injured the voters.⁶⁸ All in all, 1896 purportedly saw the highest death toll in Hungary's electoral history. A later estimate suggests that gendarmes mobilised to oversee the electoral process killed 32 and severely wounded over 70.⁶⁹

The 1896 elections turned out to be very costly for its principal organiser. Despite the Liberal party obtaining 70% of seats in the National Assembly, PM Bánffy was severely criticised in parliament for electoral mismanagement and illegal use of the state administration. Bánffy resigned in 1899 (and had to fight a duel with an opposition MP). The same year, legislators introduced a specific law restricting the gendarmerie's involvement in elections. It stipulated that the election was to be declared invalid "if the gendarmerie or troops are used to summon, collect and escort the electors, for the purpose either of bringing them to the poll or keeping them from it".⁷⁰ Nevertheless, the use of gendarmes for the advantage of a particular political party in electoral campaigns did not cease in Hungary.

Parliamentary elections in 1901, 1905 and 1906, and 1910 were again marred by lethal violence. In 1901, the deadliest encounter took place in the Transdanubian town of Pincehely between the gendarmes and a column of opposition supporters. The gendarmes, enraged by a mob of Catholic Party voters (and sympathisers) throwing stones at them, fired back killing 5 teenagers.⁷¹ An official local report on the 1905 election in Transylvania mentions a case of a

⁶⁷ Bonitz (1897, 177-178).

⁶⁸ See István Rakovszky's statement in the Lower House of the Hungarian Parliament on 5 February 1897: *Képviselőházi napló, 1896. 3. kötet*, 1897, 182-184. Nevertheless, it seems that the tensions between the Joint Army and the gendarmes were not unique to the 1896 elections. More than a decade later, Seton-Watson still recorded that "officers of the Joint Army are sometimes obliged to intervene and protect the peasantry from ill treatment [by the gendarmes]" (Seton-Watson, 1911, 12).

⁶⁹ Seton-Watson (1911, 10).

⁷⁰ Seton-Watson (1911, 21).

⁷¹ Csekő (2006, 329-370).

gendarme shooting dead 3 people who were part of a mob throwing stones.⁷² The last elections before the war, held in 1910, witnessed “a dozen victims” of gendarmerie violence.⁷³ In trying to understand gendarmerie brutality, it should be mentioned that groups of voters or their companions were also frequently given to violence. Several Liberal party candidates and their associates were subjected to verbal or physical aggression, not only with words, fists and stones, but also with firearms. And there were also cases of gendarmes disobeying those Liberal politicians and state officials who had urged them to retreat⁷⁴ against allegedly aggressive mobs of voters. The gendarmes justified this by citing the need to avoid bloodshed

Their handling of criminal investigations was another target of accusations against the gendarmes. Official gendarmerie data suggest that almost 90% of recorded criminal cases were resolved, but this high level of efficiency may be an indication of the violent methods used by the *zsandárs* during their investigations.⁷⁵ Newspapers carry a myriad of stories about the gendarmerie mistreating arrestees, beating and depriving them of food and water for days.⁷⁶ So, when the first laws of criminal procedure were voted in by parliament in 1896,⁷⁷ the gendarmerie reacted rather coldly. The police mouthpiece “*Rendőri Lapok*” (“Police Papers”) commented that “It is a good, a fine law, but Hungary is too young for it. It does not suit us, at least it does not correspond to the current situation”.⁷⁸ The range of methods the gendarmes were allowed to use in interrogating suspects was further restricted by the Hungarian parliament in 1900. Legislators strictly prohibited gendarmes from “making

⁷² Soós (2018, 272).

⁷³ Seton-Watson (1911, 10).

⁷⁴ Soós (2018, 272).

⁷⁵ Parádi (2008, 37). Csapó (1999) uses this rate to question the authenticity of *csendőr* proceedings. He suggests that many unresolved crimes were not recorded in order to give the appearance of efficiency. López (2007) reveals a similar practice of “making good numbers” by French gendarmes and policemen during the Third Republic (1870-1940).

⁷⁶ A polgárdii csendőrharc, *Pesti Hirlap*, 20 January 1889, 10.

⁷⁷ See 1896. évi XXXIII. törvénycikk a bünvádi perrendtartásról, [online] <https://www.1000ev.hu>.

⁷⁸ Cited by Cieger (2018, 139). Indeed, reports of gendarmes torturing arrestees continued to surface. See “A tóbai csata”, *Népszava*, 11 November 1898, 4.

promises, misrepresenting [the facts], using threatening behaviour, violence or coercion” in order to obtain evidence or a confession from a witness or suspect. Interestingly, when perceptions of insecurity increased in the following years, some MPs blamed this law for the gendarme’s inability to maintain order as they had previously done.⁷⁹

In time, the gendarmes’ violent reputation spread beyond Hungary’s borders. The foreign press regularly reported cases of the *csendőőr* mistreating arrestees. The Russian newspaper “*Novoye Vremya*” reported that Hungarian gendarmes beat imprisoned Rusyn peasants so severely during the second so-called Máramarossziget/Sighetu Marmației trial in 1913 that three of them went insane.⁸⁰ However, the Hungarian authorities generally turned a deaf ear to such accusations. Directly challenged in parliament to comment on the gendarmes’ “brutality” at Máramarossziget, PM Tisza replied that he “knew nothing” about it.⁸¹ Nevertheless, it seems that some of such accusations were not far from reality.⁸²

Partial explanation for the high level of alleged police violence in Hungary is that not only were the gendarmes armed and allowed to be coercive, they were also legally obliged to use weapons in situations in which the law or public order were threatened. Apparently, this rule made it difficult for *csendőőrs* to restrict the use of weapons. The directive allowed gendarmes to take up arms against any person, whether civil or military, “even against those who belong to the highest social classes.”⁸³ However, the law also prohibited the use of weapons against compliant prisoners. In stating what seem, from a modern perspective, to be

⁷⁹ *Főrendiházi napló, 1906. I. kötet, 1907, 101-102.*

⁸⁰ See “Process ugorusov”, *Novoe Vremya*, 6 February 1914. The newspaper claimed that the gendarmes tortured the arrestees in an attempt to obtain confessions of treason against Hungary in favour of Russia. In Máramarossziget, the trial of Greek Catholic laymen of Hungary who wanted to join the Eastern Orthodox church took place in a very tense atmosphere. One week before sentence was pronounced on 3 March 1914, there was a bomb attack on the new Greek Catholic Bishop of Miskolc, István Miklossy. The explosion claimed the lives of his 3 assistants and severely injured 18 others. Barabási *et al.* (2011, 450-451).

⁸¹ Barabási *et al.* (2011, 456-457).

⁸² The number of confessions submitted to Hungarian courts as the principal proof of a defendant’s guilt was high enough to suspect pressure having been applied. In 1878, 105 out of 118 convictions for murder, and 419 out of 795 convictions for manslaughter were based on confessions. Forty of the convicted murderers were sentenced to capital punishment (*Magyar statisztikai évkönyv 1878, 1881, 19*).

⁸³ “A csendőőr fegyverhasználati jogáról. A magyar kir. csendőrségi szervezeti utasítás 11. § – ának magyarázata,” 182-190. Cited from *Magyar Királyi Csendőrség zsebkönyve* (1887, 184).

obvious principles, this directive may give the impression that the gendarmerie hierarchy in *Belle Époque* Hungary regarded their rank and file colleagues as prone to inflict violence more often on those perceived as being of a lower status than on the upper social strata, whose illegal conduct they avoided challenging.

Figure 5. Hungarian gendarmes dismissed by disciplinary decision and by military court, 1887-1914.

But to what extent did the state administration consent to the gendarmes' violent behaviour? The official discourse on the legitimate use of coercion by the gendarmerie was clear. Referring to the spread of socialist agitation among Serbs and Romanians in the Banat, in January 1904 PM Tisza promised parliament that he would protect public order against social "infections" with the assistance of gendarmes and the military. Tisza justified this as law enforcement against anti-state and anti-Magyar activities.⁸⁴ In the same vein, the Interior Minister Gyula Andrassy the Younger immediately laed responsibility for the Csernova shooting not on the gendarmes, but on the victims, accusing them with "rioting against the state order and against the church order".⁸⁵ In this context, it may be of little surprise that the gendarmes involved in the massacres at Anina in 1897, Pincehely in 1901 and Csernova in 1907 were promoted and/or decorated.

At the same time, the gendarmes should not be regarded as a caste above the law. The most violent actions perpetrated by the gendarmerie were indeed investigated and sometimes even punished. From 1887 to 1914, 2,101 gendarmes were dismissed from the service by military courts and 1,136 by disciplinary courts, but over the whole period dismissals

⁸⁴ Kun (1933, 326).

⁸⁵ *Képviselőházi napló, 1906*, 108-109.

followed a downward trend. Before 1900, 2,000 *csendőrs* were forced to leave the service, but only 1,200 after (*A Magyar Királyi Csendőrség zsebkönyve, 1887-1915*; Figure 5). Taking into consideration the growth of gendarmerie manpower from 5,500 in 1887 to 12,000 in 1914, the annual rate of dismissals per 1,000 gendarmes fell from 35 to 7. While this trend may indicate growing internal discipline and cohesion in the gendarmerie corps, it also suggests the hierarchy's increasing tolerance of violent behaviour on the part of their subordinates.

The gendarmes were also regular defendants in homicide trials. The historian Csapó, researching cases of gendarme convictions, examined files brought to the attention of the gendarmerie courts in Szeged in 1895-1896 and in Debrecen in 1907-1908. Csapó discovered that the Szeged court had tried 43 *zsandárs* for killing 11 people and seriously injuring a further 20, while the Debrecen court had tried 51 gendarmes who had killed 4 people and seriously wounded 11. In the end, the Szeged court acquitted all the gendarmes, while the Debrecen court found 3 gendarmes guilty.⁸⁶ Altogether, they imposed 3 convictions per 15 deaths and per 30 seriously injured persons. While these statistics are of limited interest, the national survey with the total number of convictions among the gendarmes, available only for 1911-1913, reveal surprising numbers. During the last three pre-war years, the gendarmes accounted for 1% of all homicide convictions in Hungary (including Croatia),⁸⁷ whose total population was 20 million! The real nation-wide percentage of deaths at the hands of the gendarmerie, however, may be much higher. If 32 people were indeed killed by the gendarmes during the 1896 elections, then this number alone would represent 4% of all 805 homicides recorded in the country during that year.⁸⁸

⁸⁶ Csapó (1999, 115, 167).

⁸⁷ From 1911 to 1913 one gendarme was found guilty of murder, seven of manslaughter (and forty three of causing serious bodily injuries) (*Magyar statisztikai évkönyv 1913, 1915, 366*). These represent approximately 1% of sentences for murder and manslaughter (109 and 700 respectively) handed down in those years (*Magyar statisztikai évkönyv 1911-1913, 1912-1915*).

⁸⁸ Seton-Watson (1911, 10); *Magyar statisztikai évkönyv* (1896, 97).

This article has shown that the Hungarian Royal Gendarmerie was a powerful government force that was frequently used for political intimidation and oppression. Quantitative, international comparison may help contextualise its role. The gendarmerie's coverage per head of population in Hungary was normal for Europe: it was similar to that in Republican France and Tsarist Russia, far exceeded that in Wilhelmine Prussia, but was much lower than Liberal Italy.⁸⁹ But with regard to their exposure to violence, the Hungarian gendarmes occupied an unparalleled place on the continent. During the 25 years prior to the war, apparently only 5 law enforcement officers were killed in France and 2 in Prussia, while Hungarian gendarmerie fatalities reached 52.⁹⁰ Numerical comparison of the deadly force of law enforcement is much more problematic. The police forces and gendarmeries across Europe were (and many still are) reluctant to publicly declare how many civilians their agents have killed. Until a reliable proxy-indicator of violence is tested, a concern voiced with regard to research on nineteenth century England that the “extent of actual police violence is difficult to reveal” is also valid for dualist Hungary.⁹¹ But even patchy data suggest that the number of killings by Hungarian gendarmes was much higher than in other European countries.⁹²

⁸⁹ The growth in the Hungarian Gendarmerie's manpower reduced the average number of civilians per gendarme from 2,500 in 1891 to 1,500 in 1911. The proportions of gendarmes or policemen per head of population in other European countries at the turn of the century were as follows: in France, from 1 per 2,000 inhabitants in 1872 to 1 per 1,500 in 1907; in Prussia, around 1 per 7,000 over the same period (Johansen, 2004, 80); in Italy, 1 per 600 in 1887 (Davies, 1989, 232); in Russia, 1 per 2,100 inhabitants by the Great War (Day, 2019, 257).

⁹⁰Johansen (2004, 76). Readjusting these figures to the number of officers killed per 100,000 policemen/gendarmes, *fin de siècle* France had a rate of approximately 1 per 100,000, Prussia's was even smaller, while Hungary's average rate was 22 per 100,000 and as much as 70 per 100,000 in the deadliest years (1888 and 1914).

The pre-war Hungarian situation seems to be not far from the recent situation in the USA, where the rate of policemen killed declined from 27 per 100,000 in 1976 to 7 per 100,000 in 2012 (Zimring *et al.*, 2015, 249-250).

⁹¹ Wood (2004, 42).

⁹² For example, French and Prussian policemen of the *Belle Époque*, who covered countries whose populations were twice that of Hungary, apparently killed 39 and 21 protesters, respectively (Johansen, 2004, 76). In the 1850s, the French gendarmes, which accounted to 18,000 men, killed 17 “rebels”, and lost 1 officer (Lignereux, 2008, 56). On the other side, the total number of victims shot by Hungarian gendarmes in Anina in 1897, in Elesd in 1904 and in Csernova in 1907 alone comes to more than 50.

Did gendarmerie political violence transform Hungary into a “police state”? The Enlightenment understanding of this term, which puts the principal emphasis on the “protection and integrity of the state”, was clearly dear to many Hungarian statesmen, who justified violence by the necessity to defend the state.⁹³ However, their many critics voiced the danger of creating a “*Polizeistaat*” in another sense — that of continual surveillance of the population. The dualist administration did indeed step on freedom of expression and gatherings, but it remained far from the absolutism of Franz Joseph in the mid-nineteenth century or of Joseph II in the late eighteenth century. Yet the overall impact of the Royal Gendarmerie on the political process and state functioning in late Habsburg Hungary was dramatic. Without doubt, the gendarmes were instrumental in stifling opposition, and workers’ and national minority movements before 1914. But it remains an open question whether the gendarmerie’s politically-motivated violence strengthened the regime by silencing its adversaries, or whether instead it undermined political stability by spreading popular distrust and hatred of the governing institutions. If one agrees that “police forces are successful in proportion as they do not have to use guns or beat up people”, then the performance of the gendarmes in Hungary should be considered poor.⁹⁴ As the latest research demonstrates their brutal treatment of citizens, discriminating, for example, on ethno-national grounds was one of the key factors in the weakening of the Habsburg monarchy internally during the First World War.⁹⁵ According to rough estimates, more than 30,000 Habsburg subjects (mostly Ukrainian and Serbian speakers) were summarily murdered in the frontline

⁹³ Chapman (1971, 17).

⁹⁴ Hobsbawm (1982, 16).

⁹⁵ Stergar, Scheer (2018). The atmosphere of widespread nationalist suspicion in the autumn of 1914 is well described by the young chaplain of a Hungarian k.u.k. regiment, József Tiszó/Josef Tiso (the future president of Slovakia during the Second World War) in his diary. Tiszó noted that his comrades had burnt out several villages in Austrian Galicia and had shot all their inhabitants only “because the extraordinary circumstances do not permit a more thorough investigation.” The chaplain felt little pity towards the victims, but he was anxious at the idea of passing through these areas again in the near future and possibly witnessing the victims’ thirst for bloody revenge (Piahanau, 2017).

zone by the army on the grounds of accusations of treason, spying or revolution.⁹⁶ Ruthless military law enforcement in the peripheral zones of the empire probably destroyed much of the Habsburg's legitimacy among the local populations. In the capital city, it was gendarmerie violence that triggered the revolution. On 25 October 1918, policemen and gendarmes “beat and hit with incredible brutality everybody” in the anti-war crowd that had penetrated Buda Castle, leaving 3 dead, 40 seriously injured and around 200 with slight injuries. The violence became an additional reason to finish with the old regime and establish a new revolutionary government on 31 October 1918.⁹⁷

Another consequence of gendarmerie violence was the erosion of trust in the Hungarian state abroad. Through mass media, the general public, from Britain and France to Australia, learnt of the 1907 Csernova massacre within a week of its occurrence.⁹⁸ Referring to the event twenty years later, the former pro-government Hungarian MP Gusztáv Gratz wrote that “regardless of whether the gendarmerie's use of arms was lawful or unlawful, it is beyond doubt that this case hurt Hungary on an extremely large scale” by turning international opinion against the Budapest government.⁹⁹ Cruel Hungarian gendarmes became the targets of literary critics across Europe — from Norway (from the pen of Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson) to Romania (where Octavian Goga staged the play “*Domnul notar*”) — which greatly contributed to the belief that the Hungarian dualist regime was oppressing national minorities and trampling over their fundamental rights. After the Great War, this belief weighed heavily during the Paris Peace Conference, where participants argued for the dismemberment of historical Hungary, which was ultimately sanctioned by the Trianon Treaty of 1920.

Aliaksandr Piahanau

⁹⁶ Cornwall (2015, 121).

⁹⁷ Weltner (1929, 42).

⁹⁸ “Rioters shot by gendarmes”, *London Evening Standard*, 29.10.1907, 6; “Peasants shot down”, *Irish Independent*, 29.10.1907, 6; “Sanglante collision à Csernova”, *L'Univers. Le Monde*, 30.10.1907, 1; “Autriche-Hongrie”, *Le Temps*, 31.10.1907, 2; “Riot in Hungary”, *The Herald* (Melbourne), 02.11.1907, 1; “Austrian disturbance”, *The Australian Star* (Sydney), 02.11.1907, 1.

⁹⁹ Gratz (1929, 152).

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Figure 6. Statistical data on the Hungarian Royal Gendarmerie, 1887–1914.

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