“Wer wird für das alles bezahlen?”

“Who will pay for all this?” One of the Hungarian deportees who was forced to dig a mass grave overheard this introspective question uttered by an SS officer in a moment of “soul searching” during the mass shooting of Hungarian deportees and local Jews in Buczacz, Galicia. While his musing is especially poignant considering the enormity of the crime, the echoes of this question reverberate over and over in the story of the 1941 deportation and mass murder. One only needs to recall the similar words of Major Wilhelm Trapp, commandant of Reserve Police Battalion 101: “If this Jewish business is ever avenged on earth, then have mercy on us Germans.”

While often there are no answers to be found, questioning is an essential part of comprehending the Holocaust. This moment of reflection by a participant in the atrocity indicates a foreboding that there might be consequences for the murders.

This contemplation, however, transcends borders and cultures. The reflections of a Hungarian soldier, a witness, who, upon observing the arrival of hundreds of displaced Hungarian Jews in Ivanovce, raised an imponderable question: “although I tried to forget, the most shocking moment was my meeting these Jews. . . . It is impossible to comprehend a reality, which so clearly confounds human logic, human compassion, and our own humanity—our way of life. . . . Our everyday conduct and actions,” he wrote on August 18 about the treatment of these Jews. It “created an unsolvable contradiction with our inner most feelings. . . . And in our minds, each one of us struggled with the silent question; if this can happen at home with our own families, what are we doing here?”

Finally, the often-quoted report of a delegation under the leadership of Margit Slachta, the head of the Order of the Sisters of Social Service, that visited Carpathian Ruthenia with the aim of stopping the expulsion, brings home the ultimate contradiction between atrocity and Christian morality. An eyewitness to the relentless round-ups, transportation, and brutal treatment of the unfortunates, Margit Slachta,
a deeply religious person, not only asked an existential question but raised an accusing finger:

Witnessing such cross-border transports is tantamount to the weightiest indictment against our highest authorities that are either irresponsible and devoid of human conscience or motivated by sheer hatred and a desire to gain approval in the eyes of the ‘new world order’ by deliberately exposing thousands of people to relentless agony and almost certain death. This is done in contravention of both the letter of the law and the spirit of our unwritten moral code. One only wonders how people who consider themselves Hungarians and Christians as well as responsible administrators are not afraid of the retribution that their lawless actions might precipitate.¹

The questions posed by these four participants—the perpetrators, the witness, and the rescuer—in the unfolding drama could encapsulate the four phases of the Hungarian deportation: expulsion, the long journey across Galicia, waves of mass murder, and escape. These reflections might be the proper epigraph or this story because they present an inner conflict about the moral and ethical underpinning of the 1941 deportation and, indeed, genocide. These moments of reflection by perpetrators, witnesses, and rescuers inject into this account a sudden recognition that these actions of murder will not be forgotten and have far-reaching consequences. The difference between these questioners was that Margit Slachta’s soul-searching plea and warning reached the highest echelons of the Hungarian leadership. How much this changed the course of history, though, begets another question. How much did those in places of authority and responsibility understand or care about the gravity and costs of their action?

THE QUESTION OF LOGIC

The musings of these witnesses pose a dilemma about the rationale for the deportation and subsequent genocide in 1941 and 1942. We, of course, could wish that policymakers in the Hungarian leadership would have grappled with similar moral imperatives before embarking on their course of action. There was neither German political or military pressure, nor defendable demographic or economic reasons, for sending thousands of human beings to their death.

Obviously, this was not a mere case of criminal incompetence. The dilemma of the Hungarian authorities was an unwinnable compromise that also became the harbinger, or more accurately a connecting thread, to the full Hungarian Holocaust in 1944. The leadership had implemented, after the spate of killings in Galicia became known,
a deliberate policy of denying the return of thousands of victims, with the clear knowledge that this would spell their death sentences. This knowledge did not come only from Jewish or American sources. A direct military communication to the office of the prime minister in September 1941 did not mince words: “the German military in Galicia and the former Soviet territories are continuously executing quite a large number of Jews.”¹ With this information at their disposal, the Hungarian general staff still opted to establish a German–Hungarian joint committee for the prevention of infiltration by returning both Hungarian and escaping Galician Jews. In cooperation with the gendarmerie and police forces, the military “investigated numerous cases, handing over the offenders to the respective law-enforcement agencies for prosecution.”¹ That this was neither morally justifiable nor defendable did not escape the attention of Lieutenant General Ferenc Szombathelyi in his capacity as commander of the Carpathian Corps, which was mandated to transport the deported Jews to Galicia. By some, in the upper circles of the military, he was considered to be pro-Jewish.⁶ While it might be an exaggeration, he was definitely not an anti-Semite. His sobering comment comes to mind as we consider his dispatch to the general staff about the “Jewish Question.” His words, drafted in August 1941, reflected his ambivalence toward the deportation and murders that he witnessed in Galicia: “we achieved much more and earlier than the Germans [in Jewish policies] but because we tried to emulate them, we did everything more idiotically. They drained the Jews, dispossessed them, while we want to beat them to death.”⁷

There was a marked reluctance on his part, contrary to the chief of staff and the minister of defense, in carrying out the deportation order. An indication of Szombathelyi’s ambivalence was expressed in a letter penned to the general staff on July 14, 1941, in which he explained that it was impossible and inadvisable to begin relocation on a massive scale without prior coordination with the Germans: “The organized resettlement of the Jews might run into obstacles, or might not be approved by the Germans.” Although he brought up logistics as an issue, he also was motivated by moral considerations in light of his career.⁸

However, there was no lack of willing accomplices in the expulsion of the Jews. For the successful drive behind this policy, the civilian and military authorities could rely on the support of a committed mid-level state bureaucracy. The collection, transportation, and final transfer to Galicia of thousands of people would not have been possible without the enthusiastic participation of an administrative stratum of law enforcement agencies in Budapest and major cities, as well as provincial municipal officials that willingly ignored or outright contravened the laws of the land. They provided the bureaucratic foundation upon which genocide could be built. There were countless examples in the annals of the 1941 deportation of chief magistrates who ignored directives from Budapest and police commissioners who openly dismissed the authority of
the Ministry of Interior. The action, or inaction, on the part of the military leadership was criminally negligent at best and deliberately unlawful at worst. One cannot forget the role of the commander of the transit camp, Lieutenant-Colonel Rudolf Orbán, who went beyond military regulations to make a living hell for the suffering multitude before their expulsion across the border. Even more grievous was his obstruction of the officially sanctioned work of Nándor Batizfalvy, the police officer from KEOKH. Batizfalvy was sent specifically to the camp for enforcing KEOKH’s directive of limiting the deportation to genuine “Polish” and “Russian” citizens. He was instructed to return all individuals who were deemed to be Hungarian citizens, over seventy years old, and or too ill to be transported. The camp commander’s constant interference, restricting, or rather counter-commanding the rescue work of Batizfalvy did not escape the attention of Margit Slachta. For example, the police officer provided the necessary papers for the release of a number of prisoners who were directed to return to their village the next day. During the night all of them were shipped over the border to Galicia.9

One can argue, of course, that Hungarian military authorities were not bound by the directives of the Ministry of Interior. However, the colonel’s actions exhibit a malice that might be described as genocidal anti-Semitism. And he was not alone. An exasperated Kozma complained in a dispatch to the prime minister that “it’s hard to tolerate mentally how even minor subordinates can contravene political initiatives.”10 He should have known; his office flouted, countless times, directives from the Ministry of Interior. Again, Margit Slachta’s rhetorical question comes to mind: “One can only wonder that these officials, who consider themselves Hungarian and Christian, and conscientious civil servants, are not afraid of retribution as a consequence of their illegitimate actions.”11 Apparently, they were not overtly concerned, because one cannot find even a single example in the history of the deportation or its aftermath that any of the perpetrators were called out, disciplined, or brought to justice for their disobedience and outright criminal behavior. Instead, Margit Slachta was placed under “confidential and discreet surveillance” on October 21, 1944, by the central command of the Royal Hungarian Gendarmerie in Budapest.12 As an outside American observer, again, Eleanor Perényi’s words come to mind about contemporary Hungary where “privilege was everything.”13

In retrospect, the whole tragic affair within the framework of the Holocaust can be only partially attributed to internal pressures within the Hungarian political constellation, where a constant search for scapegoats opened the bottle with the proverbial genie. It found in the image of the foreign Jew an almost neurotic fixation with the “mythic Galicianer.” We have discussed extensively in the previous chapters the creation of the image of the “Galicianer” — a political expediency born from racial hatred — which came handily to the political right in Hungary. Thus, the second component was the urgency for neutralizing the radical elements in Parliament as well as the public life.
However, there was a third, equally weighty motive for the deportation to which we have only alluded. The whole idea of the 1941 deportation was also cloaked in an “ethnic purge” that was powered by an economic rationale. To quote again Aly Götz dictum, it was fueled by the “least desirable of the seven deadly sins: Envy.”

Sándor Márai, the highly acclaimed Hungarian writer and a keen observer of his country’s social and political scene, placed the responsibility squarely on the shoulders of a “ravenous Christian middle class.” He minced no words: “This Hungarian middle class that is corrupt to the core still refuses, or doesn’t dare to face reality. They dream about some secret new weapon that will fix everything and they will receive a confiscated Jewish property as a reward: that’s all they think, understand, and hope.”

This acerbic comment, written in 1943, describes an internecine encounter between the two “middle classes” in Hungary. It implies, as an observer postulated, that “a showdown between . . . the Jewish and non-Jewish middle class was essentially inevitable.”

This “showdown” reached its final apotheosis in the almost total destruction of Hungarian Jewry in the spring of 1944. But, to understand this terminus “bookend” for the Hungarian Holocaust, the examination of 1941 is imperative. It harbored the idea of a final reckoning with this “irksome” minority. A revealing document, dated on April 30, 1942, penned by the Sub-Committee for Judicial-Authority of the City Council of Ungvár (Uzhgorod, Carpathian Ruthenia) blatantly advocated the full ghettoization, deportation, and full-scale plunder of local and Hungarian Jewry as a whole—and in the name of Christianity. It could be considered a working blueprint for the actual deportation in 1944. It promulgated the establishment of a central organization, which would implement the expulsion. The town’s mayor, in turn, enthusiastically endorsed it and even deemed necessary to forward this memorandum directly to the attention of Minister of Interior Keresztes-Fischer.

To the credit of the authorities in Budapest, though, a terse, handwritten reply acerbically admonished the authors of this document about their unsolicited advice: “Finding a solution to this question is the responsibility of the Hungarian Government. Therefore, we are in no need of your lecture.” By that time, the utter pointlessness of the 1941 deportation and the corollary horror was already known. The Hungarian political gravitation toward the West was also in motion. Yet, this document is instructive about the contemporary ideological undercurrents that presaged the final act of the Hungarian Holocaust, with its total economic plunder and physical annihilation of Hungarian Jewry in 1944.

While this conflict was particularly relevant to Budapest and major population centers across Hungary where the two middle classes lived and competed side by side, in the outlying provinces, where Jews constituted the virtual middle class, a demographic re-engineering had to take place prior and during the expulsion. There was a concerted effort of transfer and resettle skilled Christian craftsmen and merchants from the interior...
to the periphery of the country. This, however, was not always successful without infusion of governmental support.

The 1941 annual report by Miklós Hermann, director of the Máramaros County Administrative Authority, acknowledged that “the most welcomed governmental decision of 1941 was the transfer of Jews of foreign nationality [to Galicia].” He also observed, “I am pleased to point out that the most significant and foremost development of the year 1941 was the transfer of industry and commerce in Carpathian Ruthenia to Christian hands.” Indeed, the writer considered the “Christianization” of the industry and trade as the biggest achievement of the year: “With the help of the Christian craftsmen and traders that settled down in the territory under my authority, we have achieved that the Jewry has been ousted from all important areas of trade and industry.”

Miklós Kozma, who expressed some remorse at the end of his life for the role he played in this ill-fated adventure, and others were in the dark about rational priorities. They devoted themselves to destroying a segment of their society that was the most productive, however Jewish it might be. His policies, coupled with the successive Jewish Laws, decimated the region’s already teetering economy. The highly acculturated and assimilated Jews, by some estimates not more than 6,000 to 7,000 people, who were taken from Budapest and the internment camps, were the obvious minority within the displaced population. Jews from Upper Hungary, Carpathian Ruthenia, and Transylvania, on the other hand, from where the majority of the victims hailed, while considered backward, were perhaps the most willingly “assimilating” group within a mélange of a multiethnic communities of Hungarians, Romanians, Ukrainians (Ruthenian or Rusyns), Slovaks, Germans, and Jews.

In contrast to the native population of Carpathian Ruthenia such as the Rusyns, who subsisted in dire poverty from agriculture in rural and inaccessible areas, the majority of the Jewish community, solidly middle class, resided in the cities and towns. Similar demographic distribution could be found in other regions of the periphery. It should not come as a surprise that one of Miklós Hermann’s proposals was to deport the remaining Jews from Carpathian Ruthenia and replace them in the cities with the poverty-plagued rural Ruthenian population. “The weightiest administrative problem that my county faces,” he wrote in 1942, “can only be resolved with the deportation of the Jews... Upon removal of the Jews, the Ruthenian population, should be forced by the authorities to replace them in various towns and villages.”

In general outlines, he represented the views and economic priorities of a municipal and regional administration, especially in the provinces. Unfortunately, he failed to provide an explanation as to what this rural population, steeped in agricultural poverty, would do or how it would exist in the cities. Nathaniel Katzburg’s comment underscores this point: “Carpathian Ruthenia was the only eastern region where a sizeable Jewish proletariat lived.” Countering the claim of a community that resisted assimilation,
contemporary statistics show that among all minorities, the Jews in this “periphery” were also the most ardent and staunch supporters of the government’s Magyarization drive. The American Eleanor Perényi noticed this contradiction: “The Jews, too, were pro-Hungarian. Among all the stupid things the Hungarians did perhaps none was more stupid than their persecution of these people who were so persistently loyal to them.” Based on the 1941 census, their number in the general population was about equal to that of the non-Jewish, Hungarian minority. They overwhelmingly identified themselves as Hungarians. Their children attended Hungarian schools in Carpathian Ruthenia and elsewhere in much higher numbers than other minorities, and despite the acute backwardness and poverty in the outlying provinces, they represented an emerging and well-educated middle class as well as a nascent civil society.

This picture was in glaring and dramatic contrast to the common perception of the “backward and deeply religious orthodox Jewry” ingrained in the imagination of the administrative elite, a large segment of the general public, and even the assimilated Jewish community inside Hungary. Within the context of rapidly escalating anti-Semitism, the political pragmatism of neutralizing the extreme right wing of the Hungarian political spectrum played an obvious role in the 1941 deportation. However, in trying to find a more comprehensive explanation, we might also add a virulent strain of anti-Semitism fueled by an insatiable economic opportunism. Since the local Ruthenian population in Carpathian Ruthenia was mainly rural and extremely poor, there was nothing that the authorities could expropriate except land. Thus, the Jewish middle class was deemed a logical and “ripe” target.

The 1941 deportation came on the heels of three pieces of anti-Jewish legislation, and numerous restrictive regulations, enacted from 1938 to 1941, which aimed to curtail, if not wholly eliminate, a Jewish role in Hungarian economic life. The wishful thinking of an organized emigration from Carpathian Ruthenia and other areas was a common staple of the political discourse. By 1941, though, policymakers realized that with the closing of borders across Europe, they could not provide a viable solution to the perennial “Jewish Question.” Thus, the mass expulsion of Jews in 1941 was based on the “economic” rationale of expropriation and transfer of Jewish properties and concentration of enterprises into Hungarian Christian hands. The most effective Implementer was the Hungarian military itself, which controlled the newly acquired territories. Chief of the General Staff Henrik Werth openly advocated that Jewish wealth “must be transferred into Christian ownership.”

This meant full-scale financial and economic plunder and despoliation. A meticulously drafted memorandum, dated July 25, 1941, and originating in the office of the government commissioner of Carpathian Ruthenia, gives credence to this statement. It provides a list of names of nearly two hundred Jewish residents from the border region of southern Carpathian Ruthenia who should be deported. Not surprisingly, it
A SUMMER OF MASS MURDER

contains only affluent merchants and manufacturers, outright dispensing with the pretext of “resettling alien, stateless, or ‘Polish or Russian Jews.” Instead, it promulgates full removal of the Jews from the region, making it a “Jew-free” zone, with their property being expropriated. The author of the document does not attempt to hide his underlying motives and rationale for cleansing the region: “we have to expel the repugnant Jews who only exploit visitors to this area . . . We need to get rid of the parasitic Jews so that all economic benefits and opportunities of this border region could be transferred into Christian hands.”

THE TALE OF TWO ARMIES

An assessment of the role and responsibility of the Royal Hungarian Army and the specific part the Hungarian general staff played in the expulsion leaves little ambiguity. The Hungarian general staff never produced or implemented a policy or plan that directed the military how to resettle the ill-fated expellees in any orderly fashion. Henrik Werth lied to the Council of Ministers in their meeting on July 1, 1941. The aim was, as Miklós Kozma conveyed to the prime minister, to expel the unfortunates beyond the Dniester River, which provided a natural barrier for potential returnees. The military assigned at least fifty trucks per day for transporting the deportees. A military driver observed that “there were no instructions given to the trucks as to a location or destination . . . [the soldiers] became tired of taking them any further.”

Seeing the poverty, hunger, and sufferings of the wandering multitude in Galicia, in close proximity to the border, Reserve Second Lieutenant Alajos Alapi Salamon described a picture of utter chaos. He noted in his diary in October 1941 that “there was neither order nor method to this expulsion.”

Coming from these soldiers, both from the lower ranks, this is perhaps the most damning assessment of the role the Royal Hungarian Army played in the 1941 deportation. There is no reason to revisit the never-ending and indeterminate marches from

![Two gendarmes with German soldiers. Courtesy of Dr. Sándor Szakály.](Fig 8.1)
place to place, interspersed with rape and killing sprees by the Ukrainian irregulars. Nor the moments of how the accompanying gendarmes and soldiers routinely robbed the refugees of all valuables. This was especially true for the Jews from Carpathian Ruthenia. One deportee noted in a letter to Budapest a difference between the attitudes of the military personnel toward “poor Jews with side-locks, who are so meek, toward which they are rude” and those that were expelled from Budapest who were accorded more respect. Either way, the common directive sounded like a well-rehearsed command: “Now forward march; anyone who dares to turn back—a bullet to his head!”

The behavior of the gendarmerie by all accounts was rude, brutal, and merciless. While they were not part of the Hungarian military itself, the field gendarmerie reported operationally to the military authorities in Galicia. Their conduct during the arrests, transportation, looting the meager belongings of the deportees, and reported participation in killings is well documented. One of the rescuers, Countess Szapáry, “took out her camera to document the inhuman way the victims of the deportation were loaded on lorries: desperate, weeping women and terrified, sobbing children.” It also left deep marks on the memories of the survivors. There were numerous instances of soldiers and officers rescuing Hungarian expellees from the hands of marauding Ukrainian bands. But several survivors have also mentioned the participation of the field gendarmerie (tábori csendőrség) attached to the Royal Hungarian Army in the killing process itself. By all accounts, regular army personnel “did not pull the trigger,” at least not in Kamenets-Podolsk. However, they refused to block the genocide there, which was a distinct German concern. There is also incontrovertible evidence that they were complicit in the collection and leading of the Jews on the second day to the murder site in Kamenets-Podolsk. At least two Hungarian officers partook in the final dinner, celebrating a “job-well-done of three days of murder,” which further points to the fact that they were present and witnesses to the genocide.

That German border units engaged in mass killing on the Galician side of the border should not come as a surprise. The extermination of the Jews had become state policy very early in the war against the Soviet Union. Is it possible to say the same about the Royal Hungarian Army? Based on circumstantial evidence and the recollections of survivors, the Hungarian field gendarmerie or border guards might have joined the Germans in their random killings of Jews—sometimes on both sides of the border. For example, in the Galician border town of Dolina, rumors were rife about Hungarian border guards and gendarmes robbing and killing returnees or escaping Jews from towns in Galicia. A member of a forced labor battalion stationed along the Dniester River area recalled after the war that the brother of a fellow laborer confided in him about the murder of his entire family, along with many expellees, by Hungarian gendarmes.

One, of course, did not need to pull the trigger over mass graves to kill. Several sources, independent of each other, reported atrocities along the Dniester River. A
Hungarian soldier recorded in his diary that “large groups were driven into the Dniester to hasten their crossing the river, by Hungarian soldiers who followed the orders of their officers. Only a few succeeded in that.” The name of Lieutenant Simon, the commander of a sapper battalion, pops up repeatedly in documents and survivors’ testimonies as the initiator of these atrocities. The same sources also mention the hundreds of dead bodies of men, women, and children floating around the bridges of the Dniester. Other Hungarian and Galician eyewitnesses supported this description. A member of a Hungarian forced labor company recounted that under the command of “Engineer Lieutenant Simon,” “a sergeant from Nyiregyháza, Jenő Király had 17 people thrown into the Dniester, people deported from Hungary.” Many of them drowned or were shot. Corroborating and augmenting this account, a Galician survivor’s diary tartly noted that the same officer, a notorious Hungarian officer with the last name of Simon, stood on the bridge . . . supposedly the son of some count or prince, who often made arrangements with these people that for a certain sum of money he would let them through, but when they arrived at the bridge, he robbed them of everything, threw [them] naked into the river, and shot at them. Far from the bridge, all along the banks of the river, bands of Ukrainians wandered, who did the same things . . . so that the water of the Dniester was pink from blood, and Jewish corpses floated on it like dead fish.

The Hungarian general staff and its chief, Henrik Werth, was one of the initiators and prime movers of the deportation. In the autumn of 1941, a change of personnel in the command structure of the general staff and the Carpathian Corps did not signal a discernable change in attitude toward the desperate Jews attempting to return to Hungary. There was a deliberate official policy at the highest levels that aided and abetted the killing of the remnants. Even after the Kamenets-Podolsk “affair” became common knowledge, high-level officials made it a priority to prevent the return of the survivors. A report from October 1941 summed up well: “Over the border, similar horrors, like the Kamenets-Podolsk ‘pogrom’, are continuing unabated. Returnees are reporting that entire villages and settlements are laid to waste in many areas, without regards, just to get rid of them.”

A flurry of military commands, dating from September 23 and 27, 1941, and issued by the new commander of the Carpathian Corps, Major-General Ferenc Farkas, forbade military personnel to offer any assistance to the deportees. This included the transfer of letters, packages, and money between the refugees and their relatives in Hungary proper. It is worth pondering how “Jewry can grievously harm Hungary’s national security and national economy with such actions [transfer of letters],” as the Major-General
phrased it in his decree. More important, though, was the specific directive, originating from the office of the chief of the general staff, which aimed to stop the smuggling of Jews who were desperately trying to return. The language is even more uncompromising: “My order is to implement the strictest measures for the prevention of such practices and enact the most draconian punishments for those who are guilty of them.” This directive was later expanded to the members of the Jewish forced labor companies that forbade even the transfer of letters or inquiries relating to the deportees from concerned family members.37

Survivors’ testimonies and military court documents indicate the prevalence of human smuggling, both for monetary benefits and from humanitarian impulses.18 However, the complicity of the Hungarian military’s role in the extermination process itself, excluding for a moment the field gendarmerie, is beyond doubt. The role of Hungarian units during the Kamenets-Podolsk massacre, leading the Hungarian and Galician Jews to the slaughter, raises the specter of indirect responsibility in the murder of the deportees or the local Jewish population.39 The words of the chief of the general staff, via the commander of the Carpathian Corps, carry an ominous weight here because the “strictest measures for the prevention of such practices” meant the executions of those who either attempted to cross the border or who were extradited after crossing the border. The clearly stated policy, pursued by both KEOKH and Hungarian border authorities such as the border police and gendarmerie, was to prevent the re-entry of the refugees at all costs. Hungarian Jews who succeeded in recrossing the border or Galician Jews escaping from extermination in the ghettos of Galicia were routinely handed back to German authorities, who subsequently executed them. While a directive in early 1942 explicitly forbade the handing back the escapees, instead sending them to internment camps, all evidence points to the blatant disregard of this order.40 In more fortunate circumstances, the Hungarian military transported them to Kolomea. This policy did not spare non-Jewish family members who wanted to return from the nightmare of Galicia.

Hungarian soldiers did not commit atrocities comparable to that of the Romanian army in their expulsion of over four hundred thousand Jews to Transnistria. If we can sum up the responsibility of the Hungarian military and civilian authorities, the deportation of the Jews in 1941 to Galicia smacked of a chaotic improvisation, combined with the deliberate intent to net the largest number of deportees. This was combined with a capricious implementation, if not outright incompetence bordering criminal negligence, on the levels of both the law enforcement and military authorities.

An examination of the role the Wehrmacht played in the final fate of the exiled Hungarian community in Galicia demands a more nuanced approach. Outside Galicia, especially in Belorussia (now Belarus), the direct complicity of the Wehrmacht in the extermination is beyond question. The organization became an active participant in
mass murder in which a triangular relationship existed between the Wehrmacht, the security forces, and the civilian administrators. 41

In Galicia, on the other hand, the extermination was based on a bilateral power structure between the SS and civilian authorities. German armed forces did not become involved directly in extermination. Their responsibility, though, is undeniable in initiating—indeed requesting—the murder of Hungarian Jews in Kamenets-Podolsk. Quite telling the rebuff by the German military commander when one of the Hungarian deportees approached him to ameliorate an unbearable situation in the town: “The Jews wanted war—and here it is in all brutality. It is for them to bear all the consequences.” 42

The Wehrmacht was often in overall charge of territories where the killings were taking place. They actively requested a solution to the “Jewish Question,” as was demonstrated by General von Roque’s role in Kamenets-Podolsk. One has to remember that the crucial meeting on August 25, when the fate of the Hungarian deportees and local Jews were announced, was called and chaired by Colonel Oberst Hans Georg Schmidt von Altenstadt, the chief of staff of General von Roque. Beyond that, the material support of the German military for the implementation and conduct of genocide was essential. While von Roque forbade active participation in the Kamenets-Podolsk massacre, his officers were also part of the decision-making process by eliminating the ghetto, and some of them were present during the executions and later in the festive dinner concluding the three days of murder. Wehrmacht troops under von Roque often supplied the rounds of ammunition for the submachine guns used in the massacres in 1941 and 1942. In the second phase of the extermination during the fall of 1941, which took place in various communities and municipalities, the German civilian authorities replaced the Wehrmacht by eagerly joining forces with the security agencies for the liquidation of entire ghettos and labor camps. The role Volkmann played, for example in the extermination of the Kolomea Ghetto, and specifically the Hungarian Jews, is a glaring example of how complicit civilian authorities could become in perpetrating genocide. On a more passive level, they could extend assistance for the murder process. During the Eichmann trial one of the witnesses recalled that in Buczacz, trucks provided by the local municipality transported the Hungarian victims to the site of the mass executions. 43 The same can be said about the conduct of Bloody Sunday.

The third element used by the occupational authorities was the indigenous paramilitary forces. Considering the thinly spread security network, the role of the Ukrainian auxiliaries, known as Schutzmannschaft (Protective Detachments), in the full sequence of the extermination is one of tragic irony, if this is the right word, of the Eastern European genocide. As Finder noted, “the Ukrainian police played an integral part in the German destruction of the Jews.” 44 Without them, genocide could have not been carried through. Their nightmarish spree, murdering thousands of deportees along the interminable treks and on the banks of the Dniester River, lives through the recollections of the survivors.
With a deep sense of dread, they talk about the ferocity of the “Sichaks” [Sicz or siczownik were Ukrainian paramilitary formations] who accompanied them on their wandering from village to village, the majority ending up in Kamenets-Podolsk. This Ukrainian part of digging the trenches, collecting the doomed, serving as cordon personnel, covering the graves, feeding the executioners, and hunting down escaping Jews was essential for the successful conduct of the Holocaust in Galicia. They formed by far the largest group of participants. In a curious twist, only a few hapless policemen, who could not escape with the retreating German forces, were tried in Soviet courts for their participation. In their case, there was no mercy. The sentence was invariable death. 45

Finally, as the “foot soldiers” of the genocide, the role of the Reserve police battalions in the extermination of Jews, and specifically the Hungarians, is well documented. The two main formations, Reserve Police Battalion 133 in southeast Galicia and 320 in Kamenets-Podolsk, 46 became the mainstay of the Holocaust in the District of Galicia and, consequently, the killing of Hungarian Jews. This brings up the question if anyone from these two units was brought to justice for their participation in mass murder in Galicia—and especially that of Kamenets-Podolsk? The answer is no. Neither the Feldkommandant of the city, Josef Meiler, nor the participating members of Reserve Police Battalion 320 were called before the law for the death of 23,600 people. Among the close to 400 members, only three were willing to admit that they pulled the trigger. Indeed, neither the officers nor the policemen of Reserve Police Battalion 320, were convicted in their trials in West Germany. The rationale presented by the court was based on the controversial legal principle of the so-called Befehlsnotsand, that is, the supposed “necessity to obey,” that granted to the defendant the suspension of the proceeding. On the final account, and among the multitude of perpetrators, only von Roque paid with twenty years imprisonment for his indirect participation in the Kamenets-Podolsk mass murder. 47

An explanation for the human appetite for mass murder doesn’t lie in the simplicity or lack of education of a given population. To be sure, Ukrainian irregulars began the gruesome killings of the deportees in the early phases of the expulsion. This was done with unimaginable savagery. Then, there were the hands-on mass murderers of Hungarian Jews in Podolia and Galicia: Jeckeln, Krüger, and Leideritz. All came from relatively modest backgrounds. On the other hand, almost all the high-ranking Nazi officers heading the organized extermination held university degrees. The title of “doctor” was common in front of the name of many killers in the Holocaust. Behind every mass murderer, though, there was a comprehensive mechanism that enabled or facilitated their work.

The burden of guilt, then, can be directed not only toward the executioners, but also to the three entities that were complicit in the process of murder, directly or indirectly: the Hungarian civil administration, the Royal Hungarian Army, and the Wehrmacht, jointly with the Nazi occupation authorities.
ARCHITECTS: FOOLS, COWARDS, AND CRIMINALS

In Hungary, and in many ways in Eastern Europe in general, to borrow William Faulkner’s dictum, “The past is never dead. It’s not even past.”

Often, scholarship is underpinned by the reconsideration—or cynical subversion—of the history of this war and its unseemly shadows, when each nation asserts its victimhood and denies its guilt. Yet we cannot escape the quandary as to how and why these Jews from internment camps, Hungarian cities, and the reannexed territories ended up in Galicia in the first place, and what mechanisms and circumstances precipitated their demise? There is also the question as to how a country with a highly developed legal infrastructure, a functional parliamentary structure, and a proudly stated and emphasized “value system” that was “solidly anchored in Christian values,” could perpetrate such a crime?

The list of obedient and often middle-level and overeager officials in the Hungarian civil service, police, and military, who outdid themselves in their zeal to expel the maximum number of Jews, is a long one. Yet a Hungarian historian insightfully noted that often these same officials were also willing to give a hand in saving Jews from deportation and even hiding them in the final phases of the Hungarian Holocaust. Dr. Sándor Siménfalvy, the director of KEOKH, who issued directives for the deportation, is a case in point. He was a compliant civil servant, who could also exhibit humanitarian impulses. And often, when one official made every effort to deport the maximum number of people, his counterpart tried to mitigate the tragedy. It’s hard to opine if this came from genuine humanitarian impulses or from the belated recognition that the war was lost and there would be, to quote again Margit Slachta, “a retribution as a consequence of their illegitimate actions?”

In Budapest, some KEOKH’s officials, even in the low rank of detectives, could wield almost absolute authority as to who should be deported. Several of them were called on for their crimes after the war by the people’s court. The police commissioner of Carpathian Ruthenia, Arisztid Meskó, on the other hand, was perhaps the ultimate representative of such provincial officials, matched only by his unbridled cynicism, in accomplishing the removal. He disappeared without a trace after the war. Finally, one can not forget the commander of the Kőrösmező transit camp, Lieutenant-Colonel Rudolf Orbán, who ordered the cross-border transfer of all Jews, irrespective their citizenship status. He could tear up the citizenship documents and military honors of a highly decorated World War I veteran by declaring: “Mr. Farkas, are you a Jew? Jews are not citizens of this country.” In the distance of more than five decades, his daughter still remembered a father who returned from this meeting, a broken man “aged beyond recognition.” Orban was never put to trial for his crimes.
The idea and execution of the expulsion illustrated how the law of unintended consequences can work. Preventing the return of survivors, with the knowledge of the ongoing genocide, was the rejection of the onus of such consequences. Among the top echelon of the Hungarian leadership, Keresztes-Fischer was perhaps the only one who openly objected to the deportation. By all accounts, he was not an anti-Semite, and during his career in public service, he also saved Jews. Yet his lack of awareness, if such a thing were possible in 1941, or belief in misinformation, cannot resolve his administration. He repeatedly reassured various interlocutors from Jewish circles, representatives of the Parliament, and the American ambassador about curtailing the excesses in the provinces. He repeatedly issued, via KEOKH, ineffectual instructions for limiting the deportation to Polish and Russian nationals. He was, of course, undermined or blatantly ignored. Yet in his comments, echoing the official line of the prime minister in the Hungarian Parliament in October 1941, he took personal responsibility for the removal. His statement that the cessation of the deportation was a consequence of German pressure and not humanitarian considerations might be attributable to an effort to mollify the radical right in the parliament. He opportunely neglected to mention in his speech, though, the inconvenient truth about the Kamenets-Podolsk massacre, which was known by then not only in Hungary, but across the Atlantic. In this, Keresztes-Fisher and the prime minister have presaged George Orwell’s acerbic dictum: “Political language . . . is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable.”

The timeline of the period shows that the official decree suspending the expulsion preceded by two crucial weeks the Kamenets-Podolsk massacre. This ominous milestone was followed by a dogged resistance to repatriating the remnants of the deportees, who were systematically exterminated during the fall of 1941. This is against the flow of information from Jewish as well as military sources. A military report ominously stated on September 5, 1941, that “the killing of the Jews in the occupied territories is common knowledge.” A belated directive from Keresztes-Fisher, dated on October 28, 1942, more than a year after the Kamenets-Podolsk massacre, finally and categorically prohibited the transfer of “stateless” Jews to Galicia because “the occupying authorities [Nazi Germany] in most cases execute them; so, these people will be taken to their certain death.” It was too little and too late. By that time, almost no Hungarian Jews were left alive in Galicia. As a noted historian recently quipped, the Hungarians did not kill, but “you could smell the corpses.”

The inevitable question as to who should be directly accountable is a weighty one. It might seem tempting to name the initiators of this insidious idea of uprooting and transporting thousands of people to an uncertain future and later to their certain death. Yet the ideology and motivation were deeply rooted in the fertile soil of a decades-long creation of an image that found ready acceptance across Hungarian society. It seems evident that the deportation, at least from Carpathian Ruthenia, was the personal
initiative of Miklós Kozma, the government commissioner there. The active participation of the Hungarian military, and especially the general staff, ensured governmental approval, advance planning, and logistical assistance. But, it’s also true that Colonel-General Werth went beyond this mandate. Jews from the interior of the country as well as international refugees from the internment camps, many of them foreign nationals, were of special interest to the chief of the general staff, who unilaterally expanded the ranks of those to be deported, almost immediately following the governmental consent for the removal. Finally, the directives and decrees issued by KEOKH provided the legal framework and “legitimacy” for the project. It seems highly plausible that KEOKH, in turn, unilaterally broadened the scope of the expulsion by using the impending opportunity to add thousands of Jews from Budapest.

It’s hard to answer the question of how much this “demographic expansion” was preplanned or the result of a decision by top-level officials on the spur of the moment. But to bring the deportation to fruition, mid-level administrative nomenclature was needed. A surprising document from the investigations by the Hungarian People’s Court in May 1945 shed a light on the mindset of the perpetrators who dreamed of the continuation of the expulsion, even after the minister of interior explicitly forbade future deportations. A visit by Captain Hans Krüger to Budapest in September 1941 rekindled the idea in these second-tier KEOKH bureaucrats’ minds, raising the question, within the framework of a sumptuous dinner, of restarting the transports to Galicia: “By the invitation of the head of KEOKH, Sándor Siménfaly, who was not present because of political sensitivity, Krüger was hosted for a dinner in one of the trendiest restaurants of Budapest, the Gundel.”

During the dinner, the atmosphere was cordial. The Hungarian participants inquired of Krüger if he would be willing to accommodate future transports. The gallant SS officer, obligingly, was amenable to this idea: “In reciprocating the dinner, Krüger, in turn, extended an invitation to the leadership of KEOKH to visit the occupied territories. Again Siménfaly, for his part, politely declined the invitation.” The delegation that finally embarked on this visit in the spring of 1942 comprised mid-level police officials from Budapest and Carpathian Ruthenia and two military officers, some of them intimately involved in the summer deportation itself. During their trip, as Batizfalvy recounted, “the Germans executed within 15 minutes 40–50 Jews as a demonstration by claiming that these refused to work.”

Considering the official Hungarian governmental policy line, which halted the deportation in August, the discussions by these low to mid-level officials on the renewal of the deportation is surprising. They obviously reached far beyond their authority. Was it a moral blindness or a “criminal lack of imagination” that came from ruthless ambition? Either way, this was not the first time that explicit decrees by the minister of interior to limit the scope of the deportation, or halt it altogether, were disregarded.
without bringing the officials to account. They reinforce the axiom that the gears of genocide are more often than not oiled by ordinary bureaucrats. Vasily Grossman, the Russian Jewish writer, might have grasped the essence of this by noting that “totalitarian regimes needed clerks and not believers.”

Apparently this amicable and rather “cordial relationship” was not the sole domain of the minor officialdom in KEOKH, for it continued in early 1942 by a joint coordinating committee established for the policy harmonization concerning the Galician refugees “between the Hungarian military and S.S. police authorities in Galicia, and especially with that of Stanisławów.” By mid-July of the same year, even the Hungarian military attaché in Berlin entered in the discourse by proposing to Himmler to resettle “illegally” residing Jews in Hungary to Transnistria that was controlled by Romania at the time. In light of SS-Lieutenant Colonel Tanzmann’s explicit order to Krüger in early January 1942 to shoot all those who were thrust across the border again by Hungarian authorities, this “policy harmonization” amounted to a death sentence. Indeed, cross-border expulsion of returnees went unabated until the autumn of 1942, and even, then, because of the explicit order by the minister of interior who forbade any additional transfer.

The ultimate responsibility, however, rests on the shoulders of officials hundreds of miles away from Galicia, sitting in board rooms, chairing governmental councils, and dispatching directives. There are four central architects in the planning, implementation, and final execution of the deportation: (1) General Henrik Werth, the chief of the general staff of the Royal Hungarian Army, (2) Ámon Pásztóy, the head of KEOKH, and consequently the Public Safety Section of the Ministry of Interior, (3) Prime Minister László Bárdossy, and (4) Miklós Kozma, the government commissioner for Carpathian Ruthenia.

These individuals cannot be called sadistic brutes, for all of them were highly educated, well-mannered, “normal” human beings. Yet none of them envisaged unforeseeable consequences. There is no way of knowing how much Werth, Pásztóy, and Kozma’s motivations and actions were governed by the fact that they were not “ethnic Hungarians”? Both Werth and Pásztóy came from Swabian (German) ancestry, which might explain their identification with the German war aims as well as their deep-seated anti-Semitism. Kozma concealed a deeper secret. A close confidante of Regent Horthy, he belonged to the upper crust of Hungarian society, and carried the title of Vitéz (a form of knighthood). One detail, however, remained hidden; he had Jewish ancestry on one side of his family.

Colonel-General Henrik Werth was one of the earliest proponents of a comprehensive “ethnic cleansing,” which would have included not only Jews, but the Slavic and Romanian minorities as well. A preeminent Hungarian politician, László Teleki gave voice to his reservations about General Werth’s divided loyalties to Regent Miklós
Horthy, as the pro-German chief of the general staff and a “non-Hungarian” of “German ancestry,” who will fail “to see the great task of preserving the country.”

These words were not far from the truth, for Werth repeatedly engaged in unilateral actions connecting Hungary with Nazi Germany, which often were not aligned with the policies of the Hungarian government. He was notorious for bypassing authority in pursuit of political goals, which not necessary were in his range of authority. We know from surviving correspondence that by August 19, Werth took the liberty to directly approach Horthy, bypassing even the prime minister, with a memorandum that advocated the use of the war for a much more comprehensive action than the Galicia deportation, that of the transfer of “all non-Hungarian persons, singling out Romanians, Ukrainians, and the entire Jewish community.” It was by all accounts an ambitious proposal, aiming to displace close to eight million people. This memorandum, though, was also the last straw for the prime minister. It signaled the fall of Werth, who was dismissed on August 31, 1941.

Indeed, a contemporary observer characterized his leadership as doggedly aiming to politicize the military. It was not a difficult task. The majority of the general staff consisted of officers with pro-Nazi sympathies who, by the way, also came from Swabian background. His central role, along with the minister of defense, in presenting and promoting the idea of expulsion to the Council of Ministers, is a case in point. By claiming that houses, land, and employment opportunities would be waiting for the deportees in Galicia, he deliberately misled the ministers. He also provided the planning and the operational muscle, assisted by an anti-Semitic general staff, for the deportation of
Jews from the beginning. His participation in the meetings of the Council of Ministers provided him the necessary platform and forum to present and push through this idea. But, in emptying internment camps of international refugees, which was never discussed or authorized by the government, Werth directly became complicit in the unfolding genocide in Galicia. On the other hand, his control of the material and human resources of the Royal Hungarian Army gave him the ability to provide the practical means for the deportation of these unfortunate Jews. His dismissal from his post in early September removed him from active management of the deportation itself. His imprint, though, on the functioning of the general staff remained intact. He died in Soviet captivity in 1952.

Ámon Pásztóy, with a doctoral degree in law, was the legal face of the deportation. Although he did not sign the directives and decrees issued by KEOKH, his power behind the scenes was unmistakable. They provided a cover, enveloped in legalistic framework and "governmental legitimacy," for the impending action. It is highly likely that he never personally saw the victims of his policy face-to-face or through the sight of a gun. He did not need to pull the trigger; he personified the quintessential desk murderer. But a desk murderer implies an “unideological bureaucrat,” a grey apparatchik,
who dispassionately implements orders. Rather, he formulated policies and issued orders. Far from merely mechanical and unaware, he was an ordinary mid-level official in the grip of passion—a passion to complete the task that under him became the law of KEOKH and transformed the expulsion into an ostensible act of patriotism. Neither was he Hannah Arendt’s image of the trite paper pusher, a prototypical bureaucrat. He was not the model for the “banality of evil”—a detached, unpolitical technocrat. The words “relentless” and “uncompromising” might be apt terms for describing him, as he repeatedly urged his staff to speed up the deportations. In his quest to accomplish the task, he did not shy away from keeping his immediate superior, the minister of interior, in the dark. He communicated directly with the prime minister about deportation policies, urging him repeatedly to solicit German cooperation in securing a Jew-free zone along the Galician side of the border.

The testimonies during his trial regarding his intransigence toward any request for humanitarian intercession—even threatening to resign if he was overruled—make it clear the enormous power a mid-level official could wield in the Hungarian state bureaucracy. At the time of the expulsion, the Hungarians, and among them Pásztóy, were not aware of a design or policy for mass extermination. Even Himmler didn’t express at the time his intentions for a full-blown genocide. The onus for him came when the mass murder became common knowledge. We noted earlier that he instructed border authorities about the official policy of the “repatriation of foreign citizens and their Christian family members, who left voluntarily with them . . . is out of the question.”

A follow-up communication a week later urged the prime minister to intercede through diplomatic channels with the German military authorities across the border to prevent Jews from approaching the border.

It signed, of course, the death sentence for the desperate deportees.

By incidental comments and remarks of contemporaries, a vengeful and vindictive figure filters through—a real Shakespearean villain. In the concluding phase of the deportation, he boastfully informed the prime minister that utilizing the opportunity provided by the war, “I have expelled, in this time, 18,000 Jews from the country.” During his trials, however, he denied any involvement. In a cryptic allusion, Margit Slachta, in a personal letter to Baroness Edith Weiss, paints a depressing portrait of Pásztóy. She alludes to a contentious and apparently very unpleasant meeting between the two on the subject of stopping the deportation. It reveals the depth of Pásztóy’s commitment to carrying out the expulsion and preventing the repatriation of the survivors.

His prominent role in the 1941 deportation sealed his fate during his postwar trial. While the death sentence for Pásztóy was hanging in the balance, Slachta, a devout Christian, declined to testify on behalf of the defense. In her mind, there were no and could not have been mitigating circumstances for a mass murderer. As
she recalled this inimical meeting between the two, in 1941, and its inevitable failure, she concluded: “For me every death sentence is poignant, especially if I knew the person. Pásztóy’s fate is often on my mind. . . . I have approached him, since he handled this thing [the deportation] and described to him the events since I did not think I could appeal to him on high moral grounds. His answer then was such that fully supports the impending judgment now.” Pásztóy was executed for his crimes on August 10, 1949.

As the prime minister and ultimate decision-maker, László Bárdossy’s role in the expulsion was indirect but crucial. Yet, this was not the deciding factor in his death sentence and consequent execution by a firing squad on January 10, 1946.

During his trial, Bárdossy took responsibility for bringing his country into World War II as an ally of Germany in general, and the 1941 deportation in particular. His decision in declaring war on the Soviet Union, alongside Nazi Germany, is still a contentious topic among Hungarian historians. This might have been politically expedient for him, but morally it was untenable. In representing a nation, could he take an introspective look into the question of accountability, culpability, and guilt? Yet, as prime minister, under whose regime the deportation took place, Bárdossy adroitly dodged this question by claiming, “I am responsible but not guilty.” As for the specific responsibility for the deportation, his evasive answer was that “I will not deny my responsibility but I could not know everything.” These few, carefully chosen words in a

![Fig 8.4](image-url)  
As the Hungarian prime minister in 1941, László Bárdossy (on the left) carried the ultimate responsibility for the 1941 deportation. He was convicted and executed in 1946. *Fortepan, Public Domain, courtesy of Judit Mézáros.*
specific moment and circumstance underlines the American ambassador’s (Herbert C. Pell) assessment of the prime minister. In a short message to the British ambassador to Lisbon, he characterized Bárdossy as a “very cultivated man with a great deal of diplomatic experience but extremely weak.” He might have also added that Hungarian prime minister also harbored a large degree of vanity coupled with corresponding insecurity.

Bárdossy’s guilt in launching the Hungarian participation in the war and, consequently, the opening chapter of the Hungarian Holocaust, did not lie only in his acquiescence to the deportation with unforeseeable and unintended consequences — the Kamenets-Podolsk and corollary massacres. The expulsion was obviously politically expedient in Hungary’s racially charged atmosphere. It also was welcomed by a large majority of the Hungarian public. And Bárdossy well exemplified this public view that hoped, as a contemporary social observer so incisively noted, for successfully expropriating someone’s hard-earned estate and livelihood instead of working hard for it himself. The chronicler of his trial was perhaps somewhat forgiving in his assessment that “the anti-Semitism widely held by the gentile middle-class was shared by Bárdossy.” A Hungarian diplomat summed up his character a little more incisively: “he was an ultra-anti-Bolshevik anti-Semite and believed that harmonious cooperation with Germany was a historical necessity.” In this context we might contrast his anti-Semitism with that of Teleki, who abhorred the crude anti-Semitism of Nazi Germany. Indeed, Teleki might have not gone to the extreme of sending people to their death or forcing them to remain where their fate was sealed in a mass grave. To underline this comment, one needs to examine Bárdossy’s actions after the “official” cessation of the deportation in August. In his dual role as prime and foreign minister, he pursued every effort to block the return of the deportees.

As noted earlier, the establishment of a German–Hungarian joint commission in the fall of 1941, with the goal of preventing the return of refugees to Galicia, made a priority of doing just that. Their meetings, first on October 11 in Kőrösmező, which was followed in Stanisławów on October 26, 1941, were not productive, though. By that time, of course, the German security forces had decimated the exiled Hungarian Jews to such a degree that there was not too much to talk about. A forceful protestation by the chief councilor of the Hungarian Embassy in Berlin to the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs shows that the expulsion and consequent exterminations were not just an accidental episode of the unfolding Holocaust. During a discussion between the two parties about the Galician deportation, the Hungarian representative furiously reproached his German counterpart in claiming that “while the German authorities deport Jews presently from the Reich and Berlin en-masse . . . to the occupied territories, they are sending back the repatriated [i.e., deported] Jews by us from the areas that we
control.” He concluded the exchange by pointing out that while the Hungarian government “supplies many thousands of workers for the Reich to increase German production, we receive, in return, Jews.” 71

Bárdossy’s culpability, then, might be rooted in his awareness, knowledge, and eventual cover-up of the atrocities. The critical evidence of his full complicity and consequent guilt comes from a speech during a parliamentary debate, together with the minister of interior, in which he justified his action: “Following the capture of Ukrainian territory, we have transferred a significant number of Jews, originally from Galicia. We wanted to evacuate even larger number, but our German friends warned us not to continue for the time being. Naturally, we had to yield to this request.” 72

In a finely etched portrait of the prime minister, a contemporary provides the picture of a complex but conflicted man. His defense at his trial was to deny guilt, assuming only responsibility, “because he was forced to do it.” In an eerie coincidence, Hans Frank, the Nazi governor-general in Poland, presented similar argument in Nuremberg during his war crimes trial, claiming that he “reigned but didn’t rule.” 73 Both arguments were based on a logical fallacy. A string of reports that reached Bárdossy’s desk from Jewish organizations, concerned deputies, Miklós Kozma, and the American ambassador, to whom he lied outright, clearly informed him about the flagrant violations taking place in the provinces and the bloody pogroms in Galicia. Such letters to the prime minister didn’t mince words: “The fact that lawful Hungarian citizens are being expelled by the thousands from the country will undermine the internal and international confidence in the Hungarian legal system.” The writer also appealed to the conscience of the Hungarian nation: “It is not a Jewish interest, but a Hungarian national interest that the Hungarian officials who are responsible for these resettlements, about which hundreds of letters and telegrams provide testimony describing the dreadful horrors resembling Dante’s inferno, put an end to it. If for no other reason, the Hungarian nation’s thousand-year-old Christian reputation should not be tarnished by it.” 74 The American ambassador also alerted him, unambiguously, to the fact that the expellees were exposed to mass murder in Ukraine, and that the expulsion of foreign nationals from internment camps was a distinct “violation of the right of asylum which is generally granted by sovereign countries to refugees.” 75

The most damning point could be that in spite of a clear knowledge of the genocide happening across Galicia—the massacres in Kamenets-Podolsk, Stanislavów, and elsewhere—and repeated warnings by concerned observers, he gave his endorsement to policies that perpetuated the atrocities—all the way until his dismissal on March 7, 1942. 76

Among the architects of the deportation, only Miklós Kozma died a free man, without facing the justice of history. In many ways, he served as the main actor, a spark, for the deportation. He was also the only one who expressed regret over his responsibility
for it. His prominent role in launching the deportation from Carpathian Ruthenia, which he did not have the opportunity to deny, was a disastrous policy with tragic consequences. He inherited a complex position as the government commissioner in the Carpathian Ruthenian region, which has always been a cauldron of seething ethnic politics. He was under relentless pressure by a wide segment of the region’s Hungarian population to expel the Jews. This doesn’t absolve him from full responsibility for an ill-fated, ill-conceived, and ill-executed policy that resulted in the gruesome murder of thousands of human beings. To sum up his ultimate accountability for the 1941 expulsion, one need only to look at his role in the initiation, expansion, and coordination of the deportation with the political and military leadership, and his staunch opposition to the return of the unfortunates, although in September he was advised about the ongoing murder of the expelled, at least until October 1941.

Mária Ormos’ masterful biography of Kozma depicts a conflicted man—torn between his mandate as a high-level official and a degree of humanity. He single-mindedly pursued the expulsion—even going to extremes to expand it. Yet he also realized at the end of his life the horrific outcomes of his actions. In September, he still advocated barring the refugees’ return, but by late October he had a change of heart. The atrocities came too close to ignore them. He understood that those responsible for the murders were not only German security forces, but Hungarians as well. As we noted in the previous chapter, his communication on October 22 to the minister of interior, describing in vivid details the atrocities taking place on the border and committed by the Hungarian military and gendarmerie, attested to his change of heart.
He confided to a friend in October 1941 the details of the nightly killings that were taking place close to the border on the Hungarian side and his recurring mental anguish over them. His words are chilling: "Million secrets out there . . . during the nights, not every day, but the murdered bodies litter the forest . . . the act itself is on our conscience. Do you understand? We are the ones who are killing them." The panic in his voice delivering this monologue is palpable. Kozma, perhaps recognizing his responsibility, offered this mea culpa to this confidant shortly before his death from a massive heart attack on December 8, 1941. He was gravely ill. But the confession was not just a delusional declaration of guilt by an ill person near death as his biographer proposed. It was an acknowledgment of the failure of a misguided policy, and taking responsibility for the ongoing murders of returning Jews and those escaping from the ghettos of Galicia. If anyone was well informed about such murders committed routinely by the Germans on the Galician side and Hungarian Border Police and the gendarmerie on Hungarian side, the omnipotent government commissioner was.

Although he took to the grave the inconvenient truth about his Jewish ancestry, this detail haunted the family long after his death. Worthy of a Shakespearian drama, he was expelled retroactively from the “Order of Vitéz,” a form of knighthood bestowed upon faithful members of Horthy’s circle, by the governing body of the organization. The justification stated his Jewish background.

WHAT IS RIGHT AND WHAT IS WRONG?

Hungarian governmental responsibility for the deportation cannot be questioned. It was a unilateral Hungarian action without consent or coordination with German military or civilian authorities in the occupied territories. The 1941 deportation, as we have already noted, was not unique within the context of World War II or the Holocaust itself, but it was a uniquely Hungarian experience—just like the final chapter of the Hungarian Holocaust in 1944.

In the moment the Hungarian authorities deliberately prevented the refugees’ return, with the murder of thousands as a direct result, they became also complicit in genocide.

One of the imponderable questions that inevitably emerges is where was Horthy, the ultimate authority between the two wars, during and after the deportation? While he did not immerse himself in the everyday conduct of the government, he maintained some ethical imperatives and, as a Hungarian historian noted, was not a Nazi sympathizer. But he was a selective anti-Semite—maintaining friendship with the Jewish industrial and banking elite. That he knew about the horrors taking place during the deportation and its consequences is at least plausible, if not undeniable. Margit Slachta’s
letters to Horthy’s wife, combined with a subsequent audience, that described in vivid
details the situation of the deportees, could have reached him. However, no evidence
about his response or intersession to Slachta’s pleas has survived.

These events were by no means out of the ordinary in Europe at the time. The
Hungarian state could not claim the dubious distinction of being an exception in the
annals of World War II. To paraphrase Adam Michnik’s dictum about wartime Poland,
“the gutter is not a specifically Hungarian phenomenon.” Indeed, the scale of expulsion
from Hungary in 1941 paled against its neighbors. Romania expelled Jews from territo-
ries they invaded or killed them outright—close to 300,000. Slovakia delivered its own
Jews to Nazi forces in Poland, although it was not occupied. Bulgaria (whose record
otherwise was good) handed over Jews in the captured areas of Thrace and Macedonia.
Even the “enlightened” French deported more than 25,000 foreign nationals (refugees)
to the Nazis—in 10,000 of them voluntarily from Vichy’s free zone. This action, taken at
Vichy’s own initiative, was particularly shocking since it meant that French police de-
ivered Jews to the Nazis from an area outside German occupation. There was no other
case like this in Western Europe, and few in Eastern Europe.79

Nor can we claim that the deportation and the subsequent murder of those deported
were events that inevitably precipitated the Holocaust. Although the rough contours
of the Final Solution were in the development phase, it was an ongoing process. By the
time of the infamous Wannsee Conference on January 20, 1942, close to half a mil-
ion Jews had already been murdered in the occupied Soviet territories, as well as over
20,000 Hungarian Jews.80 Rather, the expulsion and influx into Galicia accelerated and
expedited the annihilation. It became a spark and catalyst for the subsequent blood-
baths. Finally, this points to a central enigma of the Hungarian Holocaust, which can
either be interpreted as premeditated action, like the Galician expulsion, or a barbaric
follow-up improvisation to 1944.