

Diaries and Memoirs about the Eastern Theatre of War, 1942

JUDIT PIHURIK



Choice of subject and goal

The professor and tutor of my *doctor universitatis* dissertation, Lajos Serfőző, drew my attention to the importance of diaries and memoirs, which were published in ever growing number from the 1980s, and at the same time he also pointed out the latent possibilities in the research of subjective sources. My PhD dissertation is partly a tribute to his memory. Péter Sipos, the tutor of the present dissertation, also encouraged me to continue my research into this field; I should like to thank him, with respect, for his support.

My dissertation is about the history of the 2nd Hungarian army; its goal is to describe how the authors of these diaries and memoirs, Hungarian soldiers directed to the front in 1942, experienced this individual and social cataclysm. After having completed my *doctor universitatis* dissertation (*In the Flow. Turning Points in Hungary's Road into World War II until 1941 on the Basis of Diaries, Memoirs, and Autobiographies*. Szeged, 1993.) my attention turned towards this new topic. The most important goal was a systematic, deep, analytic and comparative description of unpublished diaries and memoirs. In the last two decades the number of published documents has been growing. I also relied on these sources, but I concentrated on the unpublished documents. I could not aim at completeness, because a great number of manuscripts may be hiding in the hands of descendants. However, I managed to cover the material preserved in the Article Collection of the Military Archive.

By processing this source material I did not aim at depicting the military events, though – as most of the documents of the army perished – some diaries may contain facts which help in the reconstruction of these events as well. For me the most important factor was not the reliability of the authors, because my work aims predominantly aims how the individual recognises and interprets his historical role. It is indisputable that each person emphasises his viewpoint in the discourse of history. As the authors were participants and not the makers of the events, their writings describe the individual consequences of historical decisions. My point is that on the basis of these diaries the way of thinking and mentality characteristic of these soldiers can be depicted, which also hints at the general way of thinking of the age.

Antecedents in the history of research

A detailed, objective description of the history of the Royal Hungarian Army in World War II has been missing for decades. There were only a few works on military history at the disposal of historians.¹ In the last two decades a number of military historical source publications and studies have been published. Earlier synthetic works, however, did not cover the history of the 2nd Hungarian army in detail.² In connection with mobilisation, equipment and supply of the army the works of Lóránd Dombrády threw new light on the issues, especially his *The Hungarian Military Economy in World War II*, published in 2003, which describes the Hungarian-German military and economic relations in a new light, and also his collection of studies, which deals with the military policy issues as well.³

From the viewpoint of my dissertation the most important, basic work is Péter Szabó's full army history written on the basis of archival sources.⁴ He is also one of the authors of a volume about the losses of the army, which also made use of abundant subjective sources.⁵ Apart from these, study of my topic is greatly aided by *Hungary in World War II*,⁶ and important data is contained in the book of Sándor Szakály.⁷ The book of Krisztián Ungváry⁸ covers the struggles of the 2nd army in little detail. Mention must be made about the fact that from the viewpoint of the topic the published memoirs and diaries are also of utmost importance.⁹

¹ E.g., F. Adonyi-Naredy, *A magyar katona a második világháborúban*. [The Hungarian Soldier in World War II] Klagenfurt 1954; *Adalékok a Horthy-hadsereg szervezetének és háborús tevékenységének tanulmányozásához (1938–1945)*. [Data on the Study of the Organisation and War Activity of the Horthy-Army (1938–1945)] compiled by J. Csima, Budapest 1961.

² E.g., L. Dombrády-S. Tóth, *A magyar királyi honvédség: 1919–1945*. [The Royal Hungarian Army 1919–1945] Budapest 1987. P. Gosztonyi, *A magyar honvédség a második világháborúban*. [The Hungarian Army in World War II] Budapest 1992.

³ L. Dombrády, *Katonapolitika és hadsereg: 1920–1944*. [Military Policy And Army 1920–1944] Budapest, 2000.

⁴ P. Szabó, *Don-kanyar. A magyar királyi 2. honvéd hadsereg története (1942–1943)*. [Don Bend. The History of the 2nd Royal Hungarian Army (1942–1943)] Budapest 2001.

⁵ J. Bús–P. Szabó, *Dokumentum-émlékönyv a II. világháborúban a történelmi Magyarország területén elesett, meghalt magyar katonákról és munkaszolgálatosokról*. [May They Rest in Peace... Documentary Memorial Album on the Hungarian Soldiers and Forced Labourers Fallen in World War II in the Eastern Theatre] Budapest 1999.

⁶ *Magyarország a második világháborúban*. Lexikon A-Zs. [Hungary in World War II. A Lexicon A-Zs] ed.-in-chief P. Sipos Péter ed. I. Ravasz, Budapest 1997.

⁷ S. Szakály, *A magyar katonai felső vezetés 1938–1945*. *Lexikon és Adattár*. [The Hungarian Higher Command 1938–1945. A Lexicon and Database] Budapest 2001.

⁸ K. Ungváry, *A magyar honvédség a második világháborúban*. [The Hungarian Army in World War II] Budapest 2004.

⁹ E.g., J. Koltai, *Recollections Of A Hungarian Military Officer – Portrait About The 20th Century*. (Washington, 1971), or *Lajtos, Arpád: Memory of the 2nd Hungarian Army 1942–1943*. (Budapest, 1989).

Only a few general analytical works have been published on subjective sources. The book by György Ránki¹⁰ deals with content of memoirs published by emigrants. According to his allegation it is a biased, to some extent polemical, work, but from a methodological point of view I found it rather useful.

From the 1980s an ever-growing number of diaries and memoirs dealing with the Horthy-Era can be reckoned with, the forewords of which analysed the published texts mostly from the viewpoint of source criticism, described portraits of the authors, set them in their age and evaluated their roles. A common feature – which I found worth following – is the analysis of the diaries from the viewpoint of reliability, comparative analysis and setting them in the portrait of the age.

Since the last two decades of the last century two joint tendencies can be observed in historiography, which can be associated with the topic of my research. One of them analyses the individuals and the common participants in history, the other the different fields of everyday life, the historicism of weekdays. In connection with these fields – together with other documents – the subjective sources came to the forefront of interest, their common characteristic feature being that the interest is self-centred and the tone is personal.

On the basis of the volume of Gábor Gyáni¹¹ it is evident how great an importance is attached to the subjective sources, especially diaries by the author. These documents are not important from the viewpoint of political, economic, social macro-history, although in my opinion they may complete the general picture, but because of their personal viewpoint.

Thinking over the doubts of post-modern concept of history on the cognition of history, I consider the opinions of Mária Ormos,¹² Ignác Romsics¹³ and Pál Pritz¹⁴ to be the most important. Ignác Romsics emphasised that the number of interpretations may be unlimited, but the value of the individual narratives may be different. Mária Ormos quoted the example of World War II, in which all the participants experienced it from their own viewpoints and the different experiences generated different discourses. The description of events permits certain approaches and attitudes, but only to the limit of a framework set by the sources checked. Total reconstruction of the past may be impossible, but to some extent, on the basis of reliable sources, a certain patchwork can be attempted. Though I consider these diaries important primary sources, of course their authors did not compile their works by following the above-mentioned standards, so their discourses can be regarded as subjective narrations of history.

¹⁰ György Ránki: *Memoirs and the Reality about Hungary's Role in World War II*. Budapest 1964.

¹¹ Gábor Gyáni: *Memory, Recollection and the Discourse of History*. Budapest 2000.

¹² Mária Ormos, *History: Is There Such A Thing?* <http://www.origo.hu//mindentudas-egyetem/ormos/20030307ormos1.html> 2003. 03. 28.)

¹³ The Myth of The Objectivity of Historiography and The Unattainable Mythicised Past. In *Myths, Legends and Misconceptions about 20th-century Hungarian History*, ed. I. Romsics, Budapest 2002.

¹⁴ P. Pritz, "Some Problems of Our Historiography, Especially Post-modern," *Múltunk* 2003/4.

The study of Pál Pritz dealing with post-modern historiography enumerated convincing arguments for the possibility of historical cognition. For me his most important methodological consideration was his answer to the fact of the existence of different discourses, which differed from the post-modern concept: there are rational explanations for these differences.¹⁵ His other argument supports my view: differences in certain discourses of history may be emphasised, but their common features are more important because they convey reliable information about the past.¹⁶ If I were seeking a motto for my work, I would choose the following thought of Pál Pritz: "... even through of its weaknesses, history possesses the greatest number of tools to help society look on its past without myths and legends." There is also an urgent need to look on Hungary's history in World War II without legends, and in my opinion this can greatly be helped by the use of war diaries and memoirs.

Sources of the thesis

I used diaries and recollections as a basis for my thesis from the pool of subjective sources - diaries, private letters, memoirs, recollections, oral history and autobiographies. Beside the diaries, which were written in parallel with the events, I also consider private letters a primary source, but as on the front there was no correspondence without censorship, I did not rely on the latter category. In case of oral history, the storyteller forms a conscious picture of the past; his memories are biased by time, present expectations and other factors. In this way recollections to some extent reflect the time of their writing as well. To put it simply, the diary is written for the self, the memoir for the reader; the diary writer wants to record the events, the memoir writer wants to reconstruct them. The object of description also differs, because diaries are concentrated on the individual, while memoirs take the age as their centrepiece.

The individual may be an actor or only a passive part of the events, but how he felt can be established, what he thought about them, what his set of values was in the period, what he considered as viable courses of action and why he took, or did not take, these courses of action. To what extent did he live up to expectations, what goals did he accept, what did he refuse to do and why, how and to what extent was he affected by the ideas and tendencies of the age? The diary writer works synchronised by the events; he characterises them in an honest personal way since his aim is not to inform readers, but to record his experiences and thoughts. The direct utterances, instant reactions and the unfeigned way of writing make diaries different from other types of subjective sources and contribute to a better reconstruction of the age. On a wider scale, everyday entries of participants are extremely important from the viewpoint of historical reconstruction.

Memoirs are written about a greater part of one's adult life span, while recollections are compiled about a shorter period or an important event, but both are written after the events. The goal of their writers is to consciously inform the

¹⁵ Pritz, "Some Problems," 265.

¹⁶ Pritz, "Some Problems," 277.

readers, to survey the events, perhaps to analyse them, but very often one can establish the apologetic, self-redeeming factor, too. The author undertakes to describe the background of historical events and to re-adjust those views which he considers inappropriate. Sometimes he also conveys so-far unknown facts and documents. In this way the centre seems to be the age and not the individual. Memoir writers often use sources during their work: diaries, everyday entries, documents and historical literature as well. Circumstances even in this case are not always favourable; many memoirs were written in POW camps, emigration, underground or in forced retirement. These factors may contribute to false judgement and may hinder an objective unbiased evaluation of the age.

During compilation of my work I attempted to make use of the unpublished memoirs and diaries in the collection of the Military Archive, but I also selected among, and relied on, similar recently published writings. In the course of my study I examined nearly 130 sources, so I could directly profit from nearly half of the available material. These are – with only a few exceptions – manuscripts: 21 war diaries, 44 memoirs. Most of the sources were written by officers – 24 professional officers and 21 reservists, 10 were written by privates, most of them reservists, and two by forced labourers. The number of men who wrote diaries among the 235,000 soldiers and 39,000 forced labourers serving on the eastern front cannot be established. Many of these diaries may have perished when their writers fell, disappeared, were wounded or taken into captivity, but some of them may have been preserved by their families.

In my view war diaries are not documents of everyday life; although their writers are common people, they have to act under extreme circumstances. On the front one's life is in constant danger, so activities to avoid certain death became ever-present features of life and the simplest facts of life take on another dimension. It is probable that most of the authors felt compelled to write their experiences because of these circumstances. As I have pointed out, I did not judge the reliability of the diaries from the viewpoint of historical truth, but that the authors recorded instant experiences, thoughts, atmosphere and feelings. This time I did undertake the general examination of memoirs – which are available in far greater numbers than I actually made use of – because on the one hand I consider them to be far more inaccurate. On the other hand their authors did not write about their instant impressions and later, when they recorded their memories, they were under the influence of many other factors. When making a difference between the reliability of diaries and memoirs it is not only a difference in the level of historical truth, but there are differences in the writers' intentions and content as well. Taking all these into consideration when selecting the available memoirs, one criterion was whether it contained a direct reference or other evidence for the existence of a previously written diary or recollection which served as a basis for compiling the memoir. There are cases when an individual wrote a diary and a memoir as well, which clearly demonstrate the above-mentioned difference. It is interesting to establish the change in the opinion of the author as contained in the diary and the memoir. Thematic differences can also help select

between the memoirs based on diaries; worries and feelings about home, family and work appear in diaries, while these are normally missing from memoirs.

In the examination of subjective sources a basic point is the author's background: his education, vocation, social status, religion, and world-picture, because these factors influence him in formulating his experience and attitude. However, not all of these pieces of information are at our disposal because the manuscripts sometimes contain only the name, rank and number of unit. Very little is known about the authors themselves, in most cases only what they say about themselves. In these cases we can only conclude on the basis of their texts what the governing motives, intentions, and emotions were in their deeds and opinions. A common feature of the diaries written by soldiers of different ranks is that most of them were not members of the power mechanism, so they were unaware of the background of events and they were not in a position to direct or influence either the course of history or their own personal fate.

The war diaries originating from 1942 allow for establishing a balanced picture. The diaries of reservist officers and privates depicting everyday life on the front, changes in atmosphere, and personal emotions are priceless documents of the age. Professional officers tended to write predominantly about struggles; they made fewer personal remarks, although some of them also contain personal experiences. These sources accurately describe the shift in the morale of officers and privates from the enthusiasm of arriving at the front until they came to the conclusion that they were alone in a situation without any prospect of returning. After some time the experiences induced the authors to question the course of the war and victory. They had to come to the conclusion that the Soviets were not defeated, but defended themselves steadily on the 200-kilometre-long front. Former enthusiasm gives way to doubt, feelings of being left alone, distrust, and bitter remarks began to appear in the diaries. It is not a surprise that many members of the army set about writing diaries, even those soldiers who, under normal circumstances, would not have been considered men of letters. It is probable that this was a kind of defensive reflex in an extraordinary situation: the reflex of people in constant life-threatening danger. Writing diaries may have helped them endure the ever-present fear and anxiety which exposure to almost certain death or injury meant for soldiers, who had to exchange their former civilian lives for soldiery.

Apart from the diaries and memoirs, other documents found in the documentation of the 2nd army, e.g., diary appendices, situation and atmosphere reports, situation evolutions, and summaries also contained important details in connection with my topic. Subjective opinions also appear in official documents. They may either support the descriptions found in the diaries of officers and privates or help solve controversies, so they are also worth examining.

The Structure of the thesis and the method of processing data

My dissertation is divided into 22 chapters; its structure follows the themes of diaries and memoirs. Chapters I-III contain the introduction and description of sources; chapter IV is about the mobilisation and a short history of the 2nd Army. Chapter V deals with the role of propaganda in formulating views on participa-

tion in the war. Chapters VI–VIII compares scholarly views on the supply and constitution of the army; chapters IX–XII contain experiences and opinions in connection with the march, the struggles, life on the front and the Red Army. Chapter XII also describes the situation in the autumn and winter of 1942; Ch. XIII depicts what the diaries contain about the relations of the theatre of war and the home front. Separate chapters deal with opinions on the soviet system and the people (XIV), the partisans (XV), the war (XVI), and the Jewish forced labourers (XVII). Chapter XVIII is about the war crimes committed by Hungarian soldiers and mentioned in the diaries. Chapter XIX summarises the soldiers' experiences, including remarks on women. Chapters XX–XXI deal with the literary allusions and humorous episodes in the diaries. Chapter XXII is the conclusions. At the end of the dissertation there are tables showing the rank and service of the authors in different units of the 2nd Army. There are also two appendices: a piece of satiric writing and a map.

The characteristic topics in the diaries form an organic unit and record the experience of progress in space and time, making for a continuous narrative. In connection with actual events or just incidentally they are interwoven with details about other thoughts, feelings and moods of the authors.

When processing the sources my primary method was comparative analysis: the texts of diaries and memoirs were not only compared with each other, but in certain cases with related documentation of the army and the opinion of the literature as well. When interpreting the opinions I took into consideration the factors influencing the authors, which is why I analysed the role of propaganda reflected in their works.

On the basis of the war diaries one can describe that way of thinking and mentality which was characteristic of the soldiers and also sheds light on that of the age. However, there are certain differences, as the authors found themselves in an exceptional situation, exposed to war circumstances, far away from their homes, torn from their homeland, in constant danger of death. At home their attitudes were biased by different family backgrounds, life standards, and educational differences; local communities may have influenced them and countless impressions touched them on the front, however, their attitudes became uniform to some extent.

Emotions and feelings of soldiers were intensified in the extraordinary circumstances. Examples of good and bad could be cited: comradeship, patriotism, responsibility as well as solidarity or the lack of it, envy and malevolence. The sources record the phases of change, when individual morals were undermined, and the individual became capable of committing deeds which in normal circumstances would be deemed. The diaries and memoirs clearly describe the consequences of power encouraging deeds which would be deemed by employing a double set of values to measure the value of life. The principle of stealing or robbery also gains a new dimension when the state approves of it.

Although there are identical characteristic features in the statements of the diaries, and we may assume that they contain general opinions, still the picture preserved by them is colourful and complex. The soldiers of the 2nd Hungarian Army were victims who did not go to war by their own intention and were not



responsible for their role. But they found themselves in a twofold role: their life was in danger and at the same time others' lives, freedom was at their disposal. It depended upon them how they used, or abused this - otherwise non-existent - power. In many cases there was no limit to the emotions set free by the political and military leadership, for some inhumanity became the standard. Obviously there were countless explanations for the effectiveness of extreme propaganda - the Trianon decision, the euphoria of the success of irredentism, the war situation - still it is astounding that according to the sources it influenced uneducated people as well as members of the intelligentsia - doctors, teachers, and professional officers, too. The question is whether they realised the bias of propaganda when facing reality. Some of the authors with a seemingly natural way of thinking blame all the problems on the Jews and take it for granted that they may dispose of the people, territory, and goods of the Soviet Union.

The possibilities of the topic's further development

Analysis of the processed source material can be further developed in many directions. On the one hand the history of the January 1943 breakthrough and retreat can be examined. However, few diaries dealing with this topic survive; a great number of memoirs discuss the history of the mauling and losses of the 2nd Army. Another possibility is the examination of the memoirs from a different point of view: with a thematic approach. Many memoirs, recollections written after the 1950s, contain ideas or stereotypes which were generated by circumstances and which characterise the time of writing instead of the time of narration, e.g., a reverse projection of Hungarian-Soviet co-operation in times of war, an idealised picture of circumstances in the war, opinions about the cause and goal of war. Some examples of the latter are the emphasis on the negative role of German officers, blaming the political leadership for not taking Hungarian interests into consideration, and other legends promoted by films, the press or literature (e.g., the Krúdy legend, according to which the bombing of Kassa was a German, or German-Hungarian provocation).

I plan to examine a similar type Russian source material. On two occasions (in St. Petersburg in 2002 and in Moscow in 2004) I had the chance to conduct research briefly in libraries and archives in Russia and to consult with Russian historians. My predominant interest is whether there has been a change in recent Russian historiography in connection with World War II, if there are similar manuscripts to the ones I analysed, and what opinions they contain on Hungarian soldiers.

The scholarly results of the dissertation

One of the important goals of my work is to contribute to the evolution of a more realistic opinion about the activity of the soldiers of the 2nd Hungarian Army. This includes the enumeration of those negative deeds which the Hungarian soldiers - according to the sources - committed in the theatre of war, but also the acts of bravery and firm resistance which characterised most of the soldiers. In

Hungary there is a consistent negative picture; countless stories are told about their behaviour, but deeds Hungarian soldiers committed on the front are hard to face, even if we know how circumstances deformed their set of values. Obviously, I do not intend to say that all negative examples can and should be generalised, but we cannot leave them out without paying any attention.

The many-sided interpretation of the sources examined generates a colourful picture. Nobody interprets the events in the same way; the possibilities of approaches are almost countless. The most important is if a commonly accepted version of the events evolves independent of individual narratives. If that happens, perhaps nobody wants to promote his history as the solely acceptable one.

The soldiers arrived at the front with firm ideas, partly influenced by the experiences of the former generation that had fought on the Russian front in World War I or were taken captive there. The picture was further modified by propaganda and military training; then came the personal experiences. The diaries preserve this process until today and this became the basis for a new common experience. After World War I, oral and written stories about the front had become organic parts of common talk, while talk of World War II remained taboo for a long time for political reasons. Veterans of World War I had been highly esteemed heroes for their communities and society as a whole, but after 1945 soldiers who had participated in World War II became scapegoats of the Horthy era. They had to repress their memories; they could not even be proud of those deeds – and society could not even learn about them – which would have been worthy of pride; their valour was not esteemed. In this way most personal experiences did not become known or a valuable part of the common experience of society. This not only true for their experiences with the Stalinist system, but for war experiences as well. A new type of propaganda, different stereotypes, covered reality again, which is why experiences of soldiers recorded by themselves immediately could be important.

It cannot be ascertained how many diaries are still unknown, but I think the number of sources at our disposal is enough to suppose that the general picture would not have to be modified even if there were a greater number of diaries available. I am fully convinced that I have managed to learn about an appropriate number of diaries to complete the history of Hungary in World War II from a mentality and social historical approach.

During the preparation of this dissertation I tried to keep in mind the principle voiced by Pal Prates: "... according to experience witnesses remember the events differently countless times, but by solving contradictions and the use of logic we have an almost perfect tool to differentiate between false and appropriate conclusions."¹⁷

¹⁷ Pritz, "Some Problems," 247.