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The Hungarian Members of the French Foreign Legion in the Battle of France in 1940



ABSTRACT

In the period between the two world wars, a significant number of Hungarians settled down in France for various reasons. After France entered the war in September 1939, many of the members of the Hungarian diaspora living in France joined the French army. These candidates who did not have French nationality were assigned to the French Foreign Legion by the French military command. These new recruits were trained in the south of France, after which they were deployed against the German army, which was on the offensive in May and June 1940. Many were killed in the fierce fighting, and afterwards many Hungarians were taken prisoner of war by the Germans. The present study attempts, based on the available French and Hungarian archival sources, to present the members of this particular group, as well as a sketch of the history of the units in which these soldiers served during the Battle of France.

KEYWORDS

France, French Foreign Legion, Battle of France, Hungarian volunteers, 1940.

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INTRODUCTION

After the outbreak of the Second World War, tens of thousands of foreign volunteers joined the French armed forces. Some of them (Poles, Czechoslovakians) were recruited into national units, while others were assigned to the French Foreign Legion, where they could start their military service with a traditional five-year contract or a special contract for the duration of the war. Thanks to these volunteers, the size of the Foreign Legion, which at the eve of the conflict was just about 20,000, grew in an unprecedented way to almost 50,000 in a few months.

Among the new recruits, a relatively large number were Hungarian citizens, but the Hungarian historiography (since French researchers have not focused on this topic before) has published widely differing figures, mainly based on estimates, for lack of reliable data. Recent research in French and Hungarian military archives has helped to identify the majority of Hungarians who served in the French forces between the outbreak of the war and the armistice in 1940. Since the data almost always include the names of the units to which the Hungarians were assigned, it is possible to determine the number and the main characteristics of Hungarians serving in the Foreign Legion and the general circumstances of their deployment, which we intend to publish in this study.

THE FOREIGN VOLUNTEERS

With the arrival in France of large numbers of people fleeing fascism from other European countries in the late 1930s, the French leadership rightly expected that after the outbreak of the war there would be large numbers of men willing to fight in the ranks of the French forces against the Axis powers. Accordingly, as early as September 1939, arrangements were made to receive volunteers for the duration of the war, so that they could be recruited as soon as possible to serve in combat units.¹ The French government was not disappointed in this expectation, as in the months following the outbreak of the war a total of 83,000 foreigners volunteered for the French army. This was made possible by a French government decree of 12 April 1939, which allowed foreign nationals aged between 18 and 40 to join the French army (the minimum age was later lowered to 17).² Many of these proved physically unfit for military service during the compulsory medical examination, but most were sent to a training camp.³ The extremely large numbers of Polish and Czechoslovak citizens who arrived were placed under the jurisdiction of nationally organised armies, as agreed with the emigrant governments, and were thus relatively under-represented in the ranks of the

¹ PORCH 1994. 510–514.

² COMOR 1988. 28–29.

³ COMOR 2013. 946.

Foreign Legion, which received foreign volunteers.⁴ Volunteers of other nationalities could be divided into two main categories: some volunteered directly for the Foreign Legion (8 465 by the end of 1939⁵ and 13 200 by May 1940), while others wished to join the French army in general as volunteers for the duration of the war. The number of the latter was also relatively large, estimated at 14,000.⁶ However, contrary to the wishes of the volunteers, the French command decided to assign this relatively large number of men to the units of the Foreign Legion set up for this purpose.⁷

PARTICIPATION OF FOREIGN LEGION TROOPS IN THE BATTLE OF FRANCE

The French military leadership wanted to organise the new units around the existing active and reserve foreign legionnaire personnel and accordingly planned to create separate regiments, with 2,000 active legionnaires, 500 formerly demobilised reservists and 500 recruits.⁸ This structure was intended to combine the expertise of veterans with considerable combat experience with the enthusiasm of new recruits. However, it was the large number of volunteers that prevented the concept from being applied exclusively, since the number of volunteers for the duration of the war exceeded the number of veterans available to such an extent, it was necessary to create regiments composed almost entirely of new volunteers.⁹

The first two regiments created according to the original concept were the 11th and 12th Foreign Infantry Regiments at the turn of 1939-1940, so the proportion of recruits in these regiments of 3,000 men remained below twenty per cent.¹⁰ Given that, as we have seen, the number of volunteers who had to serve in the army for the duration of the war was very large, the creation of regiments exclusively with their participation was also decided.¹¹ The average age of the volunteers was between 25 and 30, and they were therefore considered to be reservists, so the military authorities treated them accordingly, i.e., their thorough training and the provision of modern equipment were not considered a priority. They were trained at the Barcarès camp, near the Spanish border in the Perpignan area, which had been set up in 1938 to intern refugees from the Spanish Civil War. As a result, the location resembled more a prison than a training camp, which had a negative impact on

⁴ Service Historique de la Défense (hereinafter referred to as: SHD) GR 34 N 316. Instruction sur l'engagement des étrangers pendant la durée des hostilités. Annexe II, 1.

⁵ MONTAGNON 1999. 209.

⁶ The statistics by category are not very telling, but we know for sure that the Legion numbered 22,000 before the conflict, and by May 1940 it had grown to 48,900. Of these, at least 13,200 had signed up for the Legion on regular contracts, so logically the number of volunteers who signed up for the duration of the war must have been around 13,700. COMOR 1988. 29.

⁷ See for instance SHD GR 34 N 317. Création du 12^e REI. Lettre du commandant le dépôt de la Légion étrangère du 15 avril.

⁸ SHD GR 34 N 316. Fiches de renseignements novembre 1939 – août 1940, 1.

⁹ MONTAGNON 1999. 213–214.

¹⁰ MAHUAULT 2013. 271.

¹¹ These were the 21st, 22nd and 23rd Marching Regiments of Foreign Volunteers and two Marching Battalions. A small number of recruits also joined the 97th Reconnaissance Group and 13th Mountain Demi-Brigade of the Foreign Legion, but their personnel was mainly filled with soldiers transferred from active Legion units. BENE 2021. 79–83.

the morale of the volunteers, who were initially very enthusiastic.¹² The weapons issued to them were outdated and extremely poor, most of the rifles produced at the beginning of the century did not even have a shoulder strap, so they were fitted with strings to carry them on the shoulder.¹³

Most of the units formed with foreign candidates were deployed in the spring of 1940, after accelerated training, with inadequate equipment and weapons, against the heavily outnumbered German troops in a strategic situation that did not offer even a remote chance of success, as the French command deployed the legionary units to fill the gaps on the front line. Although these units fought fiercely and sometimes temporarily successful defensive battles during May and June, earning the appreciation of their superiors (and in many cases being decorated for their performance in the field), they generally lost between 70 and 80 per cent of their men in the desperate fighting, many of the survivors were taken prisoner by the German army and the units were disbanded in the summer of 1940.¹⁴

The archival documentation on the units, which is extremely fragmentary due to the outcome of the operations, in most cases contains only scattered and incomplete information on the personnel, and thus does not provide a satisfactory answer on the number and identity of the Hungarians serving in their ranks. Therefore, to answer this question, we need to consult other sources, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

THE HUNGARIAN MEMBERS OF THE FRENCH ARMY

The Hungarian Community in France

In the first half of the 20th century, tens of thousands of Hungarians emigrated to France in several waves. In some cases, this decision was triggered by political events following the First World War, but in many cases, it was motivated by economic necessity. As a result, a Hungarian diaspora was formed, divided along political lines, with groups of right-wing, Christian Democrat and Communist persuasions, although the latter was clearly the most significant.¹⁵ The geographical location of Hungarian emigrants was clearly linked to economic centres. The economic boom after the First World War created a large demand for labour, which was partly met by Hungarians, who were mainly employed in the industry. Accordingly, the Hungarian diaspora was concentrated in and around Paris, where emigrants were employed as factory workers in the engineering industry. Many also found work in the mining and industrial areas of northern France, but there are also smaller communities in Alsace-Lorraine and in the Lyon and Grenoble areas.¹⁶ Interestingly, there are also records of Hungarians settling down in the Algerian areas of North Africa, whose numbers are estimated at 4–5,000, according to contemporary memories.¹⁷

¹² PORCH 1994. 526–527.

¹³ SHD GR 34 N 319. Rapports d'officiers septembre 1939 – juin 1940. Rapport du capitaine de Franclieu, 2.

¹⁴ For reasons of space, we will not go into more detail here about the troops' activities in the field. For more on this, see DE GMELINE 2016. 354–358.

¹⁵ JANICAUD 2003. 81–82.

¹⁶ KOMJÁT – PÉCSI 1973. 17–21.

¹⁷ MOLNÁR 1931. 7.

As for the total number of emigrants, researchers have very different figures. Benjamin Janicaud, referring to data from official French authorities, indicates that the number of Hungarians living in France in the 1920s and 1930s was between 10,000 and 15,000.¹⁸ Anna Pécsi, on the other hand, puts the number of Hungarians in the colony at 30,000,¹⁹ while Sándor Molnár's contemporary account puts the number of the community at 70,000.²⁰ The significant discrepancy between these figures is probably explained by two factors. On the one hand, the high number of Hungarians residing and working illegally in France, who were obviously not included in the statistics but were present in the Hungarian communities, and on the other hand, the mass of Hungarians from outside the post-Trianon territory who appeared to the French authorities as Romanian, Czechoslovak, etc. citizens. All this suggests that the Hungarian colony in France must have realistically numbered between 40,000 and 50,000, which clearly made it one of the less populous national immigrant groups among the 3 million foreigners living in France.²¹

The Association of Francophile Hungarians, founded in 1938, with Mihály Károlyi as its president and György Bölöni as its vice-president, committed itself to fighting on the side of France on 3 September 1939, after the outbreak of the Second World War. As a result, many Hungarians joined the French army in the autumn of 1939, and those who had acquired citizenship were ordered to enlist.²² Historical works traditionally put the number of those who enlisted at around 3,000.²³ The following is an attempt to verify the veracity of this widespread claim. In order to do this, we have carried out research in various French and Hungarian archives, which has enriched the information available to us with several documents that bring us closer to the facts. In what follows, we will present, one by one, the sources and their contents that are relevant to our research, and then try to draw concrete conclusions from them, in a summarised manner, concerning the number of volunteers and their - mainly legionary - corps.

Resources and Staff Numbers

Unfortunately, as we have seen earlier, the defeat of the campaign also had a negative impact on the management of the archives, as the records of many military units were destroyed during the fighting. The summarised lists of foreign enlistments were not preserved in the French Military Historical Archives (*Service Historique de la Défense*), and for a long time, it was not possible to carry out any meaningful research on this subject. Fortunately, however, the *Mémorial de la Shoah*, which systematically collected data on Jews in the Second World War, has preserved many lists of foreign volunteers to the French army, as these lists included a large number of Jews. Since 2015, these records, which contain more than 53,000 names (including many duplicates), have been made available on the *Mémoire des Hommes* portal, allowing a better understanding of the foreign volunteers of 1939-1940 than ever before.

¹⁸ BENJAMIN 2009. 131.

¹⁹ PÉCSI 1968. 287.

²⁰ MOLNÁR 1931. 5.

²¹ COURTOIS – PESCHANSKI – RAYSKI 1989. 18.

²² FILYÓ – GODÓ – GYÖRKEI – PÉCSI – PINTÉR 1986. 50–53.

²³ BAJOMI LÁZÁR 1984. 104–106.

Finding Hungarian volunteers in the database seems to be a simple task, as in most cases the nationality and country of birth of the volunteers are indicated, so in theory, it is easy to identify Hungarians. The largest group of volunteers are those who either declared Hungarian nationality or Hungarian birth at the time of application. It should be added that among the latter, there were a few people who had moved outside the Trianon borders but described themselves as Hungarian-born.

At the same time, it gave us the idea to look at those who may have given their name and nationality in an official way - in a country neighbouring Hungary - but are most likely of Hungarian nationality. We used surnames and first names to help us to determine this, which in many cases clearly help to clarify nationality (for example, the first names Árpád, Farkas or Béla, and occasionally the surnames Csizmadia, Disznos, Kiss, etc.). Consequently, based on a search of the relevant archival material, the number of volunteers with Hungarian citizenship and/or nationality is estimated at 1,573. However, this number can be supplemented by at least 96 more if we include persons of other nationalities (Romanian, Czechoslovak, Yugoslav, etc.) but with a clearly Hungarian name and thus most probably Hungarian nationality. The number of the latter is certainly much higher (up to several hundred), but if their names are not as helpful as those of their counterparts above, and if no other available source confirms their Hungarian nationality, their identification is unfortunately not feasible in a credible way.²⁴

The second most important source, in terms of numbers and especially research, is the 100 lists of French soldiers taken prisoner by the German authorities during 1940-41, which was then handed over to the Vichy France. These lists can now be found in the French National Archives (*Archives nationales*) under the references F 9. 2802 to 2813²⁵ but are also available in searchable form on the Internet to facilitate research. It is important to add that, although the data of more than one million prisoners of war are available thanks to these records, they cannot be considered complete, since in May and June 1940 approximately 1,845,000 people were taken prisoners, of whom about 1.6 million were transferred to prison camps in Germany (the others managed to escape before then or were released for various reasons)²⁶ so that, the data of approximately half a million people are not available. Nevertheless, these lists provide the names, dates and places of birth of the prisoners of war - sometimes with the country, but unfortunately, this is not universal, so particular attention must be paid to the names of the towns - the units, the ranks and, in the case of later lists, the prison camp. In all, 322 persons of Hungarian origin were found on the lists, many of whom had served in regular units of the French army, so it can be assumed that they were persons who had already been granted French citizenship and mobilised, but whose identification had not been possible previously due to a lack of appropriate sources.

Another important source is the sections on France in the resistance collection of the Military History Archives of Budapest, archival group 07 VII, of which items 18, 19 and 20 should be highlighted,²⁷ which contain lists of names of Hungarians who participated in the French

²⁴ Mémoire des hommes (hereinafter referred to as: MS) UEVACJ-EA. MDLX-1 – MDLX-18. Listes nominatives des volontaires étrangers engagés à servir la France entre le 1er septembre 1939 et le 25 juin 1940.

²⁵ Archives nationales (hereinafter referred to as: AN) F 9 2802 à 2813.

²⁶ DURAND 1994. 11., 312.

²⁷ HM HIM HL 07 VII. F/18. A francia ellenállásban résztvevő magyarok névsora /453 fő/. A francia hadseregben harcolt önkéntesek.; HM HIM HL 07 VII. F/19. A francia és belga ellenállás magyar hősi halottainak névjegyzéke és tevékenységük rövid leírása.; HM HIM HL 07 VII. F/20. Névjegyzék a franciaországi magyar önkéntesek és ellenállók hősi halottairól.

army and resistance, sometimes sacrificing their lives, with varying length and content. The most consistent is the list of Hungarian volunteers in the French army - in French, but most probably made by Hungarians - which, in addition to personal details (name, date of birth and place of residence), gives the regiment of the soldiers, the place of their possible captivity, their post-war address and their profession for 453 of them. Unfortunately, the lists of the deaths are less uniform and less informative overall. In the case of the latter, we also face the problem that only a minority of those listed were members of the French army, the majority having been active in the Resistance, or possibly the Free French Forces, before their deaths.

Although it provides a smaller amount of information on the Hungarian participation, the database of the Archives of the Victims of Modern War Conflicts (*Bureau des Archives des victimes des conflits contemporains*) in Caen, France, which is available through the *Mémoire des Hommes* web portal,²⁸ is also a useful tool for learning about Hungarian participation. As this database is also searchable using various keywords, it is relatively easy to find Hungarian-born victims, but it is important to note that this database is also affected by the lack of sources, so if the operational logs of a unit have been destroyed, the casualty data contained in them will not be available here either, so, unfortunately, this database is of limited help for the research of the topic discussed in this chapter. Nevertheless, 54 individuals who took part in the 1939-40 operations and subsequently died can be identified from the data, which will help to better understand the range of participants.

The collation of all these sources has led to the identification of 1,999 people by name who fought in the French army, the Foreign Legion or other national armies deployed in France during the 1940 campaign. This number is, of course, much smaller than the sum of the numbers in the lists presented above, as there is a marked overlap in the totals, which adjusts the total downwards. In any case, the various sources used to make it possible to gain a more accurate picture of this previously almost completely unknown group, as the gaps in one list are often filled by the richness of the data in another, and sometimes vice versa. It is therefore possible to analyse the information relating to the identified individuals in greater depth and to use it to provide a more detailed picture of the Hungarians who took part in the French campaign. Nevertheless, it is reasonable to assume that the conclusions drawn in this way will hold good for the Hungarians concerned as a whole. In the following, therefore, we will attempt to use the information available to us to describe, from various points of view, the Hungarians who served in the French armed forces - and especially in the French Foreign Legion - in 1939-40.

Units

The identification of the units of the soldiers involved in the 1940 campaign is of paramount importance in understanding Hungarian participation in the campaign, as it helps to assess the areas in which they were deployed, whether they participated in skirmishes and what the outcome of these was. Fortunately, the various sources available to us all contain information on the formations of almost all Hungarian soldiers. This data is often not very accurate, but the fact that the individuals concerned are often listed in several types of sources means that a comparative analysis of these sources can help to identify the exact formations of many soldiers.

²⁸ SHD AC 21 P. Dossiers individuels des déportés et internés résistants.

Thanks to overlapping sources, it has not been possible to identify only 10 of them as belonging to a particular military unit, giving a relatively accurate picture of this important issue. Around three quarters of the Hungarian soldiers (1,564 or 78%) served in the Foreign Legion, but in units with quite different tasks during the French campaign, which had a major impact on the participation and fate of the volunteers. The vast majority, 1,103, were assigned to the Marching Regiments of Foreign Volunteers: 304 to the 21st, 196 to the 22nd and 200 to the 23rd, while the remaining 400 were not assigned to a specific regiment, but often to different legionary training camps, which may indicate that they were still in training and therefore not assigned to a specific regiment. For 398 individuals, only the fact that they are in the ranks of the Foreign Legion, or its training corps means that it is very likely that they have already reported to and been assigned to the Foreign Legion but have not yet been reclassified to a specific unit, so they were probably relatively new to the system at the time of recording. Seventy-nine personnel served in the regular units of the Foreign Legion - the 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 5th, 11th and 12th Foreign Infantry Regiments and the 1st and 2nd Foreign Cavalry Regiments. This fact suggests that some of these persons, unlike the majority, did not enlist for the duration of the war but for the traditional five-year period, and others were veterans who had already served with the Legion for a longer period but who, building on their experience, were transferred to combat units in France. Of the units described in more detail earlier, 19 were identified in the 11th Infantry Regiment and 15 in the 12th Infantry Regiment, while 16 in the two cavalry regiments were presumed to have been deployed with the 97th Reconnaissance Group.

Based on all this, it can be clearly stated that most of the Hungarians who participated in the French campaign were assigned to the units of the Foreign Legion, which were usually specially set up for this purpose. However, according to the available information, only a part of this relatively large contingent was assigned to a combat unit before the start of the operations, and about 50 per cent of them were still in some stage of training during the fighting. Of course, this fact does not exclude the possibility that they were deployed in some form during the fighting, but it was certainly not universal. Consequently, in terms of unit affiliation, the average Hungarian participant was a volunteer for the duration of the war, who was assigned to a newly formed regiment of the Foreign Legion and then took part in its units in the operations of May-June 1940.

The Losses: Dead and Prisoners of War

As we have already seen above, most of the corps, which included Hungarians, suffered heavy losses during the Battle of France in 1940. As a result, some of the Hungarians serving in these units obviously lost their lives during the fighting or became prisoners of war at the end of the fighting. Using the various sources available, an attempt is made to summarise the losses suffered by the Hungarians. The greatest help in this respect is the material of the Archives of the Victims of Modern War Conflicts in Caen,²⁹ but the relevant, previously presented archives of the Military History Archives in Budapest also provide important contributions. In the present case, we include in the category of persons under investigation those who, according to the records, lost their lives during 1939-40 or were taken prisoner of war by the Germans during the fighting of that period, where they died because of wounds or other causes.

²⁹ SHD AC 21 P. Dossiers individuels des déportés et internés résistants.

According to the sources, 51 dead soldiers of Hungarian origin can be identified. At first glance, this number is surprisingly low, since it has already been established that many units with hundreds of Hungarians in their ranks suffered heavy losses during the campaign, some of them even being demolished. In the light of this, this loss of about half a hundred men seems very modest and is certainly very far from the actual figure. However, precisely because of the circumstances mentioned above, i.e., the fact that the operational logbooks of the units that suffered the heaviest losses in the fighting were destroyed or deliberately annihilated to avoid falling into enemy hands, the detailed figures have not survived. This has already caused problems in identifying those who served in the ranks of the units, and the same is true of the search for the fallen. Therefore, it is safe to assume that the actual casualty figures are much higher than what is available in the sources, but the information currently available only allows us to publish this figure in a way that can be substantiated.

The common element between the elements of the data set, compiled from different sources, apart from personal data, is the indication of the formation, so we must try to draw meaningful conclusions from this information. Although, as we have pointed out, we do not know all the casualties at the present stage of the research, so the results of the analysis cannot be accepted as general, it is nevertheless striking that, despite the destruction of the logbooks, it is the marching regiments that have suffered the most casualties, 27 (53%) to be precise, which supports the hypothesis that these units suffered the most in the fighting. It should be noted that 9 more persons served in the Foreign Legion, 7 in regular units and 2 either in a newly formed unit (97th Reconnaissance Group) or in an unspecified unit within the Legion, so that 36 of the 51 killed (70%) were foreign legionnaires, which is a very high proportion.

Based on these figures, despite what are certainly incomplete data, it is perhaps not an exaggeration to say that most Hungarians who sacrificed their lives during the French campaign - in accordance with their distribution among the units and the fate of these units - were members of the Foreign Legion who enlisted for the duration of the war.

Casualties are not just those who died during the fighting, but also those who were taken prisoner at the end of it. As we have seen earlier, a very significant proportion of the French forces suffered the same fate, so logically there are also several Hungarians among the prisoners of war, numbering 408 in total. This means that more than 20 per cent of the Hungarian soldiers serving in the French forces were prisoners of war, which is a very significant proportion.

Most of the prisoners of war, 223 (54%), came from the ranks of the Marching Regiments of Foreign Volunteers, which fits in well with both the history of the units and the proportions of the fallen. The second largest group was made up of 146 (36%) of those serving in the regular French army, a relatively high proportion compared to the total number of Hungarians serving in this type of unit. This certainly suggests that the number of the latter may be higher than currently known, but in the absence of sources that allow us to know this, the figure is skewed upwards. 19 persons (4.6%) from the ranks of regular legionary units were taken prisoners, which can certainly be explained by the relatively few Hungarian legionnaires serving in their ranks. It is interesting to note that 14 (3.4%) fought and were taken prisoner in the Czechoslovak army in France, which shows that there are a good number of Hungarians in the ranks of contingents from neighbouring countries if their nationality can be identified based on some information. As no information on the military unit is available for only 6 of them, the picture

of the military affiliation of the POWs can be considered almost complete. This confirms previous trends, i.e., the strong presence of Hungarians in the Foreign Legion and the significant losses suffered in its ranks.

SUMMARY

The vast majority of the French Foreign Legion units, formed in 1939-1940 with the participation of foreign volunteers to a greater or lesser extent, were deployed with inadequate equipment and weapons, after a shortened training, against heavily outnumbered German troops in a strategic situation that offered only a slim chance of success - when the long-awaited attack was launched in an unexpected place and manner, the confused French command deployed the legion units to fill the gaps in the front line.

These fought fiercely and sometimes temporarily successful defensive battles against German troops during May and June, and their conduct earned them the respect of their superiors (and in many cases were subsequently decorated for their performance in the field), but in the desperate fighting they generally lost 70-80 per cent of their numbers, and many of the survivors were taken prisoner by the Germans.

At the same time, the available French and Hungarian documents reveal that there were about one and a half thousand Hungarians among the foreign volunteers, about half of whom took part in the fighting. Despite the incomplete information, it can be concluded that these Hungarian volunteers fought with determination, despite the lack of equipment and poor quality of the equipment and the inadequate training. However, it cost them dearly, as a significant number of those who took part in the fighting, lost their lives, or became prisoners of war.

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