

Ungvary. K. Battle for Budapest, Chapter VI - "The Siege and the Population", pp 216-310.

The Siege and the Population

1 The plight of the Hungarian population

"Therefore nobody needs to worry that the Hungarian capital will become the scene of street-fighting." (*Magyarisdg*, 9 November 1944)

While the front was drawing closer to Budapest in the autumn of 1944, no political decision was taken about the fate of the population. The Hungarians would not have been able to carry out an evacuation, and the Germans were not interested in helping them. The million inhabitants were therefore initially invited to leave the city voluntarily. Posters to that effect were appearing by 7 November 1944. At the same time the evacuation of schools began but slow progress was made. Szálasi originally intended to leave the capital with his entire government, and changed his mind only when Edmund Veesenmayer, the German envoy, informed him on 8 November that the German Embassy would stay in Budapest even if the Hungarian leaders departed.

As an 'overture' to the siege, at 2pm on 4 November, a section of Margit Bridge, between Pest and Margit Island, was blown up. Although the guns could not yet be heard in the city, the explosion stunned the inhabitants. Miklós Kovalovszky writes in his diary:

When we arrived in front of the Comedy Theatre we were shaken by a tremendous explosion...I ran back to the Danube Embankment, where a huge crowd had gathered. It was a terrible sight. On the Pest side two arches of the bridge had collapsed. Trams, cars and hundreds of people had fallen into the river. Two shattered carriages of the number 6 tram jutted out of the water and the moans of the injured could be heard. Bodies were hanging from the railings, and in the swirling water there were dead and wounded. Ships, boats and police craft were trying to save whoever they could. About 800 people had been on the bridge at the time of the explosion.

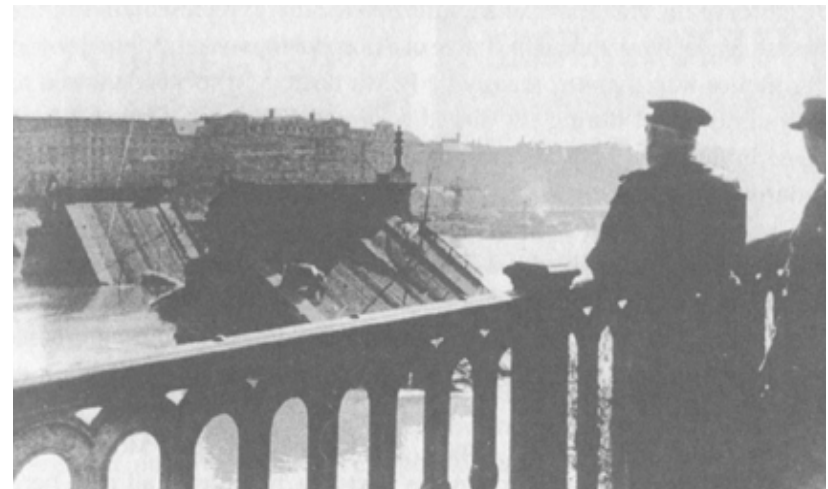
The exact number of victims is still unknown: a contemporary inquiry cites some 600. According to the same inquiry, the blast occurred because the Germans had been installing primed charges on the bridge as an exercise and the fuse had been ignited by a spark from a passing vessel. The dead included 40 German pioneers fitting the charge.

Various directives to evacuate the suburbs of Pest appeared in succession. On 10

November orders were given for the evacuation of the most sensitive areas - Kispest, Pestszenterzsébet, Pestszentlőrinc and Soroksár - but only a few inhabitants moved to the central districts of the city. Ten days later the order was rescinded, because no accommodation for the evacuees could be found. On 4 December the evacuation of Csepel was decreed, but the effort failed owing to the protests of the population. By the time the encirclement was completed on 27 December some 100,000 people had fled from the capital, but the majority preferred to stay behind. Sandor Magyarossy, the government's Commissioner for Evacuation, notes:

The evacuation ordered on 26 November was mainly obstructed by the sabotage of MÁV as only 35 carriages out of 353 earmarked for the evacuation were delivered... Neither the boilermen nor the engine drivers showed up at the station...The overwhelming majority of the city's population, rather than fleeing, chose the horrors of occupation by the Bolshevik horde.

The Russian colony in Budapest continued to function even during the siege. Its members included a number of historic figures: Count Kutuzov-Tolstoy, General Shulgin, the last adjutant of the Czar, and Count Pushkin, the pastor of the Pravoslav parish. Kutuzov-Tolstoy, as representative of the Swedish Embassy, remained in charge of a hospital for severely injured Soviet prisoners of war, manned mainly by Polish doctors, who were allowed to work undisturbed during the siege. A niece of Winston Churchill also stayed in Budapest and was most distressed by the temporary loss of her favourite dog.



(Colonel-General Hans Friessner surveying the wreck of Margit Bridge, 4 November 1944)

Civilians were first drafted to build defences on 7 November. Fifteen thousand people assembled in Kispest, but - as a result of air raids, artillery fire and lack of organisation - dispersed even before they started work. No further action of this kind was undertaken in earnest. On 19 November only a few hundred reported for duty, despite the statutory obligation to do so.

The Arrow Cross Lord Mayor of Budapest, Gyula Mohay, was inaugurated on 14 November. On the next day, he ordered all men born between 1912 and 1923 to go to the earthworks. Only some 500 turned up because, as was discovered later, those drafted early in November had been 'informed after walking several kilometres to the assembly point that the order had been rescinded'. On 20 November in Csepel only 200 people could be recruited. Many police and gendarmerie officers had either been transferred to the fighting units or decided to sabotage the pointless orders, and without their participation the civilians could not be forced to work. From the beginning of December, Arrow Cross Party activists appeared in all private and public offices and demanded from each employee a day's voluntary labour. However, the population remained totally passive.

By winter 1944, Budapest was being described as a 'second Stalingrad', both in Hungarian military reports and in Soviet propaganda leaflets dropped from the air. It is no coincidence that on 23 December the command of the Hungarian I Army Corps ordered the introduction of a special badge for the defenders along the lines of the Crete, Africa, Crimea and other combat badges of the German army. The Germans planned a similar badge for Budapest, of which a prototype was found during the breakout: it showed the imperial eagle enthroned above the burning royal castle, and a sky full of aircraft and parachutes carrying canisters. The Arrow Cross government further intended to create a decoration called Cross of the Heroes of Budapest,³ but by February 1945 there was hardly anybody left to whom it could have been awarded. Thanks to bureaucratic delays even those few Hungarian soldiers who had escaped from the city failed to receive it.

In November the food situation began to worsen. Some items were available only at irregular intervals, and fresh meat became a rarity. Because of administrative deficiencies even existing stocks could not be used effectively. The large pig farm in Teteny was suddenly evacuated on 10 December, and many animals escaped to nearby Kamaraerdo Forest. One shocked eye-witness recalls:

People were sawing at the throats of the poor animals with pen knives and dragging them away

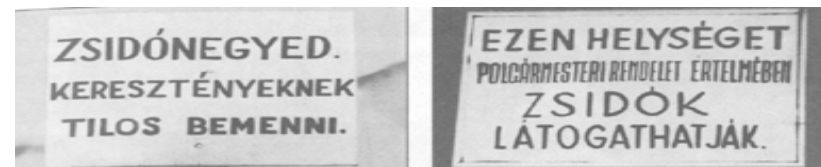
half dead. Those pigs still alive were licking the blood of the others in their hunger, while their heads were being bashed in with rocks. A soldier also took part in this terrible hunt. People were asking him to shoot the pigs and he bumped them off for 50-100 pengos. It was like one of those summer restaurants where people choose the poultry scratching about in the courtyard before it ends up on their plate as roast chicken.

On 23 December Szalasi asked the German Army Group South for help. This is how he describes the plight of the population:

I have been informed by Minister Kovarcz that it is not possible to guarantee supplies to the capital from the capital's own stocks, which are, in fact, catastrophic. The number of deaths by starvation is already alarmingly high, particularly among children. In addition, hunger riots must also be expected.

On 24 December Endre Rajk, the Arrow Cross Secretary of State and brother of the communist leader László Rajk who was later executed by his own comrades, reported that food supplies would last only 12 days. The rations had been reduced several times since the Arrow Cross had come to power: by mid-December people were receiving 150 grammes of bread a day and at Christmas, 120 grammes of meat. The International Red Cross's offer of food aid worth 50 million pengos was rejected by Szalasi because of the condition that part of it be delivered to the ghetto.

In that year, many families in Budapest decorated their Christmas trees with anti-radar aluminium strips dropped by British and US aircraft, while others, lacking firs, decorated fig trees. Midnight mass was held in the afternoon. Instead of visiting each other, people telephoned.



(notices on the ghetto wall – left: Jewish Quarter, Christians forbidden to enter; right: On the mayor's orders, Jews may enter this locality)

The evening's sensation came over the phone. We called the family we had spent 15 October with in Pasarét... They said that some strangers had arrived in front of their villa. We understood from this hint that the strangers could only be Russians...Half an hour later three or four others called us, asking if we had heard. Naturally each time the reports became more and more sensational. Some thought that the Russians were at Széll Kálmán Square, others even believed that Russian advance

guards had reached the Buda end of Margit bridge.

Similar news arrived from Széher Road in the Kurucles quarter: 'They are here. So far there are no problems. I must stop because they are coming again. In a day or two it'll also be over for you, and then we can talk. The majority of the population had no idea what the siege of a capital city meant as they watched events naively and passively. Ensign István Szalay remembers the bizarre mood:

On 25 December people brought Christmas pastry with nuts and poppy seeds on dishes and baking trays and distributed it indiscriminately among us soldiers. They brought something from every house and apartment and asked us what we knew about the military situation. I am sure they were not expecting defeat.

On the same day, during mass, Bishop István Zadravetz reprimanded his congregation as if they themselves had invited the Soviets in: 'You, you are to blame for this terrible Christmas we are having'. The last trams started from Széll Kálmán Square in the morning, but during the day most were hit by shells, and public transport ceased entirely. Nevertheless, some people still did not want to face facts. Ervin Galántay, the 14-year-old dispatch runner of the Vannay Assault Battalion, tried to arrest a conductor who had told him that the Russians were already at Budagyöngye, for panic-mongering. After Christmas organised food supplies ceased almost completely. As the population had not been prepared for a prolonged siege, most people began to starve after a few days. Many survived only thanks to the 30,000 or more horses that had been brought to the city by the Hungarian and German cavalry and artillery units. The fodder had run out by early January and the starving animals - reduced to nibbling the woodwork in the churches and shops serving as stables - had to be put out of their misery in any case. By the end of January, with only horse meat and carrots or peas available, the soldiers were also starving. The greatest problem, however, was the distribution of what food there was. Some people were positively feasting, while others had hardly anything to eat. Reinhard Noll, an NCO of the 22nd SS Cavalry Division, writes:

Our life was full of contradictions. There was barely enough water for a soup a day, but the best spirits were available in huge quantities. We got only one slice of army bread a day, but were fully supplied with lard, jam and the like...The most expensive Hungarian cigars we had never even heard of surrounded us in our cellars by the case. I became a chain smoker, otherwise I couldn't have survived this last great nervous strain.

Some bureaucrats were not prepared to open their stores without orders, even as the Soviets were approaching. Officer Cadet Norbert Major's requests, for example,

were refused at the food store in Lehel Street, although enemy machine guns were already firing in the neighbouring streets: 'Leave me alone with such defeatist talk. Who do you think you are? In three months the siege will still be on, and what am I going to give the people then,' the store commander told Major, who nevertheless succeeded in 'liberating' a few cases of supplies behind the commander's back.

Civilians were forbidden on pain of death to touch the contents of the canisters dropped by parachute, and the penalty was actually carried out by some of the German units. Often the water shortage could only be alleviated by melting snow, but this could also be fatal because soldiers of both sides would open fire indiscriminately on any civilians who ventured out of doors. Many civilians were killed by hand-grenades or phosphorus thrown through cellar windows. On 26 December Hindy addressed the population over the radio, describing the seriousness of the situation but promising that the capital would be relieved shortly. On 30 December he sent the following dispatch to the Minister of Defence and the Honved Army's chief of staff:

Food supplies to the army and the civilian population in the first week of January will be catastrophic. Today I have been informed that supplies to the ghetto, which is said to contain 40,000-60,000 Jews, have ceased completely and as a consequence the Jews are restless. If these Jews were driven by hunger to break out of the ghetto the consequences could be very unpleasant. For the time being I have ordered some cornflour to be delivered to the ghetto...The population of the capital, according to information received, regards the situation as desperate... In the city the wildest rumours are circulating. Several days ago I and my staff officers, as well as the German general staff, were said to have left Budapest by air... The masses, while not expecting the Russians to come as liberators, have been reduced by the barrage to such a state that they are at least resigned to Soviet occupation. The local patriotism of the citizens of Budapest is so great that they are not crying about their own fate but are desperate about the destruction of the city...



(Siege food: civilians carving up a dead horse)

Neither the officers nor the privates expect to be relieved any longer... The majority of the officers are carrying out their tasks dutifully. Some would like to save their own skin unnoticed, but the serious and disciplined officers have been talking about the possibility of a breakout and have submitted serious and thoughtful proposals to me. Naturally I am unable to express an opinion on these proposals, particularly as I am not in charge of the defence of Budapest and can only suggest possibilities to the commander of the German IX SS Army Corps who, in response to my request, has informed me today that there are no plans for a breakout.

The Hungarian command was rarely kept informed about events by the Germans. On 31 December Hindy did not even know whether the purpose of the promised German counter-offensive was to free the capital or to rescue the garrison. In an attempt to clarify matters he cabled the Minister of Defence: 'The strength of the people of Budapest is rapidly declining. To inspire them psychologically with the will to persevere, I consider it necessary to issue a proclamation. For this proclamation I request an appropriate situation report based on concrete facts.'

During the relief attempts in January, the Hungarian command set up the Henkei Group as a crisis-management unit which was due to deliver 'food supplies in the event of the liberation of Budapest'. The supplies would have been transported by train to Bicske and Dorog and then by road to the capital. Within six hours of the relief it would have been possible to dispatch three consignments, weighing in total about 1000 tonnes, which would easily have satisfied the needs of the population, and the lorries would also have been used to evacuate civilians. On 14 February, the day

after the capture of Buda, the group was dissolved.

Hindy received visits from representatives of various embassies and the International Red Cross, and from Angelo Rotta, the Papal Nuncio. Rotta had sent the Arrow Cross Foreign Minister, Gábor Kemény, sharp notes condemning the deportation of Jews on 13 November and 23 December. On 27 December, jointly with the Swedish ambassador, he tried to persuade Hindy to stop the fighting, but Hindy sent him away, saying that he did not have the power to do so.

The International Red Cross, in a cable of 6 January, requested the German and Soviet commands to permit the evacuation of the civilian population, and suggested a ceasefire of limited duration for that purpose. Hitler agreed in principle, but asked the military for their opinion.²⁹ The German command, afraid of unauthorised actions by the Hungarians, advised the Hungarian Minister of War, Károly Beregfy, that there could be no negotiations until orders were given from above. The Soviets in turn may have balked at the prospect of the garrison being able to divide its scarce supplies among smaller numbers after the evacuation of the civilians. In any case the Red Cross's proposal came to nothing.

On 3 February Rotta and his secretary, Archbishop Gennaro Verolino, called on Pfeffer-Wildenbruch. Verolino recalls:

Wherever we went, wounded were lying in every room and in every corridor, and operations were in progress on ordinary tables. We heard moaning and whimpering everywhere. It was hell. Eventually we reached the German general somewhere in the depths of his bunker, and he said: 'If anybody wants to defect to the Russians, he can. The Danube is frozen, one can walk across the ice.'

When the shocked Rotta asked him why he would not agree to a ceasefire, Pfeffer-Wildenbruch said that he was not authorised to do so, but promised to apply to his superiors, although he must have known that this would not produce any results.

Relations between the Hungarian and German commands became more and more strained. Initially Hindy tolerated the insults of the Germans, noting only the most blatant cases in his reports: for example, on 30 December:

A German pioneer captain blithely blew up a barricade in Ostrom Street, regardless of the fact that he was also blowing a water pipe 800mm in diameter sky high. Consequently there has been no water in the Castle for three days... I have reported this to the commander of the IX SS Mountain Army Corps... But, given my experiences so far, I do not expect my protest to bear any fruit... As a rule the Germans not only behave aggressively, but they also flatly refuse to give the names of their units, threaten the employees of industrial installations with their weapons, and any vehicles and fuel they commandeer by armed force are of course lost for ever...

I myself get on well with the commander of the German army corps and his chief of staff. We have never had any differences of opinion that could have interfered with our co-operation. As it is he who has been given the task of defending Budapest, I consider it natural that I should comply with all his

wishes and lend him a helping hand with everything... Nevertheless I must also report that by now the commanders of all the Hungarian units have appeared in front of me and asked me to take over the tactical command.

In reality, the two commands were hardly on speaking terms. Pfeffer-Wildenbruch never consulted the Hungarians, and only informed them of his plans and orders after the event. Hindy's growing bitterness shows in his reports about the plight of the capital in the daily reports he submitted in mid-January:

The lack of fighter aircraft protection was decisive in the destruction of Budapest. Among the civilian inhabitants fear of death is relegating all other questions to the background; their fate and plight are desperate. In many places the city centre is now only a pile of burning ruins.

1. In the southern parts of the Pest bridgehead only the strongpoints are still holding on. With enemy pressure increasing further, Buda can soon expect a similar fate. 2. The constant air raids and bombardment by mortars and artillery are causing immeasurable losses to the massed troops and matériel. 3. The streets are blocked by huge heaps of rubble. There is no hope of clearing them. 4. The water supply is exhausted. At the few wells there are huge queues. 5. Infestation by lice is spreading rapidly. 6. Many German soldiers have acquired civilian clothes. 7. Lieutenant-General Kalandy has been badly wounded. 8. The combat value of the troops is deteriorating by the hour, most noticeably among the German troops.

Hindy finally lost his patience on 30 January, when the Germans reported that the majority of the Hungarian army and gendarmerie had defected to the Soviets. Beregfy had sent the text to Hindy, demanding an investigation. Hindy's reply includes the following:

Civilians, bombed out of their homes and shelters, stripped of their possessions, and tormented by hunger, lack of water and both friendly and enemy fire, are increasingly expressing their hatred of the Germans and the Arrow Cross through an unstoppable whispering campaign, because they regard their own suffering and the destruction of the capital as pointless. They hate the appearance of our own soldiers in the shelters, where Russians have distributed cigarettes and brought water to civilians on some occasions. Therefore the Russians are awaited as liberators by many. The Russians respond to every military movement by shelling, but they do not fire on civilians. The concerted Russian propaganda is also confirmed by the behaviour of the Germans towards the Hungarian civilians and soldiers.

More than once Hungarian civilians and soldiers have been arrested by the SS for no apparent reason and kept in the most terrible conditions until they were freed by the Hungarian I Army Corps...Officers have been insulted and beaten without cause. During attacks the Germans lag behind, goading the Hungarian soldiers ahead with their arms, while German units rob the

Hungarians' barracks. Unarmed workers have been forced to take part in attacks simply in order to create a commotion, and have suffered bloody losses in consequence.

After citing further examples of German brutality and emphasising the daring of various Hungarian units, he declares that the defending army is at the end of its tether and even the best officers' nerves can no longer bear the siege. His reports in early February are equally explicit:

The Germans have turned the Capuchin Church in Corvin Square into stables. Relatives of soldiers and other civilians, tormented by hunger, setting aside all modesty and shame, are calling at the command posts and the kitchens of the Hungarian units to beg.

The Germans are taking the civilians drafted for labour to the front line. Enemy fire is causing casualties and obstructing their work. In most cases they return home under mortar and infantry fire without having done any work. Looting of private homes is on the increase.

According to the Germans only minimal food supplies are arriving by air. They do not pass any of these on, but where possible even seize the scarce supplies issued for the civilians or made available, under inadequate surveillance, by the Hungarian army's collecting agencies...It is impossible to resist the more and more frequent requisitions and robberies by numerous armed Germans behind the front line. The mood of the civilians is desperate. Their relations with the Hungarian soldiers are good, but they dislike the Germans because of their aggressive behaviour. The civilians no longer see the Germans as a liberating army. They say that was a fairy tale.

Hindy's reports were somewhat one-sided - the morale of the Hungarian units was worse than that of the Germans, and military co-operation as a rule presented no problems at the lower level. What the reports reveal is that the Hungarian general regarded the continuing defence of Budapest as senseless and even culpable, although he still failed to break ranks with the Germans.

Work at the metropolitan public utilities ceased comparatively late, because most of the plants (water, gas and electricity) fell into Soviet hands gradually. Gas supplies broke down on 28 December, water supplies on 3 January. Telephone connections continued to function until the end of December, and in some places - particularly near the Buda telephone exchanges - even until the beginning of the breakout in February. Electricity supplies finally failed on 30 December after the loss of the Kelenföld and Révész Street sites. During the artillery bombardments gas pipes were frequently damaged: the main under Vémező Meadow, for example, caught fire and the flames shooting out of the ground presented a ghostly spectacle for days.

Despite the breakdown of telephone links the population continued to receive information about events in the city. News about the death of the Soviet parley delegates or the capture of the notorious Arrow Cross leader Father Alfred Kun, for example, reached the deepest cellars in Buda. When a red German parachute got

caught on the dome of the Parliament Building, rumours spread like wildfire. Most took it for a Soviet flag, while some embroidered the narrative further, claiming that the Hungarian standard with the Virgin Mary (patron saint of Hungary) was hanging next to the Soviet.

For weeks, the cellars of the large apartment blocks sheltered hundreds of thousands, although many people 'on the run' did not go there even during the bombardments, because they had reason to fear that some of the others would denounce them.

The worst thing about the shelters was that they had only been designed for short air raids and not for large crowds staying there day and night for weeks on end. Therefore most only held a few benches, some firefighting equipment and a first-aid cabinet. Sometimes a wireless was later added to this primitive equipment...People moved into the shelters in stages. The first were usually families with small children, who would have had difficulty running down to the cellar from the third or fourth floor when the air raids began, and then back up again. The lifts in most apartment blocks had not been working since December...The better shelters were tiled or plastered. Almost everywhere the breath of so many people condensed on the walls, and the ceilings were constantly dripping.

The greatest conflicts among the occupants erupted over cooking, water carrying and washing. Only a few buildings had a well of their own, so that drinking water had to be brought mostly from far away and in life-threatening conditions. By the end of December, the Káposztásmegyer waterworks had fallen into Soviet hands, and water for Pest could be obtained only from the wells near the Parliament Building and on Margit Island. First Lieutenant Vladimir Oldner claims that the Soviet troops did not prevent supplies reaching the unoccupied parts of the city even after the capture of the waterworks, but this is contradicted by many other recollections.

The population of Buda obtained water from the medicinal springs near Gellért-hegy Hill and from wells drilled under residential buildings, which were more numerous than today and which increased substantially in number during the siege. In some places, however, for example in the Castle District, the shortage became catastrophic. Normally, between 15 and 20 families had to share a cooker for cooking and heating water. Those with foresight organised communal cooking, which reduced not only the preparation time but was also more economical and had the further advantage that meals did not create a sense of inequality. Where communal cooking was absent there were more conflicts. People eating in secret to avoid provoking others sometimes gave themselves away by the sound of chewing in the night.

Following the breakdown of water supplies, the lavatories also stopped working. Where people tried to use them regardless, the dried-out drains soon discharged a suffocating stench. The toilets are full, now it's the turn of the baths, but some guys wrap it in paper and burn it in the stove' is how Blanka Péchy lists the remaining

alternatives in her diary. Because of the excrement lying around everywhere, by January there was a risk of epidemics in the shelters.

The ever-growing quantities of refuse caused similar problems. After the collapse of the public disposal system the inhabitants began to carry their accumulated household waste to the streets and parks. It was not until summer 1945 that the mountains of rubbish began to be cleared away.

On 26 December the Arrow Cross Mayor of Budapest had broadcast instructions for the party leaders in the various districts and their families to report to the Danube side of Gellért-hegy Hill on the following morning, in order to attempt a breakout in the city's buses, for which Hindy had promised the assistance of the Hungarian army. However, Pfeffer-Wildenbruch had forbidden the action.

In fact, the majority of Arrow Cross members had already tried to leave earlier. Wilhelm Hottl, the representative in Hungary of the Reichs-sicherheitshauptamt, and Norbert Orendy, commander of the Arrow Cross secret police, had departed on 24 December together with the majority of the German security service and the Gestapo. Adolf Eichmann, head of the Reichssicherheitshauptamt's section in charge of Jewish affairs, had flown out on 23 December after visiting the office of the Jewish Council in the ghetto for unknown reasons. By the time the encirclement was completed on 27 December, only a few district leaders had been left behind. Lieutenant-Colonel Bela Almay, one of the last to leave Budapest by air, recalls: 'I had orders to report to the Minister for Total Mobilisation (Emil Kovarcz) in the Castle at 8 o'clock every morning... Amazingly, we found nobody there...The strongboxes open...A complete mess...Some drunk Arrow Cross men said: "They all scrambled during the night."

The Arrow Cross Party had split into several armed factions. Two of these, the Armed National Service and the Party Service, had actually been fighting each other, and on 24 December members of the latter had kidnapped the commander-in-chief of the former. After the flight of the Arrow Cross potentates the power of the uncontrolled party militia, restrained neither by the police nor by the military, had become almost absolute.

The post of Chief District Commander had been temporarily taken by Kurt Rechmann, before Szalasi tried to end the chaos by appointing Imre Nidosi (who proceeded to call himself Budapest Arrow Cross Party Police Chief in his edicts) head of the capital's party organisation, and the chemistry student Erich Csiky military commander of Budapest, although neither was given any practical function. On 9 January Erno Vajna (brother of Interior Minister Gabor Vajna), who had arrived in Budapest on 1 January as Szalasi's personal representative, made both of them lieutenant-colonels, while styling himself Party Representative for the Defence of Budapest. The party saw fit to announce these appointments by posters in the deserted streets.

The organs responsible for internal security, apart from those Gestapo sections left in the city, were the Armed National Service, the Party Service and a detachment of the Arrow Cross secret police. Almost 25 per cent of the Party Service were convicted criminals. Vilmos Kröszl, party chief of the XIV District, for example, had stolen the car of a Wehrmacht unit. The Arrow Cross secret police not only spied on, arrested and tortured real and supposed enemies of the system, but also investigated various right-wing individuals, even opening a file on SS Obergruppenführer Winkelmann, which was only closed after his vigorous protests.

Relations between the Arrow Cross Party and the Germans were neutral, but those between the Arrow Cross and the Hungarian military were extremely tense. Honved Army officers despised the Arrow Cross 'proles, who missed no opportunity to demonstrate that they were now in charge. The Arrow Cross mob loathed both the semi-feudal Hungarian social system and the officer class. It was no coincidence that some of the first measures of the Arrow Cross regime were to abolish the exalted status of officers and to enable NCOs to be promoted.

Some gendarmes, previously regarded as reliable, had also joined the party. Sergeant Feher of the Galantai Gendarmerie Battalion, for example, let slip that the Arrow Cross was using him to do the 'rough work' during interrogations, and defended his actions by saying that he had been promised an officer's rank as a reward. Another sergeant, blameless before he joined the Arrow Cross, dragged a Jew whose boots had taken his fancy out of a group of prospective deportees and chained him to his bed until he found time to kill him on the following morning.⁵⁰ The same sergeant participated daily in the ill-treatment of Jewish prisoners.

The excesses of Arrow Cross gangs did not even spare the Hungarian military. Lieutenant-Colonel Kern, for example, was killed at his combat post in the Ludovika Academy because he had refused to hand his car over to them. 'Burn him, boy,' one of the Arrow Cross men said to his adjutant, who took his submachine gun from his shoulder and emptied the magazine into the lieutenant-colonel, before the lieutenant-colonel's adjutant shot the 'boy' dead and wounded his companion with his own submachine gun.

The Arrow Cross terror also threatened diplomats and others who issued protective documents. On 17 November 1944, for example, Arrow Cross militiamen grievously injured Jozsef Cavallier, the president of the Hungarian Holy Cross Association, by pushing his head through a window pane as a punishment for distributing passes from 'Stalin's friend, the Pope' to persecution victims. On 29 December party activist Father Kun robbed the Swiss charge d'affaires Harald Feller, after having him stripped to establish that he was not circumcised. Feller lodged a complaint with Csiky, who had earlier been employed by a Swiss firm, and Hindy returned his 100 Napoleon gold coins with apologies.

All the licensed newspapers of the Arrow Cross and other right-wing groups

continued to appear until Christmas Day. In the early part of January the dailies *Új Magyarország* and *Összetartás* were printed. Later on, the daily *Budai Összetartás* published from 22 January to 11 February, and *Budapester Kesselnachrichten*, published since the beginning of the encirclement, served as the official 'fortress press'. The few incomplete copies of these papers still in existence are regarded as rarities of press history. The following extracts are from *Budai Összetartás*, published by the Arrow Cross in the XI District:

[22 January:] Apartment block commanders must collect rents and pay outstanding property taxes to the district tax office immediately, as war relief can be disbursed only if the corresponding funds are at the tax office's disposal.

[24 January:] The owners of shops selling horse meat are informed that slaughter may be carried out only in the Bicskei Street garage, under supervision of the medical officer. Slaughter time is 8am. A well-digging team commanded by technical director Ferenc Fancsaly has been formed and will begin digging wells in successive groups of buildings in the district.

[27 January:] A maternity clinic has been opened... Sign writers are to report to the party.

[5 February:] Life was beautiful, but is still beautiful with all its sufferings, sacrifices and tribulations. If you lose heart, brother, think of the words of Ferenc Szalasi: 'Without Good Friday there is no resurrection.' This is Budapest's Good Friday... Lajos Dövényi Nagy.

[7 February:] Pumping the water of the Gellert Baths up into the water-supply network and repairs to the network have enabled water supplies to resume on both sides of Horthy Miklós Road...In Budapest under siege a new type of woman is being born: her face is no longer covered in lipstick and powder, but in soot and lime dust. It is the soot of burning houses and the lime dust of collapsing walls, but it becomes her better than any cosmetics, for it bears witness to her heroic soul.

[9 February:] Deputy Prime Minister Jenő Szökö published a message to the people of the capital in the Budai Összetartás newspaper. Subsequently the paper repeatedly and emphatically reminded block administrators to remit rents immediately to the City Council. State employees could collect their salary at the same location.

Today it is almost unimaginable that the activities mentioned in the paper could be kept up under the daily barrage and air raids. It seems grotesque that people were required to pay property tax when 80 per cent of the buildings had suffered damage of some sort.

Béla Almay, as mentioned above, was one of the last to be flown out of Budapest. This is what he saw:

The streets are deserted, the shops closed, the people in the unheated cellars. Gas is not available and electricity only in a few places in Pest. Demolitions by non-experts often make the water pipes unusable for days. Since 1 January the population has been receiving 50 grammes of bread a day. As from 31 December all the horses are being slaughtered. Food supplies cannot last longer than 10-14

days, even if systematically collected. The hospitals are unheated. There is not even enough fuel for the operating theatres. The deprivations of the population are beyond imagination.

Conditions were worst in the sick bays. Thousands of civilian and military wounded were lying in the cellars of the Parliament Building, the Museum of Military History, the State Printing Press and the Castle District. Klára Ney, a local resident whose brother had been hit by a shell-splinter while fetching water, reports:

At the Szentbármóság Street entrance, on the top step, we are overpowered by the rising heat and stench. No wonder, for on the stairs leading two floors down into the cellar dead bodies are lying on stretchers. Since they bricked up the Lovas Road entrance...the temperature has been 30 degrees Celsius... The patients are lying on the floor on both sides, with only a narrow passage between them. It takes my breath away. I can't see Gyurka anywhere, although we are almost beside his bed. We didn't recognise him! Like all the patients here, he is lying in the infernal heat stark naked. In nine days he hasn't been washed once. If he finally gets his cup of soup or vegetable it's after several hours' delay...Nobody cares. Some people practically starve to death...

The inner section of the public shelter...was appropriated by the Germans as a 'military hospital' during the second week of the siege. The sick bay in the rock, a scene of terrible suffering, is a paradise of civilisation and hygiene compared with this 'military hospital'. There is some electric light here, but nothing else. Gloomy passages, branching out in all directions. People crammed together in indescribable filth and misery. Under the bare rock faces on the black soil human wrecks, with only one arm or one leg, disfigured by wounds, are lying literally one on top of the other on makeshift pallets contrived from planks, doors and stretchers... In addition, everything is positively crawling with millions of lice.

After Christmas a number of motherless babies were left in the maternity ward of a hospital, where it was becoming impossible to feed them for lack of mother's milk and other nutrients. In despair the nurses clutched the babies to their breasts, so that they might at least enjoy the comfort of a warm human body before fading away. After a while the nurses found themselves producing milk, and the babies were saved from starving to death.

The civilians were obliged to watch the killing and the destruction of their city for weeks without being able to intervene. On 2 January a Soviet incendiary bomb set the roof of the Parliament Building alight, with flames tinted an unearthly shade of blue and green by the melting lead covering. The explosions of German and Hungarian ammunition stores caused a great deal of damage: a six-storey building in Klotild Street blew up on 13 January, a building used by Germans in Rothermere Street (today Balaton Street) on 15 January, and the Regent Building on the corner of Margit Boulevard and Bimbo Road on 22 January. These disasters alone claimed about 1200 lives. In an area near the front line László Deseő, aged 15, recorded the progress of

the tragedy, hour by hour, in his diary:

7 February... The front has arrived. They are installing machine guns on both balconies of the upper floor. In my room they wanted to set up an automatic cannon. I was talking with one of the Germans in the hall when a mine exploded in front of the door and the German collapsed. A splinter had neatly shaved his fingers off down to the roots. The poor devil is screaming.

They are carrying firewood from the garden to build barricades in the windows. They are also putting furniture into the windows. While they build a barricade in one room I pull it down in the other...

8 February...The wounded are innumerable. In the house opposite there are Russian snipers, if anyone appears at the window he is shot at...Wagner [a press-ganged ethnic German private] is badly wounded. Only two hours ago he admitted, laughing, that he had been responsible for the destruction of the whole house, because he could just as well have led the horses into the empty cellar next door. There is heavy firing throughout the evening.

9 February... Half past eight in the morning. I am standing near the stairs to the cellar. A little while ago 17 Germans arrived to defend the house, among them an SS man of English origin. Five of them are standing next to me. We are not talking. They are very nervous. They smoke one cigarette after the other. Their hands are shaking. They load their submachine guns. One is a pilot. His plane was shot down and now he is one of the defenders. A large signal pistol is dangling at his side... So far two have asked for permission to put on civilian clothes. On the upper floor it's OK, but down here in the shelter we don't allow them to change...

10 February... At 10.05 they are bandaging a German wounded by a grenade. He has thigh and hand wounds. I've had a look at them. The blood doesn't bother me any more. A splinter has torn off his fingernail down to the bone. You can see the bone...At half past five they sit down in the big cellar. They won't negotiate. The cellar must now be constantly guarded.

At six they demand a kilo of potatoes and they get it. It's impossible to refuse them. One of the German wounded told me that the wounded are dying like abandoned dogs, nobody takes care of them. A man called Janos Schreiber who was wounded some time ago can't walk yet and says that he has to hide from the Germans because with his leg he wouldn't be able to escape from the Russians and so the Germans would probably shoot him. The man wounded last night... didn't get any supper because his mates gave him nothing and said they too were only getting food once a day. They gave the poor devil a few spoonfuls of bean soup, but only because my father asked them several times. He is very afraid that his mates will shoot him when the Russians get close. The situation of the wounded is indescribably bad. In the apartment there are already six dead horses. Apparently six are still alive.

10 February...A quarter to ten. One of the soldiers looked out of the lounge window (curiosity killed the cat), bang, shot in the head. When I was trying to crawl through the lounge underneath that window (I didn't fancy showing myself) I accidentally put my hand in the bloody brain matter that had spilled on the floor. At lunch I remembered I hadn't washed my hands, but went on eating calmly. Washing hands is a luxury... They are shooting from the shelter stairs. This is how I imagined war to be. But now I'm pretty fed up with it.

The mortar fire is intense. In the caretaker's flat there are already four dead bodies. In the shelter you sometimes can't see anything because of the lime dust. The lamp swings for a long time. The light is refracted by the specks on the plaster. Deathly silence. Then again the rattle of machine guns, mines exploding. Today we didn't even light a fire because the chimney is so shot up that we wouldn't be able to stand the smoke. Krisztina Church is in Soviet hands, the house at number 50 also. I looked out on the street through the one remaining window. One can already see the Russian dead with the naked eye.

11 February. The Russians have reached the Preisingers' house, the third down the street. At 5 the Germans leave because they have heard that they are encircled and the Russians are attacking from Naphegy Hill...Half past 8. The Germans come back. At 9 they have gone again. The shelter is empty. I sneak up to have a look. In the apartment there are still Germans. Dead horses everywhere. The smell of blood with a whiff of cadaver smell, nicely mixed with smoke. It's cold. In the rooms the muck is knee high ...The Germans look rather frozen. They have become tame. They even inform me in a friendly manner that they will shoot me if I don't go back to the cellar, as civilians have no business to be in the front line. I assure them that it won't stay the front line long, and they calm down. Apparently the station has been set on fire.

11 February. The Germans finally leave the house.

12 February. At a quarter to three in the morning the first two Russians arrive. They look smart. They have machine guns. They are jolly...I go up into the apartment. One could bowl, walking through the rooms. There are eight dead horses in the apartment. The walls are red with blood as high as a man, everything is full of muck and debris. A room-sized section of the loft cover has fallen down. All doors, cupboards, furniture and windows are broken. Nothing is undamaged. The plaster is almost all gone. In front of the house there are abandoned German supply vehicles... From the bedroom window to the window in Katka's room the wall is missing. One steps over dead horses. The horses are soft and springy. If you jump up and down on them, small bubbles, hissing and bloody, rise near the bullet wounds.

13 February. When I was in the street a Russian handed me a wicker bottle and tried to make me go with him. Then the caretaker of the house next door came along, I gave the bottle to him and so the Russian led him away. I'd be interested to know where he took him.

Today the girls went to see Uncle Zoltán. Their house had been hit by eight bombs. They live in the Terffy villa. The Russians have robbed them massively. During the robbery they had been locked in a closet. They took 35,000 pengős, watches, food, clothes, simply everything.

14 February. In the morning four Russians came twice and robbed us. They broke open whatever was locked and took away an incredible amount of stuff. The horses are worrying us a lot. The cadavers are beginning to swell up because of the warmth.

15 February. I have heard from several sources that free looting is at an end. If you call an officer he will tell the looting Russki to get lost.

I have seen a Jew in Russian uniform. He looked really good in the Russian clothes.

In many places they are raping women. Women are being hidden everywhere.

On Rókus-hegy Hill almost all the villas had been destroyed. Böszörményi Road, Déli Station, Széll Kálmán Square and Margit Boulevard had been reduced to rubble. The villa on the site of today's Körszálló Hotel, where the Gestapo hoarded silver, gold, china, tapestry and carpets stolen from Jews, had been blown up and all the valuable objects ruined. The streets of the Castle District could hardly be found, and people were often walking on the roofs of the razed buildings. The author Sándor Márai describes the apocalyptic picture:

What I see in Obuda is at first sight horrifying, but after every hundred metres becomes more and more grotesque and improbable. The mind boggles. It is as if the wanderer were passing not through city districts but excavations. Some streets must be guessed at: this was the corner house with the Flórián Café, this is the street where I once lived - no trace of the building - this pile of rubble at the corner of Statisztika Street and Margit Boulevard was a five-storey block with many flats and a café a few days ago... Here is a wall of a building where friends used to live, there the remnants of a street, in Széll Kálmán Square the wrecks of trams, and then the devastation of Vérmező Meadow, the Krisztinaváros quarter, Naphegy Hill and the Castle.

The zoo also suffered heavy damage. Of the 2500 animals, only 14 survived. In the final week of the siege, when the hail of bullets had killed three attendants, all attempts at feeding ceased. Many animals were slaughtered by local residents for their meat. The glass walls of the palm garden were shattered by the shock waves of explosions, and in the pool behind it the crocodiles died when the heating system received a direct hit, although the hippos lying in the warm water of an intact artesian well were saved by their fat reserves. Several large carnivores escaped from their broken cages and devoured each other or were shot by soldiers in nearby gardens. A few birds of prey flew away and kept alive by scavenging carrion. One lion hid for weeks in the tunnels of the underground railway, eating stray horses, until a task force set up by the Soviet city commander, Lieutenant-General Ivan Terentevich Zamertsev, caught him. Two Shetland ponies disappeared in January but returned to their stable in March, after spending two months unscathed in the starving city. According to one source they had been abducted by a cart driver who brought them back after the siege because he was afraid of punishment.

All the sculptures in the capital's squares were disfigured by shrapnel and bullets, and many were completely destroyed. Some were demolished by Communist Party activists after the fall of the city. Others, including the bronze lions in front of the Parliament Building, were taken away by Soviet plunderers. The metal of an equestrian statue of the 1848 revolutionary Artúr Görgey was used to cast a statue of Stalin; half a century later it was recast and placed on the plinth of a former statue of Lenin in Felvonulás Square.

In the last tragicomic episode of the siege, on 1 March 1945, parliament adopted

Szálasi's recommendation to confer the title City of Heroic Resistance on Budapest by analogy with the Soviet title of Heroic City bestowed on Leningrad, Stalingrad and Moscow. After the fall of Budapest, Károly Beregfy, as commander-in-chief of the Honvéd Army, prepared a radio speech in tribute to the defenders, which was recorded by the security and propaganda section of the supreme command. A group of soldiers, on their way to deliver the recording to the radio station, stopped at a bar, where one of them, no doubt after a few drinks, sat on the disc and shattered it. The soldiers were probably saved from severe punishment by a first lieutenant of the propaganda section who was famous for his imitations of other people's voices and who happened to be there. He re-recorded the speech, and even Beregfy was unable to tell the difference.

2 The persecution of the Jews

'I would not wish any of these gentlemen to live in one of those houses.' (Gábor Vajna's report to the Hungarian parliament on the establishment of the International Ghetto.)

During the siege of Budapest, crimes sanctioned or tolerated by the state, and unparalleled anywhere else in Europe under Nazi rule, were committed against Hungarian Jews.

After the failure of Horthy's ceasefire attempt of 15 October 1944 the Arrow Cross regime immediately embarked on the 'final solution of the Jewish question'. By this time the only Hungarian Jews not deported to German concentration camps were those in the capital and in the forced-labour service. The deportation had been organised by Adolf Eichmann - who had come to Hungary in the wake of the German invasion of 19 March for that purpose - with the assistance of the Jewish Council that had been set up on German orders one day later.

On 18 October Eichmann reappeared in Budapest. The SD and the Gestapo took up quarters in the Royal Hotel in the Great Boulevard and the Mirabella, Majestic and Lomnic boarding houses on Svábhegy Hill near the terminus of the Cogwheel Railway. Gestapo official Hans Geschke, who had already proved his 'expertise' by murdering the population of Lidice, was appointed head of the SD in Hungary, and his colleague Alfred Trenker was appointed head of the SD in Budapest.

For Szalasi and his gang, making Hungary 'Jew-free' seemed to be more important than anything - perhaps even than winning the war. There can be no other explanation for their totally irrational behaviour, the sole purpose of which was to humiliate, eliminate and annihilate the Jews. This must have struck even some of the Arrow Cross leaders who, while failing to examine the ideological justifications of the inhuman measures taken, questioned their usefulness in the existing circumstances.

Gábor Kemény, the Arrow Cross Foreign Minister, for example, asked whether 'we are rich enough to lose four million working hours a day'. However, his fellow-ministers shouted him down, and later the Hungarian government actually complained to the German authorities for allowing Jewish forced labourers digging entrenchments along the German border to work on Hungarian soil, demanding their immediate removal.

The German leadership also insisted on deportation and constantly pressed the Hungarians to take action. On 21 November, for example, Foreign Minister Joachim Ribbentrop sent a first-class telegram to Edmund Veesenmayer, the Reich's representative in Hungary, urging him to explain to Szálasi that the speedy elimination of the Jews was essential for the defence of the capital. In reality Jews - with the exception of the Warsaw ghetto - hardly ever offered any organised resistance even on the verge of annihilation.

On 17 October, as a prelude to the deportation, the residents of buildings marked with stars in the VIII District received orders to assemble in the courtyards next morning. On 18 October they were marched, hands above their heads, along Rákóczy Road to the Tattersaal Racecourse north of Kerepesi Cemetery, and on 19 October to the Danube Embankment. When they were lined up facing the river a German officer stopped the imminent execution and they were sent home. In some buildings the assembly order had been delivered in surprise raids by police and Arrow Cross militia, who beat up the residents and even killed some who would not go at once. An old man at 6 Teleki Square who was unable to walk was dragged down the stairs from the fifth floor by his feet with a long trail of blood pouring from his broken skull, and left dead in the street.

The deportation marches to Germany began soon after. After a first stop at the Obuda brickworks, some 6000 Jews every day were made to set out on foot by three different routes and cover on average 30 kilometres, driven by Arrow Cross militia who openly killed and tortured many of them along the way. From 20 October the residents of marked buildings were rounded up to dig defence works regardless of their physical condition: they even included a man of 81. Most of the anti-tank ditches were made by them.



(Bombed out residents escaping, down the Great Boulevard, about 18 January 1945)

The first Jewish suicide was registered by the police at 7.32pm on 15 October. The first shooting beside the Danube was noted in the diary of the ambulance service on 23 November, although Jews had been shot there daily since 15 October. From 25 November police reports like the following multiplied:

Labour-service man Andras Pitschoff, 22, was recovered by police officers numbers 2017 and 2048 from the Danube with a gunshot wound. Jews were shot at Széchenyi Quay on the Danube and several got stuck in the canal.

A favourite place for mass executions was the Danube Embankment, although at night the Arrow Cross killers aimed badly, so that their captives were often able to jump into the icy Danube and clamber out at bridge ends or drain outlets. The following report of the Hungarian I Army Corps command reports such an incident in a characteristically roundabout way: 'In the early morning of 30 December a police officer on duty stopped 5 Jewish-looking men, running and soaked to the skin, who

were so confused that they were unable to say who they were or how they had fallen into the Danube'.

In retrospect one wonders how such inhuman conditions could have developed. Before the end of the siege a government official told the Swiss diplomat Carl Lutz that in the whole city there had been only 4000 armed Arrow Cross militiamen. Under normal circumstances, 4000 could not have terrorised a million. Nowhere in Nazi-occupied Western Europe were people publicly killed in large numbers merely because of their origins, and in the Soviet Union such events ceased after the early phases of the occupation. In Hungary nobody would have been called to account by the Germans for trying to prevent the slaughters, and the authorities would only have needed to abide by existing regulations. Nevertheless, the police, the gendarmerie and the military idly watched the Arrow Cross atrocities. This could not have happened without a deep and far-reaching moral crisis among the population, which may be illustrated here by a few contemporary notes:

The officer told us that the Jews had been stripped to their shirts, shot at the Danube Embankment and thrown into the water. 'The trouble is not that this was done', he said, 'but that some were left alive, because so long as they aren't completely exterminated they'll all turn into vindictive swine.'

Two deaconesses are having a conversation. One says: 'It's certain that the Arrow Cross are preparing something dreadful against the ghetto.' The other: 'I'm sorry for the poor people, but maybe it's just as well, because then they won't get a chance to take revenge.'

On the road a man joins me. He has fled from Lajosmizse and regrets it. 'I fell for the propaganda', he says. I assure him that he will soon be able to go home. He mumbles with embarrassment: 'I've got two acres of Jewish land. Do you think I'll be allowed to keep it?'

The Arrow Cross rulers' concern that the excesses of the militia might induce the population to pity the Jews is reflected in parliamentary deputy Karoly Maróthy's rider to his speech advocating executions: 'We must not allow individual cases to create compassion for them... Something must also be done to stop the death rattle going on in the ditches all day, and the population must not be allowed to see the masses dying... The deaths should not be recorded in the Hungarian death register.' A statement by the national Police Commissioner Pal Hodossy was in the same vein: 'The problem is not that Jews are being murdered, the only trouble is the method. The bodies must be made to disappear, not put out in the streets'. The behaviour of the Arrow Cross militia may be exemplified through two eye-witness accounts:

In one of the streets leading to the Danube I saw a column of 30-40 people, all in white. As they

approached I saw men and women in shirts, underpants and petticoats, with the snow and broken glass crunching under their bare feet. Appalled, I stopped in my tracks, and when they reached me asked one of the Arrow Cross men who they were. I shall never forget his cynical reply: 'The holy family.' I stood petrified for a long time, until the sound of submachine gun salvos from the Danube Embankment made me realise that it had been these people's last journey.

They were herding Jews along the Great Boulevard. Four or five Arrow Cross boys aged 14-16 were escorting them in Kecskeméti Street towards Erzsébet bridge. An old woman collapsed. Understandably, she couldn't cope with the march. One of the boys started to beat her with his rifle butt. I went up to him in my uniform : 'Haven't you got a mother, son? How can you do this?' - 'She's only a Jew, uncle', he said.



(Bodies in the garden of the Dohány Street Synagogue)



(Jews and Soviets: death of Hungary – contemporary poster)

Many Arrow Cross men had a 'token Jew' they treated well, whom they later tried to use as proof of their sympathy towards Jews when tried for war crimes. The law student Istvan Kelecsényi, head of the Arrow Cross Department for the Elimination of Jews and deputy director of the Anthropological Department in Charge of Racial Screening, was prepared to certify the Aryan descent of wealthy Jews, at a price. The wife of Gábor Vajna, the Interior Minister, became the party's national social organiser, although she had partly Jewish ancestors, and only resigned when her background had been discovered and her husband divorced her.

Occasionally the viciousness of the Arrow Cross militia revolted not only the generally indifferent Hungarian population but also some Germans. Pfeffer-Wildenbruch, for one, forbade his soldiers to take part in anti-Semitic actions. The German political leadership, however, found it convenient that somebody else was solving the 'Jewish question' even more brutally than they. Veessenmayer received instructions from Berlin to assist the Arrow Cross 'in every way' because it was 'in our particular interest that the Hungarians should now proceed against the Jews in the harshest possible manner'.

As a result of the Arrow Cross terror the number of Jews in Budapest declined by 105,453 between 15 October 1944 and 13 February 1945. Of some 50,000 'loan-Jews', who had been handed over to the Germans before the closure of the encirclement to build fortifications, about 7000 became Soviet prisoners and 6000 died outside the city. Forced labourers in uniform falling into Soviet hands had little

chance of being spared prison camp, and even after the siege the Soviets captured people regardless of whether or not they had been persecuted.

Most police and gendarmerie officers had disliked collaborating with the Arrow Cross from the outset. When party militiamen in Zugló, for example, noticed that they were recapturing more and more individuals whom they had earlier delivered to the police station, the party leaders in the area decided that any undesirable elements should be liquidated by their own men. The first multiple murder of this kind took place on 12 November after the opening ceremony of the party headquarters, when about a dozen prisoners were executed on the bank of the Rakos stream.

The only protest against these actions, which were theoretically illegal, came from the Angyalföld branch of the party, whose leader angrily objected to others leaving 'carcasses' in his district, where it was 'hard enough to justify their own to the population'. Among the murderers was a boy aged 15, who became an officer in the Hungarian air force after the war and was arrested in 1966, together with other members of his group, as a result of investigations into former Arrow Cross activists. He and his companions carried out continuous executions, preceded by savage torture and perversions. On Christmas Day alone they shot more than 50 people, and in total killed at least 1000-1200. The murders took place on the Danube Embankment, in Városliget Park, alongside the Rakos stream, on the backs of lorries circulating in the city, and in the laundry room of the party headquarters, where interrogations continued until the drain was blocked by clotted blood. The bodies were usually left at the scene as a deterrent. On the benches in Városliget Park and Stefánia Road so many had piled up in November that it took several days to remove them.

Practically all party activists were obliged to take part in tortures and executions, which served as a so-called 'loyalty test'. Boys aged 14-15 and women also participated in the bloodshed, the most notorious of the latter being Mrs Vilmos Salzer, 23, and the former nurse Piroska Deli. Party militiaman Péter Pál Katona, conducting a group of 1100 from the Obuda brickworks to the ghetto, personally shot 62 stragglers. Father Kun, who directed several bloodbaths, admitted after the siege to 500 murders. His order usually ran: 'In the name of Christ - fire!'

Some 8000 Jews had been exempt from persecution by special legislation. The Arrow Cross government reduced this number drastically. Seventy-one who had received the golden Hero's Medal in the First World War were awarded exceptional status by Szálasi, while 500 others were granted immunity by the Interior Ministry. Commissioned by the International Red Cross, the Swedish Embassy, under ambassador Carl Ivan Danielsson, was first to issue letters of safe conduct to Jews after the German invasion of 19 March. Subsequently Raoul Wallenberg, who had been sent to Hungary by the Swedish government and the US War Refugee Board, introduced special passes on his own initiative. These documents - which had come

into being without any legal foundation and were retrospectively approved by the Swedish government - stated that the Swedish Red Cross or the Swedish state had a particular interest in their holder, who was therefore under Swedish protection.



(Body on the Danube Embankment)

The various protection papers were honoured by the Sztójay government and also accepted by the new Foreign Ministry after Szalasi had come to power. Although the Foreign Minister, Gábor Vajna, had declared on 18 October that he did 'not recognise any letter of safe conduct or foreign passports received by a Jew of Hungarian nationality from anyone or anywhere', the Arrow Cross government, under pressure from the countries concerned, eventually recognised 34,800. In reality more than 100,000, either genuine or forged, were in circulation, and the embassies themselves significantly exceeded the permitted quotas. Various other methods of saving lives were developed by Wallenberg, who was among the first to establish 'protected houses' and organise supplies for their occupants, often risking his own life. Jews of military age were drafted into 'protected' labour-service companies, although on 29 November they were loaded into cattle trucks and handed over to the Germans.

Like the Swedes, the Swiss diplomat Carl Lutz, the Portuguese diplomat Carlos Branquinho and the Papal nunciature supplied protection papers. Friedrich Born, chief delegate of the International Red Cross, issued 1300 identity cards serving as letters of safe conduct. The B section of the Red Cross, directed by the evangelical pastor Gábor Sztéhlo, under the Good Shepherd Children's Action, set up 32 homes for children who had lost their parents, saving 1540 from deportation or death by starvation. In addition, the Red Cross ran 18 hospitals and emergency clinics. The El Salvador Embassy distributed 800 special certificates of citizenship, and the

Nicaraguan Embassy distributed 500.

The most daring rescues, perhaps, were accomplished by Giorgio Perlasca, the 'Spanish charge d'affaires'. Perlasca was actually an Italian citizen who had been interned on 19 March 1944 because of his anti-German views. After escaping he took refuge in the Spanish Embassy, where he joined the life-saving missions. The Arrow Cross tolerated the actions of the embassy, hoping that the Szálasi regime would be recognised by the Spanish dictator Francisco Franco. The Spanish charge d'affaires Angel Sanz-Briz had firm instructions to the contrary. He sent enthusiastic but meaningless statements to the Arrow Cross Foreign Ministry, where the truth remained unrecognised for a long time, which enabled the embassy to adopt a more aggressive approach than its Swedish and Swiss counterparts. It called the Arrow Cross to account for every single atrocity and demanded a special train for protected Jews, calculating that the regime, unable to meet these demands, would be prepared to make other concessions. On 29 November Sanz-Briz left for Spain, as the Arrow Cross's pressure for an unequivocal answer was beginning to make his position untenable. Before leaving he gave Perlasca a German visa and promised to help him escape through Switzerland. Perlasca, however, would not desert his charges. He told the Arrow Cross that Sanz-Briz had gone to complete the recognition formalities and left him behind as charge d'affaires designate. He was thus able to save the occupants of the Spanish protected houses, as they were about to be taken to the ghetto. Until the closure of the encirclement he constantly supplied the Foreign Ministry with misleading information and even resorted to blackmail, claiming that several thousand Hungarian hostages could be found in Spain if anything happened to his protégés. By the time his activities came to an end the number of Jews under his protection had grown from 300 to 5000.

When Perlasca confessed his lies to Angelo Rotta, the Papal Nuncio, he was only told not to mention them to Archbishop Verolino, who was 'so punctilious that he wouldn't be able to sleep afterwards'. However, when he later asked Rotta to threaten the Arrow Cross regime with breaking off diplomatic relations, the Nuncio replied that "he couldn't do it without asking the Vatican". Unable to bear this, I said a few sharp things about diplomats and ran away. I was so upset that I even forgot to kiss his ring.'

The case of Miksa Domonkos, a member of the Jewish Council, was equally bizarre. When an Arrow Cross gang tried to loot the council's headquarters in Sip Street immediately after Szálasi's coup of 16 October, he phoned gendarmerie superintendent László Ferenczy to ask for help. The superintendent, who was in charge of the deportation, merely replied: 'Everything is fine. Now the Jews have got what they wanted.' Nevertheless, Domonkos advised the Arrow Cross thugs to leave because Ferenczy was sending patrol cars, and they obeyed. Later on Domonkos, in captain's uniform, began to distribute 'official certificates' in Ferenczy's name, saving

many Jews from deportation and liberating several members of the Jewish Council from Arrow Cross captivity. He carried such authority that he was eventually appointed police chief of the ghetto, as he was thought to represent the Ministry of Defence and nobody realised that he was himself Jewish. When Arrow Cross militia operating in the neighbourhood captured Jews outside the ghetto they would deliver them to his 'command post' in Sip Street - if they did not shoot them on the Danube Embankment.

The anti-Jewish laws of 1942 had been supported in parliament by the representatives of Hungary's three principal churches. But by 1944, having witnessed the inhumanity of the deportation, many church organisations began to save Jews. In early summer the Reformed and Evangelical churches submitted a joint Protestant Memorandum to Prime Minister Sztójay, and on 29 June Cardinal Jusztinian Serédi wrote a circular condemning the persecutions. Sztójay responded by banning the publication of the memorandum and the reading in church of the circular. In the course of the summer - again without much public response - Bishop László Ravasz of the Reformed Church, followed by Serédi, repeatedly spoke out against the deportation. In a letter written five days after the Arrow Cross seizure of power, the bishop asked Szálasi to declare Budapest an open city, and in another, written on 1 December, to halt the persecutions. Smaller church organisations joined in rescue missions with the knowledge of church leaders. However, in many instances only selected groups - converts in particular - received assistance. The (police) Chief Constable of Budapest, Gyula Sédey, and his deputy, Gyula Gyulai, also tried to help the inmates of the ghettos. There were even a few humane Arrow Cross Party members who took part in rescue missions. Best known among these was Pál Szalai, who had left the party in 1942 and rejoined it after Horthy's ceasefire attempt, becoming its police-liaison officer. In this post he was able to do even more good than before. He banned the removal without official warrant of possessions from apartments vacated by Jews, thus preserving 50-60 per cent of movable property. He persuaded party organiser József Gera to protest against the atrocities and managed to set some police investigations in motion. He informed Wallenberg about a planned pogrom in the ghetto, and his deputy, Ferenc Perjési, actually moved into the ghetto in an attempt to improve conditions.

Ara Jerezian, a doctor of Armenian origin, had been the Arrow Cross's deputy youth leader until his expulsion in 1939. After the ceasefire attempt he decided to protect 1 Zichy Jenő Street. He rejoined the party and became its second deputy leader in the VI District. As the only functionary with legible handwriting, he was assigned the task of completing all the official warrants, which enabled him to save several lives. For 1 Zichy Jenő Street he obtained a protection certificate from the Swiss Embassy, and then procured orders from the Interior Ministry to convert the protected building into a Jewish hospital, although officially it was supposed to be a

free Arrow Cross clinic. More than 400 Jews, including 40 doctors, survived here.

On several occasions Jerezian avoided discovery thanks only to his presence of mind. In January 1945 an Arrow Cross commander with 30 armed men surrounded the building and arrested him, announcing that everybody inside would be massacred according to regulations. After invoking the Interior Ministry order in vain, Jerezian invited the commander to carry out an inspection. A group of people wounded by an exploding shell had just arrived, and the visitors were obliged to make their way past the beds of groaning and dying patients. Jerezian's report paints a somewhat romanticised picture of the outcome:

The nerve-racking inspection lasted almost an hour and a half, after which he returned my pistol and asked me to summon the doctors... Some women began to feel sick; one unfortunate soul, unable to bear the uncertainty, jumped out of a third-floor window, and the... orderlies could only recover her dead body. When the doctors had assembled in one of the rooms the commander positioned himself in the centre and began:

'I was sent here today with orders to massacre 400 Jews said to be hiding in this place together with their leader Jerezian. I came with that intention, but what I have seen and experienced here goes beyond imagination. I wouldn't have believed, and I don't think anybody could have thought, that such a perfectly functioning institution could have been created in the heart of the city within a few short weeks. What you have done and are doing here is such an achievement that I must bow to it even though I know that it is being performed by Jews. From now on your magnificent work won't be disturbed by anybody, I will see to that. Hold out a few more days. The liberating troops are on their way. As far as a reward for your extraordinary achievement and heroism is concerned, rest assured I will see to it... that in the new Hungarist state you will not be classified as Jews.'

The Jewish hospital survived unscathed, although Jerezian was arrested and deported by the Soviets on trumped-up charges by a doctor, and was only released months later. In 1981 he received the Yad Vashem order, the highest distinction in Israel awarded to those who had saved Jewish lives.

The embassies of the neutral states lodged continuous protests. On 21 October Papal Nuncio Rotta negotiated for more than two hours with Szalasi. On 17 November, jointly with the neutral embassies, he addressed a note to the Arrow Cross government, demanding the immediate cessation of the deportation and humane treatment for the Jews. On 23 December the neutral powers sent another note to the government, which had fled in the meantime. The suggested evacuation of the embassies was rejected by all. On 5 January 1945 Wallenberg addressed a comprehensive final note to Pfeffer-Wildenbruch.

On 12 November 72 buildings near Szent Istvan Square in the VI District in Pest had been placed under Swiss protection, and from 15 November this area became officially known as the International Ghetto. It was intended to concentrate all Jews

with foreign passes in these protected houses, which had been designed to hold 3969 people, but which began by taking in 15,600 and ended with nearly 40,000. In theory the houses were extraterritorial and each should have been guarded by two police officers, but Arrow Cross hit squads regularly raided them regardless.

The International Ghetto was far more dangerous than the 'ordinary' ghetto - which was created little later in the VII District - because the proximity of the Danube Embankment and easy access to the houses encouraged the Arrow Cross to perpetrate bloodbaths. By the end of November, when only 32,000 Jews instead of the expected 100,000 had moved into the 'ordinary' ghetto, the Arrow Cross grew suspicious, and when tens of thousands (instead of 7800) sought refuge in the 'Swiss houses' of the International Ghetto, it became clear that many protection papers were forged. These houses were searched as a priority, and because it was difficult to distinguish between genuine and forged documents, many people were deported indiscriminately.

The creation of a segregated quarter for Jews without protection papers in the VII District had begun on 18 November 1944. The formal order for the conversion of this quarter into the 'ordinary' ghetto was issued by Interior Minister Gábor Vajna on 21 November, and all Jews without protection papers were ordered to move here by 2 December. On 10 December the area was closed off with wooden boards, leaving only four exit gates. About 60,000 people were packed into 4513 apartments, sometimes 14 to a room. According to plans, all the Jews - with or without protection papers - were eventually to be brought here. Officially the daily food ration was 900 calories plus any supplies available from the Jewish Council and the neutral embassies. In reality five soup kitchens provided barely 790 calories. Occasionally food carriers were robbed or hit by shells, and then the occupants of the houses concerned starved all day. The one police station within the ghetto had been closed on Vajna's orders, and internal security was provided by unarmed Jewish policemen, of whom Arrow Cross raiders bent on robbery took no notice. An eye-witness recalls conditions in late December:

In narrow Kazinczy Street enfeebled men, drooping their heads, were pushing a wheelbarrow. On the rattling contraption naked human bodies as yellow as wax were jolted along and a stiff arm with black patches was dangling and knocking against the spokes of the wheel. They stopped in front of the Kazinczy baths and awkwardly turned into the lattice gate. In the courtyard of the baths behind the weatherbeaten facade bodies were piled up, frozen stiff like pieces of wood...I crossed Klauzal Square. In the middle people were squatting or kneeling around a dead horse and hacking the meat off it with knives. The animal's head was lying a few metres away. The yellow and blue intestines, jelly-like and with a cold sheen, were bursting out of the opened and mutilated body.

The Arrow Cross committed innumerable atrocities against the inmates of each

ghetto, and even invaded neutral diplomatic missions elsewhere in the city: members of the Swedish Embassy in Jokai Street were murdered on 7 January, and blood was also shed at the Swiss Embassy in Vadasz Street. The Germans were relatively humane: although they frequently rounded up Jews for work on fortifications they always sent them back to the ghetto alive.

Between 14 November 1944 and 18 January 1945, the average daily number of deaths in the ghetto was 80, and by the end of March it was 50: the comparable number in peacetime would have been eight. For a while, between 50 and 60 Jews who had been shot through the base of the skull were brought to the Forensic Institute every day. In one incident on 28 December, Arrow Cross activists, joined by some Germans against their orders, dragged a sizeable group of men from the hospital in Bethlen Gabor Square to the Danube Embankment and executed them. The number of Jewish suicides in one week exceeded the total of all suicides in Hungary in 1943. 'Old men, young girls, pregnant women killed themselves. Some mothers knocked their reluctant daughters unconscious with rolling pins and laid them under the open gas taps.' On 3 January Inspector General István Löcsei, the Ministerial Commissioner for the Concentration of the Jews, ordered the immediate formation of 12 Jewish labour regiments. The order could not be carried out because by that time the starving inmates were hardly able to walk.

On 1 January 1945 Szalasi's special representative, Ernő Vajna, had issued his first order for all the occupants of the International Ghetto to be transferred to the 'ordinary' ghetto, purportedly for 'for military reasons', but in reality to facilitate the murders. On 4 January he repeated the order, and this time even Wallenberg found it impossible to prevaricate. On 5 and 6 January 5000 occupants of the 'Swedish houses' were marched, under fire from Soviet fighter aircraft, to the 'ordinary' ghetto. The Arrow Cross declared that if foreign states did not recognise their government, they in turn were not obliged to honour any agreements. On 7 January the evacuation was stopped, after Wallenberg's offer to give any surplus food in the protected houses to the Arrow Cross, but on the same day Arrow Cross men attacked the 'Swedish house' in Vadasz Street, herded some 130 people to the Danube Embankment, and machine-gunned them." A survivor remembers:

After me they interrogated my mother, a woman of 67. They stripped her naked and three of them beat her up with rubber truncheons. When she fell they trampled on her and tore her hair out. Then I was...beaten up again by three men...At midnight I had to go to the cellar, where about 30 torturers stood in line. All 30 of them had clubs, straps and cudgels, and all set about me. From the cellar I was pushed into the laundry room, where there were already about 30 people with blood pouring from them. In the cellar the younger women were stripped and beaten with rubber truncheons. In the hall Arrow Cross man [Dénes] Bokor then told me to ask for a Hungarist blow in the face. Afterwards I had to stand in the doorway, where they started kicking me. They did the same to

women of 60, they hit us till we fell. At three o'clock we were tied together in pairs with leather belts and sent off, allegedly to the ghetto. I was constantly watching how they were carrying their rifles and machine guns. At the Chain Bridge there was a German guard, who let our group of 45-50 pass. On the Chain Bridge the weapons were levelled, which looked ominous. I began to loosen the belt. I was tied together with a man called Guttman, who was only wearing a pair of pants and a shirt. When we turned off from the Chain Bridge to the Danube Embankment the situation had become totally hopeless. I let go of my mother and released the belt completely. After 20 metres they stopped and ordered us to line up on the embankment and face the Danube, because they were going to shoot us. I had got to the embankment first with Mr. Guttman. The torturers' leader, a stocky fellow with a small moustache, ordered me to go a bit further. I pretended to obey and dived into the Danube, with the machine guns firing at me. From the water I could hear them execute the fifty people.

First Lieutenant Ivan Hermandy describes a similar execution on the embankment:

I peeped round the corner of the Vigado Concert Hall and saw the victims standing on the track of the number 2 tram line in a long row, completely resigned to their fate. Those close to the Danube were already naked, the others were slowly walking down and undressing. It all happened in total silence, with only the occasional sound of a gun shot or machine gun salvo. In the afternoon, when there was nobody left, we took another look. The dead were lying in their blood on the ice slabs or floating in the Danube. Among them were women, children, Jews, Gentiles, soldiers and officers.

To stop the constant massacres 100 police officers were ordered into the ghetto on 10 January, but the very next day 45 Jews were murdered in Wesselenyi Street only a few steps from the police shelter. Their bodies were deposited in the garden of the Kazinczy Street synagogue and in Klauzal Square, as nobody had the time or the inclination to follow the cynical advice of Ferenc Orsos, the professor of medicine and former member of the international commission investigating the massacre of Polish officers: 'Throw the dead Jews into the Danube, we don't want another Katyn'.

On 16 January, when the Soviet troops had reached the Great Boulevard near the ghetto, the Arrow Cross decided to mount a pogrom. The plan was betrayed by a police officer to Pal Szalai, the Arrow Cross police-liaison officer. Szalai called on Erno Vajna, who told him that he knew about the plan and had no intention of stopping it. With Wallenberg's agreement Szalai warned Colonel-General Schmidhuber, the German commander of Pest, that he would be held responsible for the actions of his subordinates. Schmidhuber promptly summoned Vajna and the German and Hungarian initiators of the plan, arrested an SS sergeant and forbade the pogrom. To ensure that his order was obeyed he sent his Wehrmacht soldiers into the ghetto.

On 17 January Soviet troops reached the edge of the ghetto in Wesselenyi Street. László Benedek, a doctor in the temporary Jewish hospital at number 44, persuaded a

Hungarian anti-aircraft battery stationed there to abandon the struggle. He admitted the soldiers as patients, having their uniforms burnt in the hospital's ovens. Next day, after a short street battle, the ghetto was liberated.

In Buda, however, the persecution continued. On 14 January a gang from the Arrow Cross headquarters in Németvölgyi Road, led by Father Kun, murdered 170 patients and others hiding in the Jewish hospital in Maros Street. On 19 January they slaughtered 90 people in the Jewish almshouse in Alma Street, and on 21 January another 149 in the Jewish hospital in Városmajor Street. At the Városmajor Street hospital they ordered any occupants who could prove their Christian origin to come forward, and when some produced their forged documents they shot them. The rest were told to line up in the street to be 'taken to the ghetto' in Pest - which was already in Soviet hands and in any case unreachable as the Danube bridges had been blown up - and gunned down as they were waiting. Patients unable to walk were killed in the wards together with their nurses, and their dying screams could be heard for two hours. Only one woman survived, by hiding among the dead bodies in the street.



(Arrow Cross Militia putting up posters, in the background Father Kun with a pistol holster on his monk habit)

The same gang also attacked the high-ranking police officers responsible for the security of Chief Constable Gyula Sédey. They forced the officers to hand over their arms and left. However, at midnight they returned with Father Kun. The officers were stood against a wall and abused by Kun for 'hiding while others are suffering for

victory in the front line'. The six officers present were taken to the Arrow Cross headquarters. The seventh, Chief Inspector László Beliczky, who had hidden in the lavatory alerted Sédey, but a police detachment sent to free the officers was disarmed by the Arrow Cross men. 'Brothers, here's Dr. [Imre] Marosvölgyi of the detention centre', one of them, a former convict, shouted when he saw the captives -who were already well-known to the party membership as their duties had included interrogating dangerous criminals. Now the moment of revenge had come: 'The door burst open. Father Kun was first to rush out and to make a start. He rammed his fist into the face of one captive and then, for good measure, added a hard slap with his open hand. "Well, you bastard, we've got you at last", he said and pushed the man into the room he himself had come from.' The captives could only be freed by a second, reinforced police detachment. Father Kun and his accomplices were arrested, although Kun managed to escape during the breakout. Péter Szabó, the leader of the gang, had kept a detailed diary, which he buried together with his identification papers and photos, but which were later found by chance and handed over to the police. The exact record of the crimes, including the rape of nuns, also enabled other members of the group, who had been in hiding, to be brought to trial. Kun was finally sentenced to death by the People's Court and executed. Table 23 lists the principal events in the persecution of the Jews of Budapest during the siege.

3 The resistance

Internal resistance in Budapest features in many Hungarian studies published after 1945, primarily because the communist state had an interest in recording anti-fascist activities in detail. It is hardly mentioned in contemporary German and Hungarian military documents, possibly because its strategic significance was minimal.

Military units fighting the Soviets seldom came under attack from resistance groups. Germans, whom Hungarians did not generally regard as enemies, were rarely targeted, so that Alfred Trenker, the Gestapo commander in Budapest, declared that for Germans a year in Hungary was less dangerous than a day in Yugoslavia. The Arrow Cross, however, was feared and hated. According to German reports, even among Hungarian army officers only 3-5 per cent were in favour of the regime, and many rejected the propaganda of the extreme right. Consequently the resistance engaged mainly in saving lives, sabotaging deportation and increasingly undertaking armed operations against Arrow Cross units and party buildings.

After the Arrow Cross coup several politicians who had been forced to go underground began to develop the rudimentary resistance movement. Based on the illegal Hungarian Front, which had been operating since the German invasion, the Liberation Committee of the Hungarian National Uprising (MNFFB) was founded

on 9 November, with Endre Bajcsy-Zsilinszky as president and Janos Csorba as deputy president. Its military arm was set up on 11 November, with Lieutenant-General Janos Kiss as chief of staff and Major Jenő Nagy as his deputy, assisted by staff officers Vilmos Tartsay, Pal Nemeth and Istvan Beleznyai, technical officers Jozsef Kovago, Pal Almasy and Imre Radvanyi, Hussar Captain Kálmán Révay, and many others. The MNFFB was joined by various illegal organisations, formerly of the Hungarian Front: the Independent Smallholders' Party, the Social-Democratic Party, the Legitimist Dual Cross Association, the Hungarian Communist Party and the National Peasants' Party. Hoping to prevent the siege and destruction of Budapest, the MNFFB planned to open the front line to the Soviets and trigger a simultaneous uprising: it even approached the Hungarian 10th Infantry Division commanded by Sándor Andras, and several KISKA auxiliary units with this suggestion. On 13 November Major Ernő Simonffy-Tóth, the Hungarian VI Army's chief of operations, flew to the Soviets as the Hungarian Front's representative. He had spent the preceding days dictating to his secretary behind closed doors and was later discovered to have been describing the air raid protection and fortification system of the capital.



(Airforce Colonel Sándor András, commander of the Hungarian 10th Infantry Division)

Eventually he became a Red Army propagandist urging the Hungarian defenders to change sides. On 22 November, having been betrayed by Captain Tibor Mikulich, the military staff of the MNFFB were arrested during a meeting. Imre Kovacs, a leader of the Peasant Party, owed his life to his late arrival:

I had not reached Andrassy Road when I heard shots being fired near the Opera. I walked faster and could hardly believe my eyes: the neighbourhood of the Opera looked like a battlefield. From gateways and from behind trees and advertising pillars field gendarmes and party militiamen were firing like mad on a car, which was returning their fire. The bodies of four gendarmes were lying on the road covered by soldiers' coats.

The fray had been unleashed by Ensign Pál Széchényi and Lieutenant Messik, who had also arrived late. Both were killed and more than 30 people arrested. Subsequently the majority of the organisation, numbering several hundred, were rounded up. János Kiss, Jenő Nagy and Vilmos Tartsay were sentenced to death by a special court of the Hungarian army and executed in the military prison in Margit Boulevard on 8 December. Endre Bajcsy-Zsilinszky was hanged in Sopronköhida on 24 December. Most of the remainder received prison sentences of between 10 and 15 years.

A resistance group of university students, KISKA units and others was organised by Staff Captain Zoltaá Mikó, head of the supreme command's defence section, who belonged to the MNFFB but had evaded arrest. In the supreme command Miko had supervised the KISKA auxiliaries, and towards the end of November was entrusted with organising subversion and espionage units; he had also been placed in charge of the Pronay commandos and a gendarmerie investigation detachment. Early in November he had set up the Gorgey Battalion, a sabotage unit designed to procure legitimate identity papers for people in hiding and members of the resistance, which consisted entirely of deserters, left-wing activists, outlawed politicians and resistance fighters, although it was officially part of the Pronay commandos and the Arrow Cross. Through Wallenberg, he continuously sent food from the battalion's supplies to the protected houses. Thanks to his connections with the head of the State Security Centre, Chief Superintendent Lajos Kudar, a gendarmerie unit was sent in November to the International Ghetto, where it fought several gun battles with Arrow Cross marauders.

For a month the Gorgey Battalion took part in exercises alongside the Pronay commandos, while surreptitiously carrying out acts of sabotage and attacking Arrow Cross men. On 21 November one of its members, a Jewish deserter from the labour service, was recognised by a sergeant on duty in the Pronay food stores and arrested with his yellow star in his pocket. Ten more labour-service deserters in the battalion were seized by the Arrow Cross secret police and executed in the prison in Margit Boulevard on 4 December. Miko transferred the battalion to the Börzsöny Hills north of the Danube, using the need for 'training' and a request from Germans for the deployment of Arrow Cross partisans as pretexts.

Miko had recruited some 800 armed resistance fighters, comprising 250 members

of the Görgey Battalion, 500 members of various KISKA units, and 50 members of his own staff stationed at 54 Bimbo Road. A contingent of this size seemed capable of undertaking serious operations. On 20 December Imre Kovacs and three other representatives of the MNFFB visited the Soviets in the Borzsony Hills to discuss the possibility of changing sides. However, Kovacs was arrested by suspicious Soviet counter-espionage officers and did not escape until the end of February.

As the encirclement was about to be completed, Miko made plans to defect and open the front line to the Soviets in Zugló and on Rózsadomb Hill. On 25 December the University Assault Battalion delivered a Russian prisoner called Krylov to his unit; he had lived in Hungary since the First World War and had been returned to Budapest as a scout after being captured by the Soviets at Szentendre. Mikó sent Krylov back to the Soviets as an intermediary. After obtaining the German commander's permission to take over the defence of Kapy Street on Rózsadomb Hill he alerted his men, but instead of the expected 300-400 only 70 turned up: the majority had been either unwilling to risk their lives or unable to cross the Danube from Pest to Buda.

In despair Mikó approached the commander of the University Assault Battalion, Captain Sipeki Balá, a former fellow-student at the military academy, whom he hoped to persuade to defect with him. Sipeki took Mikó - who had arrived with eight armed companions including First Lieutenant Vilmos Bondor, who was wearing a large number of medals - for an *agent provocateur*, and prevaricated. Mikó's final argument was:

So far I haven't told you the whole confidential truth. The differences between the German and Hungarian commands have become so acute that tonight there will be a complete volte-face. At 8pm in four important sections of the front line the Hungarian troops will lay their arms down and let the Soviet forces pass.

When Sipeki replied that he was going to make inquiries at the army-corps command, Miko knew that his bluff had been called. Some members of the group, at 54 Bimbo Road, decided to call off the defection and disappear as fast as possible. Mikó fled with his secretary to the Turkish Embassy, where he survived the siege. Others decided not to disband, hoping that something would turn up, although it should have been clear that Sipeki would not defect on his own initiative.

There are two versions of what happened next. According to Bondor and his companions Sipeki deliberately betrayed them. Sipeki himself claims that he had every reason to distrust Mikó, as nobody at the corps command mentioned any intention to defect and he could not ask because he was not sure who else was involved. He maintains that he was about to leave, when a gendarmerie Chief Inspector approached him:

He asked me who I was and whether I had reported that Miko had come to see me about defecting. I said that I had not. He took me to a colonel, whom I did not know but who could have been the head of the corps's I.b section. The colonel received me by saying it was a pity that I had not reported of my own free will that I had been invited to defect. I was to tell everything exactly as it had happened if I did not want to find myself in an even more awkward position.

The Arrow Cross secret police had kept Miko's group under surveillance since 26 December, when the University Assault Battalion apprehended some Russian soldiers in civilian clothes carrying identity papers issued by Miko. Bondor was summoned to Bimbo Street, ostensibly for a meeting, and arrested together with his companions. After the siege it was the Russians who arrested Mikó and Bondor and sentenced them to death for espionage. Bondor's sentence was converted to 25 years in prison; Miko was executed in Odessa on 15 August 1945, even though he had voluntarily co-operated with the Soviets - for instance, in identifying Arrow Cross members among the prisoners of war in Budafok.

After the failure of Horthy's ceasefire attempt, many Hungarian officers had defected to the Soviets. They included Colonel Sandor Andras, commander of the 10th Infantry Division, who was aided by the anti-espionage and intelligence section of his unit, and Colonel Otto Hátszeghi-Hatz, the Hungarian VII Army Corps's chief of staff, who had taken part in the ceasefire negotiations as a military diplomat. On 7 November 1944 Hátszeghi-Hatz flew to Szeged, where he delivered detailed sketches of the Margit Line to the Soviets. Subsequently he performed propaganda missions for the Soviets and from February to 5 April 1945 held the appointment of liaison officer at the Soviet military command in Budapest. Having been arrested by the NKVD (People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs) on false charges and sentenced to 15 years in a labour camp after seven years on remand, he was acquitted on 30 June 1955.

Dezső Németh, chief quartermaster of the Hungarian I Army Corps, played a particularly important part in the resistance, issuing false papers to persecution victims, assisting in the defection of Simonffy-Tóth, hiding Soviet soldiers and sabotaging the capital's defence. When the closure of the encirclement was imminent he deliberately moved the food stores to the outer suburbs. He kept most of the corps's ammunition in railway wagons on Margit Quay, hoping that the Soviets would destroy it. This indeed happened, but the enormous explosions also destroyed the adjacent buildings, killing all the occupants. Together with his staff, Németh defected to the Soviets on 7 February 1945, and subsequently fought against the German and Hungarian garrison as a company commander, being wounded in the process. In 1949 he was sentenced to death in a communist show trial and executed.

The Hungarian Students' Freedom Front (MDSZF) was formed on 7 November

by amalgamating seven illegal university organisations. Led by László Kardos, Sándor Kiss and Tibor Zimányi, the front represented the radical wing of the people's movement. Many of its members enlisted in the University Assault Battalion, the Gorgey Battalion and the Tancsics Mihály Battalion. An illegal newsletter published by the MDSZF brought it to the attention of the Arrow Cross secret police, which raided its headquarters and arrested many of its members on 12 December.

The Tancsics Mihály Battalion, camouflaged by the official name I Hungarist University Reconnaissance Battalion, was mainly recruited from the National Guard at the Budapest universities. It had between 350 and 400 members, who issued hundreds of false identity papers and carried out several armed attacks on the Germans and the Arrow Cross. When their attempt to defect was foiled by Arrow Cross militia and German troops, they dispersed to await the arrival of the Soviets in Budapest.

In various offices of the City Hall of Budapest, resistance groups were formed after the German invasion. These concentrated mainly on providing certificates of immunity from persecution and other protective documents. Their military nucleus was the KISKA company in the VI District, with whose help they intended but failed to take over the City Hall and various public utilities. They were also in touch with resistance fighters in the MÁVAG arms factory, led by Endre Misteth and Ferenc Koczkás, who sequestered some anti-tank guns for the MNFFB. On 19 November a number of their members were uncovered, together with the MÁVAG Group. The Hungarian Freedom Movement, led by Frigyes Pisky-Schmidt, which was close to the Social Democratic Party, primarily engaged in intellectual resistance. From 1943, with the tacit support of the government of Miklós Kállay, it had run a clandestine radio station and published a newspaper entitled *Feltámadás*. After the German invasion it became more active, and after the Arrow Cross coup it published an illegal newspaper entitled *Szabadságbarc*. By agreement with Árpád Szakasits, executive president of the MNFFB, it also deployed an armed group to protect the illegal Légrády printworks from being dismantled. In a gun battle on 25 December the group's leader Béla Stollár and 23 of his companions were killed, but the works were saved because the workers had taken the bulk of the equipment to their homes.

The Future in the East Group consisted of civilians and cadets of the Security Battalion. They were preparing to save some public buildings and factories mined by the garrison, but on 10 November 27 of them, including their leader, Captain Sándor Fürjes, the commander of the Security Battalion's 2nd Company, were arrested, and the group disintegrated. The Congregation of Marist School Brothers hid Jewish children, French and Alsatian SS soldiers on the run, and escaped French and Belgian prisoners of war. The Wehrmacht arrested them on 19 December, but their proteges were saved.

The poet Zseni Várnay, together with the biochemist Albert Szent-Györgyi, a

winner of the Nobel prize, had begun to organise a resistance group on the day of the German invasion, recruiting several officers of the river guard and the manager of the Taurus factory. After Horthy's ceasefire attempt, Szent-Györgyi took refuge in the Swedish Embassy, while the group developed a base in a cave on Ferenc-hegy Hill. Early in December the Germans raided the cave and arrested its occupants.

Since September 1944 two rival factions of the Communist Party (one led by Pál Demény, the other following the Moscow party line) had been setting up small resistance groups. The leaders of the Moscow faction weathered the siege in an apartment in Hungaria Boulevard and a cellar in Francia Road, fed by György Aczél, who was to become an active cultural politician in the Kadar era. The military committee of this faction included György Palffy-Osterreicher, Lajos Fehér and László Sólyom, with János Kádár as liaison officer. Their task was to organise, arm, and direct the operations of the Szir, Laci, Marot and other 'action groups'. In Csepel, where Demény's co-operation was indispensable, the two factions, together with the Social Democrats, set up a committee of 13 to co-ordinate the resistance, which most notably prevented the dismantling of factories and sabotaged the production of armaments, including the rocket commonly known as 'Szálasi popper'.

The most important operation of the resistance in Csepel was the prevention of the evacuation. On 4 December posters appeared ordering the civilians to leave within 24 hours. This caused enormous anger, and several thousand people gathered at the town hall, where windows were broken in a spontaneous demonstration against the Germans and the Arrow Cross. Hungarian soldiers and police officers promised their support. Arrow Cross militiamen, arriving at the scene, fled after some of them had been pelted with rocks and two beaten up by local women. Feelings against the evacuation were running so high that those who tried to obey were attacked by the demonstrators and had their possessions scattered all over the area.

On 5 December the chief public notary and his assistant joined the protesters, declaring: 'They are right, we aren't moving an inch either'. The Arrow Cross arrested them, and when the demonstrators demanded their release they also arrested eight workers in the crowd. Four armed communists charged the Arrow Cross headquarters and liberated the captives: the communist László Kormos killed three Arrow Cross men before he was shot dead. The demonstrators then moved from the town hall to Piac Square, where a German soldier on a motorcycle opened fire on them, killing a woman, which further inflamed their fury. On 6 December soldiers stationed in the Kiralyerdo' quarter began to distribute their arms to civilians, and the evacuation was halted.

In Pestszentlőrinc the evacuation also foundered on the opposition of the population. Here a deputation called on the authorities to rescind the order, which could not have been carried out in any case for want of troops.

In Köbánya, Károly Kiss and István P. Horváth created a 40-strong communist-

resistance group in November. They stole a wagonload of weapons, explosives and uniforms from Ferencvaros Station, with which they formed a KISKA unit. Disguised in Arrow Cross uniforms some of them shot 'Brother' Csordas, the district's Arrow Cross chief, and two other party leaders. Most important among their many armed operations were the blowing up of the Rákoskeresztúr Arrow Cross headquarters and, jointly with the Stollár Group, the defence of the Legrady print works.

Another outstanding communist resistance group was that in Újpest, led by László Földes. Its best-known actions were the rescue of the Újpest water tower which had been mined by the Arrow Cross on 31 December and the blowing up of the Újpest Arrow Cross headquarters after the liberation of 48 political prisoners held there on 9 January. In the latter action 12 members of the group entered the headquarters in Arrow Cross secret police uniforms, demanded the handover of the prisoners for 'execution' and, on the way towards the Danube, released them. They then returned to the headquarters and delivered a time bomb made of 14 kilograms of picric acid, claiming that it was gold. By the time the ruse was discovered, 28 Arrow Cross militiamen had been buried under the ruins of the building. The total number of substantial operations carried out by the Újpest group was 53.

There were several more bomb attacks by communist partisans. On 6 October the Marót Group destroyed a statue of Gyula Gömbös, a former right-wing Prime Minister of Hungary, and on 22 November the Szír Group devastated the Metropol Hotel, where high-ranking German officers were billeted. On 2 December the Szír Group blew up the pillars at the entrance to the Municipal Theatre, where the Arrow Cross Party Congress was due to be held. By 3 December the rubble had been cleared, but on the same day members of the Marót Group threw two acetone bombs into the crowd that had gathered there. Through this most spectacular of their actions the communists prevented the first and only mass-meeting planned by the regime.

Eventually several members of the Szír Group were arrested, and only Gabor Csillik managed to escape in late December. He promptly reorganised the group and carried out further operations. Ironically, he was rearrested on 13 January by the Soviets, as was Dezső Weinberger, known as Szír, who later disappeared in the Gulag. The 'liberators' were suspicious of everybody, and after the passing of the first wave Soviet officers with more time on their hands often took resistance fighters prisoner together with others.

The Ságvári Group, organised by Lajos Turcsányi, an activist of the Communist Youth Federation, suffered a similar fate. Its members, 'borrowing' the necessary uniforms, documents and office equipment, established themselves in the vacant premises of the German Volksbund organisation as the 'staff of the 101st Mechanised Chemical Warfare Battalion'. In this disguise they carried out several armed operations. Eventually they were captured by the Soviets and only released

from the Gödöllő prison camp thanks to the intervention of the Communist Party.

Fourteen members of the communist Red Brigade were denounced and arrested by the Arrow Cross on 2 January. At the secret police station in the Royal Palace they were subjected to brutal torture. The worst was probably suffered by Éva Braun, as one of her fellow-prisoners remembers:

While I was being interrogated I could hear terrible screaming and panting from the next room. The gendarme interrogating me behaved relatively decently. When he noticed that I was listening to the screams from the next room he told me that they were 'doing' Éva Braun. He said that she was being raped with a piece of wood. After my interrogation I was led through that room where I saw Éva Braun lying on the floor half naked and weeping.

Later in January many of the prisoners were executed by Hungarian gendarmes on a terrace of the Royal Palace.

The Jewish resistance was primarily engaged in saving lives. Ottó Komoly, leader of the Hungarian Zionists and the Budapest Jewish Rescue Committee, had made contact with the Hungarian Front in 1943, and before the German occupation the committee had helped persecution victims from neighbouring countries find refuge in Hungary or Romania. In September 1944 Friedrich Born, the representative of the International Red Cross in Budapest, had put Komoly in charge of the Red Cross's 'A' Office for International Affairs. In reality this office was a cover for the Zionists, and one of its sections was directly involved in the resistance. After the Arrow Cross coup Komoly issued several hundred letters of safe conduct, some genuine and others false, and had food delivered to the ghetto. On 1 January 1945 two Hungarian officers called at his office, which had extraterritorial status, and invited him to a meeting to 'talk things over'. Komoly accompanied them and was never seen again.

From the beginning of the German occupation, the Jewish resistance issued tens of thousands of forged identity cards, letters of safe conduct, passports, registration certificates and exemptions for munitions workers. Members of the radical Zionist Hashomer Hatsair organisation, founded in the 1930s by Ernő Szilágyi, also undertook armed operations. In half a dozen cases, wearing Arrow Cross uniforms, they carried out rescue missions or killed genuine Arrow Cross activists. On 24 and 26 December respectively, with false 'open orders', they liberated 30 and 137 captives from the prison in Margit Boulevard, including György Nonn, who later became a notorious communist public prosecutor.

The Jewish communist actor György Aczél, who had converted to Christianity, worked as a liaison officer in the Zionist resistance. His task was to receive money, arms and food for the Communist Party from the Zionists. His superiors were Gábor Péter, later the head of the communist secret Police, and György Donáth. After Horthy's ceasefire attempt he disguised himself by growing a moustache, and reports

about his escapades vary:

Aczél was remembered wearing either a gendarmerie, Gestapo or German army officer's uniform, or a dress uniform, or a camouflage coat...He was seen in a large black car or, according to others, in a jeep...He was repeatedly heard shouting orders in German, pretending not to speak Hungarian (although in fact he did not speak German).

Many army, police and gendarmerie officers helped to save fugitives, of whom tens of thousands were hiding in the capital. Colonel András Dienstl for instance, received an Arrow Cross gang looking for Jews in his house in his dress uniform, covered with medals, and simply sent them away. Gendarmerie Chief Inspector Istvan Paradi attended to Wallenberg's personal protection and prevented numerous operations against Jews. Even in the entourage of the head of the State Security Police, Péter Hain, there were some who sabotaged the 'final solution'.

However, shortage of time, anti-Semitic propaganda and lack of unanimity in the Hungarian middle class precluded the development of a concerted movement against the implementation of the anti-Jewish legislation. Some individuals tried, with little success, to appeal to the public, as did for instance the wife of Count István Bethlen, who was arrested when she tried to persuade Christian women to pin a yellow leaf to their garments as a sign of solidarity after the introduction of the yellow star.¹³⁰ Pál Tetéleni, managing director of the Bauxit company, was executed together with his pregnant wife and two small daughters for sheltering fugitives. Everywhere posters announced that anybody hiding Jews would be punished by immediate execution, and Arrow Cross militia carried this out whenever possible.

Early in October 1944 the US Army's Office of Strategic Services (OSS) sent the Hungarian-American First Lieutenant Pál Kovács to Hungary to organise resistance and obtain military intelligence. Using Béla Jánosi's Dallam Group with its 20 members as his base, he contacted the Hungarian Front and several resistance organisations, but was arrested on 5 December. Forty-six others were also seized and most of them murdered by the Arrow Cross secret police between 15 January and 11 February.

The British dropped paratroopers on secret missions into Hungary. Among others, 22 Hungarian-Canadians were trained for that purpose, but only one of them managed to escape after being captured by Hungarian police, and make his way to Budapest, where he was hidden by the resistance group of the number 11 garrison hospital.

The resistance movement created several KISKA battalions, with those in the III - VIII, XIII and XIV Districts in particular carrying out armed operations. Most important was the XIII/1 Battalion, led by First Lieutenant Lajos Gidófalvy. This was formed on 18 October, and at the time of its dissolution in early January claimed

to have 1200 members, although many only belonged to it on paper. This group, liaising with others, issued forged certificates, attacked Arrow Cross militia and prevented the destruction of Ferdinand Bridge and several factories. It planned to open the front line to the Soviets, but on 8 January most of its members were arrested by Arrow Cross security forces. Gidófalvy and several of his companions, who had managed to hide, were killed a few days later, probably while trying to prevent Erzsébet Bridge being blown up.

In September 1944 Aurél Desewffy, Janos Brencean, Janos Szecsy and Antal Viczián - four members of Emericana, the largest university students' union - had formed a National Guard battalion which subsequently became a KISKA battalion. Apart from producing false documents, the students participated in rescue missions and armed resistance. By the time the encirclement was completed they had stolen five wagonloads of food and military matériel (10,000 uniforms, 20,000 hand-grenades, three anti-aircraft guns with ammunition, 5000 pairs of boots, and other equipment), which they threw into the Danube before the arrival of the Soviets. When the first Soviet soldier appeared, practically all of them defected, but most ended up in prison camp.

The primary task of a group led by Imre Radó and Endre Magyari, with 457 members operating under the guise of the Hungarian Publishing Company, was to forge documents, which were supplied even to German soldiers. On 29 December, as a result of betrayal, 71 members were arrested and - in the largest mass execution of resistance fighters - shot together with 30 others in the courtyard of the school at 52 Wesselényi Street.

József Ferenczy, subsequently a press tycoon, had organised several anti-war missions since the German invasion. On 15 October he established the VII/2 KISKA Company in order to provide legal status for his 86 men, who carried out several armed operations and hid fugitives. Hussar Captain Ede Gobbi produced forged exemption forms, which were distributed by his daughter, the actress Hilda Gobbi.

As the KISKA units had proved unreliable, the Arrow Cross authorities ordered them to be disbanded on 6 January - although several could only be broken up by armed force. Some of their members were drafted into the Hungarist Legion, while the majority either defected or escaped.

The work of Soviet reconnaissance is least documented. Major Mariya Fortus of the 3rd Ukrainian Front wrote several books about her activities, mixing myth and reality, as demonstrated, for example, by her report on the 'Balaton operation'. In January 1945 she claimed to have obtained documentation guarded by a Hungarian unit in the casemates of the Castle District concerning a 'new German supertank'. However, no 'German supertank' was being manufactured in 1945 and no such documentation would have been kept outside Germany - least of all in a fortress

surrounded by the enemy and without any manufacturing capacity. Nor would the Germans have passed any documentation about a 'wonder weapon' yet to be produced to others, particularly to a fickle ally: in summer 1944 they had even refused to grant production rights for any of their existing tanks. Finally, neither Frigyes Waczek, chief of staff of the unit concerned, nor its quartermaster Alajos Vajda knew anything about their division holding such documents.

4 Hungarian soldiers on the Soviet side.

After Horthy's ceasefire attempt growing numbers of Hungarian soldiers began to defect to the Soviets, although most were not motivated by anti-fascist feelings but by the belief that it was pointless to continue the struggle. Major-General Kornel Oszlányi's order of 23 November 1944 exemplifies the response of the leadership:

Incitement or conspiracy to desert will be punished by hanging. Commanders must use their weapons against deserters. Field gendarmes are to comb the woods and shoot any soldiers hiding or deserting. Those captured alive are to be court-martialled and punished by confiscation of their property and reprisals against their families. Defectors to the enemy must also be shot. The difficult situation is no longer due to the enemy but to the fact that the troops are contaminated and enemy propaganda is falling on fertile ground among some. Commanders must take more forceful action.

The number of soldiers hiding in Budapest ran to tens of thousands. The most resourceful set up fictitious military formations to cover their activities. Apart from the KISKA units these included the '101 Recruitment Centre', which served only to hide fugitive soldiers. Defections were encouraged by the front-line propaganda of the Soviets, who often sent prisoners of war back to persuade those still fighting to cross over. During the entire siege the Soviets dispatched 739 Hungarian and 53 German soldiers on such missions, and 580 Hungarians and 27 Germans returned with 6208 and 219 of their respective comrades. Defections of whole units began in late January 1945, when, according to Soviet reports, the 74th Artillery Battalion, the 204th and 206/11 Anti-aircraft Artillery Battalions, the IV Motorised Army Corps Battalion and the I Bem József Mounted Artillery Battalion changed sides.

As the siege progressed defectors were often given the choice between prison camp in Siberia and deployment against their fellow-countrymen. With memories of Russian captivity during the First World War still rife, they generally opted for the latter. For the first time ever, defecting Hungarians were allowed to fight in Buda alongside the Soviets.

Previously, on Stalin's orders, even units that surrendered as a whole had been sent to prison camps, where recruitment for the Hungarian Legion and similar

organisations had been discontinued by the end of 1943 because the Soviets had no desire to share the approaching victory with non-communists. The reason why Hungarian volunteer units could be formed in Buda, mainly from the end of January 1945, was that the exhausted Red Army needed reinforcements, which its own command was unable to supply. The success of agitation among Hungarian soldiers made it seem reasonable to arm the defectors. Moreover, the ceasefire agreement of 20 January 1945 between the Soviet Union and the Hungarian Provisional National Government, which had been inaugurated on 22 December 1944, had removed any legal obstacle to the creation of Hungarian combat units.

Hungarian volunteers were first deployed with the Soviet 18th and 37th Soviet Rifle Corps. The difficulty of securing volunteers is described by one researcher as follows: 'Initially many officers in particular were reluctant to fight alongside the Soviet troops. The vacillation of the officers prevented many soldiers volunteering, although conversely many officers were induced to volunteer by the example of their men.' Hussar Lieutenant Aurél Salamon remembers the problems of volunteering:

Next morning there was another roll call. The soldiers were reeling with hunger and thirst. One or two fell down as a result of starvation or possibly nervousness. A Hungarian-speaking officer stood in front of the row and uttered the decisive words: 'Hungarian soldiers, those willing to fight the fascist Germans jointly with the Red Army in the new Hungarian units step forward. Everybody will keep his rank and receive the same treatment as the Soviet soldiers.'

Initially very few responded. The men suspected a trap and were thinking hard. It may have occurred to them that they could find themselves confronting their own relatives or be caught between the Germans and the Soviets...

We knew that before the German campaign the great Stalin had liquidated thousands of his trained officers (for which a heavy price had then to be paid) without sparing even his marshalls, for fear that one of them might turn into a Soviet Napoleon... Then the shadow of Katyn, the massacre of Polish officers, loomed...

The Hungarian soldier, facing nothingness, had a choice. He could become a victim of Hitler's ideology like thousands of his comrades or end his pointless life in some murderous prison camp, if he ever got there. The other way pointed to the fight against the Germans. Whose heart had not been rent by the sight of our proud bridges tumbling into the water and the mournful cloud of smoke swirling above the city? The vainglorious crimes of the Nazis...

They began to undress the better dressed and equipped among the hesitating Hungarians. An infantry ensign came up to me and tried to unbuckle my belt 'You won't need this, Lieutenant', he said with an insolent grin. 'I'll smash your head if you touch it', I snapped at the hyena, 'I'm joining the unit against the Germans.' The 'comrade' slunk away with his tail between his legs. This was what had finally made me change sides.

When the looter had retreated, more and more people gathered around me. . Three of our hussars, including my batman Miklos Kroczkai, opted for prison camp. 'Miklos', I said to him, 'you'll regret

it...' But no, he didn't want to go back to the front. So be it. We embraced each other, and he was the only one I ever saw again, more than three years later. The other two, Dobos and Koska, ended up in the mass grave of the camp. Our diagnosis proved to have been correct. The numbers of those lost in the camps and on the front line did not differ greatly.

It was probably Ferenc Krupiczner, the interpreter of the Soviet 37th Rifle Corps, who set up the first volunteer units, followed by 11 others during the siege. The volunteers were allocated, after 1-2 days' training, to separate Hungarian groups numbering up to 183, the prescribed company size. Reserve Artillery Captain Kázmer Várady's group, the first to join battle on 21 January in Farkasrét Cemetery, suffered the heaviest casualties: by the end of the siege all its members but two, who had been gravely wounded, were dead.

The Hungarian volunteers were deployed at the most dangerous points, which resulted in extraordinary casualties: several companies lost 50-80 per cent of their strength. In all other respects the Soviet commanders treated them as comrades. The 83rd Marine Infantry Brigade's chief of staff, for example, issued the following order when Hungarians were attached to his unit: 'Give them full provisions, regard them as our equals and avoid any rudeness or incident'. The commander of the 37th Rifle Corps, Major-General Kolchuk, repeatedly invited officers of the Hungarian companies to dinner. The battle positions of other Soviet commanders were guarded by Hungarian volunteers.

More than 2500 Hungarian volunteers defected - mainly in the final week of the siege - and fought on the Soviet side, primarily around Deli Station, Nemetvolgyi Road, Marvany Street, Csorsz Street, Attila Road, Gellért-hegy Hill and the Castle District. They wore Hungarian uniforms, with strips of red German parachute silk tied round their arms and hats. Some 600 were killed. On 15 February 1945 the volunteer companies were amalgamated with a volunteer battalion set up three days earlier under Lieutenant-Colonel Oszkar Varihazy to form the 1st Hungarian Volunteer Regiment (later called Buda Volunteer Regiment).

During the last fortnight of the siege Hungarians were capitulating in large numbers. The 10th Infantry Division had been trying to evade the fighting ever since the closure of the encirclement. Suspecting that the Germans would defend the Castle District to the bitter end, it had moved from nearby Rózsadomb Hill to Horthy Miklós Square (today Bartók Béla Square) further south, and on the eve of the breakout Captain Győző Benyovszky, the division's chief of staff, falsely reported that the route back was blocked by Soviet tanks. As a result, on the morning of 11 February, 6000-7000 Hungarian soldiers, including several unscathed units of the division - for example, the 10th Signal Battalion and the 6th Infantry Regiment - were captured with all their equipment. The Soviets lined up the Hungarians on Budafoki Road and called on them to join the common struggle. Benyovszky remembers:

A Russian captain climbed on a table and told those who wanted to fight the Germans to turn right. When the whole crowd turned right he was somewhat taken aback because he hadn't expected such a success. He said that he needed a combat-ready unit, and so the soldiers of the Signal Battalion, who hadn't taken part in any fighting, became a volunteer company.

Benyovszky struck up a conversation with a Soviet lieutenant-colonel, who invited him to help with the organisation of a new army in Debrecen. In the confusion he was arrested by a Soviet sergeant and forced to join a passing transport of prisoners. Varihazy, with the majority of his subordinates, was initially taken to a cellar in Budafok, where, according to his adjutant, First Lieutenant Gyula Létay, he 'completely went to pieces...the Russians even took away his leather coat'.

On the next day the Soviets asked again who wanted to fight. Everybody, except the officers in charge of mail and duplicating, volunteered, and Létay even dragged two protesting field chaplains with him. This produced the first exclusively Hungarian volunteer battalion: until then volunteers had only been able to fight in company strength alongside the Soviet units.



(Central Budapest, January 1945: soldier's grave with a starving horse)

The Buda volunteers took a particularly active part in resisting the breakout, which

the Soviets rewarded by allowing them to raise a Hungarian flag on the Royal Palace beside their own. The palace itself was surrendered by the Germans on 12 February to a volunteer group led by First Lieutenant László Cseresnyés.

As a result of the Soviet security forces' habit of indiscriminately consigning any 'dangerous elements' to the camps, some volunteer units were also taken prisoner. Thus, on 15 February, 2534 members of the Buda Volunteer Regiment were assembled in the suburb of Kelenvölgy, disarmed and directed to Jászberény, 80 kilometres east of Budapest, to be incorporated in the emerging 1st Infantry Division.

The fact that Hungarian units could participate in the action on the Soviet side should not be underestimated. Their very presence had a powerful effect on the population. They prevented many acts of violence and persuaded many Hungarian soldiers to abandon the struggle. Despite huge losses, they helped to shorten the siege and thereby reduce the number of victims.

5 Zero hour - it's all over

On the morning of 12 February 1945 a strange silence descended on the city. Only sporadic shots or machine gun salvos could be heard. While the battle continued in the Buda Hills, the streets of Buda were completely deserted except for some stray animals and a few Hungarian or German soldiers, half-demented with hunger and fear, searching for a hiding place. As the Soviet troops had also left, there were no armed forces in the centre for several hours.

After six weeks in a cellar and encouraged by the silence, the civil servant József Finta set out to see his former workplace in the Castle District:

In Rétke Street I saw some burnt-out tanks, but they weren't smoking any more. Walking along Ostrom Street, I reached Bécsi Gate. I didn't meet anybody... not a soul - only dead bodies. No Russians either...

I got to the Castle District, not a soul anywhere. I walked along Werbőczy Street [today Táncsics Mihály Street]. Nothing but bodies and ruins, supply carts and drays...I got to Szentháromság Square and decided to look in at the Council in case I found somebody there. Deserted. I went up to the office. Everything turned upside down, and not a soul. I went down the stairs and turned right. In Szentháromság Street a man was dragging himself along in front of me with his head drooping. When I was level with him I realised that he was István Bárczibágy Bárczy, the Prime Minister's under-secretary of state. He lived in Uri Street. A broken man, turned grey. When I got quite close he looked up. 'Mr Under-secretary, where have you been?' I asked. 'Jóska', he said, 'leave me alone... go and see for yourself if you can bear it...'

I walked to the Prime Minister's Palace. The corner section of the beautiful Baroque building was

in ruins... Opposite the gate in the courtyard was the coach house. I stepped in, and there was the carriage the King of Italy had used when he came on a state visit, smashed to pieces. Next to it the stables. I decided to have a look, perhaps there were some horses left alive. Two dead horses were lying on the floor and not far from them, perhaps one or two metres away, a dead man, face down. I was so shaken that I turned round and ran out without looking where I was going...

When I was about twenty metres from the entrance to the temporary military hospital I saw two German soldiers coming out. Without weapons or anything, just like that. When they saw me they started running...towards Vérmező Meadow. They disappeared at the bottom of the steps and I walked back to Bécsi Gate. I saw some dead bodies here and there, but no Russians. In the deathly silence on my way home I didn't meet any Russians either. This time I walked down Várfoke Street... towards Moszkva Square [formerly Széll Kálmán Square]. I was in such a state that I was only looking in front of my feet to make sure that I didn't stumble over a body.

The student Dénes Kövendi went out at about the same time:

In the morning I walked into the college shouting 'Hurrah, we've been liberated', but was met by silence and black looks. It transpired that during the night several women had been raped and 10-15 students hiding there had been taken away for 'malenki robot' [light work] (although they were allowed back home three days later)...

I immediately set out to see what had happened to my father and sister, from whom I hadn't heard since Christmas. They had taken refuge in the Baár Madas boarding school, which had been regarded by people from the country as a particularly safe haven in Budapest. I understood that the Russians had got there about New Year. However, I had no way of knowing what the situation was like now. There were vague rumours about the breakout and about some Germans being left in the Castle District. So I started towards Alkotás Street with a great detour... intending to follow today's Határőr Street towards Városmajor Grange, but when I turned into Alma Street some shots were fired. I wasn't sure whether they were meant for me, but in any case I sought shelter in a nearby villa...In the doorway I found three young men who also wanted to go down that street. Eventually we started, and this time there was no shooting...

When we reached the row of trees near the Cartographical Institute about 20 dead soldiers were lying on the opposite pavement. I think they were Hungarians and Germans. We didn't look at them very closely, but we could see more dead soldiers on the ground floor of a burnt-out building that looked like a big shop or office... To this day I can't imagine how so many of them could have got there: we hadn't seen any dead bodies anywhere else in the neighbourhood...

I left my temporary companions as I had to walk up Trombitás Street and they were going somewhere else. In the autumn I had heard that a former classmate of mine was living at number 2, and it seemed natural to drop in and find out what had been happening there.

When I opened the front door I got the first (and last) real fright during the whole siege. 10-15 apparently high-ranking German officers were standing on the stairs in a line stretching from the front door to the mezzanine... I had been programmed to be afraid of the Germans and to expect the

Russians to liberate us (albeit somewhat unpleasantly). Now in my first confusion I thought that I had been captured by Germans. I mumbled something about what I had come for but didn't dare to ask about my classmate. All I wanted was to get out as quickly as possible. Nevertheless, I suspected that they weren't in a world-conquering mood either and might even have been frightened a little by my appearance. As they were going to be captured anyway they were nervously waiting to get it over as soon as possible. They asked if I had seen any Russians. I said, not in that neighbourhood. I asked whether I could continue up the road (meaning: would they please let me go). 'As a civilian you can certainly go', one of them said, and I ran for my life.

From Trombitás Street I sneaked into the boarding school from the back, without seeing either a Russian or anyone else. There I found my loved ones... Suddenly somebody brought word from the Russian soldiers posted at the gate to Lorántffy Street that nobody was to go out into the street because at half past two (or three?) they were going to start mopping up the German and Hungarian soldiers who had dispersed during the breakout.

Next morning I walked back to the college, feeling completely safe. I had no idea that they were rounding up thousands of young men in civilian clothes in the streets. In any case I got home without any mishap.

Within the ghetto in Pest there had been no significant encounters, but the inmates nevertheless experienced some of the last skirmishes as the front line passed by them:

On 17 January towards 10pm some SS men appeared from 8 Klauzál Street, having broken through the emergency passage between the shelters. They told us that they would be followed by a whole company within the hour and left, breaking through the emergency passage to 12 Klauzál Street. An hour later, however, a platoon of Red soldiers arrived from the street through the normal entrance to the shelter. The block commander (who had probably learnt Russian as a prisoner in the First World War) told them what the SS men had said. They sent us out of the room into which the emergency passage opened...and hid behind the concrete water tanks in the larger room to await the Germans.

It could have been midnight when they arrived. The Russians let five or six enter before opening fire with their submachine guns. Luckily they could see even in the semi-darkness that one German was carrying a panzerfaust, and they shot him before he could use it. Another threw a hand grenade at the Germans, which made quite a mess. It smashed three water tanks and the water poured into our part of the cellar, half a metre below the large room. We climbed on the wooden boxes we had turned into beds, trying to think of a way to reach the emergency exit if the water rose higher... Of course we didn't feel like going out into the street, where we could still hear the battle going on. In any case it was so cold out there that when we did go out next day the dead bodies piled up to be burnt didn't even smell.

It could have been about one o'clock when they herded us from the cellar to the ground floor apartments, where we waited till morning. The wounded SS man was still breathing heavily when we walked past him. His panzerfaust was lying on the corner of one of the concrete water tanks. No Red soldiers committed the slightest atrocity against anybody in the building while this platoon was

there.

The buildings on the front line had been evacuated immediately before the breakout. On the afternoon of 10 February the residents of Olasz Avenue, Filler Street, Fény Street and Káplár Street were marching towards Budakeszi:

Along Olasz Avenue, with civilians from the neighbouring streets and German prisoners of war, our procession grew to several hundred. That is how we reached the wooded stretch of land between the edge of the city and Budakeszi...

The peaceful silence of the picturesque landscape was broken by swearing and the stamping of hooves. As we were stomping through the creaking snow, a Russian soldier appeared on horseback, with a submachine gun and drum magazine hanging from his shoulder on a leather strap. At that time I didn't know any Russian and couldn't understand the abuse he was letting loose on one German soldier who was walking along with his comrades, painfully dragging his thickly bandaged foot. We automatically stopped when we saw the Russian force his horse to knock the wounded man down and stamp on him...

The German tried to get up and hobble on. The previous scene was repeated three times - as we heard while we walked on horrified - and then we could only assume that he hadn't got up again and had been left behind in the snow, either wounded or dead.

The Russian's fury was humanly understandable. He might have seen or suffered many German cruelties in the war...and come to hate all Germans. But... why had this particular prisoner among hundreds aroused his unbridled fury? If he wanted to kill him in revenge why didn't he simply shoot him rather than torture him to death? Why did he alone want revenge and none of his comrades who were escorting us? Could his thirst for revenge have turned on us as well? To this day I can't find a satisfactory answer to these questions.

When the Soviets allowed some evacuees back home the day after the breakout one of them witnessed the following scene:

On 12 February in the morning it was still dark when a patrol of three came in, saying: 'Go home - the siege is over'. They called at every villa... We went back the way we had come, along Filler Street, but in Nyíl Street we turned off towards Olasz Avenue. My son and I had great difficulty pulling the sledge because the snow had melted in the meantime. By then we could see fully equipped German soldiers lying dead everywhere. In Olasz Avenue we met people coming from the Cogwheel Railway and they told us what it was like there - the road covered in dead bodies. Hundreds of us, from Lövház Street, Retek Street and Széll Kálmán Square, had gathered.



(Margit Boulevard after the siege)

In Olasz Avenue three armed Russians were walking ahead of us. When we reached the Cartographical Institute the Russians stopped us. We didn't know what was going on. We were in the third row behind the patrol, followed by the crowd, women, children, sick people. Suddenly I saw a ragged, down-at-heel, stooped man in German uniform, without weapons or anything, coming towards us from Retek Street. The poor devil had made one mistake. He hadn't buttoned up his coat and his iron cross was showing. As the patrol was deliberating we stood and waited to see what was going to happen. After talking for a while one of them beckoned to the German soldier: 'Come along'. He escorted him to the tracks of the Huvosvolgy tram line on the other side of the street. Of course by then the tram wasn't running and the tracks were full of snow. He made the German walk ahead of him and when he had almost reached the track shot him in the base of the skull in front of our eyes. The German fell forward... and was left lying on the ground.

6 The treatment of the prisoners of war

I was trudging towards Olasz Avenue with a large Russian soldier. He had a purple surcingle tied round his waist (who knows which prelate he had got it from) and kept showing me a silver chain that looked like gold... It occurred to me that the surcingle symbolises the taming of physical desires. I wonder if it did this warrior any good.

They really took a lot. From me a pair of boots, my spare jodhpurs, my torch - into which I had

scratched 'Stolen from First Lieutenant Péchy' - and many other trifles.

Victors generally commit more outrages than those facing defeat. German atrocities against Soviet soldiers during the siege were relatively rare, and not many are known today. Contrary to international practice, the Germans forced prisoners to carry ammunition but treated them relatively humanely, not least because they knew that if they were captured - as was becoming more and more likely - they would be called to account for any acts of brutality. Typically, when Germany became a battleground, Hitler issued a special order: 'Prisoners taken during the capture of towns or villages... must not be killed near the front because later on the civilian population would have to pay for it'. In Hungary only a few German atrocities caused a stir, and these were duly exploited by the Soviet propaganda machine. Nor were the claims entirely groundless. In isolated cases Germans had indeed executed wounded Soviet soldiers: a German sergeant attached to Major Viharos's combat group, for instance, had assembled a number of wounded in a cellar and shot them.

On the Soviet side the execution of wounded prisoners, particularly SS and auxiliary servicemen wrongly named 'vlasovists', was common. The latter, allocated mainly to the Service Corps, represented 5-10 per cent of the German forces. A member of the Morlin Group remembers: 'The Russians started to chase the Russian/Ukrainian prisoners who had been serving in the German army ...out of one of the houses with their rifle butts. As they reached the square after running the gauntlet between the Russians they were shot into a heap in front of us.' Another prisoner recalls:

When we had lined up, a Russian officer asked which of us were Russians. I knew the Russian mentality and language well enough to guess what that meant. About 15-20 stepped forward. There were probably some Hivis among them, but most were ethnic Germans from Russia who had served in the Waffen SS. Before our eyes the Soviets set about them with their swords and when they were lying on the ground, battered and stabbed all over, they were finally killed with a submachine gun.

The executions were unpredictable:

They were herding us towards Rózsadomb Hill. We stopped in front of a large villa. Two rows ahead of me they shot a prisoner in the head after a short exchange. He was wearing a Hungarian uniform but also spoke Russian. Was he a vlasovist? As he was dying with blood pouring from his head we stepped over him.

In the German military hospital underneath today's Szechenyi Library Soviet soldiers addressed each patient individually, and those in German uniforms who did not answer in German were shot on the spot. They raped and stabbed several nurses

and threw handgrenades into the wards. Similar atrocities against German wounded occurred in almost every hospital.

The Soviet soldiers often took no prisoners and slaughtered even those Germans who surrendered. According to survivors 'dead German soldiers with their hands above their heads were lying in serried ranks on the embankment of the Cogwheel Railway', and similar executions are reported by many other sources.

The Waffen SS and the wounded were most at risk. The former were killed for political reasons, the latter because their care would have required too much effort and they could not work. In the sports ground in Budakeszi SS soldiers were forced to dig their own graves before being shot. In Pilisszentkereszt both the Soviets and the Germans used axes to dismember prisoners who had been wounded in street fighting. Some wounded prisoners who could not walk were dragged along the road behind trucks or crushed alive by tanks. The latter fate befell the patients of the military hospital near the Ministry of War, who were carried out into the street expressly for that purpose. Ensign Norbert Major witnessed the following incident:

Two human figures were lying in Toth Árpád Promenade. Suddenly we saw one of them raising his hand and then feebly dropping it. Nobody dared to do anything, but several of us asked the Soviet lieutenant who was escorting us to help. He drew his pistol, walked up to them and... shot them in the back of the neck. That completed the first aid.

Soldiers captured during the breakout, when the Soviets no longer feared reprisals, were most likely to be executed. This is confirmed by the mutilated bodies exhumed from the mass graves in the environment of Buda, and by the reminiscences of the foresters and other villagers who buried them. German and Soviet dead were often interred in common graves with a red star placed above them, as for instance in Csolnok. German graves were destroyed by the Soviets in Pilisszenttelek and elsewhere.

One particularly dark episode was the death march of prisoners to Baja, when those unable to walk any further were shot through the base of the skull and thrown into the ditch on the roadside by Soviet soldiers bringing up the rear. Iván Hermándy had witnessed four such executions when he too faltered and lay down, resigned to his fate. When the Soviets discovered that he was a Hungarian, they bundled him on a passing peasant cart that took him to a prison camp, where he was refused admission because he had arrived on his own. Finally he was abandoned propped up against a tree.

At that stage the prisoners received hardly any food. The first meal given to one group transferred from the Sósút camp was maize with salami, cooked in a petrol drum, which they were unable to eat, although they soon wished they had. One survivor remembers: 'Sometimes we were allowed to rest. Then all the prisoners

threw themselves into the puddles and ditches to drink. If there was a field of corn along the road we all rushed to grab some, ignoring the shots fired at us at random. Hundreds died of dysentery after drinking the dirty snow water.'

The executions were not carried out according to any master plan. The Soviet army command, unlike the German, issued no unequivocal orders, but instead engaged in constant propaganda portraying the enemy as vile diabolical and only fit to be executed.

In every war Stalin's official propagandists called the enemy troops 'wild beasts', 'murderers', 'scum', 'barbarians' and 'animals'. During the winter war of 1939 they had described the Finns, who behaved in a relatively civilised manner, in such terms, and the daily reading of Soviet soldiers included articles about men having their eyes gouged out or being burnt alive, and about the barbarities of Finnish Red Cross nurses. During the Second World War they labelled the Germans 'cannibals', 'filth', 'monsters' and 'brutes'. Printed envelopes issued to soldiers for their letters home frequently showed the picture of a child begging: 'Dad, kill a German.' In some units forms called 'Personal Revenge Account' were distributed with blanks for the number of Germans killed, the type of weapon used and the confirmation of the commander.

In his propaganda piece *The German*, the Soviet author Ilya Ehrenburg styled even ordinary German conscripts 'murderers', 'wild beasts' or 'starving rats' and declared: 'We do not regard them as human beings...Europe has long known that the best German is the dead German.' Similar phrases are found in the writings of Aleksandr Aleksandrovich Fadeev, Aleksei Tolstoy and the historian Evgeni Tarle, or in the novel *The Science of Hatred* by the Nobel Prize winner Mikhail Sholokhov.

Articles by Ehrenburg and his colleagues, which had been appearing in the front-line newspapers since July 1941, were compulsory reading for the Red Army. The mood they created was responsible for the deaths of many German prisoners. However, the experiences of Soviet soldiers who had personally witnessed the Germans' treatment of Jews and other civilians, also played an important part in triggering atrocities.

The Soviet leadership must have been aware of the soldiers' conduct. The command of the political section of the 2nd Ukrainian Front stressed in a report that the German soldiers preferred death to captivity. The Red Army contained many officers who had served in the political police (Cheka, OGPU, NKVD) or the notorious OSNAS sabotage units. In his memoirs, Lieutenant-Colonel Chebotarev recalls commanding an 'extermination unit' of the NKVD in the fight against Caucasian tribes in the 1930s. Others acquired ample experience in operations such as the suppression of the Tambov peasants' uprising (when projectiles filled with poison gas were used against civilians for the first time in history), the campaign against the kulaks or the Katyn massacre. Regiments, battalions or NKVD units of this kind - professional murderers, trained to kill even innocent people - were attached

to every Soviet army. Eye-witnesses report that they often took away the identification discs of those about to be executed in order to prevent them being recognised in the future.

The opposite sometimes also happened. First Lieutenant Wolfgang Betzler was congratulated by a Soviet soldier on his medals, and given a hat by another when he had lost his own. SS Hauptsturmführer Kurt Portugall writes:

After asking for my name, rank and unit they offered me a piece of bread and some vodka, remarking that I had probably not had anything to eat or drink for days and must be hungry... The heat of the room made me break out in a sweat. The Russian major told me to open my camouflage suit. When I did so he studied my stripes, SS runes and medals with interest. Then he said: 'I have great respect for the soldiers of the Waffen SS. You will now be transported to our hinterland. In our base there are as many bastards as in yours. I advise you to take off the SS runes and medals, it would be better for your health. I don't want your medals, none of us here wants them, because we are members of the guard units, who are the Russian Waffen SS.'



(left – artist Sándor Ék painting his poster ‘The Fascist Beast Cannot Escape’
right – ‘GPU: It would be the same here – contemporary poster)

A few minutes earlier two men who turned out to speak Russian...

...were given a terrible beating. The Russians made them kneel down and swear by the Mother of

God that they would never again take up weapons against their fatherland. These two comrades were Germans from the Volga who had emigrated in 1939 as a result of the pact between Hitler and Stalin. They were allowed to rejoin our line after being treated by Russian nurses, and each had a loaf of bread tucked under his arm.

An incident involving a number of Germans and Hungarians, captured in Detrekö Street on Rózsadomb Hill, was typical of the unpredictability of the Soviets. The prisoners were lined up and shot one after another by their vengeful captors. When they came to Staff Captain Bela Barabas a Soviet officer dashed out of a nearby villa and roared at the Soviet soldiers to stop the executions. In another incident some postmen and conductors captured near Hegyalja Road, were saved by a Russian-speaking Hungarian officer who explained to the Soviets that their uniforms were not those of the Arrow Cross militia.

Sometimes well-meaning Soviet soldiers practically invited Hungarian prisoners to escape. Thus First Lieutenant Istvan Kaszas, asking for water, was told by a Soviet guard to go wherever he liked, although after drinking a few mouthfuls he rejoined the column because he was afraid of being unable to prove his identity if he was left behind. Elsewhere, at the end of a march, the officers were ordered to step out of line: instead of being shot as they expected, they were allowed to sleep in the farmhouses together with their guards, while the lower ranks slept in the barns.

Sometimes people were captured by pure coincidence. The wounded Hussar Lieutenant Istvan Tabody was asked by a Soviet soldier if he spoke German. As soon as he had uttered an eager 'ja' the soldier, with an enormous kick, propelled him into a batch of prisoners - he never had a chance to explain that he was a Hungarian.

As a result of the unbridled propaganda, 'lawless behaviour, unworthy of human beings' had spread among the Soviet soldiers and 'some units had become uncontrollable'. From 1945, therefore, firm orders prohibiting the ill-treatment of innocent prisoners of war and civilians were given to almost every unit. A copy of such an order issued by Marshall Malinovsky, for example, fell into the hands of German and Hungarian troops early that year.

The Soviet atrocities in Budapest were not the only ones committed during the war and bear no comparison to the crimes of the German *Einsatzgruppen* in the Soviet Union or of Soviet soldiers in East Prussia. The fact that they occurred does not mitigate the culpability of the German National Socialist system.

7 The Soviet crimes

Institutional offences

To some extent every army fighting a war violates human rights. The Red Army

was no exception. However, there were significant differences between the two sides as to the manner and extent of these violations. Before the siege Hungary had been a theoretically independent ally of the Germans, who therefore committed fewer atrocities there than, for example, in the Soviet Union. Although Germans participated in the persecution of the Jews, their role was largely restricted to 'paperwork' - those most directly responsible were the Arrow Cross government and its executive organs.

German crimes in Budapest occurred primarily during the last phase of the siege, but generally remained confined to looting and destroying property, as for instance in Pestszentlőrinc, where a number of workers' homes were blown up to provide a clear field of fire for the artillery. One of the most serious acts of violence against civilians took place in Dunaharaszti, where a group of Germans shot villagers protesting against the confiscation of their cattle. At 3 Hegytető Street on Sashegy Hill another group drove a family with whom they had been billeted out of their own home, killing their young daughter in the process. However, such cases did not exceed a few dozen.

The Red Army had reached the Carpathian Basin in very different circumstances. The Soviets rightly regarded Hungary as an enemy state, and they also found communications with the population more difficult, because very few Hungarians spoke Russian. Soviet soldiers were rarely granted leave and there were no field brothels, which accounted for many of the rapes. They were allowed to send home parcels weighing up to 10 kilogrammes, which was a hidden incentive to loot, as there was nothing else to send. Most, including the highest officers, had directly or indirectly experienced the behaviour of the German and Hungarian occupiers of their country and were therefore frequently bent on revenge.

Although the neargenocidal activities of the Germans and Hungarians in the Soviet Union received a great deal of publicity from Soviet propagandists, they bore no immediate relation to those of the Soviet soldiers, who also perpetrated atrocities in Czechoslovakia or allied Yugoslavia. The causes of war crimes are mainly found in the system that tolerates, supports or instigates them, determining the extent to which the rule of law and justice may be ignored and where institutional (and, to a degree, personal) limits to criminal behaviour should be set. Armies commit crimes because the military command has an interest in deterrence. In the totalitarian Soviet state, with its partly Asiatic structures, the destructive impulses awakened by this approach surfaced with particular violence.

Many Soviet crimes, in addition to those committed by individuals on their own initiative, were ordered from above. In Budapest, as in other large cities, special units of the Red Army promptly began to collect valuables for the Soviet Union. According to the Swiss Embassy, a small but meticulous group of officers 'plundered the strongboxes - particularly American and British - in every bank and took away all

the cash' shortly after the end of the siege. The Jews paid dearly for their 'liberation': 95 per cent of the works of art that were stolen are thought to have belonged to famous Jewish collectors including Moricz Kornfeld, Bertalan Demeny and Sándor Harsányi.

The country's public collections were systematically robbed by officers trained in art history, which is how the collection of Ferenc Hatvany disappeared from the safe of the Bank for Commerce (today the Interior Ministry). The only well still working in the neighbourhood was in the cellar of the bank, and people who came to fetch water were able to observe Soviet soldiers carrying valuables away for days. It may have been no coincidence that the art dealer Márton Porkai, who lived next door, was seized by the NKVD at the same time. Events in the Hungarian General Credit Bank (today the Ministry of Finance) were reported by the manager as follows:

On 20 January 1945 a group of Russian officers came to the bank. They opened every safe and strongbox, at times by force. They took away 113 million pengős in cash as well as about 800 suitcases and other containers deposited by clients, and emptied 1,400 safe-deposit boxes.

It is impossible to estimate the value of the objects taken, but it is certain that it was a very large amount. They also took securities worth several hundred million pengős, which belonged partly to clients and partly to the bank.

The Weiss Manfred Works in Csepel were dismantled and carried away by the Soviets on the grounds that they were German property (the Weiss family had handed its shares over to the SS in exchange for being allowed to escape to Switzerland). Jewish possessions stored in the vaults of the National Bank also fell into the hands of the Soviets, who continued loading crates of them onto lorries for days. In tandem with the Soviet occupation of the city the 'cleansing' of the Communist Party began. The resistance activist Pal Demeny, whose followers comprised the majority of the Budapest Communist Party, was arrested on 13 February, allegedly because his faction had opposed the Moscow party line. No notice was taken of the fact that on 16 February, shortly after being released from Arrow Cross detention, he had written to the Communist leader Mátyás Rákosi, asking for clarification of his position. The first step in 'uniting the workers' in order to secure a Communist takeover was always the removal of dissidents.

A particularly murky case was that of Raoul Wallenberg, perhaps the most famous victim of the pathologically suspicious Soviet counterintelligence service. His fate has repeatedly been attributed to the fact that he had seen documents concerning the Katyn massacre. In 1943 the Hungarian forensic pathologist Ferenc Orsós had reported on his inspection of the scene of the massacre, and the Polish resistance had also sent details to Hungary. These documents were stored in the Hungarian General Credit Bank. Like Wallenberg, Béla Varga, the president of the Hungarian National

Assembly in 1945, and Zoltán Mikó, the prominent resistance fighter, were familiar with the results of the investigation. It was therefore no coincidence that all three were seized by Soviet counter-intelligence. The two Hungarians were initially sentenced to death. Bela Varga was saved by his interpreter, a Soviet colonel of Hungarian origin, who told him what to say: 'Most important, if they ask you about Katyn, you know nothing'. Miko was executed on 15 August 1945. Miko's assistant, Vilmos Bondor, who was sentenced to 25 years' imprisonment, was repeatedly asked during interrogations what he knew about Wallenberg and the 'documents'. Wallenberg himself was arrested on 19 January 1945 in Rákosszentmihály and died in the Soviet Union in unknown circumstances.

In addition, Wallenberg, Miko and Bondor had committed capital offences, according to Soviet logic, simply by having contacts with espionage organisations. Wallenberg, whose position at the Swedish Embassy was merely a blind, was financed by the US World Refugee Board, which Soviet counter-intelligence believed - not entirely without reason - to have links with the US secret service. Mikó and Bondor for their part had commanded an Arrow Cross sabotage and intelligence unit. These facts alone would have been sufficient for the Soviets to treat the three men with utmost severity.

The paranoia of the Soviets was so great that they even arrested Communist members of the armed resistance and accused Zionist activists of spying for the Germans. Hardest hit were people who had been engaged in intelligence or counter-intelligence, held the post of public Prosecutor, or done business with foreign firms:

Everybody was a suspect and when somebody was caught all of his acquaintances, friends, relatives, debtors and business partners whose names were found in his notebooks were arrested. Every exporter was suspected of being a spy and his documents were searched with the greatest enthusiasm; and if for some reason an unfortunate citizen was named in the files of an export company - whether as an employee, an expert, an inquirer, a lawyer or a tenderer - he was locked up in a front-line prison.

The fact that such occupations and connections were associated by the Soviets with the worst crimes right from the outset reflects on their own totalitarian system. As an inevitable consequence of Stalinism Soviet soldiers distrusted even their fellow-soldiers and kept constant watch over each other.

The Wallenberg affair continued to claim victims long after the war. In 1952, in parallel with the 'Jewish doctors' trial' in Moscow, a show trial of Zionists was mounted in Budapest. The leaders of the Pest ghetto and the organisers of rescue operations were to be convicted of the 'murder' of Wallenberg. Several hundred people were arrested, and in the course of interrogations many suffered injuries from which they never recovered. Miksa Domonkos, one of celebrated rescuers, died as a

result of torture on 25 February 1954. It was only thanks to the death of Stalin that the trials were broken off.

Even diplomats were not always spared, as Carl Lutz, the Swiss charge d'affaires, experienced:

Shortly after the capture of Budapest the Russian military also descended on us in the ruins of the British Embassy. An officer demanded our embassy cars, some of which were no longer functioning, and gave me 5 minutes to get the missing 'spare part'. Then he drew his pistol, ran after me into the bunker and shot at me several times. I barely managed to escape through the emergency exit of the air raid shelter. Subsequently we were harassed and looted for 10 days and nights by drunken soldiers.

A report of the Swiss Embassy about the treatment of its staff and the loss of Jewish property reads:

Soon after the arrival of the Russians the head of the Swiss Embassy, Herr [Harald] Feller, and his chief clerk, Herr [Hans] Mayer, were arrested by the GPU [actually the NKVD, which had absorbed the GPU in 1934]. They have not been heard of since...The premises of the Embassy were looted four times. During one of the raids a Russian even put a noose round the neck of an embassy employee, Herr Ember, in an attempt to force him to hand over the safe key. When he still refused the noose was drawn so tight that he lost consciousness. The Russians took the key from his pocket and cleared out the safe, taking deposits worth several million with them... One of the large safes of the Swedish Embassy that the Germans had not managed to remove was removed by the Russians with all its contents.

In several cases during the fighting Soviet soldiers had forced unarmed civilians to walk ahead of them as living shields. After the fall of Budapest, Malinovsky granted his troops three days of 'free looting' - which included forcing women to act as prostitutes and holding them captive for a fortnight if they were considered attractive - to celebrate their victory. There were some well-meaning Soviet officers who warned their Hungarian acquaintances of the imminent danger.

The depredation of the capital became more and more systematic as the occupation progressed. In concerted actions the entire equipment of the hotels on Margit Island was stolen, as were many sculptures in public places. In Budafok, a suburb famous for its wine cellars, the Soviet district commanders and their political officers were replaced twice in quick succession because their exploits under the influence of free alcohol had come to the attention of the supreme command.

In March 1945 the Swiss Embassy reported on the methods of the 'liberators':

Looting was ubiquitous and thorough, albeit not always systematic. One man had all his trousers

stolen but not his jackets. Some small groups specialised in valuables, looking for gold, silver and other metals with detectors. Trained dogs were also used... Immovable furniture and large works of art were often simply destroyed. Often the looted homes were finally set on fire...

Today order is being kept by Hungarian police. However, Russian soldiers frequently stop passers-by to relieve them of the contents of their pockets, particularly watches, cash and sometimes even personal documents...

The insecurity is made worse by the Russian practice of abducting people from the streets or flats to secure labourers for public works...In this way thousands of people are forced to work in the countryside and in Budapest itself. After a while they are generally allowed to return home, but are never given the opportunity to inform their relations of their whereabouts. The current Minister of Public Works, Count Géza Teleki, and a Mayor of Budapest were led away without prior warning and found only two days later, when a Russian officer to whom they were able to talk finally released them. Prince Pál Esterházy was discovered in a cemetery burying dead horses. Near Godollo a large concentration camp has been set up with about 40,000 internees, who are being deported to an unknown destination in the east. It is common knowledge that these internees are given very little food unless they sign a statement that they wish to join the Red Army or to work in Russia of their own free will.

The concept of public work was rather loosely interpreted by the Soviets:

If some work had to be done for the military, such as moving a gun into position, pulling a broken-down car from the road or loading goods from a store onto a lorry, the Russians simply stopped pedestrians and set them to work... Sometimes the forced labourers worked for half an hour, at other times for half a day. They were either given food or not, just as the Russians pleased.

The Soviets' favourite spots for seizing labourers were those with the heaviest pedestrian traffic. The Anker Palace corner, the intersection of Kossuth Lajos Street and Múzeum Boulevard, and the junction of the Great Boulevard and Rákóczy Road were particularly hazardous, and so were the bridges, where they used the trick of announcing that people would only be allowed to cross in groups of a hundred, whereupon all those rushing to be in the first group were forced to carry rubble instead of continuing their journey.

In February 1945 Malinovsky had some 50,000 men rounded up in order to deliver the 110,000 prisoners he had reported to the Soviet supreme command. Police officers, postmen and firefighters in uniform were classified as prisoners of war from the outset, and many members of the pro-Soviet Buda Volunteer Regiment suffered the same fate. As this was still not enough, people with German names listed in the municipal records were seized in their homes, as were many passers-by in the streets, including former victims of the fascists. To fill the gaps left by captives escaping from marches, residents were dragged out of their houses. The most notorious camps were

those in Gödöllő, Cegléd, Jászberény and Baja. Imre Kovács remembers Gödöllő:

We stumbled across the railway lines and the three- or four-storey buildings of the magnificent high school appeared in front of our eyes, surrounded by a double barbed wire fence. Both inside and outside the fence guards were doing the rounds, constantly yelling and shooting. In front of the fence huge groups of women, children and old people stood calling out, and from behind it frightening shadows waved and answered. The guards did all they could to keep the visitors at a distance, firing warning shots at the more daring who advanced closer... We really had the impression that the whole of Budapest was crammed together before us. Fur-coated gentlemen, distinguished in their bearing but shabby and worn out, were marking time in the courtyard next to tram conductors, streetsweepers, postmen and policemen...For some reason the camp command was continually taking stock of the people. Names were flying through the air and there was swearing and cursing.

Only a small percentage of the Hungarians captured in Budapest and its environs could really be regarded as prisoners of war. The deportation of civilians assumed such proportions that János Gyöngyösi, the Foreign

Minister in the Hungarian Provisional National Government, personally requested the head of the Allied Control Commission for Hungary, Marshall Kliment Yefremovich Voroshilov, to end them.

Many houses that were still habitable remained occupied by Soviet soldiers for months. The owners were at best allowed into the gardens to rummage among the objects smashed and thrown out by the victors. One of them remembers what she found when she could finally return home:

The Russians stayed in the villa for over six months. All that time they had not even carried the rubble out of the wrecked rooms. When they suddenly left at the end of the summer a shocking sight awaited us. They had taken away practically everything they had not burnt as firewood or thrown into the bomb craters. The piano, the paintings, the furniture, the carpets - at least those they had not cut up to make horse blankets or 'curtain fringes' for their trucks - they had taken them all. And they had also taken 13 doors and a total of 72 window frames... In every room the remnants of my grandfather's library were stacked high: a pile of human excrement, an open book placed on top of it, another pile, another book, and so on... The paper required for this 'activity' had of course been torn out of the books in handfuls... These towers stood in rows like proud skyscrapers, giving off an unbearable stench.

The Soviets brutally retaliated for any action taken against them. When an Arrow Cross sniper shot a Russian officer from an upper floor in Halmi Road all the men found in the vicinity were herded to the park in Sósfürdő Street and executed in front of the assembled residents of the district as a 'warning'. After the capture of Buda mass executions took place in the courtyard of Margit Boulevard prison, Széna

Square and Torockó Square.

Looting and rapes

What he told us was nothing short of hell on earth. 70 percent of women, from girls of twelve to mothers in the ninth month of pregnancy, raped; most men deported; every home looted; the city and its churches in ruins; in the restaurants and stores horses; in the streets, cemeteries and ransacked shops thousands of unburied bodies; in the cellars people half-demented with hunger, cutting pieces of flesh from horses dead for days; and so on. This is how things may have been in Jerusalem when the prophet Jeremiah uttered his laments. (Bishop József Grösz)

To some inhabitants of Budapest, the Soviet occupation meant life and freedom, or at least deliverance from the Arrow Cross, to others - who often bore no direct responsibility for the fascist crimes - it meant mass graves, rapes or being sent to Siberia. The worst thing was the sense of absolute defencelessness. Although the danger of being killed had been greater during the siege, it had in some ways been easier to bear than the precarious existence that followed. Since the air raids in summer 1944 everybody had known that the war would also claim civilian victims, but few had expected the utter lawlessness and insecurity that came with the 'liberation'.

The atrocities varied from one area of the city to another. Where fighting had been most prolonged, the suffering of the population was greatest. In Buda, particularly around Gellért-hegy Hill, the Castle District and Rozsadomb Hill, law and order had not returned even by the beginning of March 1945. Here almost all the houses were looted several times by marauding Soviet soldiers or deserters, Soviet patrols called in to help or Hungarian criminals.

The looters' behaviour was unpredictable. Sometimes they killed whole families, at other times they started to play with a child's toys and left peacefully. Even the Soviet city command was not spared: Lieutenant-General Zamertsev's car was stolen while he was in the theatre. Ferenc Kishont (Ephraim Kishon), the Israeli humorist, who lived in Budapest at the time, recalls:

We thought that the men who had defeated the gigantic National Socialist war machine were superior in military terms. However, all the Soviets we met were just gifted black marketeers and passionate rag-and-bone men. They were wearing a colourful medley of clothes from the occupied territories. Some were pulling prams filled with plunder from their looting campaigns.

Both during and after the siege it was primarily the women who looked after their

families and often risked their lives, carrying water, queueing for food, nursing the sick and trying to protect their families. Most men did not venture out of the cellars, either because they had reason to fear capture - first by the Arrow Cross, then by the Soviets - or because they were less brave. Intruders were more often resisted by women, who often paid for their courage with their lives. A Swiss Embassy report reads:

The worst suffering of the Hungarian population is due to the rape of women. Rapes - affecting all age groups from ten to seventy - are so common that very few women in Hungary have been spared. They are sometimes accompanied by incredible brutalities. Many women prefer suicide to these horrors... The misery is made worse by the sad fact that many Russian soldiers are diseased and there are absolutely no medicines in Hungary.

Mrs Ödön Faragó kept a diary throughout the siege and stopped temporarily when the second wave of Soviet soldiers replaced those on the front line and the rapes began:

I haven't been able to write for a week. This week has been hell. What we have been through is indescribable. We tremble whenever we hear a Russian. We fold our hands and pray to God to let him walk on. We have nothing left. They have taken our clothes, household linen, food, drink, everything. We have been up day and night, trembling. The seven weeks of the siege were child's play compared with the three weeks of torture we have endured since.

In February 1945 the communists of Köbánya submitted the following appeal to the Soviets:

For decades the workers of the world have been looking to Moscow like the ignorant labourer to Christ. It was from there that they expected...liberation from the barbaric vandalism of fascism. After long and painful persecution the glorious, longed-for Red Army has come, but what a Red Army!...

Köbánya was the place where the liberating Red Army arrived on 2 January after heavy house-to-house fighting, leaving destruction, devastation and desolation in its wake. This was not because there were fascists among the rags and bits of furniture in the homes of the people who had been wage slaves for decades: among the working people of Köbánya very few were pro-German and the rest hated the Nazis. Rather, it was an outbreak of rampant, demented hatred. Mothers were raped by drunken soldiers in front of their children and husbands. Girls as young as 12 were dragged from their fathers and mothers to be violated by 10-15 soldiers and often infected with venereal diseases. After the first group came others, who followed their example...Several comrades lost their lives trying to protect their wives and daughters...

The situation in the factories is terrible. Russian officers have created impossible conditions by ignoring the workers' committees, which contain many Communist Party members. The workers toil for 3 pengös an hour on an empty stomach with no more than a lunch of peas or beans all day... The former fascist managers are treated with more respect than the workers' committees, because they supply the Russian officers with women... Lootings by Russian soldiers are still the order of the day... We know that the intelligent members of the army are communists, but if we turn to them for help they have fits of rage and threaten to shoot us, saying: 'And what did you do in the Soviet Union? You not only raped our wives before our eyes, but for good measure you killed them together with their children, set fire to our villages and razed our cities to the ground.' We know that Hungarian capitalism bred its own sadist brutes... But we do not understand why a Siberian soldier talks like that... when the fascist attacks...never even reached the Urals, the dream of German fascism, let alone Siberia...

It is no good praising the Red Army on posters, in the Party, in the factories and everywhere, if men who have survived the tyranny of Szálasi are now herded along the roads like cattle by Russian soldiers, constantly leaving dead bodies behind...

Comrades sent to the countryside to promote land distribution are being asked by the peasants what use the land is to them if their horses have been taken away from the meadows by the Russians - they cannot plough with their noses. If these things were stopped it would outshine all the frantic propaganda and the Hungarian workers would regard the Red soldiers as gods.

In spring 1945 the leadership of the Hungarian Communist Party received this complaint from the branch in the village of Bicske:

Although the front line is now a long way from here Bicske is in an even worse position than when we were evicted from our village for 9 weeks [during the relief attempts from December 1944 to February 1945]. We have been robbed of everything, but marauding soldiers are still constantly stealing and looting. In peacetime we had more than 1000 horses, now only 30, and the soldiers are still stealing them daily...The people live in fear...the women are treated most shamelessly...Every day that passes the people have less confidence in the Party.

In the village of Pilisszentkereszt, which changed hands twice during the relief attempts, the local priest writes in his diary:

Till 6 January 1945 things were relatively quiet, although the soldiers, and even the officers, did a lot of looting and pillaging. Led by an officer, they robbed me three times...From 6 to 11 January the GPU constantly interrogated me, twice opening fire with a submachine gun behind me (as a threat) ...Anti-tank mines have so far claimed 13 dead and 87 more or less seriously wounded [of a total population of about 950] ...We have been ordered to destroy the mines that are being found. By now we have disarmed many hundred. Four men have been shot by the Russians...The Russians camped in the church for two weeks. They broke the tabernacle open and scattered the host on the floor. They

spread mattresses taken from my house and elsewhere in front of the altar, and raped girls and women on them. They used the side altars as tables and the tabernacle as a store cupboard for jam, lard, bacon etc. They ruined the organ by playing dance music on it during their parties. They cut the vestments into thin ribbons...to make military insignia, decorations for their hats and stripes for their trousers. They unscrewed the chalices after copiously drinking from them...

They were going to execute me because - as a 'bourgeois' who has a phone and a radio and can speak German - I must be spying for the Germans... My home has been completely plundered by the Russians...80 percent of my furniture is a thing of the past. It was used as firewood. I have nothing left.

In various places specially hired prostitutes entertained the Soviets, while elsewhere housemaids sacrificed themselves for their employers, or mothers for their daughters. Generally women tried to look older than they were. Many wore shapeless clothes and smudged their faces or pretended to be suffering from diseases.

There are no precise records of the number of women raped in Hungary. Zamertsev spoke of 1800 to Sándor Tóth, but this was clearly only a fraction of all cases. The picture is also distorted by the fact that the existing figures do not show how many women died due to rapes, or were raped several times. In any case the situation was so grave that even Matyas Rakosi, Secretary General of the Communist Party, appealed to the Soviet authorities.

Statistics show that two million women in Germany were raped, and some 60,000 children were born as a result. Of the 1.4 million female inhabitants of Berlin at least 110,000, were raped and 1156 subsequently gave birth. In Hungary similar statistics could be prepared only in towns temporarily recaptured by German and Hungarian troops. In Lajoskomárom 140 out of 1000 women residents sought medical treatment, and in Székesfehérvár 1500 women were reported raped, but the estimated number was between 5000 and 7000, or 10-15 per cent of the population - all this after a Soviet occupation lasting 30 days. In Budapest, according to information available to date, about 10 per cent of the population was raped. In addition, about 1000 German women in the Wehrmacht were captured, probably suffering most at the hands of the Soviets.

Significantly, in territories occupied by the Red Army, for example in Germany, the number of people suffering from venereal diseases had grown by a factor of 20. In Hungary a compulsory treatment centre was set up in every town with more than 10,000 inhabitants, and elsewhere as necessary. In Budapest after the war 35,000-40,000 clandestine prostitutes were known to the police, apart from those listed in official records. This number is also more than 20 times the number before 1945. Nor was the increase caused by loose morals: when the fighting was over, the sense of helplessness, hunger and sheer need to survive often drove women to prostitution.

The rapes are only partly explained by the fact that the soldiers wanted to satisfy

their sexual urges. They usually occurred in appallingly unhygienic conditions (with the victims unable to clean up for weeks in some cases) and often within a few metres of indifferent onlookers awaiting their turn. The soldiers could hardly have derived much pleasure from them, while running a considerable risk of contracting diseases which were incurable, as penicillin was not available in the Soviet Union at the time.

Mass rape as an archaic army rite was a much more common practice among the Soviets than in any other European army. The defilement of women, providing the victors with a kind of collective recompense and gratification, has existed as a psychological phenomenon ever since the wars of ancient times. The better-organised an army, the less likely are its soldiers to give in to such archaic urges. This is not to say that even the most civilised soldier may not commit sexual violence on some occasion, but he would be seeking his pleasure as an individual rather than as a conqueror. That is why the German or Hungarian soldiers' way of indulging in such excesses was completely different from that of the Soviets.

A horrifying picture is painted by a variety of reminiscences and reports. The youngest rape victims were less than 10, the oldest over 90. Some women were raped up to 22 times. Four cases of men being raped by female soldiers are also known. All this seems to confirm that these crimes were not simply sexually motivated, but arose from more complex psychological impulses. One of several letters written by Soviet soldiers which fell into German hands illustrates how they felt about the women concerned: 'There are enough women and they don't speak a word off Russian. So much the better: we don't have to try and persuade them - we just point the pistol at them, the order "lie down" settles the matter, and we can move on.'

Apart from the human aspect, the rapes probably did more harm to socialism as represented by the political system of the Soviet Union (and, tragically, to Russian culture) than the most savage National Socialist propaganda. Even those who sympathised with the Soviet Union, or belonged to the Communist Party, were unable to understand these crimes. All they could do was remain silent or resort to euphemisms: for example Lajos Feher, writing about his efforts to bring his fiancée to safety, said: 'Because of the situation that has arisen I have decided to rescue aunt Diera's daughter Éva urgently from the Filatori fields'. Ivan Boldizsár characterises the same 'situation' through a cynical joke:

Grisba pulls out his wallet and hands his wife's photo round. She is a typical Caucasian, large and dark-eyed, beautiful rather than pretty. He is about to put the wallet away, but the others in a chorus demand to see the rest of the photos. For a while Grisba plays hard to get, but finally produces them.

'This is Ilonka, this is Marianna, this is Sári, this is Amália, this is again Ilonka, this is Magda, this is Márta, this is again Ilonka...' We all laugh. The pictures represent every age and social class. Through a gesture I ask him whether he had got them with his pistol. A new wave of

laughter. Before Grisba can answer Vassily explains: 'A little bread, a little flour, a little lard, a tiny little bit of sugar.'

The Soviet supreme command did not really appreciate the problem, although in some cases it handed out punishments harsher than they would have been in Western Europe. A case in point was Yugoslavia. The leadership of the Yugoslav Communist Party protested to Stalin against the rapes, which it regarded as particularly grave, given that the country was an ally of the Soviet Union. As Milovan Djilas recalls, Stalin rejected the protest: 'Doesn't Djilas... understand that a soldier who has marched thousands of kilometres through pools of blood and through fire and water will want to have a little fun with a wench or steal a trifle?'

The saddest psychological consequence of the mass rapes, however, was not so much the discreditation of the Soviet system as the fact that for half a century these unspeakable and unforgettable experiences remained in the foreground, preventing the Hungarian people from personally confronting what had happened in their history before and during the Second World War. Whenever the question of direct or indirect individual responsibility for the fate of the Hungarian Jews or Hungary's involvement in the war arose, the Soviet soldiers' behaviour was immediately cited as a supposedly logical answer. 'We also suffered a lot' was the common response.

While these experiences barred Hungarians from coming to terms with their responsibility at a personal level, the Soviet political system imposed on Hungary did so at a social level. Márai, in his diary, describes what should have started in 1945: 'The Jewish part of the problems has been resolved for a long time to come thanks to the arrival of the Russians: the liberation of the Jews has happened. Now the harder part of the problem is beginning: the liberation of the gentiles.' Before long he had to recognise that nobody had really been liberated. The outbreaks of anti-Semitism in Kunmadaras, Ózd, Makó and Miskolc - often instigated by Communist Party members - provided sombre proof that nothing had been resolved and no social or political liberation had taken place.

8 The Soviet soldiers' mentality as reflected in contemporary recollections

"Were you looking forward to the arrival of the Russians?" - "Yes, as if they had been our own family. Rafi, for example, ran to meet them like a madman and embraced the first Russian in tears. The Russian said: Here, Jew, give me your leather coat."

There have been many attempts to analyse the distinctive features of the Soviet troops' behaviour. The reminiscences of contemporaries suggest that Soviet soldiers were more likely to act on extreme impulses than their Western or central European

counterparts. In Hungary, as a result of the war and the subsequent Stalinist dictatorship, the negative aspects were more vividly remembered than the humane gestures shown towards the population by many of the occupiers, whose spontaneity manifested itself not only in violence but also in kindness at both personal and institutional levels. Soviet soldiers frequently took children or whole families under their protection, and the same Soviet army that deported tens of thousands of innocent civilians to Siberia set up mobile kitchens for those left behind without asking for anything in return.

Budapest was the first Western-style metropolis in which Soviet soldiers were confronted with the material amenities of 'bourgeois' culture after heavy fighting. In Bucharest and Belgrade they had been welcomed as allies, while Warsaw had been totally destroyed before their arrival. To many of them water closets, large book collections, spectacles and many other things were a novelty. Swiss consul Carl Lutz, who set out to look for the Soviet high command after the breakout, tells:

We climbed over burnt-out flamethrowers and tanks in the long tunnel under the Castle District, and when we finally reached the Soviet headquarters we were met by an infernal racket. The officers were celebrating their victory, dancing on the tables blind drunk. I was allocated a Ukrainian as guard, but he ran away on the second evening.

Occupation by the Red Army brought with it a clash of two fundamentally different cultures. The Hungarians regarded the Germans as civilised but capable of great cruelty and the Soviets as basically well-meaning but savage, with ideas very unlike their own about the meaning of private property, duty and responsibility.

The only thing many Soviet soldiers knew about the West was that at every step they would be meeting the 'bourgeois', which included anybody who possessed a watch, a bed or a stove. They often had no idea of how to use water closets, which they called 'stealing machines' because they 'swallowed' everything - including objects left in them for cooling or cleaning - when they were flushed.

Watches and clocks seemed to have a mythical significance. The writer Endre Illés tells the story of a professor who had made friends with a group of Soviet privates and whose watch was stolen by some others. The professor's friends immediately set out to put matters right and soon he was wearing a watch again - but not his own. An eye-witness of the 'liberation' of the emergency hospital in Lovas Road remembers:

Suddenly two Soviet soldiers appeared at the entrance. One...told us in a loud voice to hand over our watches and jewellery, while his companion was pointing his submachine gun at us, with the safety catch released. Not a word was heard, until a woman... began to sob violently. The warrior, who had scarcely outgrown his childhood, was moved. 'Don't cry', he kept saying as he stroked her

and, reaching in his pocket, pressed two wrist watches into her hand. Then he went on looting.

Months after the siege a newsreel of the Yalta conference was being shown in Budapest cinemas. When US President Franklin D. Roosevelt raised his arm to point something out to Stalin and his wrist-watch became visible, several jokers in the audience shouted: 'Mind your watch!'

Despite their propensity for savage acts the Soviet soldiers had many taboos. One was hurting children. The following recollection could be paralleled many times over. The speaker, then aged three, was discovered with his grandparents in a shelter by a Russian captain:

'Daddy', I said because his stubble made me think that he was my father, home from the front. The captain asked the others what I had said. Somebody answered in Serbo-Croat and he burst into tears. He hugged me, saying that he was a teacher with a child of the same age, and showed us a picture. Later he kept bringing us food. After the breakout he posted a guard in front of our house to protect us, and at times of free looting wouldn't allow any of us out into the streets.

An incident reported by Kishon is equally instructive:

My sister Agi decided to thank our liberators personally. One evening, soon after the retreat of the Germans from our suburb, she dolled herself up in a dress with a low neckline and set out for the nearby Soviet command post. We waited for her half the night, worried out of our minds. She came home in the small hours in high spirits, telling us how politely the Russians had treated her. They had hugged and fed her and given her a food parcel to take home.

In the afternoon we... discovered that in the whole district my sister was the only woman not to have been raped.

My sister was very young and naive at the time, which was probably what had saved her from the worst on that terrible night. But it is also possible that the Russians, like Moslems, respected a madwoman...

They were simple and cruel like children. With millions of people destroyed by Lenin, Trotsky and Stalin or in the war, death, to them, had become an everyday affair. They killed without hatred and let themselves be killed without resisting.

The soldiers had tremendous respect for doctors and - because of their supposed political influence - writers. Márai recalls a fierce cossack who forced him to carry a sack full of loot several kilometres before asking him about his profession: 'When he heard the magic word "writer" he took the sack from me. With a frown, he pulled out his knife, cut a loaf of bread in two halves, handed one half to me, tucked the sack under his arm and plodded on by himself.'

Contrary to expectations, people were pressed into labour, plundered or raped by the Red Army regardless of their religion. This caused great disillusionment among

the Jews. Márai writes about the first meeting between the rabbi of Leányfalu and a Russian soldier. When the 'patriarchal figure... revealed that he was a Jew' the soldier kissed him on both cheeks and said that he was also a Jew. Then he stood the whole family up against the wall and, searching the house with the thoroughness of a Moscow burglar, stole every valuable object. A good impression of how the Soviets ran public affairs in Budapest is given by one observer:

In the West the populations of territories about to be occupied received early radio broadcasts from General Montgomery instructing them what to do when the British and American troops arrived. After the capture of Budapest weeks went by without either individuals or the authorities knowing which Russian commands to approach when the need arose. In fact the Russians themselves did not know. Typically, the first Russian order appeared on 5 February, and the second, marked number 1, on 6 February. They were not signed by the commander-in-chief or the city commander but by a certain Major Nefedov.

The end of the siege brought no relief to Budapest. People spoke about another city as a land of milk and honey: 'Szeged is enjoying perfect law and order. There is no looting, in the streets the lights are burning and the trams running, in the theatre plays are being performed, in the cinemas American and English films are being shown, and in the market everything is available.' Of Budapest, however, the opposite was true. Apart from regular soldiers there were thousands of Soviet deserters in the city, living on pillage and fighting pitched battles with the NKVD and the police. As late as February 1946 eight robberies with murder occurred on a single day. Most of the culprits were Soviet soldiers, although many Hungarian criminals also took advantage of the power vacuum after the defeat.

On a happier occasion a group of Russian soldiers commandeered a bus and forced the driver at gunpoint to take them on a sightseeing tour, and some of the occupiers tried to become regular residents:

If a Russian took a fancy to the bourgeois way of life or to a Hungarian woman he decided to stay. He simply changed into civilian clothes and nobody cared. In our neighbourhood a Russian who had been a cobbler at home, attracted by the good income and freedom, became a shoemaker's apprentice...A Russian female soldier turned up on our caretaker's doorstep asking him for accommodation in the block as she wanted to leave the army; she had already found a proper job and promised to be a good tenant who would not disturb the others.

Hungarians soon started to defend themselves. As a first sign many tied ribbons in the British, US, French, Yugoslav, Swedish, Romanian, Portuguese or Czechoslovak colours round their arms, while others carried the insignia of the Red Cross or public services such as Budapest Transport, the Hungarian State Railways or the police. The

last two were particularly popular because they were usually respected by the Soviets. Civilian guards were positioned in many apartment blocks. At the time of the air raids various metal objects had been fixed in front of every building and struck to announce the approach of the bombers. Now they were used to alert the security patrols when looters were coming.

During the interregnum after the siege caretakers became virtually absolute rulers. They negotiated with the Soviets, traded possessions found in their blocks and laid down the duties of the tenants. As a leftover from the multinational Austro-Hungarian monarchy, many were of Slav descent, spoke a Slav language, and sympathised with their fellow-Slavs. When Mrs K. B. resisted a Russian officer's attempt to rape her in a cellar the caretaker offhandedly remarked: 'Why are you making such a fuss? You're a grown-up woman.'

Many complaints about the excesses of soldiers were submitted to the Soviet authorities, which often took a strict line, executing the perpetrators on the spot. Malinovsky was said to have personally shot a Soviet major for rape. Naturally the opposite also happened. The commander in Csepel, arguing that 'the command wishes to spend its time in more useful ways', requested permission to call to account anybody who slandered the Red Army within his jurisdiction. Permission was granted, and the complaints miraculously ceased.

9 Life goes on

Sheltering in the window of a ruined shop in Vas Street a woman was selling potato fritters at 10 pengos each. The fritters were cold, unappetising and of doubtful cleanliness... But the starving people were no longer fussy, they stopped to buy and eat them.

Near the National Theatre a young man was touting his merchandise: 'Soviet stars to wear!... Only two pengös each!... Buy Soviet stars!' The fritters were more popular. When the din of battle had subsided, the civilians began to return home from the cellars, the areas behind the front line and the ghetto. As they entered their homes - particularly the villas on Sashegy, Gellért-hegy and Rózsadomb Hills - they stumbled over dead German, Russian or Hungarian soldiers. Covered in plaster dust, between collapsed walls, fallen ceilings and shattered glass, the bodies lay frozen stiff in unlikely postures, with their weapons, ammunition and other possessions scattered around them. Their boots were usually missing, their clothes torn and black with dried blood, their documents strewn all over the floors by Russians searching their pockets. It was often necessary to sand down the furniture or window frames to remove the blood and brain matter that had soaked into them, or to dispose of the stained fabric of sofas and armchairs on which somebody had died. One of the first tasks was burying the decomposing bodies - both human and animal - that were

found everywhere. The Soviet army drove all available civilians, including children as young as 12, out of their homes to do this.

Before Christmas 1944 and during January 1945 state employees were paid three months' salary in advance as the military situation was expected to make further payments impossible. For the average civil servant this amounted to between 1200 and 2000 pengös. When the fighting ended everybody wanted to make up for being unable to shop for weeks. By February people were paying 100 pengös for 1 kilogram of flour, 400 for sugar, 6000-7000 for a suit and 3000 for a pair of shoes - although this was nothing compared to the hyperinflation that followed later.

Conditions began to cause concern even to the Soviet high command. The first city commander, Major-General Chernishev, who had been motivated entirely by self-interest, was replaced in late February by Major-General Zamertsev, who was to remain in charge until 1948. Colonel Kálmán Gál, head of the Budapest Security Battalion until 17 October 1944, became the first Hungarian city commander on 13 April 1945, but Zamertsev continued to make all the important decisions.

Four resistance fighters - Marquis Pal Odesscalchi, the landowner Imre Biedermann and First Lieutenants Guidó Görgey and Jenő Thassy - had arranged to meet their comrade László Sólyom, who had supplied them with explosives during the fighting, at the National Museum the day after the fall of Pest. Thassy recalls what happened when they arrived there on 19 January:

The sun was shining. The broken pavement was covered in snow, blood and mud. The place was swarming with Soviet soldiers arguing. The only civilians we could see were groups herded along by the Russians. The National Museum was still standing, although it had been damaged, and we could hardly believe our eyes when we saw László Sólyom standing at the iron railing near the entrance... At one point a Soviet patrol stopped us, but their commander seemed to be satisfied by the piece of rubber-stamped paper Sólyom shoved under his nose, and we were able to continue... to a yellow building with several storeys opposite the Municipal Theatre. Its facade still carried the inscription 'Volksbund', but above it there was a freshly painted wooden board announcing 'Budapest Central Office of the Hungarian Communist Party'... and next to it was a red flag with the hammer and sickle... Sólyom led us to the far end of the corridor and told us to wait. He disappeared in one of the offices and soon came back with a lanky individual, who planted himself in front of us and said: 'My name is János Kádár. I am the secretary of the Budapest section of the Communist Party. Comrade Sólyom has told me that you took part in the armed struggle for liberation. In recognition of your merit we offer you the opportunity to join our party. This is a particular honour... I would like to have your answer immediately, you must make up your minds now.'

The four men refused the offer and left. At the next street corner three of them (having parted from Biedermann) were arrested by Soviet soldiers. Thassy continues:

'We confidently protested and presented the bilingual [Hungarian and Russian] documents we had received at the party office. The Russian NCO spat, tore up all three documents, and shoved us into the row of prisoners'.

Kádár and the Budapest Communist Party leadership had met the first Soviet soldiers on 13 January 1945 in Köbánya: as none of them spoke Russian it took them a long time to explain who they were. Ten days later Kádár was appointed Deputy Police Commissioner for Budapest. He was fully aware of the Soviet transgressions, about which he submitted a strictly confidential report on 9 February:

Despite all difficulties the organisation of the National Guard began immediately after the arrival of the Soviet troops... This was extremely difficult as the Soviet authorities were arresting the police officers at the police stations and barracks. Every day only 50 percent of the police officers who set out on their rounds' reached their destination. The arrests assumed such proportions that by now there are 2000-3000 police officers of all ranks in the Gödöllő prison camp. The Soviet commands made our work very difficult, particularly in the early phases, and are still doing so. The newly established police stations and headquarters were overrun by NKVD units, whose continuous presence and unreasonable demands are still wasting a large amount of our time and crippling our work... The confusion was exacerbated by the fact that in a number of places several police forces were formed at the same time. In some cases two individuals were acting as police chiefs at the same station as a result of orders given, without thinking of the consequences, both by political parties and by ill-informed Soviet commands... Another characteristic phenomenon is the Jewish infiltration... I must also mention the activities of illegal police forces such as the 'Hungarian GPU', the 'Miklós Guard' and the 'Social-democratic Organisation for Internal Security'. These have been, or are being, liquidated.

In view of the catastrophic situation security forces from Debrecen and other provincial towns were brought to Budapest and armed by the Soviets (initially police patrols had only been equipped with batons). As Kádár notes, the civilians at first received these forces with joy, but were soon bitterly disappointed by their abuses.

Arbitrary 'people's judgments' and arrests by the Communist Party and its nascent police had begun even before the end of the siege. Labour-service supervisors József Rotyis and Sándor Szivós were charged with 124 fascist murders and publicly hanged in Oktogon Square on 4 February 1945. Public executions, which were sometimes turned into popular festivals for political reasons, went on for several years. One eye-witness remembers:

The new communist audience continuously shouted in chorus at the hangman: 'Slowly, Bogár. Slowly, Bogár.' Many of us asked the Ministry of Justice to put an end to this barbarity... When I visited Justice Minister István Ries he refused my appeal. He said: 'The Jews need some satisfaction after suffering so much.'

By 12 April 1945 the number of 'fascist and other reactionary elements' arrested in Budapest had reached 8260, of whom only 1608 were eventually released.

On 20 January the Provisional National Government had agreed a ceasefire with the Soviet Union. One condition was that the Hungarian government take full responsibility for feeding the entire Red Army in Hungary - which had in any case confiscated most of the available food stocks and paid for them solely with military currency printed without any cover. This irresponsible currency issue was one of the causes of the subsequent hyperinflation.

Despite the pleas of the Communist leaders, Malinovsky refused to supply any food to the Hungarian authorities. In view of the crucial importance of feeding the capital, the coalition parties vested extraordinary powers in Zoltán Vas, appointed the government commissioner for public supplies on 13 February 1945. Vas confiscated all the food that had not been appropriated by the Soviets and ordered the arrest of anyone who obstructed his work. He only changed his mind once: when János Gundel, owner of the famous Gundel Restaurant, was interned for allegedly overcharging, the intellectuals of Budapest raised such an outcry that he had to be released. Vas's first directives included the evacuation of Budapest's children and the creation of emergency kitchens in the city. The first food delivery arrived on 17 February. The minimum requirement was 10 wagonloads a day, but initially this could not be achieved. In the interim many factories fed their own workers, bartering their products for food in the provinces. By spring 1945 the communal kitchens were feeding 50,000 people. Three hundred selected artists and scholars received special rations, nicknamed 'Vas parcels'.

Distributing food in the ruins was a major task: at first everything was transported by steam trains on tram lines repaired in a makeshift fashion. On 25 February Vas ordered the introduction of food coupons in the city centre. The rations amounted to 500 calories daily until the end of March and 1000 calories after - 25 and 50 per cent respectively of the minimum requirement. Things began to improve rapidly when the Soviet command agreed to lend the Hungarian government some of the supplies it had confiscated and to hand back many of the impounded public works: first to resume production, on 27 March, was the Gizella Mill, although the communal bread factory' with the largest capacity did not return to civilian use until the end of June. The suburbs of Kispest, Pestszenterzsebet, Pestszentlorinc, Újpest and Csepel were included in the coupon system on 1 April, Mátyásföld, Cinkota, Hidegkút and Nagytétény on 1 June.



(Soviet soldier feeding Hungarian children)

Commerce centred on the Stock Exchange (today the Television Building) with the square in front of it, and Teleki Square. Apart from currency and securities, people bought and sold fat, plum jam, copper vitriol and everything else under the sun. Most dealers kept no merchandise, but knew where goods could be purchased. Rucksacks were among the most common fashion accessories, carried by all those who travelled to the countryside to do business, or who simply hoped that something would turn up. Equally popular were red silk shirts made from German parachutes hidden by civilians, either with some further use in mind or because of the Soviets' habit of opening ferocious artillery and mortar fire on whole residential areas where they saw signs of ammunition canisters having been dropped from the air. In the countryside such a shirt could even buy a goose.

In addition to watches, the Soviets were particularly keen on lighters and fountain pens, all of which ranked almost as a currency. Watches with 'red stones' were most popular, and some smart operators dotted the mechanisms inside with red enamel paint to fake the non-existent jewels. A peculiar aspect of these commercial activities is highlighted by

Mayor Vas's ban, announced in the newspapers, on dealers placing in their shop windows notices in Russian about wanting to buy gold, silver, leather and textile goods. Such notices would show the heroic Russian army of liberation in an untruthful light by fostering the belief that its members are marketing unlawfully acquired wares.

The owner of a shop in the city centre placed the following warning in Hungarian and Russian in his window: 'I keep no merchandise in my shop. Please refrain from breaking in.'

Most cars had been destroyed during the siege, and the remaining few confiscated by the Soviets. The first tram line began to operate between Újpest and Forgács Street in Angyalföld on 8 February. Others did not follow suit until April and May, but by November most were running.



(Procession of the Social Democratic Party's XII District section)

Bus traffic resumed on 20 February, with a single vehicle produced by the bus company in Istvánmezei Road after the Soviet command had ordered it to do so within three days. The first horse-drawn cab appeared on 19 March. Telephone communications and radio broadcasts were restored on 1 May, as were mail deliveries. Industrial production restarted with the match factory in Budafok: the Soviets had undertaken to provide the factory with armed protection against looting by their own soldiers and the workers initially received their wages in the form of matches. The gas-works were back in action from 7 February, although as late as November, because of the damage to the pipes, only about 50 per cent of the reconnected households were receiving supplies. Last to recover were the drains and sewers, which had scarcely reached 2 per cent of their pre-war performance by November. The collection of 45,000 cubic metres of rubbish in public squares began in April and took several months to complete. The Soviets had only demanded the immediate removal of dead bodies, which was necessary to prevent epidemics - a task carried out mainly by the local population.



(The 'new' foreign ministry)

As water supplies remained erratic, laundry was often washed at public fountains and springs. The hot springs in Városliget Park were particularly popular, and the bronze statues in nearby Hosok Square served as clothes-horses. Many people dug up

their gardens to cover at least part of their food requirements - in summer 1945 in the XIV District alone 35,000 people were growing their own vegetables.

The first cinema re-opened on 6 February 1945 in Pest with the Soviet film *The Battle of Orel*. Soviet heroes were further celebrated with statues erected, on the orders of the 2nd Ukrainian Front's War Council, opposite the Gellert Hotel in Buda, in Szabadság Square and on the Danube Promenade in Pest - after the areas concerned had been forcibly cleaned by civilians living nearby. Cabaret in Pest also began to come to life: the comedian Kálmán Latabár received a standing ovation when he appeared on stage and, pulling up his sleeves and trouser-legs, revealed about 30 watches. His puns and jokes about the looting Russians reduced audiences to helpless laughter.

The villages near Buda had suffered greatly from the siege: many had changed hands several times and Pilismarót, for example, had remained on the front line for three months. Between 10 and 20 per cent of the inhabitants had been abducted, and all were robbed by the victors. Their destitution reached such proportions that by early March they were disinterring dead bodies in order to barter their clothes for seed corn in the more prosperous villages of Transdanubia. In Csolnok some villagers dug up a Soviet soldier, whom they had earlier been ordered to bury, and found five pairs of trousers stolen from a local Swabian on him, two of which proved perfectly usable. Boots were also recovered and bartered in this way weeks after the burial of their owners.

By April 1945 the population of Budapest had been reduced from 1,200,000 to 830,000, with 166,000 more women than men surviving. Losses in the I and II Districts in Buda in particular amounted to 44 per cent and 33 per cent respectively. British and US air raids before the siege had damaged 38.9 per cent of all buildings, hitting hardest the IX and XII Districts in Pest and Buda respectively.