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*Izvorni naučni rad/Original scientific article*

UDK/UDC: 94(439:437.3:437.6)"1938/1939" (093)

323.1:355:355.4[(497.6)+(439:437.3:437.6)]"1938/1939"

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.52259/historijskipogledi.2022.5.7.183>

## **BOSNIANS IN SUBCARPATHIAN FIGHTS, AGAINST CZECHOSLOVAKIAN SOLDIERS A ND IN THE “RAGGED GUARDS”**

**Abstract:** *Before the outbreak of World War II, under the leadership of the German Empire, European countries redrew the borders of Central European nations in several steps. Within the framework of these great power games, the boundaries of the newly formed Slovakia and its southern neighbour Hungary were marked in 1938 so none of the parties were really happy with the decision. The Hungarian side determined to command paramilitary units in addition to the professional army to the reclaimed territories, including Transcarpathia. Thus, the Ragged Guard, which was dismantled in 1921, was reactivated.*

*The topic of this paper addresses how the Ragged Guard was reorganized from October 1938 onwards, and how roughly 30 to 40 armed men of Bosnian descent joined its contingent that had contained a high number Slav and Balkanic people in the early 1920s. This paper looks at all the preparations that Iván Héjjas has made to get the soldiers who have been disarmed for almost two decades to be reintroduced to the military life. This paper will argue that the Bosnian soldiers thus "enlisted" were essentially unprepared for the mobilization, did not have adequate clothing and armaments, and this may explain why, although they initially had military success, suffered heavy losses when the Hungarian army in the spring of 1939 headed east through the Carpathians against the Soviet Union. This study examines Hungarian archival sources and analytical work in Hungarian, as well as an interview with a Hungarian soldier who was present on the spots where the Bosnian paramilitarists were the most active, in order to prove that the Bosnian soldiers operating in Transcarpathia were the bravest and most determined in Héjjas' unit.*

**Key words:** *World War II, Hungary, Slovakia, Transcarpathia, Ragged Guard.*

## **BOŠNJACI U PODKARPATSKOM BORBAMA PROTIV ČEHOSLOVAČKIH VOJNIKA I U “OTRCANIM GARDAMA”**

**Apstrakt:** *Prije izbijanja Drugog svjetskog rata, pod vodstvom Njemačkog carstva, evropske zemlje su u nekoliko koraka prekrajale granice srednjoevropskih nacija. U okviru ovih igara velikih sila, granice novoformirane Slovačke i njenog južnog susjeda Mađarske formirane su 1938. godine, na način da nijedna strana nije bila baš zadovoljna odlukom. Mađarska strana je odlučila da pored profesionalne vojske komanduje i paravojnim jedinicama na zadobijenim teritorijama, uključujući Zakarpatje. Tako je ponovo aktivirana Rongyos Gárda (Otrcana garda), paravojna formacija koja je ugašena 1921. godine.*

*Tema ovog rada govori o tome kako je Rongyos Gárda reorganizirana od oktobra 1938. nadalje i kako se otprilike 30 do 40 naoružanih ljudi bosanskog porijekla pridružilo njenom kontingentu koji je sadržavao veliki broj slavenskih i balkanskih naroda početkom 1920-ih. Ovaj rad se bavi svim pripremama koje je Ivan Héjjas izvršio kako bi vojnike koji su bili razoružani skoro dvije decenije ponovo uveo u vojni život. U ovom radu će se tvrditi da su tako „regrutirani“ bosanski vojnici bili u suštini nespreni za mobilizaciju, da nisu imali adekvatnu odjeću i naoružanje, a to može objasniti zašto su, iako su u početku imali vojni uspjeh, pretrpjeli velike gubitke kada je mađarska vojska u proljeće 1939. krenuo na istok kroz Karpatе protiv Sovjetskog Saveza. Ova studija ispituje mađarske arhivske izvore i sprovodi analitički rad na mađarskom jeziku, kao i intervju sa mađarskim vojnikom koji je bio prisutan na mjestima gdje su bosanski paramilitaristi bili najaktivniji, kako bi se dokazalo da su bosanski vojnici koji su djelovali u Zakarpatju bili najhrabriji a najodlučniji u Héjjasovoj jedinici.*

**Ključne riječi:** *Drugi svjetski rat, Mađarska, Slovačka, Zakarpatje, Otrcana garda.*

### **Background**

On November 2, 1938, in Wien, which by then had become part of the Reich, in the Upper Belvedere Palace the arbitration jury requested by the Hungarian and Slovakian parties granted Hungary about 12.000 km<sup>2</sup> of the area lost by the Treaty of Trianon. This decree is known today as the First Vienna Award, ratified by the Italian Count Ciano and German Foreign Minister Ribbentropp. Subcarpathia – which is part of Ukraine today – remained a part of Slovakia led by Tiso. None of the parties was satisfied with this decree, Tiso

finding the overtaken area excessive, while Horthy insufficient. On March 14, 1939, Slovakia declared independence, while Germany occupied the rest of Bohemia and Moravia. Hungary claimed shared Hungarian-Polonian borders, full accession of Subcarpathia, claiming that most of its inhabitants are Ruthenians who were obviously not Slovaks, and there was also a large number of Hungarian minority in the area.

The Hungarian Ministry of Defence and the Chiefs of Defence of the Hungarian Armed Forces started the strategic planning of entering Subcarpathia which was to be preceded by a diversion. The 'Ragged Guards' were entrusted with the implementation of the diversion. The Ragged Guards ceased all military operations abroad after the 1921 uprising in West Hungary, but their training, drills and meetings aimed at the fortification of the ties of brotherhood continued in Hungary. There were hundreds of Bosnian veterans among the members of the Ragged Guards who still participated in fights in the Sopron area in 1921. Diversion and minor confrontations with the Horthy-army are named "the Small War" in Hungarian history, which is little known by the general public and even historians. This operation was the correction of the Treaty of Trianon right before the Second World War.

### **The "Ragged Guards"**

Minister of the Interior Miklós Kozma secretly organised re-militarization of the Ragged Guards which had by then become ready for action and mobilised around Szatmár. Organisation had started earlier on the Héjjas-property and leaders of the Guards had already evaluated their groups. Troop "H" was a semi-military group mobilised by Iván Héjjas. Héjjas' "Bosnians", approximately 30 to 40 people were also part of this group. On March 23, 1939, the Hungarian Army unexpectedly blasted the Subcarpathian region of Slovakia, heading towards the East. They were confident that the Polish would also join the fight since they also had territorial disputes with Slovakia. However, to their frustration, the Polish did not have the courage to face this challenge. Before the attack of the Hungarian forces, the troops of the Ragged Guards had already started guerrilla fight with the Slovakian and Check police and military. On October 6, 1938, they secretly crossed the border. Border crossing continued for days in groups of 10 to 15. The Guards and the Bosnians were trained at Janka puszta, in Zala county. The Héjjas property was near Kecskemét where he used to meet his Bosnians since 1922. The news of the Bosnians induces fear in everyone. For instance, 3 Bosnian guards raided a gendarmerie barracks and killed 10 Slovakian gendarmes. When they left their homeland, they were provided with arms and ammunition and also offered food which they refused,

claiming that they would acquire from the enemy.<sup>1</sup> They performed saboteur moves, raiding patrols, destroying phone and railway lines, attacking gendarmerie barracks from time to time. Their aim was to create a turmoil and to disappear in the forests afterwards. Based on contemporary accounts, Hungarian paramilitary units counted 950 to 1,000 members. Some of them never crossed the border, some were deployed only once, while others had been to Ruszninszko<sup>2</sup> multiple times. Official records of the VKF put their number to 934, from which 354 were taken as prisoners of war, 37 died/disappeared and 23 wounded. VKF also prepared a report about the fights the first period of which was flooding the region and propaganda between 5-9 October 1938. On October 6, the “Héjjas troops” consisting of 150 people – among them the Bosnians – also arrived, without arms or equipment. The corps consisted of 4 troops commanded by First Lieutenant József Prém. The first troop of 29 people from Kecskemét was under Prém’s direct command. The Gérecz troop consisted of 33 people, the third troop with 20 people including the Bosnians was commanded by Maczák, the fourth troop consisted of 11 people from Tarpa, who were later joined by 2 more people from Tarpa and 1 from Beregszász.

On October 9 at 10:30 equipment, machine guns, pistols and ammunition was distributed as well as hand grenades, field dressings, maps, torches, food supply for 2 days, compasses, backpacks and 5 kgs of explosives, fuses and detonators for each troop. Their password was “Rutén”. They crossed the border through the slot at Tarpa, heading towards Mukáncs in order to occupy it. In case of facing preponderance they were supposed to flee to Poland. They crossed the border at 1 AM on October 11. They had a liaison who kept the troops on the Hungarian border informed. The group was exhausted after the long march, therefore they reached the Nyíres forest between Dercen and Fornos in full daylight, around 7 – 7:30 AM. Local inhabitants were working in the fields. The Check had already been informed about the arrival of the Hungarian forces. Many of the locals presumed that armed communists would arrive and informed authorities, among others the Kerepec police station. The march to Dercen took 2 days. so the troops set guards and rested in the woods. They were drenched and out of food and tobacco. Locals gave them food and drink. A reconnaissance aircraft hovered over the forest causing panic. Prém first considered using explosives in defence but Private First-Class Schultz, an explosives expert was against the idea, so the troop retreated to the “Upper Nyáras Forest” about 1.7 kms from their camp. Maczák also collected his Bosnians.

However, when they reached the plains between the two forests they got under enemy fire and were not able to retreat over the open area and could only keep them back using hand grenades. According to the Notary of Dercen, the Czech troops counted 2 to 3 hundred bicycle infantry, a tank division deployed

<sup>1</sup> Fodor Géza, *Magyar-Csehszlovák konfliktus Dercen környékén 1938 októberében*, Együtt, 11. évf. 2009. 03.

<sup>2</sup> Subcarpathia, part of Ukraine today.

from Ungvár and gendarmerie troops deployed from various places. The so called Maczák troop with the Bosnians as the greatest military force, was able to take a strategic position and withhold the Czech bicycle infantry. The sun set around 18:30, fire was ceased, the Czech tanks and infantry retreated. The walking wounded were tended but 7 seriously wounded soldiers and 6 casualties were left on the battlefield. Hungarian troops ran out of ammunition during the battle.<sup>3</sup> There were approximately 30 to 50 Bosnians involved in the battle. Reszulovics Mehmed, who was mistakenly reported dead served in Troop "H", and the names of Szlatinovics Muharem, Stipics, Dinics and Mersics were also mentioned in reports<sup>4</sup>.

According to a report of October 11, 1938, "Around 15:00 PM the sound of engines was heard. A Bosnian guard came running from the edge of the forest reporting 'Tank, tank!'" Military intelligence, exploring the location and equipment of the Czech troops was among the missions of these troops. They monitored the movements of the enemy troops, transportation, and the activities of law enforcement agencies. They were also to induce sympathy among the local Ruthenians for Hungarians. The Official Military Journal later stated that a secret military order was issued on January 1, 1939, in Budapest to "liberate Upper Hungary from the shackles of Trianon"<sup>5</sup>. The Bosnians fought under the direct command of János Maczák. They were called the Bosnian Troop<sup>6</sup>. Meanwhile professional soldiers also arrived at the border along with VKF. German and Polish press reported the events favourably. Most fights took place in the area between Beregszász and Dercen. There were no gendarmerie barracks in Dercen and Fornos therefore the locals supported the Ragged Guards freely, considering them their liberators. They also treated Héjjas' dreadful Bosnians in a friendly way. "At the end of the last century András Kotri Bíró and others remembered their conversations favourably"<sup>7</sup>.

Czech soldiers with their tanks surrounded the Ragged Guard near Dercen and almost all Bosnians were killed. The Czech did not spare the wounded either. They captured the Ragged, tortured them, some of them were dragged behind horses and killed in the process<sup>8</sup>. This so called "small war" was horrendous and bloody on both sides. The dead were buried in a common grave. The locals of Dercen set a wooden headboard on the grave. Reszulovics was captured injured and taken to Illava with the other captives where he was beaten within inches of his life with batons and sticks, he received three large wounds on his head and lay unconscious in the cellars of the gendarmerie barracks for several days. Daily

<sup>3</sup> Hadtörténeti Levéltár VKF iratok 1939. Összefoglalás az 1838-39.

<sup>4</sup> Az erő útján, Magyar Ház Kiadó, Bp. 2000. 337.old.

<sup>5</sup> Hadtörténeti Levéltár, VKF dosszié, 1939. Összefoglalás az 1938-39.

<sup>6</sup> Az erő útján, Magyar Ház Kiadó, Bp. 2000. 337.old.

<sup>7</sup> Fodor Géza, *Magyar-Csehszlovák konfliktus Dercen környékén 1938 októberében*, Együtt, 11. évf. 2009. 03.

<sup>8</sup> Fodor Géza, *Magyar-Csehszlovák konfliktus Dercen környékén 1938 októberében*, Együtt, 11. évf. 2009. 03.

interrogation was introduced since the Czech officers wanted to get information about the Ragged Guards. Once the captives were forced to dig their own graves after having been shown the dead bodies of their comrades. In the village of Jutka, Raszulovics and his comrades were forced to dig their own graves, forced to kneel, then the Czech soldiers loaded their weapons. The kneeling people started praying loudly whereon the enemy soldiers started laughing at them – an example of early psychological torture<sup>9</sup>. Some days later Horthy's soldiers marched in. On July 18, 1939, Reszulovics and his comrades were called in for military re-examination, enclosing a Commander's Evaluation from 1939 and a table of evaluation. Before the process, he was proposed for promotion to the rank of lieutenant because of his heroic conduct in battle. Meanwhile by Resolution No 36.565/eln.8-1939 he was awarded the Minor Hungarian Silver Medal of Valour.<sup>10</sup>

Reszulovics Mehmed was born in 1902. He served as a fencing-master at the Ludovica Academy in 1935-36. Between the two World Wars he was the best left-handed foil fencer in Hungary. He graduated at the Hungarian Royal Toldi Miklós Sports Instructor and Fencing-master Training Institute. After 1945 he was a fencing instructor at the Vörös Lobogó SE sport club. He left Hungary in 1956 and worked as a fencing instructor in Wien, later in West Germany. He died in 1983. His only son lives in Wien, Dr. György Léderer prepared a short and rather uninformative interview with him.

Survivors of the Subcarpathian fights were allowed to hand in an application to have their future plans supported: they could apply for a job, being reinstated to their former position or getting a new public position. Application forms prepared for veterans included questions about the corps they fought in, their qualification, residency, personal data, awards, their requests, and others. Widows and orphans who lost family members in the Ruszinszkó fights could also hand in applications. Sosics Judit, as an orphan, requested support for her studies. Veterans Sztipics and Ruhics also applied for jobs just like the 4 Ruthenians who had joined the fight.<sup>11</sup>

On September 5, 2018, with the help of the local Major I personally prepared an interview with Bálint Máté who was 15 in 1938 and was 95 years old at the time of the interview. He was the last live witness of the Dercen events, some of which he knew from the narration of his father and friends, since at that time he worked in the fields around Dercen. However, he considered himself a mature young man at the time since "he had already been confirmed". Locals from the village were working in the fields at the time, being the time of autumn sowing. "I was standing near the bridge when a horse cart came with two people in it, and they threw a bundle in front of me." There were pamphlets in the bundle that the people in the cart received from the Hungarian H-brigade. One of them said to

<sup>9</sup> Az Erő útján. A Rongyos Gárda harcai. 1919-1939.

<sup>10</sup> Hadtörténeti Levéltár, VKF dosszié. 1939. Összefoglalás az 1938-39-es.

<sup>11</sup> Hadtörténeti Levéltár. VKF dosszié. 1939. Összefoglalás az 1938-39-es.

Bálint Máté: 'The Hungarians are here!' He asked what they meant by that, saying "I am also Hungarian just like you two, what are you talking about?" The man in the cart replied, 'No, they are the paramilitary.' Bálint Máté started reading the pamphlets and wondered what was going to happen.

My interviewee did not see the battle itself, but heard it, since according to his account, he was approximately 3 to 4 kilometres from the battlefield. 'The paramilitary entered the Szende swamps through the Beregszász mountains.' He heard from his father and friends that after the battle the survivors of the paramilitary units crossed the trenches and entered the village, going to the local minister 'who was in his advanced years then'. Bálint Máté estimated the number of casualties around 3 to 5 who were buried in Fornos. The wounded were carried to the village in a horse cart which stopped at the local parish hall where they gave water to wounded who were still able to ask for it.<sup>12</sup>

"The most ferocious among our people were Héjjas' Bosnians. Like, three of them attacked a gendarmerie barracks and fought like devils. They stabbed all 10 gendarmes. Before crossing the border, when receiving their supplies, they did not accept food, saying 'For a Bosnian, ammunition and hand grenades are sufficient, he can acquire his food for himself'. They were not right, however, since acquiring food was not easy in those parts. In the villages, everyone helped our people but there might have been Czech or Jewish traitors, and, alas, Hungarians also." Kozma, who was not present at the events, was informed by the participants, was right. Soldiers of the Prém-company camping near Dercen could enter Dercen or Fornos any time, there being no gendarmeries in either village. Locals gave them food and ever wine or schnaps, considering them their liberators. Héjjas' Bosnians did not make a bad impression on the locals either. András Bíró Kotri, who died at the end of the last century, mentioned their conversations favourably, and the Ragged Guards are praised by those who witnessed the fight between the Czech soldiers and the paramilitary outnumbered by them. Around 3 o'clock in the afternoon a troop of Czechoslovakian gendarmerie, 2 battalions of bicycle infantry and a tank squad appeared from the direction of Munkács on the other side of the Nyírjes forest. Guards of the paramilitary detected them in time, and the company engaged in fighting in three groups. The Czech tried to surround them from 3 sides. Paramilitary squads were confused by the preponderance of the enemy, dispersed, and tried to escape tank fire, heading towards east. The first squads were able to break out, but the rest were driven out of the shelter of the woods into the canal called Csalhó-trench which was filled with water. The rear-guard returned enemy fire standing in chest-high water, trying to slowly withdraw towards south and east. "17 soldiers volunteered as rear-guard. They endured until the fall of darkness under the command of First Lieutenant Miklós Zórád. 14 of them were killed and only 3 managed to break free." This extraordinary

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<sup>12</sup> This account is based on the recordings prepared during my interview.

tableau took place in clear view of the inhabitants of Dercen who worked in the potato fields near the forest, in the area named Milkó-hill.<sup>13</sup>

Bosnian veterans fought for the integrity of Hungary in 1919 in the Red Army, in the so called South Slavic Battalion. Their number decreased in 1921, approximately 300 of them participated in the uprising in West Hungary, and in my present study I estimated their number between 30 to 40, and, as described, most of them were killed in the war. By 1945, there are no more data about Bosnian veterans, most probably all of them had died by then, partly because of their age, and partly because their participation in the fights of the Ragged Guards decimated them. Most of those who survived until 1956 left Hungary and only their children or grandchildren survived. After the Second World War, the areas acquired by the First Vienna Award or military activity were not returned to Hungary by the Allied powers or the Soviet Union (the areas were not returned to Czechoslovakia but acquired by the Soviet Union. These lands are the part of the independent Ukraine today, inhabited by a significant number of Hungarian minority).

## Summary

Driven by loyalty and gratitude, some 30-40 former soldiers of Bosnian descent responded to Iván Héjjas' call in the autumn of 1938, when Hungary was preparing to occupy the territories reclaimed from Czechoslovakia and attack the Soviet Union. Although the South Slavic militants, who were very active in the uprising in western Hungary until 1921, were retrained in Zala County, the Hungarian state did not take enough care to make them an efficient strike force and cause serious losses to the enemy even in sharp situations. Although hopes were there in the initial stages of the advance as three Bosnian gunmen destroyed a ten-man Slovak gendarmerie unit, but when this poorly equipped military unit was caught in a massive artillery fire and had to fight tanks, crashed and roughly 80% of the soldiers was killed on the ground.

Although the paramilitary forces active in Transcarpathia and the neighboring areas, that included the 30-40 Bosnian volunteers, was soon crushed by the superior armies, it is safe to say that they were mentioned by their surviving fellow soldiers as the bravest. Not only did the Bosnians try to stand up on the battlefield, but they established very good relations with the local population during the breaks of the fighting. According to the records, the inhabitants of the affected settlements, including Dercen, viewed the Bosnians as liberators and welcomed them.

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<sup>13</sup> file:///C:/Users/admin/Desktop/EPA00595\_Egyutt\_2009\_3\_085-093.pdf 90. old. (Letöltés ideje: 2018. 02. 15).

Although there are no exact data, it can be assumed that some of them may have returned home from the Eastern Front, but none of the Bosnian soldiers of the Ragged Guard could have experienced the end of the war, as none of them were listed in the 1945 veterans' census. Although these few gunmen were only a minor episode in the history of World War II, their efforts and patriotic stance were good examples of the arms friendship of the Hungarian and Bosnian people.

## Zaključak

Vodeni lojalnošću i zahvalnošću, oko 30-40 bivših vojnika bosanskog porijekla odazvalo se pozivu Ivana Héjjasa u jesen 1938. godine, kada se Mađarska spremala da okupira teritorije osvojene od Čehoslovačke i napadne Sovjetski Savez. Iako su južnoslavenski militanti, koji su bili vrlo aktivni u ustanku u zapadnoj Mađarskoj do 1921. godine, ponovno prošli obuku u Zalskom okrugu, mađarska država nije vodila dovoljno računa da od njih napravi efikasnu udarnu snagu i nanese ozbiljne gubitke neprijatelju čak i u ozbiljnoj situaciji. Iako su nade postojale u početnim fazama napredovanja jer su tri bosanska naoružana napadača uništila jedinicu slovačke žandarmerije od deset ljudi, ali kada je ova loše opremljena vojna jedinica zahvaćena masivnom artiljerijskom vatrom i morala se boriti protiv tenkova, raspala se i otprilike 80% vojnika ubijeni su na licu mjesta.

Iako su paravojne snage aktivne u Zakarpatju i susjednim oblastima, koje su uključivale 30-40 bosanskih dobrovoljaca, ubrzo razbijene od strane suparničkih vojski, slobodno se može reći da su ih njihovi preživjeli suborci pominjali kao najhrabrije. Ne samo da su Bosanci pokušali da se istaknu na bojnopolju, već su u pauzama borbi uspostavili vrlo dobre odnose sa lokalnim stanovništvom. Prema evidenciji, stanovnici pogođenih naselja, uključujući i Dercen, na Bosance su gledali kao na oslobodiocima i pozdravljali ih.

Iako nema tačnih podataka, može se pretpostaviti da su se neki od njih možda vratili kućama sa Istočnog fronta, ali niko od bosanskih vojnika Otrcane garde nije mogao doživjeti kraj rata, jer niko od njih nije upisan u popis veterana iz 1945. godine. Iako je ovih nekoliko naoružanih ljudi bila samo mala epizoda u historiji Drugog svjetskog rata, njihovi naponi i patriotski stav bili su dobri primjeri oružanog prijateljstva mađarskog i bosanskog naroda.

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