

After Trianon Life near the Hungarian–Czechoslovak Border during the 1920s*

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Local consequences of the Trianon Peace Treaty have not been researched thoroughly. This study describes the everyday life of rural people on both sides of the Eastern part of the new border between Hungary and Czechoslovakia. Based on research in Hungarian and Czech archives and with the help of newspaper articles, the author illustrates the difficulties of re-establishing the old familial and economic ties between villages that were separated by the border. Many activities of the borderland people were illegal. The paper discusses how authorities responded to these offences. Besides long and small distance traffic and the problems of dual landowners, illegal crossing, contraband, and border incidents are also part of the analysis. Contrary to all hardships, the border remained permeable in the interwar period.

Keywords: Hungary, Czechoslovakia, interwar period, Trianon, border crossing, dual landowners, small border traffic, contraband, border incidents.

The overall consequences of the Trianon Peace Treaty are already well-known. Although most studies focus on the huge emotional and economic losses, a significant part of recent scholarship demonstrates that the *dictate* did not cause huge economic losses, at least in the long run,¹ and was not even considered to be a trauma by everyone.² At the same time, local consequences are much less researched. On the hundredth anniversary it is not only possible but also necessary to contribute to these investigations. My aim is to show the local developments after the establishment of the new border, focusing on the Eastern part of the common frontier between Hungary and Slovakia (and not Czechoslovakia proper, i.e. Ruthenia is excluded from the scope of this study). The

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¹ TOMKA 2018, 47–79.

² KOVÁCS 2015, 82–107.; KOVÁCS 2016, 523–534.; EGRY 2015; EGRY 2017, 78–108.

questions I try to answer are the following: In what ways had the border changed the life of local people? Were these changes advantageous for them or not? The study relies mostly on archival sources of Hungarian and Czechoslovak origin. However, the picture is not complete; a large part of the sources has been discarded. As archivists explained, these were sorted out during the 1960s, labelling them as “historically not relevant”.

The basic (remaining and changing) circumstances were the following: agriculture was and remained the most important sector of local life. Most people were working in the fields and were rather poor before and also after the Great War. Therefore, life was determined by sowing plants, harvesting crops, and taking care of animals. Back in the 19th century, only a few people travelled from their villages to a larger distance. But the mobility of people was gradually growing. More and more of them had some family members outside their villages so they travelled often in order to meet them. In many cases, the place of residence and the working place were different, regardless whether someone was an owner, a tenant or only a hired worker. The peace treaty interrupted these familial and work contacts: families and estates were also separated by the border. Similarly, some public administration centres ended up on the other side of the border. Many counties and even more districts were cut into two parts. To solve this problem, new administration centres were created – some of them hardly bigger than a village. People could arrange their official business there, so they had to get accustomed to travelling to new destinations. Until 1918, these areas were a long way from any borders, except the very long and narrow Zemplén county. People moved freely not only inside the country but also to abroad before the war; only emigrants were obliged to use a passport.³ Now, after the new border was established, they had to apply for travel documents, which was rather unusual for them. Different currencies were introduced in the successor states, which also meant huge price differences. Political culture, standards of living, and habits were changing slower, but in time these factors also became important. Although the official language changed at the northern side of the border, most people in the closest vicinity of the border were ethnic Hungarians and spoke the same language.

This short review suggests the following topics to be discussed: passports and other travel documents, including the problem of dual landowners; illegal border crossing (without travel documents); contraband; border incidents. The sources which were created at either side of the border are rather different. It also means that they complement one another: the Hungarian sources depict the problems of dual landowners and illegal crossing, and in addition they shed some light on contraband activities, while the Czechoslovak ones are of a political character, emphasizing traces of Hungarian irredentist activities, including border incidents, military preparations, revisionist propaganda, and activities of spies.

³ BENCSIK 2003.

Travel documents

The best-known travel document, the passport, played a marginal role in the life of the borderland population. During the first years after the war, the issuance of passports was still centralized. Instead of district authorities, only the Ministry of the Interior was authorized to issue passports. Decentralization was ordered in June 1920,⁴ but this measure took effect only on the first day of 1921.⁵ When obtaining a passport became possible, travel was still impossible. The reason for that was the visa obligation which meant that every traveller had to go to the Czechoslovak diplomatic mission in Budapest and pay an amount for the visa application (not to mention the cost of travel to Budapest and the time it consumed). Local peasants had neither time nor money for that. Therefore, passports were used by wealthy citizens and landowners.

Getting a passport and a visa was not easy for them, either. Applicants had to give a reason for travel (official delegation, study, work or business abroad, medical treatment, visiting family members etc.). If the reason was not regarded to be well-founded, the issuance of the passport could be denied. Initially, passports were valid only for two months, which was extended to 6 or even 12 months from 1920 on. The territorial validity of passports was also limited. Hungarian authorities often issued passports to the "occupied territories" (of pre-war Hungary) instead of Czechoslovakia or the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes (or even instead of Romania). Neighbouring countries protested (and applied certain measures against such travellers). Hungary had no other choice but to abandon this practice.⁶ As far as Czechoslovak passports are concerned, they were often "not valid for Hungary". After Hungarian protests, this limitation disappeared.⁷ In 1920 travellers even had to pay a border-crossing fee. Passport fees were also increasing fast due to the high inflation rate.⁸

An interesting fact is that the Hungarian Passport Act of 1903 remained in force in Slovakia and in Ruthenia. In fact, old laws were overwritten here by lower-level regulations. These interim rules appeared as a government resolution in 1921 while diplomatic missions received a more detailed instruction.⁹

⁴ Government decree no. 4937/1920. *Rendeletek Tára*, vol. 54. (1920) p. 295.

⁵ Decree of the minister of interior no. 86.200/1920. *Rendeletek Tára*, vol. 54. (1920) pp. 768-777.

⁶ Decree of the minister of interior no. 48.909/1921. *Belügyi Közlöny*, vol. 26. (1921) no. 31. pp. 1349-1350.

⁷ MNL OL K72-1939-17 (reserved documents, Czechoslovakia), 522/1939 res. (1/1925 res.).

⁸ BENCŠIK 2003, 53-55.

⁹ Government resolution no. 215/1921. *Sbírka zákonů a nařízení státu československého*, vol. 4. (1921) no. 52. p. 485-487. See other instructions in AKPR, f. KPR 1919-1947, inv. č. 438, sign. D 2326.

The new Passport Act was finally adopted in the Prague National Assembly in 1928.¹⁰

Travelling with a passport was possible most often by train. Several railways were cut by the border, some of them more than once. Therefore, agreements were concluded to solve these problems (including the common use of rail border crossing stations and the so-called *péage* traffic, i.e. transit trains through the territory of the other state).¹¹

The biggest hardships arose from getting a visa, although it was arranged by the passport issuing authority – theoretically until 1922. A new decree abolished this practice¹² (which was in use since 1904 when only a few countries demanded a visa). The reason is obvious: many states ordered even previously that all clients should apply for a visa in person. Obtaining a Czechoslovak visa was easier than getting a Romanian or Yugoslavian one. However, according to the visa instructions of the Czechoslovak legation in Budapest, a visa should have been denied to anyone whose questionnaire was incomplete. The legation could issue visas generally only after getting a permission from a competent Czechoslovak authority, in order to filter any “unwanted element”. Exceptions included cases of urgency, e.g. attending a funeral or visiting a seriously ill person.¹³ Consequently, Prague wanted to curb interpersonal relations among Hungarians living on both sides of the border. This is best proven by the Czechoslovak practice introduced in December 1921: visa applications to Slovakia were treated differently than to Moravia and Bohemia. If someone wanted to travel to Slovakia, a separate permit from the local Slovak authorities was requested before issuing the visa. Contrary to the resolutions of the Passport Conference held in Graz in January 1922, Czechoslovakia kept on demanding these permits and issued only short-term visas (instead of a one-year validity). What is more, issuance was completely suspended for several weeks in October and November 1921 (when the last Habsburg king, Charles IV returned to Hungary), in September 1922 (for an unknown reason), and also in April 1923 (due to the so-called Hym¹⁴ incident which will be discussed later in detail). Contrary to the Graz Agreement again, certain Hungarian social strata were discriminated against during their visa applications. Politicians, higher nobility, landowners, members of the state and county administration, officers, clergymen, nuns, teachers, and even students got their visas after a previous screening process and permit. At the end of 1923, Hungary launched a coun-

¹⁰ Act no. 55/1928. (Zákon ze dne 29. března 1928. o cestovních pasech). *Sbírka zákonů a nařízení státu československého*, vol. 11. (1928) no. 21. pp. 277–279.

¹¹ AKPR, f. KPR – L (Legislativa), inv. č. 551, sign. L 1184/24; inv. č. 676, sign. L 436/26; inv. č. 697, sign. L 866/26.

¹² Decree of the minister of interior no. 198.171/1922. *Belügyi Közlöny*, vol. 26. (1922) no. 49. pp. 2178–2181.

¹³ AMZV, V. Sekce – administrativní 1918–1939, kr. 402a., Maďarsko 1923–1928, Visová instrukce.

¹⁴ Hym (in Hungarian: Hím, since 1948 officially Chym) is a former village in Slovakia. Now it is a part of Perín (Perény).

termeasure to enforce Prague to a compromise but without much success. (This time, it was Czechoslovakia who was complaining that Hungary violated the Graz agreement.¹⁵) Applicants had to stand in long queues and all official deadlines were missed by the authorities. The situation was normalized in 1925, except in the case of officers and politicians. Even the long queues disappeared. Prague agreed that personal appearance was not necessary for visa applications.¹⁶ However, officers of the Hungarian army and members of irredentist organizations had problems of obtaining a visa still in the second half of the 1920s.¹⁷

No wonder that the poor had no time and money for such a complicated process. What is more, they could not navigate through the maze of rules.

Dual landowners and small border traffic

For local farmers and workers living in the borderland, other travel documents were in use which were cheaper and easier to obtain. These documents included borderland certificates valid for a year and one-time travel permits valid for 5 days. The so-called small border traffic was introduced in 1873 for residents of the 40-kilometer-wide border zone near Romania and later near Serbia. (Other parts of the border were internal borders within the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy.) When Hungary became independent, all borders became international frontiers, and small border traffic was established in all directions. In short, borderland certificates were used by dual landowners and one-time permits by other residents of the border zone.¹⁸

Dual landownership was the result of the new borderline. After the Trianon peace treaty delimited the borders, it also had to be demarcated. The aim of this process was to adjust the borders to local conditions. These adjustments were not really successful, because the definitive version of the border bisected the territory of 220 settlements. What is even more important, 1,011 estates were also divided, one part remaining in Hungary and the other half getting to a neighbouring country. Among these, 290 holdings were divided between Hungary and Czechoslovakia. Even more owners had properties in several villages, partly in the territory Czechoslovakia but some of them remaining in Hungary. Most of the demarcation works were finished in 1922, but minor

¹⁵ AMZV, V. Sekce, kr. 402a., Maďarsko 1923–1928, 208.089/1923.

¹⁶ BENCŠIK 1999a, 154–155. Statements are based on the following archival sources: MNL OL K72-11-1919-1926 (decrees and circulars); MNL OL K72-12/2-1926 (international passport conferences); MNL OL K72-17-1919-1925 (reserved documents); MNL OL K72-17-1939 (reserved documents, Czechoslovakia)

¹⁷ MNL OL K72-15-Czechoslovakia-1923-1931 (Passport and visa relations with Czechoslovakia); AMZV, ZÚ Budapest (Zastupitelský úřad Budapešť), kr. 53, inv. č. 1053, 1920–1924.; AMZV, V. Sekce, kr. 402a. Maďarsko.

¹⁸ BENCŠIK 2021.

changes took place even later. The demarcation process is a well-researched topic and is excluded from the scope of this study.¹⁹

Dual landowners had holdings on both sides of the border, so they had to cross it almost daily to cultivate their lands. Given that these people were working on the very same properties as before, it is logical to say that the new border, which separated their holdings, was not really a possibility but rather an obstacle. They had to spend time and money getting the necessary permissions. In addition, they had to use official border crossing points, which resulted in costly, time-consuming detours. Less is known about how many people were affected by small border traffic. An example from Ludány (1,100 inhabitants) shows that 25 dual landowners had a certificate even in 1937 (their number must have been higher in the 1920s).²⁰ In fact, these 25 people mean 25 families, i.e. almost 100 persons (9 per cent of the population).

Small border traffic had to be regulated by international agreements. Initially, only local agreements were concluded about which less is known in the case of the Czechoslovak border. It seems that almost no primary source can be traced. I could not find any evidence in the archives, neither in Hungary, nor in Prague. Even the relevant Czech historical literature only suggests that there were some local agreements.²¹ However, some reports are available in newspaper articles. An agreement was signed in August 1920 in Zemplén county (at Nagykázmér, now Kazimír, Slovakia). According to this, animals, tools, seeds, and crops could be transported duty-free across the demarcation line in order to cultivate estates on the other side but only for those who obtained a border crossing permit. This agreement allowed that all crops could be transported to the territory of that country where the owner resided.²² The general practice could have been different, because when the Hungarian government discussed the topic a month later, in September 1920, they demanded that half of the crops should be allowed to be transported free of any duties and taxes. The government wished to conclude an agreement with Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia, setting the border zone to a six-kilometre strip.²³ Later, in November 1922, a trade agreement was concluded between Prague and Budapest. Its annex facilitated small border traffic, but the Czechoslovak government refused

¹⁹ The most important contribution is SUBA 1999a. Czech and Slovak authors did not make such detailed analyses, contrary to the large amount of archival sources in Prague. NA, f. 1075/4 (Ministerstvo vnitra I – hraniční spisy), ka. 5, inv. č. 17, sign. 2/143/10 and ka. 6., inv. č. 25., sign. 2/147/19.; AMZV, ZÚ Budapest, kr. 5., inv. č. 133. For Hungarian archival sources, see MNL OL, fonds K477, K478, K479.

²⁰ AMZV, Sekce V, kr. 388., Hranice čs.–maďarská, vidování pohraničních legitimací 1937.

²¹ RYCHLÍK – RYCHLÍKOVÁ 2016, 94–95.; RYCHLÍK 2017, 87.

²² Cseh–magyar megállapodás a mezőgazdasági forgalomra. *Köztelek*, 7 August 1920, p. 597.; Cseh–magyar megállapodás a mezőgazdasági forgalomban. *Nyírvidek*, 10 August 1920, p. 3.

²³ A terményforgalom szabályozása a demarkációs vonal melletti birtokokon. *Magyarország*, 2 September 1920, p. 5.

to ratify it, due to the unsolved problem of tariffs between Prague and Budapest. Therefore, until 1927, only interim agreements regulated small border traffic.²⁴ The common feature of these early agreements is that the possibility of small border traffic was limited to the border crossing of the dual landowners. It was by far not the case before 1914, when reasons were much more diverse. The other notable difference is the narrowing of the border zone from 40 km to only 10–15 km. In addition, Hungary adopted an internal regulation in 1923. According to this regulation, borderland certificates were used by dual landowners, doctors, and veterinary surgeons. These permits were valid for a year. Workers had another certificate valid for two months. Besides, single use travel permits were introduced, valid for three days.²⁵ A similar internal regulation was made in 1922 in Czechoslovakia. There were only minor differences between the two regulations; the Czechoslovak one was slightly more accurate and detailed. Borderland certificates were valid there for 6 months only. Abusers of the regulation, including smugglers and those who were agitating against Czechoslovakia, were to be excluded from small border traffic.²⁶

Not much is known about the running of small border traffic between the two countries. Archives contain only very sporadic information. The situation was rather different near the Romanian and the Yugoslav border, where problems were usual. As most dual landowners were ethnically Hungarian, neighbouring countries were not interested in maintaining these transnational connections. The lack of sources relating to the Czechoslovak border suggests that—compared to Romania and Yugoslavia—things were running smoother here. However, the Czechoslovaks protested when Hungary issued certificates for people who were not living in the border zone.²⁷ When Prague closed the border for political reasons, even small border traffic was suspended. After the Hym incident in April 1923, legal crossing was impossible for dual landowners for three weeks.²⁸ During 1923, the Czechoslovaks complained that they were not allowed to transport crops, especially cereals out of Hungary.²⁹

²⁴ SUBA 1999b, 202.

²⁵ MNL OL K27-13.07.1923, agenda no. 13. (Minutes of the Government); Government decree no. 5.300/1923. *Rendeletek Tára*, vol. 57. (1923) p. 260–271. For more details, see BENCSIK 2003, 62–63.

²⁶ AMZV, ZÚ Budapest, kr. 5, inv. č. 131. (The document is available also in Hungarian.)

²⁷ AMZV, ZÚ Budapest, kr. 5, inv. č. 129.

²⁸ A cseh–magyar határt egész hosszában elzárták mától kezdve a csehek. *Pesti Napló*, 24 April 1923, p. 4.; Hétfőtől ismét megindult a határszéli személyforgalom. *Esztergom*, 16 May 1923, p. 1. See also NA, f. PMV (Prezidiální spis Ministerstva vnitra), 225-129-3, 10789/1923.

²⁹ AMZV, ZÚ Budapest, kr. 5, inv. č. 131. For other Czechoslovak complaints, see *ibid.*, inv. č. 126–130.

A full bilateral treaty was concluded only in May 1927 as a supplement to the trade agreement.³⁰ The width of the border zone was 10 km, but considering local needs, it could have been widened to 15 km. The treaty declared that Pozsony (Bratislava) and Losonc (Lučenec) were not part of the border zone. Borderland certificates were only valid for 12 months. An important element is that a visa-free one-time travel card (*alkalmi útilap*) was introduced for every resident of the border zone in urgent cases, valid for 5 days to Czechoslovakia (including, exceptionally, even non-residents of the border zone). Border crossing was possible on certain roads only, except if the borderline ran through the estate.³¹

Illegal border crossing

However, most people just did not care to obtain a travel permit. If they had urgent business beyond the border, and no time (or money) was left to apply for a one-time travel permit, they simply went through the border.

Crossing the border without travel documents was an infraction (summary offence, in Hungarian: *kihágás*) under the Passport Act of 1903.³² These minor offences were tried by the administrative leader of the district, the so-called high sheriff (*főszolgabíró*) or, more often, one of their deputies (sheriff, *szolgabíró*). Unfortunately, hardly any sources are available from the 1920s in this region. There is only one district where these infraction papers were not discarded, namely Putnok.³³ In all other borderland districts of Nógrád and Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén counties, these sources are missing. Even in the case of Putnok, infraction sources are only available from the years 1928 and 1929. Looking through the illegal border crossing cases, I have made the following conclusions. Illegal crossing was rather common. In 1928, approximately 4 per cent of all infraction cases belonged to this group of minor crimes. Of course, many cases could have been unnoticed. Most illegal crossers were under 30, many of them were even teenagers. When caught by gendarmes, perpetrators “told nothing in their defence”, and many of them pleaded guilty. However, when they were interrogated by the local sheriff, at least half of them had excuses. It means that in the meantime they made up an explanation or, most likely, they had been frightened by the gendarmes and remained silent. In front of the sheriff they were not intimidated, so they dared to speak in their defence. Their most common argument was that they had no time and / or

³⁰ Act no. XVII of 1927. Supplement E. In: *Corpus Juris Hungarici. Magyar Törvénytár. 1927. évi törvénycikkek*. Budapest: Franklin, 1928. pp. 316–323 and 366–367. For the Czechoslovak version, Czechoslovak Government decree no. 120/1927. *Sbírka zákonů a nařízení státu československého*, vol. 10. (1927) no. 54. pp. 1168–1185.

³¹ For more details and later developments see BENCSIK 1999b, 357–372.

³² Act. no. VI of 1903, §15. *Corpus Juris Hungarici. Magyar Törvénytár. 1903. évi törvénycikkek*. Budapest: Franklin, 1904. pp. 78–84.

³³ MNL BAZML, IV.922.c.

money to apply for a one-time travel card. Others even denied that they crossed the border saying that they were only planning to do so. (These people were often detained in their homes, when authorities received rumours that someone returned from the other side of the border.)³⁴ Those who were caught red-handed had several reasonings: news came that one of their relatives became seriously ill,³⁵ or just wanted to visit their relatives;³⁶ they had to obtain an official document at the other side of the border;³⁷ some Czechoslovak citizens (ethnic Hungarians) came in order to find a new job.³⁸

If we take a look at the place of residence of the illegal crossers, we find that with a sole exception all of them were living very close to the border, generally not more than 2–3 kilometres away. Neither their destination was farther, which means that they “travelled” basically to a neighbouring village. These familial connections were disturbed by the new border which was not yet a physical obstacle, so it was rather permeable. People just visited their relatives as they did ten or twenty years before. In 1928, almost a decade after Trianon these connections were still intense, but anyone who crossed the border now had to face certain punishment. Those who spent the night on the other side of the border took another risk. Under the terms of the Aliens Act of 1903, all foreigners must have been reported by their hosts to local authorities. Breaking this law was also an infraction, and the perpetrators were to be fined.³⁹

I have made a statistical analysis among the illegal border crossing cases in the Putnok district in 1928. Unfortunately, the verdict is missing from some sources. Among the cases where all details are known, 41 per cent of the perpetrators were Czechoslovak citizens and 59 per cent were Hungarians. Ethnically, no Slovaks were among them. However, minutes consistently emphasized if the illegal crosser was a Gypsy (23.5 per cent of all cases). Exactly 50 per cent of these trials ended with an acquittal. However, only a third of the Czechoslovak citizens were acquitted, while 55 per cent of the Hungarian citizens received a favourable judgement. The typical conviction was one day in custody, which was a rather mild sentence as the 1903 Passport Act prescribed custody up to fifteen days. The statistics prove that illegal border crossing was not treated very harshly in Putnok. Unfavourable judgement was a result only in the case of pleading guilty. If someone had a reasonable excuse, he or she was acquitted. However, the Czechoslovak citizens were acquitted only if they told the sheriff that “I was not given a travel permit by the Czechs”.⁴⁰ Justifications included the following: “their act was only an attempt, and attempting an in-

³⁴ Ibid., case no. 287/1928., 345/1928., 650/1928.

³⁵ Ibid., case no. 263/1928., 570/1928., 573/1928.

³⁶ Ibid., case no. 416/1928., 436/1928., 863/1928.

³⁷ Ibid., case no. 286/1928.

³⁸ Ibid., case no. 868/1928., 886/1928.

³⁹ Act no. V. of 1903, §§ 2 and 11. *Corpus Juris Hungarici. Magyar Törvénytár. 1903. évi törvénycikkek*. Budapest: Franklin, 1904. pp. 69–78. For such cases in Putnok district, see MNL BAZML, IV.922.c., case no. 416/1928., 504/1928.

⁴⁰ Ibid., case no. 570/1928., 573/1928.

fraction is not punishable by law”.⁴¹ Mitigating circumstances were also taken into account, e.g. “poverty” or “lack of intelligence”. A common feature of all these cases is that the Hungarian authorities never called the other side of the border “Czechoslovakia” but “territory occupied by the Czechs”.

Contraband

Hungarian criminal law distinguished three kinds of criminal offences: felony (*bűntett*), misdemeanour (*vétség*) and infraction (*kihágás*). Smuggling, like illegal border crossing, was an infraction under Hungarian law. It is important to add that during and after the First World War, all transport of food was subject to authorization, and anyone without a transport licence committed a contraband infraction, even in territories deep inside the country. Rules changed very often,⁴² which also meant that local people were not really aware what is allowed and what is not. To complicate matters even more, an act was adopted in 1920 against illegitimate overpricing (*árdrágítás*).⁴³ This measure was aimed against loan sharks, profiteers, chain-traders, and smugglers. The act was to be valid only for three years (see § 11), i.e. it was meant to be only a temporary regulation which was necessary due to the economic disturbances caused by the war. According to this act, overpricing was a misdemeanour or, in aggravating circumstances, a felony. In theory, contraband was regarded to be overpricing only if the smuggled item was a “commodity of public need” (which was defined by the government). If other goods were transported without a licence, it was only simple or normal smuggling. Therefore, previous decrees against smuggling remained in force. It seems that the legal practice differed from county to county. In most parts of the country, smugglers were convicted for an infraction even if they took a large amount of commodity out of the country. It was a legal nonsense because the very same deed was interpreted as an infraction in one part of the country and as a misdemeanour in another region.⁴⁴ In Borsod-Gömör, Abaúj-Torna and Zemplén counties, i.e. near the Eastern part of the Hungarian-Slovak border, most smugglers were brought to court for a misdemeanour. What is more, the situation hardly changed from 1923 on, when the Act on overpricing was supposed to have been repealed.

Trials against simple smugglers were to be held by sheriffs in the districts, while overpricing was tried by the so-called usury court (*uzsorabíróság*), a special judicial council set up in 1920. If we take a look at the surviving sources in

⁴¹ Ibid., case no. 650/1928. (Similar reasoning can be found also in 287/1928.)

⁴² Changes mostly included the list of products subject to transport limitation. However, penalties remained the same from 1916 to 1921, contrary to inflation. For more details, see BENCSIK 2020, 766–768.

⁴³ Act no. XV of 1920. *Corpus Juris Hungarici. Magyar Törvénytár. 1920. évi törvénycikkek.* Budapest: Franklin, 1921. pp. 47–50.

⁴⁴ I conducted research at several county archives, but I found only minor exceptions to this rule.

Borsod–Abaúj–Zemplén county, it is obvious that no contraband case was tried in the Putnok district even in 1928, while the usury court kept working until 1950, and every contraband case was decided upon there. To conclude, the “temporary” regulation became permanent and smuggling *de facto* became a misdemeanour.

In the following, I analyse the smuggling / overpricing cases in the practice of the Miskolc usury court in 1922. 391 cases are available in the fond of the Miskolc royal prosecutor’s office in this year.⁴⁵ Smugglers were somewhat older than illegal border crossers but typically were under 50 years of age. They were exclusively men, contrary to the illegal border crossing cases where many women were among the perpetrators. Most of them lived rather close to the border, not farther than 5 kilometres away. At least 80 per cent of smugglers were poor people acting to improve their own living standard. In three quarters of the cases, bigger animals were smuggled (horses, cows or oxen) while the ratio of smuggling tobacco and cereals was also around ten per cent. This evidence supports our previous knowledge based on ethnographic research that horses were taken to Czechoslovakia in large numbers due to the price difference.⁴⁶ The court process ended with acquittal in a relatively high proportion of the cases. Acquittal was justified by the following: “their testimony could not be refuted”;⁴⁷ they transported goods for their own need;⁴⁸ the incriminating confession was rebuttable;⁴⁹ and, most importantly, “the Act on overpricing is only applicable in the case of commodities listed by the government”.⁵⁰ For those who were convicted, the typical sentence was 15 days to 3 months in a C category prison (i.e. in a low security level gaol.). However, in some cases, a seven- or eight-month verdict was also imposed. In all cases, a secondary punishment was also imposed (a fine of 1000 to 2000 koronas). Of course, all smuggled animals and goods were confiscated (causing much more losses than the fines themselves, as a horse was worth 15–20 thousand koronas). Some of the convicted persons requested that they start serving their

⁴⁵ MNL BAZML, VII.51.b. (This fond can be found in Alsózsolca.)

⁴⁶ BOROSS 1985, 179–183; DOBOSSY 1982, 115–121; NAGY 1983, 138–144; VIGA 1990; VIGA 1996. Price difference is proved also by newspaper articles (e.g. *Ló- és aranycsempészés Csonka-Magyarországon át. Új Barázda*, 9 March 1921, p. 2.) and by Czech scientific literature: MAREK 2000, 39; TOUNGOUSOV 2007, 14–15, 55, 59, 62–64. – The price of animals in Czechoslovakia was twice to three times higher than in Hungary. According to ethnographic research, spirits, and food were also smuggled out, while industrial products (Baťa shoes, clothes, chemicals, tools etc.) were brought into the country.

⁴⁷ MNL BAZML, VII.51.b., case no. IV.68/1922; IV.206/1922; IV.749/1922

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, case no. IV.729/1922.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, case no. IV.1403/1922.; IV.1712/1922. In the latter case, a witness told the judge that he gave a forced confession, because he was intimidated by the gendarmes.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, case no. IV.1483/1922.; IV.1546/1922.

prison sentence later, because—as the breadwinners of their families—they were irreplaceable during harvest. These requests were accepted.⁵¹

Newspapers and ethnographic research give us other evidence about contraband. Based on these sources it can be stated that—with the exception of tobacco—smuggling was a new phenomenon caused by the new border⁵² and the controlled economy resulting from the war. The biggest reason for smuggling was poverty and, initially, hunger. Profiteers also appeared on the scene, including modest or even rich people who wanted to make a fortune and hired others to do the most dangerous part of their “job”. Instead of food and animals, more processed goods were smuggled some years later, including textiles. Customs officers at Szob railway station told journalists that almost all passengers were carrying some illegal goods, including 90 per cent of the women. A suspiciously “fat” lady wore large amounts of clothing, including four jumpers and 260 metres of lace.⁵³ Another interesting case took place in Sátoraljaújhely. A “gentry gang” made thirty million koronas in 1920 from smuggling alcohol. As the city itself was cut into two parts by the border, workers of the water supply could cross the border regularly. However, instead of instrument oil, they transported spirits.⁵⁴ Leading members of the gang were convicted by the usury court of Zemplén county, receiving 4 and 3 months in prison and a high fine. Unfortunately, archival records of the case are missing.⁵⁵

“Smuggling is the most sympathetic crime in the eyes of the public”, wrote police captain Daniel Schreiber in a newspaper.⁵⁶ When local residents were interrogated as witnesses, they usually gave a false testimony. Even some officials helped the smugglers, e.g. a village mayor in Slovakia regularly falsified cattle licences, so that the cows and bulls which were smuggled in could be sold “legally” in Czechoslovakia.⁵⁷ However, Schreiber was right when he wrote that “there are many ordinary criminals among them, who make a living as professional smugglers”. There were complete families who earned their living from contraband activity on both sides of the border, some of them in

⁵¹ Ibid., case no. IV.392/1922.; IV.1193/1922.; IV.1550/1922. In case no. IV.1558/1922., the request was accepted due to the pregnancy of the convict’s wife.

⁵² VIGA 1990, 162.

⁵³ Óriási arányú csempészés folyik a szobi határon. *Az Est*, 20 August 1924, p. 4.

⁵⁴ Egy úri banda harminc milliót keresett szesz-csempészéssel. *8 Órai Újság*, 22 January, 1921, p. 3.; Újabb fordulat az újhelyi szesz-csempészés ügyében. *Új Nemzedék*, 27 January 1921, p. 4. For more details, see BENCSIK 2020, 775.

⁵⁵ Magyar Távirati Iroda, Napi Hírek, 22 March 1921. Information on the missing documents is from Tamás Oláh, senior archivist in Sátoraljaújhely. I thank him for his help.

⁵⁶ A nemzetközi csempészek trükkjei. *Pesti Napló*, 28. June 1925, p. 8.

⁵⁷ BOROSS 1985, 180–181; Cseh bélyegzővel csempészték magyar lovakat Csehszlovákiába. *Magyarország*, 20 May 1925, p. 15.

armed gangs.⁵⁸ Those gangs did not hesitate to use firearms. In many cases, blood was spilled and there were even some fatalities.⁵⁹ These cases lead us to the last topic, namely, border incidents.

Border incidents

Border incidents can be both unarmed and armed conflicts. Their most severe cases mean armed clashes between the border guards of two neighbouring countries. Considering the tense political relations of Hungary and Czechoslovakia in the 1920s, it is not surprising that such incidents occurred. It is interesting to see how newspapers covered this topic in the 1920s. Until 1923, the term border incident was mentioned mostly in the context of the conflict between Hungary and Austria over Burgenland. It was only in late 1922 that a Czechoslovak incident hit the headlines.⁶⁰ This situation changed in 1923, when dozens of articles discussed the topic. The main reason was the so-called Hym incident in April 1923, but other cases also took place. (In addition, there were also serious conflicts at the Romanian border in 1923.) The following year, in 1924, things were again back to normal, when only two smaller Czechoslovak cases were covered in the newspapers.

Archival sources suggest the same. During the first years the border remained relatively calm between the two states (in contrast to the other sectors of the Czechoslovak border⁶¹). Nevertheless, armed incidents took place already in 1921.⁶² These conflicts, however, did not bother local residents much, with a sole exception of the Hym case. Therefore, I am going to discuss only that case even without going into too much detail. The Hungarian opinion is available from the press, while I found lots of archival sources which shed light on the Czechoslovak interpretation of events. According to Hungarian newspapers, Czechoslovakia provoked several incidents from March 1923 on-

⁵⁸ TOUNGOUSSOV 2007, 82–84.

⁵⁹ Véres küzdelem a cseh csendőrökkel. *Egri Népiújság*, 25. February 1922, p. 3.; A csempészek agyonverték egy pénzügyőrt. *Prágai Magyar Hírlap*, 18. March 1924, p. 4. Most Czechoslovak financial guards were murdered in the first half of the 1920s, see HOLUB 1987, 27–30. Most casualties took place in Slovakia, mainly at the Hungarian border, see MAREK 2000, 23, 28–31.

⁶⁰ Tendenciózus cseh híresztelések felvidéki határincidensekről. *8 Órai Újság*, 17. December 1922, p. 1. In early 1923, the same newspaper wrote that “no border incidents ever took place at the Czech border”. A német–francia konfliktus Prágában aggodalmakat kelt. *8 Órai Újság*, 14 January 1923, pp. 1–2.

⁶¹ AMZV, V. sekce, kr. 387. Hraniční incidenty 1918–1920. The Hungarian–Czechoslovak border is not represented here.

⁶² AMZV, ZÚ Budapest 1918–1940, kr. 5., inv. č. 127.; NA, f. PMV, 225-132-9.; Összeütközés a cseh demarkációs vonal mentén. *Reggeli Hírlap*, 1921. november 20. 11.; Magyar és cseh csendőrök véres összeütközése. *Friss Újság*, 1921. november 22. 3.; Magyar vámőrök és csehszlovák katonák összetűzése. *Előre*, 1921. december 21. 3. Small cases in 1922: NA, f. PMV, 225-132-10.

wards.⁶³ Tensions were already high when the biggest affair took place on 10 April 1923. News came about a planned Czechoslovak “attack” and the Hungarian customs guards were preparing to fight back. At midnight, not far from Hym, two Czechoslovak guards appeared on Hungarian territory and opened fire. The Hungarian guards did not shoot but one of them used his bayonet, stabbing sergeant Jan Sedláček, whose gun misfired. The other Czechoslovak guard escaped from the scene.⁶⁴ Sedláček fell on the ground and died instantly. His body was taken by the Hungarian guards but later handed over to the “Czechs”.⁶⁵ According to the Czechoslovaks, their patrol suspected smugglers in front of themselves. They shouted “stop” but someone shot at them. Sedláček wanted to shoot back but a dark figure stabbed him and suddenly took his body away from the scene.⁶⁶ The Prague government ordered a border closure on 20 April; as from the following day, no visa was issued for Hungarians, no Hungarian citizens were allowed to enter Czechoslovakia, and passengers were forced to get out of trains and return to Hungary.⁶⁷ Budapest introduced no countermeasures, contrary to the fact that several Hungarians – most of them living in Czechoslovakia – were expelled from the country.⁶⁸

A joint inquiry took place on 29 April. The parties disagreed which side shot first and also about the precise location of the incident (i.e. was it on Czechoslovak or “neutral” territory).⁶⁹ While some Hungarian journalists were present at the scene during the investigation, Czechoslovak newspapers were excluded. Therefore, even the Hungarian-language press in Czechoslovakia presented the opinion of the Prague authorities, stating that Sedláček was stabbed 19 times (instead of three or four mentioned in the Hungarian press and five in the medical report) and the murder was on Czechoslovak territory.⁷⁰ At the beginning of May, border closure was lifted, and visa issuance restarted.⁷¹

⁶³ Hármás határincidens Hidasnémeti mellett. *Nyírvidék*, 17 April 1923, p. 1.

⁶⁴ A cseh kormány előzetes elégtételt követel. *Szeged*, 25 April 1923, p. 1.

⁶⁵ Illetékes nyilatkozatok a cseh-magyar határkonfliktusról. *Az Újság*, 24 April 1923, pp. 1-2.

⁶⁶ A kassai rendőrség információi a hími határincidensről. *Prágai Magyar Hírlap*, 15 April 1923, p. 5. See also documents of the internal Czechoslovak investigation at NA, f. PMV, 225-129-5.

⁶⁷ A csehek elzárták a magyar határt. *Az Est*, 24 April 1923, pp. 1-2.; Represszáliák a határincidensek miatt. *Prágai Magyar Hírlap*, 24 April 1923, p. 1.; Uzavření hranic proti Maďarsku. *Lidové noviny*, 24 April 1923. See also NA, f. PMV, 225-129-4.

⁶⁸ The list of expelled persons is available at NA, f. PMV, 225-129-4.

⁶⁹ Az Est tudósítójának jelentése a magyar-cseh vegyes bizottság tárgyalásáról a határincidens színhelyén. *Az Est*, 1 May 1923, pp. 1-2.; Hivatalos jelentés a cseh-magyar bizottság vasárnapi tárgyalásáról. *Ibid.*, p. 11. Official protocols of the inquiry: NA, f. PMV, 225-129-3.

⁷⁰ A cseh-szlovák-magyar vegyes bizottság vizsgálata. *Prágai Magyar Hírlap*, 1 May 1923, p. 1.

⁷¹ A csehek megszüntetik a repressziós intézkedéseket. *8 Órai Újság*, 4 May 1923, p. 1.

It is not possible to find out what really happened late at night on 10 April 1923. However, comparing the different views, the most likely scenario is that there was a third party, most likely an armed smuggler gang. If we suppose that, some of the differences can be explained. Neither the Hungarian customs guards, nor the Czechoslovak financial guards shot first, but the smugglers did. After they disappeared, the guards on both sides believed they had to defend themselves from "enemy attack". This is even more likely as the Czechoslovaks heard someone answering them in Czech "That's us", and the Hungarians declared they had not answered at all.

Czechoslovakia launched an international propaganda campaign, issuing a pamphlet titled *The tension between Czechoslovakia and Hungary* in 1923. This text underlined that Hungary had been terrorizing its northern neighbour for a long time and killing Sedláček was only the last drop in the glass and this is why Prague introduced drastic measures. The case was presented to the international public from the view of the Czechoslovak side.⁷²

The two parties started negotiations in the second half of 1923 in order to prevent such conflicts.⁷³ Talks ended without success in 1925.⁷⁴ However, according to Czechoslovak sources, the Hungarian side strictly forbade that customs guards cross the border or talk with Czechoslovak border guards. Using a firearm was possible on orders from their commanders.⁷⁵ Contrary to all efforts, border incidents continued in the second half of the 1920s.⁷⁶

Conclusions

To answer the questions which were asked on the second page of this study, we can say that the border severely affected the locals, causing them large difficulties. The border separated families, settlements, estates, and cut old economic ties. Residents near the border simply did not understand that visiting their relatives, transporting their agricultural or other products to local markets was not allowed the way as it had been before the war. It is true that the transport of commodities without a special licence was forbidden also during the First World War due to food shortages, but people believed that after the war everything would be back to normal. Although the border was not fortified and was relatively permeable, it constituted large administrative difficulties for many people, and also material losses due to passport and visa fees, previously unnecessary travel detours and, of course, criminal proceedings with prison sentences and fines. Contrary to all these hardships, people kept

⁷² NA, f. PMV, 225-129-3. There was also a French version, *Le Conflit entre la Tchécoslovaquie et la Hongrie*.

⁷³ AMZV, ZÚ Budapest, kr. 5., inv. č. 132.

⁷⁴ MNL OL K69, pile no. 638, Czechoslovakia, folder no.2., 1924-1925 and folder no. 3., 1923-1925.

⁷⁵ NA, f. PMV, 225-129-1, 8176/D-23 prez. adm.

⁷⁶ MNL OL K70, pile no. 233., Czechoslovakia-2/a.

on visiting neighbouring villages, taking foodstuffs with themselves to their relatives, caring not much about whether it was legal or not. Even the Hungarian authorities were lenient in some cases, acquitting many illegal border crossers and even some smugglers. Contraband was the biggest consequence of the border. Small amount smuggling was soon replaced by large scale contraband, also with the formation of armed gangs. The fight against smugglers on both sides of the border was also a factor in the growing conflicts between Czechoslovakia and Hungary. These tensions were already high due to political reasons; it is not surprising that the borderland became a scene of armed clashes in 1923.

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