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Border Incidents and Border Crossings in the Baja Triangle Border Area (1948–1953)

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ABSTRACT

The study examines border incidents, border violations, and illegal border crossings that occurred during the Soviet–Yugoslav conflict (1948–1953) on the Hungarian–Yugoslav border adjacent to the Baja Triangle, based on documents from the National Command of the Hungarian Border Guard. The border incidents took various forms. Most of them can be considered minor provocations, but there were more serious cases, too. After they were detected, illegal border violations were always followed by extensive raids lasting up to several days. Initially, the local population did not assist the border guards, but a change can be observed from 1951 onwards.

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Introduction

Hungary played an active role in the Soviet–Yugoslav conflict that broke out in the spring of 1948. Mátyás Rákosi and the leadership of the Hungarian Working Peoples' Party (Magyar Dolgozók Pártja) were quick to spearhead a smear campaign against Josip Broz Tito and the Yugoslav communist leadership. Within a short time, Tito was portrayed as the “chain dog of imperialism”.¹ The frosty relations between the two communist parties and, consequently, between the two countries were also felt in the everyday lives of those living near the Hungarian–Yugoslav border. Similar to the Hungarian–Austrian border, an “iron curtain” descended on the Hungarian–Yugoslav border, making it (almost) impossible to maintain contact with relatives and acquaintances living on the other side of the border. It also became impossible for Hungarian citizens to cultivate their land on the Yugoslav side of the border and vice versa. Border incidents and raids against those who crossed the border illegally became a regular occurrence.²

In this study I attempt to highlight the border incidents, border violations and the raids surrounding them not at the entire length of the Hungarian–Yugoslav border, but only one section, the Baja Triangle area. Covering an area of 1,245 km², bordered by the Danube River to the west and the Hungarian–Yugoslav border to the south, this region, which roughly forms a triangle, included some twenty settlements (including the city of Baja with a population of 30,000). After the collapse of the

Austro-Hungarian Empire in October 1918, the region was occupied by Serbian troops. Yugoslavia claimed the territory for itself at the peace conference that ended World War I and did not withdraw its troops until August 1921. For centuries, the region had been inhabited by a mixed population of Hungarians, Germans, and South Slavs. After World War II, with the expulsion of the local German minority (the Svabians), the South Slavs became the largest minority. In relation to the total population, South Slavs from Hungary made up the largest proportion here: according to official data, 11.2% of the population in the Baja district and 7.7% in the Bácsalmás district were South Slavs.³ Although the contemporary sources uses the collective term South Slavs (*délszláv*) for the different South Slavic communities (Serb, Croat, Šokci, Bunjevci and Slovene) in Hungary after 1945, most of the South Slavic minorities in the Baja Triangle belonged to the Bunjevci, a Croatian subethnic group, whose ancestors originated from Dalmatia, the region between the Drinari Mountains and Svilaja, and moved to the Baja Triangle because of the Ottoman conquests in the early modern period. Serbs can be found only in Baja and Hercegszántó. It is particularly interesting that, because of the wars against the Ottomans, the Šokci, another ethnic Croatian subgroup originally of Roman Catholic faith, settled in Hercegszántó. In protest the Magyarization activities of the Hungarian Catholic Church, they converted *en masse* to the Serbian Orthodox Church at the end of the 19th century. Later, three-quarters of them returned to the Roman Catholic faith, while the remaining quarter still consider themselves Serbian to this day.⁴

¹ On the causes of the Soviet-Yugoslav conflict and its effects on Hungarian–Yugoslav relations: Leonid Gibianskii, “The Soviet Bloc and the Initial Stage of the Cold War. Archival Documents on Stalin’s Meetings with Communist Leaders of Yugoslavia and Bulgaria, 1946–1948”, *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, March, (1998): 112–134.; Leonid Gibianski, “The 1948 Soviet–Yugoslav Conflict and the Formation of the ‘Socialist Camp’ Model,” in *The Soviet Union in Eastern Europe, 1945–89*, ed. Odd Arne Westad, Sven G. Holtmark, and Iver B. Neumann (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1994.): 26–46.; Jeronim Perović, “The Tito-Stalin Split. A Reassessment in Light of New Evidence”, *Journal of Cold War Studies*, 2 (2007): 32–63.; Svetožar Rajak, “The Cold War in the Balkans, 1945–1956,” in *History of the Cold War*, ed. Melvin P. Leffler and Odd Arne Westad (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010): Vol. I. 198–220.; Vukman Péter, “„A fordulat évei”. Magyar–jugoszláv kapcsolatok (1948–1949),” *Acta Historica Szegediensis* Tomus 141 (2017): 179–194. and Vukman Péter, “Barátból ellenség – ellenségből barát (?): A magyar–jugoszláv párt- és államközi kapcsolatok (1945–1956),” *Fejezetek a titói Jugoszlávia korai szakaszából*, ed. Molnár Tibor (Zenta: Történelmi Levéltár, 2016), 45–79.

² On the strengthening of the border defence at the Hungarian–Yugoslav border: Okváth Imre, *Bástya a béke frontján*.

Magyar haderő és katonapolitika 1945–1956 (Budapest: Aquila, 1998), 113–14.; Kovács Imre, “Déli határunk műszaki-zárési és erősítési munkái 1950–1955-ben,” *Új Honvédségi Szemle* 120, no 1 (1992): 34–6.; Orgoványi István, “A déli határsáv 1948 és 1956 között,” *Bács-Kiskun megye múltjából* 17 (2001): 253–85.

³ Tóth Ágnes, “A „nagypolitika” erőterében. Délszlávok Magyarországon 1945–1948,” in *Magyarok és szerbek a változó határ két oldalán, 1941–1948. Történelem és emlékezet*, szerk. Bíró László and Hornyák Árpád (Budapest: MTA BTK Történettudományi Intézet, 2016), 341. Table 3.

⁴ For the history of the Bunjevci: Robert Skenderović, *Povijest podunavskih hrvata (Bunjevaca i Šokaca) od doseljavanja do propasti Austro-Ugarske Monarhije*, (Subotica - Slavonski Brod: Zavod za kulturu vojvodanskih Hrvata – Hrvatski institut za povijest, 2017). In Hungarian: Dr. Mándity Mihály, *A magyarországi bunyevác-horvátok története*, (Kecskemét: Bács-Kiskun megyei Tanács, 1989).; Ikotity István, *Bunyevácok*, (Baja: Bunyevác Kulturális Intézet, 2019) and Sokcsevits Dénes, *A magyarországi horvátok rövid története*, (Budapest: Croatica, 2021), particularly 23–37.

The Baja Triangle area can also be interpreted as a border region. According to Oscar J. Martínez, there are four basic forms of relations between border regions (alienated, coexistent, interdependent, and integrated). In the case of the Baja Triangle, between 1948 and 1953, the border region was clearly alienated. The border between Hungary and Yugoslavia was closed, cross-border traffic and relations were limited, and the border was strictly guarded by military forces. After 1953, with the easing of Hungarian–Yugoslav tensions, the border became more open, and the border region moved from alienation towards coexistence. Since there were significant Hungarian and South Slavic minorities living on both sides of the border, it would have been logical for both Hungary and Yugoslavia to have an interest in keeping the border as open as possible throughout 1945–56. However, the Soviet–Yugoslav power struggle in 1948 overrode all this, and both the Yugoslav and Hungarian leadership became interested in strengthening border protection and making the border as closed as possible.⁵

As the villages around Baja were located directly along the country's south border, thus forming a region bordering Yugoslavia, a result of the Soviet–Yugoslav conflict was that border incidents and illegal border crossings became commonplace in the region. My argumentation is based on the contemporary documents of the National Border Guard Command (Határőrség Országos Parancsnoksága, HOP) preserved at the National Archives of Hungary. The border guard documented every border violation, border incident, and successful or unsuccessful escape attempt at the border. Behind the dry, bureaucratic, descriptive language, however, the everyday world is sufficiently apparent, and on a few occasions, we can also gain insight into the propagandistic and ideological values of the time.

However, it is not my intention in this study to present

every single incident in chronological order, as this would require several volumes. Rather, my aim is to highlight the many different types of border incidents with a few relevant examples. Looking at the ethnic background of illegal border crossers, we know from the ethnic relations in the Baja Triangle and on the Yugoslav side of the border that there were both Hungarians and South Slavs among them. In some cases, the border guard records mention the ethnic background of the border crossers, but in other cases they remain silent on this issue. This type of source is therefore not suitable for capturing the ethnic dimensions of border incidents and border violations; these can only be examined by involving other types of archival sources. This would have significantly increased the length and content of this text, therefore, the examination of this issue could be the subject of a further study. It is also important to note that Hungarian archival sources mainly provide insight into the Hungarian side of the border, allowing us to learn about border violations and provocations committed by the Yugoslavs, which means that the picture emerging from the study may be one-sided in a certain sense. To learn about the other side, it would be necessary to conduct research in Serbian, Croatian, and Slovenian archives. Even with these limitations, I believe that the sources provide a vivid picture of everyday life along the border between 1948 and 1953.

Results

Border incidents and border violations in the Baja Triangle

With the deterioration of Soviet–Yugoslav relations, border incidents literally became part of everyday life for those living on both sides of the border. Although it is true that various incidents had occurred even before the conflict, from the spring of 1948 onwards, the number of border incidents multiplied and became part of the escalating tension between Yugoslavia and the Soviet camp. Through

For the Croatian nationhood of Bunjevci in Hungarian historiography, see recently Sokcsevits Dénes, "A horvátság csángói: a bácskai bunyevácok a horvát, a magyar és a szerb nemzeti integrációs törekvések ütközőpontján", in: Sokcsevits Dénes, *Mozaikkockák déli szomszédaink történetéből*, (Budapest: Rubicon, 2022), 75–86.

For the history of South Slavs living in the Baja Triangle between 1945 and 1956: Vukman Péter, "A bajai háromszögben élő délszlávok és a változó magyar–jugoszláv kapcsolatok (1944–1956)", *Századok* 5 (2024): 951 – 977. In English: Péter Vukman, "Land Reform, Collectivization, Hungarians and South Slavs in the Baja Triangle (1945–1956)", *History in Flux*, 1 (2024): 123–141.; Péter Vukman, "Border, identity, everyday life. The South Slavs of Gara in state security documents (1945–1956)", *Études sur la région*

méditerranéenne – Mediterrán Tanulmányok, Numéro spécial, 251–264.; Péter Vukman, "Living in the Vicinity of the Yugoslav–Hungarian border (1945–1960): Breaks and Continuities. A Case Study of Hercegszántó (Santovo)", *History in Flux*, 1 (2020): 9–27.

⁵ Oscar J. Martinez, "The dynamics of border interaction. New approaches to border analysis," in *Global Boundaries*, ed. Clive H. Schofield (London – New York: Routledge, 1994), 1–15. The typology of borders, territorialization, and border regimes are discussed in Hungarian: Bencsik Péter, "Az osztrák–magyar határ a 20. században. Territoralizálás, határrezsimek, erőszak," in *Kerülőutakon. Az osztrák–magyar határ 20. századi története*, szerk. Murber Ibolya and Nagy Adrienn (Pécs: Kronosz, 2024), 37–69.

the exchange of notes and press reports, every incident, whether it was a simple shouting match or a serious firefight claiming human lives, had a propaganda function, too.

From June 1948 (when the Soviet–Yugoslav conflict became public) to the end of 1952, according to Yugoslav reports, there were a total of 5,359 border incidents, more than half of which (2,886) occurred on the Hungarian–Yugoslav border.⁶ According to the annual summary data found in the documents of the National Border Guard Command, there were far fewer border incidents and provocations on the common border between the two countries than Yugoslavia claimed. The Hungarian data from that period represent almost a fraction of the Yugoslav figures. According to these, there were 169 border provocations in 1950 and 426 two years later along the entire length of the Hungarian–Yugoslav border.⁷

Border incidents could take many different forms: sources mention shouting matches, lighting up sections of the border strip, damaging technical border barriers, shooting across the border and violating the other country's airspace. A significant proportion of border incidents were in fact minor provocations. In many cases, Yugoslav border guards threw stones, large pieces of earth, logs of various sizes or even apple cores into the technical border fence. On 22 June and 1 September 1951, in the area of the Hercegszántó guard post, and on 6 October, near Gara, they threw stones at the patrols of the Hungarian Border Guard who were checking the track gauge.⁸ In other cases, Yugoslav border guard dogs were tied to the technical barrier, disturbed the Hungarian border zone, and attacked Hungarian patrols or local workers performing track maintenance works near the border zone. On 6 July 1950, a Yugoslav border guard set his sheepdog on a Hungarian border patrol near Gara. The patrol shot the dog, whereupon ten Yugoslav border guards took up

firing positions, while two of their comrades – committing a border violation – carried the dog's carcass into Yugoslav territory.⁹ A year and a half later, on 19 November 1951, the Yugoslavs sent a dog to the minefield and then monitored the dog's path with a film camera. Meanwhile, they provoked the Hungarian border guards by accusing them: "Comrades in arms! Why did you shoot the dog?"¹⁰ In April 1951, a pig strayed onto the minefield near Karapanca (the outskirts of Hercegszántó),¹¹ In early October 1952, the Yugoslavs herded a rabbit into the scrubland near the border at Bácsszentgyörgy, then sent a dog after it. The dog ran onto the mine field, and the explosion wounded patrolman Miklós Horváth, who was carrying out technical work nearby.¹² In addition to frightening each other, the throwing of objects and the harassment of border guard dogs also served practical purposes: objects falling on the mines or animals stepping on them exploded, providing the Yugoslavs with useful information about the location of the mines. The creation of mine-free zones in this way could also facilitate the transfer of spies and agents.

It was a common provocation for Yugoslav border guards to rattle their weapons and aim at Hungarian patrols or fire a few shots in their direction when they approached. This happened, for example, in the Gara border guard zone on 20 November 1949, but in this case, according to the Hungarian border guards, it was an accidental incident that did not require further action.¹³ Border guard reports on Yugoslav border guards firing shots began to increase significantly from 1951 onwards, at least in relation to the Baja Triangle. On 1 May 1951, Yugoslavs fired two shots at patrols checking the track on the Bokortanya guard post.¹⁴ On the night of 9 July 1951, Yugoslav border guards working on reinforcing the technical border fired at Hungarian border guards on patrol.¹⁵ On 15 August, they fired at patrols checking the border at Bácsszentgyörgy, and on 2 September, they fired at patrols checking the border at

⁶ *White Book on Aggressive Activities by the Governments of the USSR, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Rumania, Bulgaria and Albania towards Yugoslavia*, (Beograd: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia, 1951), Tables 447–71.

⁷ The National Archives of Hungary (henceforth: MNL OL), Papers of the National Border Guard Command (henceforth: HOP) XIX-B-10 1950. 45. d. 013. fsz. Határőrizettel kapcsolatos iratanyagok. Összefoglaló jelentés.; MNL OL HOP XIX-B-10 1952. 17. d. 314. fsz. 1952. év határőrizeti nyilvántartása.

⁸ MNL OL HOP XIX-B-10 1951. 14. d. IV/10. 263. ö. e. Átirat. Kiskunhalas, 4 September., 17. d. IV/10. 327. f. sz. Átirat. Kiskunhalas, 1951. július 7., 339. f. sz. Átirat. Kiskunhalas, 15 October 1951.

⁹ MNL OL HOP XIX-B-10 1950. 45. d. IV/5. 48. f. sz. Feljegyzés. Budapest, 22 August 1950.

¹⁰ MNL OL HOP XIX-B-10 1951. 17. d. IV/10. 320. f. Átirat. Kiskunhalas, 22 November 1951.

¹¹ MNL OL HOP XIX-B-10 1951. 14. d. IV/10. 176. f. sz. Provokációs karton, undated.

¹² MNL OL HOP XIX-B-10 1952. 16. d. IV/5. 270. f. sz. Átirat. Kiskunhalas, 22 October 1952.

¹³ MNL OL HOP XIX-B-10 1949. 26 December 1949. IV/15. 3. f. sz. Átirat. Kiskunhalas, 23 November 1949.

¹⁴ MNL OL HOP XIX-B-10 1951. 14. d. IV/10. 128. ö. e. Átirat. Kiskunhalas, 1 May 1951.

¹⁵ MNL OL HOP XIX-B-10 1951. 14. d. IV/10. 206. f. sz.

Kunbaja.¹⁶ In the early hours of 16 September, three shots were fired at Hungarian border guards with tracer bullets in the Karapanca guard post.¹⁷ On 13 November, two rifle shots were fired in the area of the Latinovits Castle guard post (near Katymár).¹⁸

Although I assume that in most cases these were provocative acts of “annoyance”, poorly aimed (or, from another point of view, overly precise) projectiles could easily have caused serious bodily injury. In some cases, the Yugoslavs fired a short burst of machine-gun fire at the Hungarian patrols, while in other cases a serious firefight broke out. Near the village of Kercaszomor, in the Körmend district of Vas County, close to the present-day Hungarian–Slovenian border, shortly after 9 p.m. on 7 August 1951, Yugoslav border guards opened fire with submachine guns on a Hungarian patrol on watch and then at the guard commander. The ensuing firefight lasted nearly 40 minutes. In the Felsőszőlők border guard area, a 30–40-minute firefight broke out around 10 p.m. on 15 September 1951, during which Yugoslav armed forces fired approximately 50 bursts from machine guns, 70–80 rifle shots and 6–8 bursts from long machine guns and shotguns. Since in both cases the Yugoslavs were also firing towards the interior of Yugoslavia, it can be assumed that they wanted to give the impression that the Hungarian border guards had attacked them. In the latter case, the border guards believed they had discovered a connection with a similar incident that had occurred two days earlier at Katymár, located in the Baja Triangle. The border guards also believed that the Yugoslavs wanted to use these provocations to divert the attention of the Hungarian border guards so that they could smuggle agents into the country at other border sections.¹⁹

Of course, it would be naive to assume that the Hungarians did not commit similar acts; we could examine their number and nature based on Yugoslav archival sources. Sometimes we find references to these in Hungarian documents as well, also in relation to the Baja Triangle. For example, the following incident occurred in the Kunbaja guard zone. On 18 February 1952, border guard László Radianov (or Raidonov), who

was on duty, stopped at the Hintesszer farm, 60–70 metres from the observation tower. Here, János Hintesszer, who was employed by the State Protection Authority (Államvédelmi Hatóság, ÁVH) as an informant, allegedly deliberately got him drunk. Returning to his post, Radianov and his colleague fired 50 machine gun shots and 30 rifle shots towards the Yugoslav side of the border. The border guard officers launched an investigation into the incident and placed the intoxicated border guards in pre-trial detention at the district headquarters.²⁰ It is not known what happened to the border guards, what punishment they faced, or whether the Yugoslavs protested about the incident. Such provocations, regardless of which side committed them, could easily have escalated and developed into more serious incidents.

According to Yugoslav accusations, on 22 March 1949, Hungarian border guards fired 22 shots into Yugoslav territory on the border between Bajmok (in Yugoslavia) and Madaras. The Yugoslavs protested in a note on 6 April, but the Hungarian side naturally denied the accusations.²¹ At dawn on the same day, two Hungarian border guards strayed into Yugoslavia on the border between Kunbaja and Tavankút and fired 25 shots from their automatic weapons at Yugoslav border guards. According to the Hungarian investigation, they accidentally strayed from their usual patrol route due to bad weather (snowstorms), misinterpreted the Yugoslav border guards’ customary warning shots, and then started shooting. They did not enter Yugoslav territory, as the bullets landed on the Hungarian side of the border.²²

A serious incident occurred on 28 April 1949 around the Karapanca guard post (near Hercegszántó). At around 8 p.m., a unit of about 25–30 Yugoslavs occupied the border, then between 1 and 2 a.m. they started shooting and illuminated the Hungarian territory with searchlights, finally withdrawing from the border at 6 a.m. They presumably carried out a raid-like border closure, but since the direction of the shots could not be determined, the fact of the border violation could not be established.²³ The most serious incident occurred a month later, on 30 May 1949, on the border of Madaras. Yugoslav border guards fired on Hungarian border patrols walking on Hungarian territory – according to the Hungarian position, from Hungarian

¹⁶ MNL OL HOP XIX-B-10 1951. 14. d. IV/10. 241. f. sz. Átirat. Kiskunhalas, 22 August 1951, 262. f. sz. Átirat. Kiskunhalas, 4 September 1951.

¹⁷ MNL OL HOP XIX-B-10 1951. 17. d. IV/10. 280. f. sz. Átirat. Kiskunhalas, 25 September 1951.

¹⁸ MNL OL HOP XIX-B-10 1951. 17. d. IV/10. 319. f. Átirat. Kiskunhalas, 17 November 1951.

¹⁹ MNL OL HOP XIX-B-10 1951. 14. d. 71. fsz. Fegyveres jugo. provokáció. Jelentés, 16 September 1951.

²⁰ MNL OL HOP XIX-B-10 1952. 14. d. IV/5. 52. f. sz. Átirat. Kiskunhalas, 1952. February 18, 53. f. sz. Jelentés. Budapest, February 18, 1952.

²¹ MNL OL HOP XIX-B-10 1949. 26. d. IV/15. 26. f. sz. Emlékeztető, 12 April 1949.

²² MNL OL HOP XIX-B-10 1949. 26. d. IV/15.34. f. sz. Szóbeli jegyzék, 5 April 1949, Emlékeztető, 19 April 1949.

²³ MNL OL HOP XIX-B-10 1949. 24. d. IV/10. 4. f. Emlékeztető, 10 May 1949, Feljegyzés. Kiskunhalas, 2 May 1949.

territory – killing one of them, soldier Miklós Vetési, and wounding another.²⁴

In other cases, the incoming projectiles caused minor or major damage to properties located near the border. On 20 August 1950, a Yugoslav explosive projectile hit the farm of János Vankovics Jr. The barn caught fire, which was extinguished within 30–40 minutes.²⁵ Two years later, Yugoslavs fired targeted shots at the observation tower in the Kunbaja guard zone. The projectile hit the tower's pillar and it caught fire. The border guards tried in vain to pull the camouflage material off the tower, but due to the severe drought, the observation tower quickly burned down.²⁶

The border incidents were marked by a variety of shouts and shouting matches, ranging from neutral remarks by patrol officers to obscene expressions, swearing and vulgar language. Despite the one-sidedness of the sources, I assume that similar remarks may have been made by the Hungarian border guards, too.

At Gara on 28 March 1951, the Yugoslav border guard apparently inquired about the Easter holidays. The border guard, who was of Hungarian nationality, said that it would be better if the border were abolished, people could come and go freely, and he would not have to serve. He then threw a box of cigarettes across the border to the Hungarian border guard. The latter, acting in accordance with regulations and fearing possible poisoning, handed it over to the guard command, where the appropriate conclusion was drawn from the incident: "The Yugoslavs will use any means to provoke the Hungarian border guards."²⁷

On 18 April 1951, at Hercegszántó, János Tóth, who had fled to Yugoslavia, shouted to the Hungarian border guards from Yugoslav territory, encouraging them to defect, emphasising his high salary in Yugoslavia. As he left, he added: "Bye, see you later. What did Tóth (police chief) say about the escape? Don't believe that scoundrel (csirkefogó), because he's lying."²⁸

On 11 July 1951, Yugoslav soldiers resting at a haystack in the Bokortanya guard area taunted the Hungarian

patrol: "Come over and light [your cigarettes] up, come on, fuck you, light it up, it's not like here than they say over there." One of the farm residents recognised one of them as István Orosz, who had recently defected. Referring to the better living conditions in Yugoslavia, he continued: "At Szalai's (a merchant in Bokortanya), you can't even get some jam (lekvar), but here, the very next day after I came over, I was able to eat it. [...] Come over for a cigarette! It's not [...] like they say over there, because we have everything here. Over there at Szalai's, all you can get is root brushes (gyökérkefe)."²⁹

The shouting incidents continued in 1952. In early April, the aforementioned János Tóth, a border guard shouted to his former colleagues: "Hello, , kids! How are you? [...] I am Jancsi Tóth, the UN secretary. Don't you recognise me? Come over!"³⁰ On the evening of 22 June, border guards and patrols checking the border strip at Mélykút were pelted with stones and bricks from the Yugoslav side of the border. Around midnight, the patrols returning from their rounds were pelted again at the same spot, while loud shouts rang out: "Fuck your whore mother, Hungarian!" and "Rákosi, Stalin, socialists".³¹ In mid-September, at Madaras, Yugoslav border guards threw a two-decilitre bottle of pálinka at the Hungarian border guards, singing the song "Rámás csizmát visel a babám" (a popular melody) in Hungarian. The next morning, they shouted again: "Good morning," "Do you have wine? Bring me a litre of wine!" and finally: "Do you have any Russian soldiers? If so, send one over, we'll pay for him, we'll give you good money."³² A month later, in the same place, the Yugoslavs drove a rabbit across the border while shouting, "We're bringing you a rabbit, shoot it," and clapping their hands. The Yugoslav border guards continued to tease the Hungarians: "Where is Zrínyi, we haven't seen him for a long time, you must have locked him up, I can't shoot well because you only shot my cap to pieces. [...] What happened two or three days ago, when you scattered so many leaflets over our territory, throwing them from aeroplanes or balloons?" Luckily, the border guards did not allow themselves to be provoked and did not respond to the provocation.³³

I also encountered one specific method of provocation by the Hungarian side related to the Baja Triangle, the details

²⁴ MNL OL XIX-J-1-k-Yugoslavia-29/f-5358/1949 (46.d.); Újabb gyilkosság a magyar határon, *Szabad Nép*, 4 June 1949. 2.

²⁵ MNL OL HOP XIX-B-10 1950. 45. d. IV/5. 4. ő. Kiskunhalas, 23 August 1950.

²⁶ MNL OL HOP XIX-B-10 1952. 14. d. IV/5. 58. f. sz. Átirat. Kiskunhalas, 16 July 1952.

²⁷ MNL OL HOP XIX-B-10 1951. 14. d. 92. f. sz. Átirat. Kiskunhalas, 9 April 1951.

²⁸ MNL OL HOP XIX-B-10 1951. 14. d. 138. f. sz. Átirat. Kiskunhalas, 10 May 1951.

²⁹ MNL OL HOP XIX-B-10 1951. 14. d. IV/10. 212. f. sz. Átirat. Kiskunhalas, 15 July 1951.

³⁰ MNL OL HOP XIX-B-10 1952. 14. d. IV/5. 107. f. sz. Átirat. Kiskunhalas, 11 April 1952.

³¹ MNL OL HOP XIX-B-10 1952. 15. d. IV/5. 165. f. sz. Átirat. Kiskunhalas, 25 June 1952.

³² MNL OL HOP XIX-B-10 1952. 16. d. IV/5. 239. f. sz. Átirat. Kiskunhalas, 29 September 1952.

³³ MNL OL HOP XIX-B-10 1952. 16. d. IV/5. 262. f. sz. Átirat. Kiskunhalas, 22 October 1952.

of which are unfortunately unknown: the Yugoslavs gathered the population of nearby Yugoslav villages and held celebrations in the immediate vicinity of the border, where they ethnic Hungarian peasants had to praise the Yugoslav system.³⁴

Illegal border crossings and raids in the Baja Triangle border area

According to the reports of the National Border Guard Command, between 1950 and 1952, a total of 1,757 people committed 1,289 border violations, either leaving or entering Hungary. Among those who crossed the border illegally, there were certainly many Yugoslav spies and intelligence agents. Also, according to border guard data, between 1950 and 1952, 231 Yugoslav agents were captured along the entire length of the Hungarian–Yugoslav border.³⁵ Seventy years on, however, it is impossible to say how many of them were actually spies. In the paranoid atmosphere that developed in the wake of the Soviet–Yugoslav conflict, the state security services saw and portrayed every border violator as a potential Yugoslav or Hungarian secret agent.

Those who crossed the border illegally were motivated by a variety of factors. Some took this particularly dangerous step for financial reasons, in the hope of a better life, while others made their decision to avoid the expected reprisals because of their political views. In many cases, people from other, distant parts of the country tried to flee the country at the Baja Triangle. We also know of one or two cases where completely different, almost laughable personal considerations played a role. In May 1951, two young men of Hungarian nationality, born in 1932 and 1933, were caught in the operational zone of the Latinovits Castle guard. Their unsuccessful escape attempt had no ideological motive: they had run up debts and, fearing that their parents would punish them, they decided to flee to Yugoslavia.³⁶ We do not know how seriously the ÁVH took the case and whether they considered it a “cover story” or thought it sufficient for the parents to punish their teenage children.

However, the general practice was that illegal border crossings had much more serious consequences than in the above example. If the border patrol detected a border violation heading towards the interior of the country, it was often followed by a large-scale raid, which had an impact on the daily lives of those living in border villages and made them aware of the fact of control and surveillance.

On 2 July 1950, a border guard noticed someone approaching the border, but the person disappeared by running into a cornfield. The border guards immediately closed the entrances to Bácsalmás, Katymár, Madaras and Mélykút and ordered increased checks on the local population. The roads leading from Bácsalmás to Kunbaja and Tataháza were closed, and checks began at railway stations. A search party of about 70–90 people combed through Bácsalmás, while another unit searched the forests nearby. The raid lasted until 8 a.m. on 5 July, when Antal Radák, a resident of Szabadka (Subotica, nowadays Serbia), was apprehended as he was leaving the country. It was assumed that he had also committed the border violation six days earlier, although Radák denied the charges.³⁷

On 9 August 1950, a border guard on duty in the area of the Latinovits Castle discovered traces of a border violator at around 9 p.m. As the border violator was walking backwards in a deceptive manner, his footprints were interpreted as signs of an inward border violation, and a raid was ordered at 11 p.m. As part of the raid, the inspection of nearby railway stations was ordered and the Kunbaja–Bácsalmás–Madaras railway line was closed with about 70 people. The border violator was probably police sergeant József Tóth from the Baja police station. The newly constructed technical barrier did not hinder his crossing as the wire mesh was extremely sparse along the entire border section, making it easy to climb over. The local population also helped him in his escape. Starting from Bácsalmás, he passed through several “kulak” farms on his way to the border, with the cornfields and forests providing excellent cover.³⁸ Nine days later, a raid was ordered at Csikéria for an inward border violation, involving a total of four officers, six non-commissioned officers and 185 crew members, but they still failed to apprehend the border violator.³⁹

³⁴ MNL OL HOP XIX-B-10 1953. 15. d. IV/8-9. 167. f. sz. Átirat. Kiskunhalas, 5 January 1953.

³⁵ MNL OL HOP XIX-B-10 1950. 45. d. 013. fsz. Határőrizettel kapcsolatos iratanyagok. Összefoglaló jelentés.; MNL OL HOP XIX-B-10 1951. 18. d. 349. fsz. 1951 év határőrizeti nyilvántartása.; MNL OL HOP XIX-B-10 1952. 17. d. 314. fsz. 1952 év határőrizeti nyilvántartása.

³⁶ MNL OL HOP XIX-B-10 1951. 22. d. IV/10. 829. f. sz. Átirat. Kiskunhalas, 18 May 1951.

³⁷ MNL OL HOP XIX-B-10 1950. 46. d. IV/10. 5. f. sz. Átirat. Kiskunhalas, 5 July 1950. The border guards who made the arrest were rewarded with five days' leave. 149. f. Átirat. Kiskunhalas, 5 July 1950.

³⁸ MNL OL HOP XIX-B-10 1945. 46. d. IV/10. 1. f. sz. Felirat. Kiskunhalas, 14 August 1950, Jelentés, 10 August 1950.

³⁹ MNL OL HOP XIX-B-10 1950. 46. d. IV/10. 2. f. Átirat. Kiskunhalas, 23 August 1950.

On 18 July 1950, a border violator knocked down a column of wire fencing at Katymár, allowing him to cross without hindrance. A raid was ordered again. Between 11 a.m. and 2 p.m., a 230-strong detachment led by 12 officers and 10 non-commissioned officers searched Katymár, and Madaras, Bácsalmás and the railway line were also closed off. The raid ended at 10 p.m., involving a total of 15 officers, 12 non-commissioned officers and 340 crew members. The perpetrator, who probably had Yugoslavian relatives and good local knowledge, was not apprehended. The failure was also due to the fact that the people of Katymár – whom the border guards considered to be “a predominantly hostile ethnic population” – did not assist the armed forces at all.⁴⁰

On the same day, raids were also carried out in Csikéria and Bácszentgyörgy. Despite the participation of six officers, five non-commissioned officers and a 150-strong crew in the raid, the border violator, who had sufficient knowledge of the border, could not be apprehended. István Kusztos, a resident of Regőce (Ridica), who was born in Bácszentgyörgy, was of Hungarian nationality and citizenship, voluntarily surrendered himself to the chief clerk of Bácszentgyörgy. According to his statement, he was sentenced to 10 years in prison in Yugoslavia, of which he served 5 years and 2 months in the Mitrovica camp, and was released on 12 January. He crossed the border in order to move in with his wife and older son living in Bácszentgyörgy. Twelve officers, ten non-commissioned officers and 295 personnel took part in the raid to apprehend him.⁴¹

A few months earlier, the district command of the border guard had formed a similar impression that the local Bunjevci in Csikéria was fundamentally hostile towards the border guards and they regularly helped the border violators.⁴² In mid-July 1950, in connection with a border violation near Madaras, the local border commanders put it this way: “The kulaks, who sympathise with the Yugoslavs living on the southern border, and the Bunjevci population, who do not sympathise with people’s democracy, hide the border

violators and help them back across the border when the opportunity arises.”⁴³

A change in the attitude of the population can be observed from 1951 onwards, when farm residents and middle peasants in Csikéria, Kunbaja and Madaras helped to arrest people who had fled from Yugoslavia.⁴⁴ In the early hours of 1 February 1951, for example, a border guard on duty in the Hercegszántó area heard an explosion. Rushing to the scene, he determined that a mine had exploded, tearing off a man’s left foot and crushing his throat. He was taken to a doctor in Hercegszántó and then to a hospital in Baja, but he died of his injuries the next day. At the same time, a stranger knocked on the door of József Braun’s farm. While keeping the man at the farm, he sent his daughter Katalin to the local police station to report what had happened. In the meantime, another patrol officer arrived at the farm, so he apprehended the man and took him to the Karapanca police station. The captured man was a Greek-born Yugoslav citizen who fled as a political refugee of the Greek Civil War to Budapest in 1949. Now, three years later, he and his stepfather were trying to escape back to their relatives living in Yugoslavia, but the mine explosion prevented them from doing so. József Braun, on the other hand, was rewarded for his assistance to the border guards.⁴⁵

In July 1951, János Tímár and János Hegedüs, members of the Gara agricultural cooperative farm, noticed two suspicious figures running away from them into a cornfield. The incident was reported to the police, and the two men were apprehended. László Kestén and János Lénárt, 19-year-old residents of Dunapentele (now Dunaújváros), wanted to flee to Austria via Yugoslavia. It was noted at the border patrol command that this was the fourth case in a month in which border violators had been apprehended with the help of the residents of Gara.⁴⁶

On 18 October 1951, shortly after 7 p.m., Ágnes Pertics knocked on the door of the Csikéria police station with the news that half an hour earlier, a foreign man “speaking Yugoslavian” had appeared on their farm, located just 200 metres from the border. The man in question was Lukács Markovics, a 20-year-old young man who had allegedly attempted to escape with five others, but his companions had already been captured by the Yugoslavs. His further

⁴⁰ MNL OL HOP XIX-B-10 1950. 46. d. IV/10. 6. f. Átirat. Kiskunhalas, 21 July 1950. Átirat. Budapest, 7 August 1950.

⁴¹ MNL OL HOP XIX-B-10 1950. 46. d. IV/10. 7. f. Átirat, Kiskunhalas, 21 July 1950. 8. f. Átirat. Kiskunhalas, 21 July 1950.

⁴² MNL OL HOP XIX-B-10 1950. 46. d. IV/10. 75. f. Átirat. Kiskunhalas, 8 May 1950.

⁴³ MNL OL HOP XIX-B-10 1950. 46. d. IV/10. 89. f. Átirat. Kiskunhalas, 31 July 1950.

⁴⁴ The National Archives of Hungary Bács-Kiskun County Archives (henceforth: MNL BKML) XXXV. 39. f. 92. d. 2. cs. 17. ő. e. MDP Járási Pártbizottsága az MDP Megyei Pártbizottságának. Bácsalmás, 5 June 1951.

⁴⁵ MNL OL HOP XIX-B-10 1951. 20. d. IV/10. 597. f. Átirat. Kiskunhalas, 5 February 1951.

⁴⁶ MNL OL HOP XIX-B-10 1951. 22. d. IV/10. 863. f. sz. Átirat. Kiskunhalas, 21 July 1951.

fate is unknown, but he was presumably interrogated by the ÁVH. Ágnes Pertics was rewarded for her courage with a piece of women's clothing.⁴⁷

However, the sources do not reveal the motivations of the locals who assisted in the capture of the illegal border crossers. We do not know whether they helped of conviction, identifying with the anti-Tito ideology of the Rákosi regime, or out of fear or in the hope of personal gain. Nor do we know how widespread this change of heart was among the population.

Epilogue

Following Stalin's death (5 March 1953), a slow, gradual and protracted normalisation began in Hungarian–Yugoslav relations, which was closely linked to the changes taking place in Soviet–Yugoslav relations. began a slow, gradual and protracted normalisation process, which was closely linked to changes in Soviet–Yugoslav relations and the impact of power struggles within the Soviet Union on Hungarian party and state leaders. As in other countries of the Soviet bloc, the rapprochement began with the exchange of ambassadors in the field of inter-state relations. Hungary requested agreement for Sándor Kurimszky as its new ambassador to Belgrade on 10 August 1953, and the Yugoslavs requested Hungary's consent for the appointment of Dalibor Soldatić as ambassador on 29 September.⁴⁸

Beyond the exchange of ambassadors, the rapprochement achieved its first visible results in the settlement of border incidents and other border-related issues. It was in Yugoslavia's interest to resolve these issues as soon as possible; it took the initiative in both stopping the border incidents and restoring the border markers. As a result of the negotiations that began in Baja on 5 August 1953, an agreement was signed in Sombor on 28 August on the settlement of border incidents, and a written agreement was concluded in Subotica on 20 January 1954 on the restoration of border markers. However, this did not mean that the border itself had become peaceful. According to the border guard records of the National Border Guard Command for that year, there were still

700 provocations on the Hungarian–Yugoslav border, significantly more than in the previous year.⁴⁹ The normalisation between the two countries lasted only a short time, and in the autumn of 1956, the border once again played an important role due to the refugee issue following the suppression of the Hungarian revolution.

Conclusion

Between 1948 and 1953, the Baja Triangle along the Hungarian–Yugoslav frontier functioned as a tightly controlled, alienated borderland where minor daily provocations (stone-throwing, animal-triggered mines, warning shots) coexisted with occasional firefights and casualties. Hungarian Border Guard records report far fewer incidents than Yugoslav tallies, highlighting sharply divergent official narratives and the limits of single-side documentation. Illegal crossings were frequent and routinely triggered sweeping raids that sealed towns, rail lines, and countryside; while locals initially resisted cooperating with Hungarian authorities, some began assisting from 1951 onward, though their motivations—conviction, fear, or incentive—remain unclear. The area's mixed ethnic fabric (including Bunjevci and other South Slavic groups) and the broader Cold War propaganda context further complicated local dynamics. After Stalin's death, pragmatic steps—exchange of ambassadors and agreements at Sombor (August 1953) and Subotica (January 1954) to curb incidents and restore markers—initiated a limited thaw. Yet provocations persisted, and the border's strategic salience reemerged during the 1956 refugee crisis. Overall, the study reveals a frontier where everyday life was shaped by surveillance, competing state narratives, and periodic normalization that never fully dispelled volatility.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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- ⁴⁹ MNL OL HOP XIX-B-10 15 May 1953. 190. 1953 évi határőrizeti nyilvántartás.

⁴⁷ MNL OL HOP XIX-B-10 1951. 21. d. IV/10. 719. f. sz. Átirat. Kiskunhalas, 22 October 1951.

⁴⁸ On the normalisation of bilateral relations in more detail: Marelyin Kiss József – Ripp Zoltán – Vida István, "A szovjet–jugoszláv és a magyar–jugoszláv kapcsolatok a diplomáciai levelezés tükrében," *Múltunk* 46, no. 1 (2001): 233–84., A. Sz. Sztikalin, "A szovjet–jugoszláv közeledés és a magyar belpolitikai helyzet (1954–1956 nyara), *Múltunk* 48, no. 1

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