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Hungarian Prisoners of War in Albania under Italian control during WWI



ABSTRACT

During the First World War, the Italian leadership transferred over ten thousand prisoners of war to Albania for forced labour, starting from the autumn of 1917. Among them there were more than four thousand Hungarians, who built and repaired roads, railroads, bridges, and communication networks, and cleared the land to stop the spread of malaria. The POWs were taken from Italian internment camps because the Albanian front did not generate the necessary amount of POW workforce. They lived in harsh circumstances due to food shortage, the spread of malaria and the hard physical work. Many wrote memoirs, or messages on postcards, including lance corporal János Kozeschnik and corporal László Horthy, which I also examined in the paper.

KEYWORDS

First World War, prisoners of war, Italian captivity, Albanian forced labour

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1. INTRODUCTION

During the First World War, thousands of Hungarian¹ prisoners of war were held in Albania under various circumstances. First, Hungarians who had fallen into captivity in the Serbian front and were transferred at sea to Italy after Serbia's defeat, were forced to march to the Adriatic coast through Albania.² Secondly, there was a front between the Central Powers and the Entente in the territory of Albania – several Hungarians were captured there as well.³ Thirdly, Italy transported thousands of POWs from Italian internment camps to the Italian-controlled, southern part of Albania, for forced labour. The aim of this paper is to examine the third category, by presenting the POWs' living conditions and determining their number.

The sources I use originate from Italian military and administrative organs, as well as from two Hungarian prisoners. I examined the postcards of János Kozeschnik, a lance corporal of the Budapest-based 1st Honvéd Infantry Regiment, and the memoir of László Horthy, a corporal of the 85th Imperial Royal Infantry Regiment, based in Lőcse (today Levoča in Slovakia). By comparing the POWs' writings with the official records, we get a relatively detailed picture about this topic that has not been discussed yet in the literature of POW-history.

¹ By Hungarians, people originating from the territory of Hungary are understood, regardless of ethnicity.

² Austria–Hungary launched its military operation against Serbia in August 1914 but was able to defeat the country much later than expected, in the autumn of 1915, with the help of German and Bulgarian forces. In early 1916 the Central Powers also occupied Montenegro as well as the northern three quarters of Albania. One third of the Serbian army survived and fled to the island of Corfu through Albania, taking 30–40 thousand POWs along, including thousands of Hungarians. This Great Retreat is referred to as the Serbian death march from the point of view of POWs, as they were forced to walk nearly 700 km in two months in very harsh conditions due to the cold winter and various pandemics. Italy agreed with Serbia to take over the POWs from the Adriatic coastal city of Vlorë (in Italian sources: Valona). The survivors numbered less than 24 thousand (though some POW camps had been liberated by the Austro–Hungarian forces) and were transported to the island of Asinara, to the north of Sardinia. For further details, see FERRARI 1929; GALÁNTAI 2001. 128–130., 174–179.; GORGOLINI 2011; *Hadifogoly magyarok* 1930. 79–83., 90., 135–136., 169–209.; MARGITTAI 2014; MORTARA 1925; RESIDORI 2017. 66–98.; TORTATO 2004. 63–83.; JUHÁSZ 2022. 85–89. For published sources, see KISS 2009; POLLMANN 2020; SZŐLLŐSY 1925.

³ In that front the majority of the POWs were taken to camps in Greece and South Albania (Saranda), and to Italy (mainly Sicily) and France in a smaller number. They only numbered a few thousand, because there was not any notable action until mid-September 1918, when the Entente forces began their attack under the command of General Franchet d'Espèrey. However, it is unclear where the POWs captured afterwards were interned. GALÁNTAI 2001. 348–349.; *Hadifogoly magyarok* 1930. 83., 166., 299.

2. THE FORCED LABOUR AND THE NUMBER OF THE POWS

In the northern part of Albania, which was under the control of the Central Powers, Italian POWs were forced to work.⁴ Similarly, in the southern part of the country the occupying Italian forces made the Austro–Hungarian prisoners work.

Concerning the transfer of POWs from Italy to Albania, the first transport took place in the autumn of 1917, when General Giacinto Ferrero, commander of the occupying Italian army corps, requested permission from the Italian government for the transport of 4,000 POWs from Italy to Albania for the repair of a road connecting the Albanian coastal city of Saranda with Macedonia. The road was needed to facilitate the inland movement of the Entente forces and to reduce this way the maritime route which was used to move forces from Western Europe to Thessaloniki. Minister of Maritime Affairs Alberto Del Bono and Foreign Minister Sidney Sonnino supported the idea, and Minister of War Gaetano Giardino replied to Prime Minister Paolo Boselli that his Ministry approved the transport of 3,000 POWs and the Supreme Command made the preparations for its execution.⁵

Another transport was in March 1918, when 150 men were taken to Sazan Island for reforestation.⁶ However, because of missing records, it is unclear whether Hungarian soldiers were in that group or not.

The Italian statistical sources clearly indicate that even in July 1918 there were 3,000 POWs under Italian control in Albania.⁷ In the August statistics,⁸ instead of the number of the POWs, the numbers of their labour detachments were recorded, namely 70–73., 82–83., 87., 89., 91–92., 98–99., 102–109., 120–150. This means that the three thousand working prisoners were divided into 51 detachments, and in each location there were over a hundred workers.

In late October – early November 1918, General Settimio Piacentini, new commander of Italy's Balkan Force, and Colonel Luigi Toselli, chief of staff of the Force, requested 10,000 prisoners of war for various infrastructural works.⁹ Albania's infrastructural development was supported by Italy's Foreign Ministry as it had plans with the country for the future. The biggest undertaking was the construction of a 300 km long railroad described as the Transbalkan Railroad. It was planned to start in Vlorë and go northwards until Durrës (Durazzo in Italian)

⁴ Note verbale n. 1145, Embajada de España en Italia, 26 Mar. 1917. Archivio Storico-Diplomatico del Ministero degli Affari esteri, fondo Gabinetto 1915–1918, pacco 350 (hereinafter: ASD Gabinetto 1915–1918).

⁵ Relevant records: Protocol n. 829 G of the Minister of Maritime Affairs, 12 Oct. 1917. Telegram n. 12097 of the Ministry of War, 17 Oct. 1917. Telegram n. 14811 of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 27 Oct. 1917. Subject: Prigionieri per lavori stradali in Albania (Prisoners of war for road site works in Albania). Position: Archivio Centrale dello Stato, fondo Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri, Guerra Europea 5 (hereinafter: ACS PCM), 19.4.6. (99Bis.) b., 120. cart. The prime minister's letters to the ministers (15 and 28 Oct. 1917) are in the same place. Cfr. RESIDORI 2017. 199., 298–299.

⁶ The prisoners of war were requested by Captain Eugenio Torino, Royal Commissioner for Reforestation (*Regio Commissario ai rimboschimenti*), in a letter to Deputy Chief of Staff Pietro Badoglio on 19 Mar. 1918. Badoglio's reply: Protocol n. 153384, 29 Mar. 1918. The records are in the Archivio dell'Ufficio Storico dello Stato Maggiore dell'Esercito italiano (hereinafter: AUSSME), fondo F-11, cart. 125/2.

⁷ Protocol n. 8019 of the Ministry of War, 12 Jul. 1918. ASD Gabinetto 1915–1918, b. 350.

⁸ Protocol n. 92532 of the Supreme Command, 10 Aug. 1918. Without subject. AUSSME F-11, 126/1.

⁹ Protocol n. 94 Op. of Balkan Force Command, 9 Nov. 1918. Subject: Richiesta di mano d'opera (Request for work-force). AUSSME F-11, 128/1.

and then eastwards through Albania until Bitola (or Monastir in the sources of the time) in Macedonia (today Битола in North Macedonia).¹⁰ The commander believed its first section, which was circa 18 km long connecting Vlorë and Mifol (Mifoli in Italian sources), would take at least a year without new POW workforce.¹¹ The construction was also hindered by material shortage though. Other projects for which the new POWs were requested were the clearing of the malaria-affected area around Vlorë, building a telegraph network in the occupied area and the maintenance of the already built roads. The commander also noted that many Italian soldiers died in malaria. Consequently, the prisoners of war, including many Hungarians, significantly contributed to the infrastructural development of Albania.

The requested POW workforce was mostly to be taken to Albania from Italy. According to a memorandum¹² of Colonel Ugo Cavallero, head of the Operations Office of the Supreme Command, Colonel Toselli was able to form only seven labour companies of the prisoners caught in the Albanian front and during the Entente offensive in the autumn of 1918. Those prisoners were mostly Germans and Hungarians, as prisoners of other ethnicities rather joined their legions to return to battle and fight on Italy's side. At the end of 1918 the internment camps in North Italy were overcrowded because Italy captured hundreds of thousands during and after the battle of Vittorio Veneto in October and November. However, those prisoners were needed in Italy, mainly for agricultural work. The Supreme Command requested 7,000 POWs from the 3rd Italian Army. The army's intendant, Giuseppe Ottolenghi reported that 1,500 POWs were available, but maximum 1,000 could be given equipment for the transport.¹³ Then the 1st Army was asked, which eventually provided 8,000 POWs for the Albanian Army Corps.¹⁴

The shortage of POW workforce is also demonstrated by a case that happened in December 1918. The French Command of the Balkan Entente Force offered the Italian Command 3,300 prisoners of war who had been captured during the offensive and interned near Shkodër (Scutari). The Italians were willing to accept the offer and planned to take those prisoners to Vlorë. Since they were captured by French units, the Italians first considered giving POWs of the same number to France from Italian internment camps. However, Pietro Badoglio, the Italian deputy chief of staff discarded this idea, claiming there was not any redundant POW in Italy. Then a surprising turn came: the Italians did not receive the POWs from the French either. They were informed that the POWs in question had been in fact captured by Serbian units and were thus taken to Serbia.¹⁵

In February 1919, Commander Piacentini requested newer POWs from the Supreme Command. He noted in his telegram that the previously received POW workforce was employed in the construction of the first section of the Transbalkan Railroad. He needed the new prisoners for Durrës, for the next section, and for the repair of the communication network of Central Albania

¹⁰ Protocol n. 60121 of the Supreme Command, 14 Dec. 1918. Subject: Mano d'opera di prigionieri di guerra per l'Albania (Prisoner of war workforce to Albania). AUSSME F-11, 128/1. And a note of the same issuer, subject: Promemoria (Memorandum), 25 Oct. 1918. AUSSME F-11, 128/1.

¹¹ Protocol n. 575 Op. of the Balkan Force Command, 15 Dec. 1918. Without subject. AUSSME F-11, 128/1.

¹² Promemoria (Memorandum) of the Supreme Command, 25 Oct. 1918. AUSSME F-11, 128/1.

¹³ Telegram n. 59078, 17 Nov. 1918; and telegram n. 1978, 28 Nov. 1918. AUSSME F-11, 128/1.

¹⁴ Protocol n. 60121 of the Supreme Command, 14 Dec. 1918. Subject: Mano d'opera di prigionieri di guerra per l'Albania (Prisoner of war workforce to Albania). And telegram n. 93526, 18 Dec. 1918. AUSSME F-11, 128/1.

¹⁵ Telegram n. 59831, 3 Dec. 1918; telegram n. 35728, 7 Dec. 1918; telegram n. 59962, 10 Dec. 1918; telegram n. 36164, 19 Dec. 1918; telegram n. 36704, 7 Jan. 1919. All positioned in AUSSME F-11, 128/1.

that suffered serious damages during the offensive. The Supreme Command responded that the POWs of the North Italian concentration camps were set to be transported elsewhere. Consequently, the 3,000 POWs, who were eventually given, were taken from internment camps of inner Italy. This is confirmed by a telegram of Colonel Toselli in March, in which he notified the Supreme Command that in the latest POW transport, which amounted to 1,300 men and originated from the Central Italian internment camp of Cassino, there were 250 Czech and Slovakian prisoners.¹⁶

Concerning the exact works and the number of Hungarian POWs, a statistical list¹⁷ of POW labour detachments made in February 1919 by Lieutenant Colonel Rossi, deputy chief of staff of the Italian Balkan Force is a fundamental record, as it contains the number of POWs in each detachment, as well as their ethnicity and workplace. According to this record, Hungarians were the majority in several detachments, like in the 83rd company, which comprised exclusively Hungarians, 378 in number, and was stationing near Skrofotinë (Scrofatina) and working on the road near Cerkovinë, about 15 km north of Vlorë. In the labour company n. 99 there were 286 Hungarians and 87 Austrians. They were building an over 9 km long road between Levan and Fier, circa 50 km north of Vlorë. A Hungarian man named Mihály Majzik was in the 135th detachment.¹⁸ This unit was engaged in building a road near a town called *Asna* in the Italian source whose current identity cannot be determined. I presume it was in the vicinity of Panaja, because the 136th company, comprising 104 Hungarian, 229 German and 1 Romanian soldiers, was building a road between Panaja and Asna. The 139th company contained 250 Hungarian, 20 Austrian and 42 Ruthenian men and was used in the construction of a bridgehead between Hostimë (in the sources: Ostima) and Panaja, near Vlorë.

According to the statistics of February 1919, 4,015 Hungarian prisoners were working in Albania, of whom 161 needed healthcare for some reasons, for example malaria or accidents. The total number of working POWs was 15,154. Besides the Hungarians, there were 6,966 Germans/Austrians, and the remaining 4,173 men were of other ethnicities in total. A month later new statistics were made, which indicated the number of Hungarians to be 4,026.¹⁹

The works of POWs were registered again a few months later, in May 1919.²⁰ Besides the Transbalkan Railroad and various road constructions, they were also employed as dockworkers in the dock of Vlorë (although those prisoners were all of Italian origin) and built an aqueduct.

¹⁶ The Balkan Force Command intended to send the POWs back, but the Supreme Command confirmed that they could be employed too, because they refused to join the Czechoslovakian Legion. In some cases, prisoners transported to Albania were immediately taken back to Italy, like in March 1919, when it was revealed that too few Italian soldiers were assigned to them as guards. Telegrams between the Supreme Command, the Italian Balkan Force, and the Italian War Ministry: n. 38322, 20 Feb. 1919; n. 62217, 25 Feb. 1919; n. 15136, 4 Mar. 1919; n. 62544, 6 Mar. 1919; n. 62594, 6 Mar. 1919; n. 17865, 19 Mar. 1919; n. 39369, 19 Mar. 1919; n. 39439, 21 Mar. 1919; n. 79759, 3 Apr. 1919.

¹⁷ Protocol n. 1622, 22 Feb. 1919. Subject: Specchi situazione della forza dei prigionieri di guerra dipendenti da questo comando alla data 10 Febbraio 1919 (Statistical data of prisoners of war under the control of this command, as of 10 February 1919). AUSSME F-11, 126/1.

¹⁸ The name of the soldier was revealed in another source. His relatives sought information about him in January 1921, because he had not returned home. Note n. 68 of the Head of the Italian Military Mission in Budapest, 14 Jan. 1921. AUSSME E-15, 84/1.

¹⁹ Telegram n. 62259 of Deputy Chief of Staff Badoglio to the Italian Balkan Force, 23 Feb. 1919. In response to it, telegram n. 38498, 24 Feb. 1919. AUSSME F-11, 126/5.

²⁰ Protocol n. 4774 of the Balkan Force Command, 28 May 1919. Subject: Specchi indicanti i reparti prigionieri di guerra lavoratori, presenti nel territorio del suddetto comando alla data del 1o maggio 1919 (Statistics of the prisoner of war labour detachments in the territory of the above command, as of 1 May 1919). AUSSME F-11, 126/5.

The 121st labour company contained 361 workers who were building a 10-11 km long road between Shijak and Vorë (in the source: Sjak-Vorra, not to confuse with Vlorë), to the east of Durrës. Among them there were 103 Hungarians, of whom nine were treated at an infirmary.

The statistics of June 1919 indicate that the Italians kept 16,559 POWs in Albania at that time, which was only a small fraction of the total number of POWs in Italian captivity (477,024 men).²¹ The Italian Balkan Force Command was compelled by the Ministry of War to register the names of those prisoners, but it failed to comply, claiming it did not receive the necessary forms, the so-called POW registry notes.²²

3. THE LIFE OF POWS ACCORDING TO OFFICIAL RECORDS

The sources originating from various Italian military and administrative organs contain further information about POWs life besides their forced labour. One of the main issues was the spread of malaria.²³ In May 1919 the Embassy of Spain in Rome forwarded a request²⁴ of the Bern Mission of the Hungarian Red Cross to transfer the POWs who had worked in malaria-affected places during the winter, to a malaria-free place, before the summer, or let them return home. The case was addressed by the Ministry of War, which apparently aimed not to bring a notable resolution. In response²⁵ to the foreign minister's request, the war minister emphasized that Italian troops were also present in the malaria-affected places and that it was not acceptable to create better conditions for POWs than for Italian soldiers. He also indicated that employers had to comply with hygiene regulations, and POWs were to be withdrawn from employers who failed to comply. Finally, he noted that the peak season of the pandemic was August and not early summer. From such a response, we can draw the conclusion – and the abovementioned statistics confirm it too – that the Italian leadership did not intend to terminate the POWs' forced labour in the summer of 1919.

Also in the spring of 1919, the issue of POWs kept in malaria-affected places got the attention of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) as well, which asked for permission to send delegates for a visit in the affected POW camps in Sicily, Sardinia, and Albania. This initiative was unsuccessful, because Minister of War Enrico Caviglia rejected it with a general reply, arguing that visits in POW camps were not allowed as long as the typhus pandemic did not decline.²⁶

²¹ Dati statistici relativi ai prigionieri di guerra catturati dall'Esercito Italiano al 1o giugno 1919 (Statistics of prisoners of war captured by Italian ground forces, as of 1 June 1919). ACS PCM, 19.19.6. (169.) doboz, 14. cart.

²² Deputy Chief of Staff Badoglio notified the War Ministry about the failure, see protocol n. 63189, 27 Mar. 1919. AUSSME F-11, 125/3.

²³ A severe outbreak of malaria among POWs in Albania in 1918 was noted in *Hadifogoly magyarok története* (History of Hungarian Prisoners of War) see *Hadifogoly magyarok* 1930. 242.

²⁴ Note verbale n. 1312, Embajada de España en Italia, 7 May 1919. And protocol n. 530/1919 of the Red Cross – Mission de la Croix Rouge Hongroise en Suisse, 23 Apr. 1919. ASD Gabinetto 1915–1918, b. 370. Cfr. RESIDORI 2017. 301.

²⁵ Protocol n. 22544 of the Ministry of War, 25 May 1919. Subject: Prigionieri di guerra ungheresi – malaria (Hungarian prisoners of war – malaria). ASD Gabinetto 1915–1918, b. 370.

²⁶ Telegram n. 311T to the Italian Foreign Ministry, 8 May 1919. And protocol n. 16058 of the War Ministry, 19 May 1919. Subject: Visite di Delegazioni Sanitarie Svizzere ai campi prig. a. u. (Visits of Swiss health delegation in camps of Au-Hu. POWs). ASD Gabinetto 1915–1918, b. 365.

Another issue was alimentation. In December 1918, the Austrian and the Hungarian Ministries of War demanded explanation²⁷ from Italy's government – again with the mediation of the Spanish Embassy – about news of POWs starved to death in Albania. General Piacentini denied this allegation but admitted that they had little food to give to the prisoners and requested the government to increase the daily amount of bread from 400 g to 600 g per capita, arguing that the POWs were doing hard physical work. The increase was approved. The Italian Ministry of War notified the Foreign Ministry about these, which responded to the Austrian and Hungarian parties that the news was false and that the POWs did not get less food than Italian prisoners in Austrian and Hungarian captivity.²⁸

In October 1919, the Hungarian Foreign Ministry wanted to discuss certain complaints about the conditions of POWs in Albania as well as in Forte Begato in Genoa. Concerning the Albanian situation, Commander Piacentini responded again and denied each complaint. He claimed it was not true that the tents serving as accommodation for the prisoners were overcrowded. He emphasized that food was provided in the prescribed amount, and the POWs could sometimes eat fresh meat while the Italian soldiers ate tinned food. The POWs always had access to drinking water, although in some cases it was not right at the accommodation of the labour detachment. He also denied that the Italian soldiers interrogated prisoners with force and that the prisoners were deliberately accommodated in malaria-affected places. He emphasized that Italian soldiers were also exposed to malaria.²⁹ This last sentence is obviously true. However, due to missing sources, we cannot verify the rest of the commander's statement. The complaints were certainly made by POWs, but the examination was done by the captors and not by a neutral party, like delegates of a third country or of an international organization. Moreover, the harsh circumstances of the Albanian forced labour were recorded in POWs' writings.³⁰

4. LIFE OF POWS BASED ON THEIR RECORDS

Like the sources written by Italian authorities, the records of Hungarian POWs must also be used with source criticism. I prefer to discuss the two kinds of sources separately for their better understanding, as they differ from each other from multiple aspects. Their authors were of different nations, hostile to each other. The Italian sources were official rulings and commands related to the treatment of the POWs, while the POWs' sources rather show us how they lived and conceived their captivity.

²⁷ Most complaints were related to barbaric punishments, abuses of power, and the use of POWs for military purposes on the Albanian coast in the deadly climate. *Hadifogoly magyarok* 1930. 403.

²⁸ Telegram n. 630 of the War Ministry, 15 Feb. 1919; Piacentini's protocol n. 170, 7 Jan. 1919; note verbale n. 5681, Embajada de España en Italia, 13 Dec. 1918; Telegram n. 18428 of the Foreign Ministry, 21 Dec. 1918. ASD Gabinetto 1915–1918, b. 370. (Also conserved at AUSSME F-11, 115/3). The reply of the Foreign Ministry n. 6022, 1 Mar. 1919. Subject: Prigionieri a. u. dislocati in Albania (Au-Hu prisoners of war kept in Albania).

²⁹ Note verbale n. 2512, Embajada de España en Italia, 24 Oct. 1919. The complaints are listed in the annex. Piacentini's reply (protocol n. 7794, 1 Dec. 1919) was forwarded by the War Ministry to the Foreign Ministry, see protocol n. 54610, 18 Dec. 1919. Subject: Trattamento dei prigionieri ungheresi internati in Albania ed a Genova, Forte Begato (The treatment of Hungarian prisoners of war interned in Albania and Genova, Forte Begato). ASD Gabinetto 1915–1918, b. 370. Cfr. RESIDORI 2017. 301.

³⁰ For Austrian sources, see WEILAND – KERN 1931. 38., 45.

4.1. János Kozeschnik

János Kozeschnik, lance corporal of the Budapest-based 1st Honvéd Infantry Regiment was transferred to Albania from a camp of Sicily in late October or early November 1917.³¹ The Museum of Military History in Budapest obtained his postcards and telegram receipt that he had exchanged with his wife. Of the postcards he sent home from Albania nine survived.³² The first one was sent on 6 March 1918. He received at least two postcards in Albania from his wife, the first one on 2 January 1918.³³

Concerning the postcards, it is visible that Kozeschnik wrote his exact location on them, but the Italian censorship always erased it – the only information about his place was “Z. G. A. M.”, which is the abbreviation of the Italian expression *Zona di Guerra Albania Meridionale*, meaning War Zone South Albania. However, the receipt of his telegram message³⁴ reveals that he was working in the vicinity of Vlorë, from where the telegram was sent.

In his messages he reported to his wife that he was healthy and was working on a road construction in Albania. He asked her to send him bread, salt, sugar, spices, jam, fat, tea, paprika, tobacco, toothpaste, cash, and a moustache holder. We can see his wife was unable to send him all these articles, because he repeated his requests partially in later messages. He was probably unaware that their prices highly increased at home and were thus not easily available for his wife. He hoped his work in Albania would end soon and that his wife and three children were fine.

Kozeschnik sent his last postcard from Albania in May, and his next card was dated at the Altamura Military Hospital in South Italy, on 25 November 1918. In that message he communicated that he was cured from malaria. He obviously caught the illness in Albania, which also explains the 4-month-long pause in his correspondence. He added that he had received her wife’s package in Albania on 2 October. He was healthy again and hoped to return home by the end of the year. However, his repatriation took nearly a year, because after Altamura he was interned in the camp of Cassino until September 1919.

4.2. László Horthy

László Horthy, a corporal of the 85th Imperial Royal Infantry Regiment, based in Lőcse (today Levoča in Slovakia), was captured in the Italian front in June 1918, and Albania was the first place where he was interned for a longer period. He was taken there by ship through Gallipoli when the truce was already in effect.

³¹ Kozeschnik was captured in December 1915 and was kept in seven places during his 4-year-long Italian captivity. For more details, see TAKÁCS 2018.

³² The postcards in chronological order: Museum of Military History, Collection of Handwritten Records (hereinafter: HTM KE) 15.469/Em, 15.465/Em, 15.579/Em, 15.464/Em, 15.471/Em, 15.470/Em, 15.473/Em, 15.468/Em, 15.467/Em. Postcard messages and letters have to be handled with source criticism. Their authors may withhold or alter information for various reasons. For example, János Kozeschnik obviously wanted to prevent his messages from being blocked by the Italian or the Austro–Hungarian censorship. This is why he directly wrote little about how the Italians handled the POWs. Instead, he listed what he needed to be sent him from home in packages and from that we can draw conclusions about his condition.

³³ HTM KE 15.570/Em and 15.466/Em. Both Kozeschnik and his wife wrote the dates of sending on their postcards.

³⁴ HTM KE 15.590/Em attachments. The telegram has not remained, only its receipt. It was sent on 7 May 1918.

In his memoir,³⁵ he wrote more than 100 pages about his life in Albania. Concerning accommodation and clothing, he noted that the tents were simple, lacking straw, so that they lay on the cold ground. When they slept, they covered themselves with linen trousers and cloaks instead of bedsheet. He complained about food shortage, noting that salt and sugar were also missing sometimes, which coincides with János Kozeschnik's messages. In some cases, the prisoners stole the food that was to be given to horses and mules, namely bread and peas. He confirmed that they had access to drinking water, as the Italian commander noted too. However, it usually caused diarrhoea. He recounted the day when the food quantity was increased. He and his fellows were then given 700 g bread, 220 g meat, 220 g pasta or rice, a few decagrams of cheese, a piece of orange and 3 dl wine on a daily basis. He was told that Prime Minister Dénes Berinkey's government interceded for the food increase, so it seems to have happened in the first months of 1919. Once recaptured, escaped prisoners were led back to their detachments and then punished by the guards beating them, instead of incarceration. Like Kozeschnik and many others, Horthy also contracted malaria. He was also cautious when writing letters, to make sure his messages would not be blocked. The delivery of postcards was problematic, for which he also decided to choose telegram correspondence. However, contrary to postcard sending, the POWs had to pay for telegram messages. In their free time, the POWs read newspapers, which were translated by their Italian-speaker fellows.

László Horthy remained in Albania until November 1919 and returned home at the end of that year. He wrote his memoir in the 1950s and '60s. Therefore, it has to be used with source criticism. Even so, it is an important record, as it confirms the complaints discussed in the official Italian sources, as well as the statements of János Kozeschnik about alimentation, malaria, and the harsh circumstances.

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³⁵ HORTHY 2016.

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