

## THE CINEMATOGRAPHIC REPRESENTATION OF ATROCITIES DURING THE SECOND WORLD WAR IN VOJVODINA

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### ABSTRACT

*Up till the period of the change of regime, neither historical works, nor publications were issued regarding the massacres and horrors lasting for months committed against the Hungarians during 1944/1945 in Vojvodina. Between 1945 and 1991, not a singular cinematographic work depicted the series of tragic events. Exiled Prime minister Ferenc Nagy proceeded to mention the atrocities against the Hungarians in Vojvodina, and the works of some emigrants (to the West) also appeared concerning the subject.<sup>1</sup> In Tito's Yugoslavia – during the Kádár era – in Hungary, the genocide carried out by the partisans was also a taboo subject. The novel by writer Sándor Illés, published in 1977, which commemorates the victims of the Temerin massacre, was considered to be a great milestone.<sup>2</sup> From the 1990s onwards, journalists<sup>3</sup>, local history researchers<sup>4</sup> and historians<sup>5</sup> unveiled the grieved events via the help of archival sources and oral history. The first documentary was directed in 1991, in which witnesses, relatives described the retaliations committed against the Hungarians.<sup>6</sup>*

*Keywords: Hungarians of Vojvodina, atrocities, change of regime, documentaries, war crimes*

Between 1941 and 1944/1945, two shifts of power took place in Vojvodina (Hungarian „Délvidék” – referring to Southern Hungary). By the order of Miklós Horthy, the Third Army of Hungary and the Rapid Corps of the Hungarians crossed the Hungarian-Yugoslav border on April 11th, 1941. Without major confrontation with the Yugoslav army, Bácska, the Danube-Tisza Interfluve and South Baranya were reoccupied within three days. The local Hungarians experienced the entrance of the Royal Hungarian Army as liberation, as a Revision of the Treaty of Trianon. After the introduction of military administration, the Hungarian government invalidated the disintegrated Yugoslav state's political, legal, economic, as well as its educational measures. The Commission of Vojvodina, established following the Second World War – for the investigation of war crimes – determined the 3506 civilians lost their lives during the „pacification” of the region. In spite of this, the Hungarian military sources of the era gave reports about significantly lower number of victims (1435 people). The operations of the communist saboteurs loyal to Tito, as well as the guerilla actions of the Chetnik troops, were followed by retort. Serbs settled in the region after 1918 were taken to internment camps, and were replaced by Szeklers from Bukovina and Hungarian families from Bosnia. With the purpose of exterminating the illegal partisan movement, in 1942 January – in Novi Sad and in the villages of Šajkaš – in the course of a raid, the units of Grand-General Ferenc Szombathelyi executed 3340 civilians (mainly Serbs and Jews). In 1946, the People's Court of Budapest proceeded to investigate the case and issued life imprisonment for Szombathelyi and his companions. They were extradited to Yugoslavia a few months later, where they were sentenced to death.<sup>7</sup> In 1964, author Cseres Tibor (1915-1993); Attila József and Kossuth Award winner) published his historical novel, *Hideg napok* [Cold Days]<sup>8</sup>, on the basis of which the successful drama of András Kovács – released in 1966 – was produced<sup>9</sup>. The narrative, reproducing the terrific days of the Novi Sad massacre, situates the events on a parallel timelines. The timeline-disrupting narration, unfolding from a closed situational drama, but still establishing harmony between different perspectives, earned the film its place among the masterpieces of contemporary cinematic history.<sup>10</sup> The chamber-like closed area is the prison, where the suspects of the raid explain their role in the retaliation from various aspects.<sup>11</sup> The varying perspectives of the recollections reconstruct the sorrowful reality in a mosaic-like manner. Cseres and Kovács approached the depiction of historical facts from the viewpoint of responsibility, furthermore of moral and national conscience.<sup>12</sup> Tibor Cseres set an example for Central and Eastern European writers. For decades, his anticipation, for intellectuals living in neighbouring countries to tell the public – following positive example – about the horrors committed by Yugoslav, Romanian etc. armed forces during the Second World War, was futile.

Following the entrance of the Royal Hungarian Army into Vojvodina during 1941, the Bácska region was connected to Bács-Bodrog royal county. The Baranya-triangle became part of Baranya county, while Muraköz and the Mura region were attached to Zala, and Vas counties, in due course. After the disintegration of Yugoslavia, the German administrative system, under the control of Hitler's Germany was set up in Banat. Most of the Jews of Vojvodina were inhabitants of four major cities of Bács-Bodrog county (Novi Sad, Subotica, Sombor, Senta). The atrocities, mainly against Hungarian Jews of Vojvodina almost instantly began. Consequently, the disenfranchisement and the deportation of Jews of Banat to internment camps started after the German occupation. The Hungarian anti-Jewish laws and discriminatory decrees were extended to re-annexed territories as well. During the Bárdossy-government, the situation of the Jews worsened further. In the scope of the manslaughter committed during the Southern Bács raid (1942), according to some data 743, while as stated in other sources more than a thousand Jews were killed. On April 27, 1944, a large portion of Jews living along river Tisza, were concentrated in the ghettos of Subotica, Baja and Szeged. They were transported from the Baja ghetto on May 27, 1944, as well as from the Szeged and Bácsalmás concentration and transportation centers between June 25-28, 1944 respectively, to the Auschwitz-Birkenau death camp, where they became victims of the Holocaust. According to the data of historians dealing with this adverse period, the number of deported Jews from Vojvodina can be estimated to range from 10 to 15 thousand people.<sup>13</sup> Besides the documentaries, presenting the tragic events of the Holocaust, from the 1960s onwards, numerous Hungarian feature films made an attempt to present the Shoah.<sup>14</sup> Károly Kovács portrayed the period of persecution of Jews in Banat and Bačka in his documentaries. Via the help of an interview featuring Dr. Teodor Kovács (doctor, publicist and Holocaust survivor), it reconstructs the genocides of Banat – from the summer of 1941 – flaring up in Zrenjanin and Pančevo, furthermore the murders carried out by the Nazi regime.<sup>15</sup> The *Logorski dnevnik Boriške Štark – Auschwitz – Strasshoff – Lenzing* [The Lager-diary of Boriške Štark – Auschwitz – Strasshoff – Lenzing]<sup>16</sup> titled reportage-documentary visualizes the challenges of the Jewish population of Novi Sad and Subotica. The production, providing a detailed insight into the stations of deportations, with scenes shot at authentic locations, commemorates the innocent, captivated and executed Jews of Vojvodina.<sup>17</sup>

At the end of the Second World War – another – genocide ensued, heavily affecting the civil inhabitants of Vojvodina. On October 1, 1944, the Red Army and Tito's partisans made an entrance to Banat. A few days later, in the course of the Bačka operation, they reoccupied cities along river Tisza, eventually marching into Subotica on October 10. On October 17, 1944, Josip Broz Tito, the commander in

chief of the Yugoslav People's Army, ordered the introduction of military administration in the territories of Bačka, Banat and Baranya. Keeping them under rigid control, he allowed people's power bodies to operate and people's guards to be established – exclusively being made up of South Slavic residents. The advisory and executive bodies of local political life were the people's liberation committees. The true power was exercised by the army, law enforcement was in the hands of military courts. The most important task of the committees, dealing with investigations of war crimes, was to discover the people answerable for such crimes. Hungarians and Germans, considered to be enemies of the nation, were prohibited to leave their place of residence, nor could they use their vernacular.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, in certain cases – with the purpose of easier differentiation – they were obliged to wear white armbands.<sup>19</sup> The period of military administration provided the possibility for the communist leadership to eliminate its political opponents, the royalist South Slavic groups. From the autumn of 1944 onwards, a systematic annihilation was launched, amid tens of thousands of innocent, local Hungarians and Germans – by false charges and retrospective verdicts – were liquidated. In the settlements of Vojvodina, a significant portion of the (mainly) male civilian population, collected to camps on ethnic basis, locked in cellars, were put through brutal torture. Following the torment, frequently lasting weeks, they were taken to the spot of execution and eliminated there.<sup>20</sup> At the turn of 1944/45, in the concentration camps of Čurug, Bački Jarak, Gajdobra etc. – several thousand – individuals (children women, elderly), confined merely because of their origins, deceased. The partisan retaliation, carried out at the end of World War II, was considered to be a taboo subject for more than 40 years in Tito's Yugoslavia. In Hungary, during the Kádár era, only the novel of Sándor Illés – published in 1977 – touched on the subject of Southern anti-Hungarians atrocities, reinvigorating the memoirs of the Temerin massacre.<sup>21</sup> In 1991, Tibor Cseres finished reportage documentary book with the title of *Vérbosszú Bácskában* [Serbian Vendetta in Bačka], which can be interpreted as a sequel of *Hideg Napok* [Cold days].<sup>22</sup> From the 1990s, a series of articles appearing in the columns of *Magyar Szó* in Novi Sad revealed the sorrow reality, the instances of bloodshed, not talked about for decades. The local history researchers and historians unveiled and documented the events of bloody years, via the help of archival sources and oral history.

The first instance of depicting the carnage against the Hungarians of Vojvodina in 1944/45, the horrible acts of Tito's partisans was by remarkable, two-part documentary, with the title of *Temetetlen holtjaink* [Our Unburied Deceased], released in 1991. The production of the movie, that provides a detailed insight into the collective tragedy of the Hungarian minority of Vojvodina, lasted almost 3 years. According to the shocking confessions of eyewitnesses, as well as the victims'

relatives, it suggests the personal interpretation of painful memory and history. The interview that features the papal chaplain János Tari is exceptionally stirring, in which he reveals the tragic fate of Totovo Selo's priest, Dénes Szabó, tortured and killed in the course of the adverse days. The details of the Subotica massacre are uncovered in the film by Blaško Stražarković, who held the position of political commissar of the Subotica District Police (Militia) from 1944 autumn.<sup>23</sup>

The release of the expository documentary *Jelöletlen tömegsírok* [Unmarked Mass Graves] took place in 2009.<sup>24</sup> The similarly titled scientific publication of historian Lajos Forró, released in 1995, served as a basis of the script of the movie. The birth of the cinematic work was preceded by 15 years of serious research, being based on archival sources, which, in conjunction with the interviews featuring the family members of the victims, validates the professionalism of the documentary. The Hungarians of Kanjiža, Martonoš and Adorjan were forced to face unprecedented methods of torture, right before their liquidation in 1944 autumn. The alternation of disturbing, deep interviews and the feature film elements set in authentic locations gives the movie a dramatic tone. The representatives of the film industry frequently formulate a negative critique of documentaries, with the content of fictional characters. The genre with ever-increasing popularity, is often described, as commercial, tabloid, documentary film, oftentimes rightfully so.<sup>25</sup> According to their arising arguments, the directors attempt to express the unpresentable via images of fictional elements. The close-up shot, the fate of man reflected on a person's face, frequently gives more authenticity, and overrides "the cinematographic requirement of making an impact"<sup>26</sup>. In the documentary *Jelöletlen tömegsírok* [Unmarked Mass Graves], the primary method of aspiration to realistic presentation, as well as objectivity is the presentation of tragic events, factually described by legitimate interviewees. Parallelly, the feature film episodes avoid extinguishing the drama, as its presence is guaranteed by the work of the two-time Jászai Mari Award-winning János Sándor, along with the performances of Jászai Mari Award-winning actor Árpád Bakota, and István Bicskei, a member of the JEL Theater in Paris. Bicskei played Lajos Forró's grandfather, while Bakota played his own ancestor in the fictional scenes of the documentary.<sup>27</sup> The cinematograph, winning the special prize of the 10th Film Review of Small-Region and Micro-Community Televisions, was displayed by numerous national channels, furthermore it served as a vital part of the programme of multiple scientific conferences in Serbia and Hungary.

The historical documentary *Halottak napja Bajmokon* [All Souls' Day in Bajmok] – brings a detailed description of the cruel tortures, murders committed against the local Hungarians – in 1944 November – in the Vojvodinian small town. On October 31, 1944, more than 200 local Hungarians were determined to be war criminals by an emergency court appointed by the People's Liberation Committee

of Bajmok, on the basis of trumped-up charges. On November 2, 1944, a part of the people held captive in the village hall of Bajnok were executed at the Bajmok border, while the remaining hostages were transported to Subotica and died there. In the film, Antal Mojzes, local history researcher – departed in 2015 – presents the terrific chapters of atrocities.<sup>28</sup> *Adorján története: Magyarellaenes atrocitások a Délvidéken* [History of Adorjan: Anti-Hungarian Atrocities in Vojvodina] titled, 29-minute long historical documentary contains a reproduction of the period of partisan reprisals in Adorjan. On October 31, 1944, the arriving special unit of partisans summoned the male population of the village. 50 people selected by them – without a court verdict – were driven to the bank of River Tisza and shot into the river. The movie commemorates the innocent civilians, who were massacred.<sup>29</sup> The plot of the 2013-produced historical documentary *Az utolsó óráig: egyházi személyeket ért atrocitások 1944/45-ben a Délvidéken* [Till the Last Hour: Atrocities against Ecclesiastical Officials in 1944/45 in Vojvodina] is centered around the members of the church, who were innocently subjugated and slaughtered during the 1944/45 massacre in Vojvodina. The screenplay summarizes the barely-known events of the end of the Second World War – through the medium of certain experts, eyewitnesses and relatives of the victims.<sup>30</sup>

Čurug is a location holding symbolic value in the case of the Southern genocide. In 1942, in the course of the raid of South-Bačka, several thousands of Serbian civilians lost their lives, due to the actions of the units of the Hungarian National Guard and the Hungarian Gendarme. As a response, in the period of Military Administration lasting from October 17, 1944 till February 1, 1945, Tito's partisans proceeded to engage in a mass-murder. The local People's Liberation Committee, formed in 1944 autumn, conjointly with the court of the partisan unit of Šajkaš searched the believed to be guilty Hungarians on the basis of certain lists. Many of them were immediately liquidated at the time of their captivation, others were kept as hostages in local schools, as well as in grain warehouses. The Hungarian survivors of the havoc – along with the population of Žabalj and Mošorin – were collectively condemned as war criminals. The Hungarian inhabitants of Čurug – from infants to elderly – were driven to the death camp of Jarek on January 23, 1945. At the commemoration with historical significance, on June 26, 2013, János Áder president of Hungary, together with Tomislav Nikolić head-of-state of Serbia bowed their heads at the common monument of Hungarian and Serbian innocent victims murdered in the Second World War. The historical documentary *Csurog története: Magyarellaenes atrocitások a Délvidéken 1944/45-ben* [History of Čurug: Anti-Hungarian Atrocities in Vojvodina in 1944/45] unveils the cruelties, murders, as well as the inhumane circumstances in the internment camps.<sup>31</sup> On January 28, 2020, in the Millenium

Café in Szeged, organized by the public benefit association VMDK Department of Szeged and the Catholic Youth Foundation, the presentation of the historical documentary *Horgos története: Magyarellenés atrocitások a Délvidéken 1944/45-ben* [History of Horgoš: Anti-Hungarian Atrocities in Vojvodina in 1944/45] took place. The cinematic work, depicting the sorrowful reality of the massacres committed against the Hungarians in Horgoš in 1944/45, became a vital component of the series of – similarly themed – productions from other Hungarian-inhabited regions of Vojvodina (Adorjan, Bajmok, Čurug, Kanjiža, Martonoš).<sup>32</sup>

The Danube Television, included the expository documentary of Zoltán Kozma, with the title of *Megbocsájtani igen, feledni nem! Történet az 1944-es délvidéki vérengzés csantavéri áldozatairól* [To Forgive, but not to Forget! Story of the Čantavirian Victims of the Massacre of Vojvodina in 1944]. The work narrates the story of Boldizsár Kozma, who lost his father (Mátyás Kozma) at the age of 2 in 1944, in the course of the partisan retaliation eventuating in Čantaviri. Alongside the fatherlessness, the stigma for decades, the question arises: how is it possible to explain the “unexplainable”<sup>33</sup>

The novelty of the documentary of Ferenc Lavro and Olga Lavro-Gazdag is that it unveils the traumas of the shared Hungarian-Serbian history, the events of the anti-Serbian atrocities in 1942, as well as the anti-Hungarian massacre in Vojvodina in 1944/45. In the interviews Hungarian and Serbian survivors, historians (Enikő A. Sajti, Lajos Forró, Srđan Cvetković, Zoltán Dévavári, Zoltán Mészáros), legal scholar Tibor Várady along with descendants of the victims participate. The piece was honored with the top accolade in the documentary category in the 19th Film Festival of Göcsej.<sup>34</sup>

Milutin Petrović's documentary *U Ime Naroda – Politička represija u Srbiji 1944–1953* [In the Name of the Nation – Political Oppression in Serbia 1944–1953]<sup>35</sup> depicts the undisclosed events of the bloody period, that followed the Second World War.<sup>36</sup> The plot of the movie, exposing the darkest era of the Tito-regime, was written by Srđan Cvetković, whose field of research involves the victims of the Yugoslav communist dictatorship. In 2014, in Belgrade, within the frames of an open interactive exhibition, along with scientific presentation, the film was also shown. The exhibition also commemorated the innocently tortured and executed Hungarian and German victims of the Southern Region. The documentaries, covering the period between 1941 and 1945, disclosing the genocides executed in Vojvodina, accurately present the perhaps most grieved period of the history of the region. Moreover, they pay a tribute to the tens of thousands of Hungarian, Serbian, Jewish, German and other nationalities innocently murdered in Bačka, Banat and Baranya, with the hope of such shameful events would never come to fruition again.

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