

**Thesis of the Doctoral (PhD) Dissertation**

**SOVIETIZATION OF ZALA COUNTY  
BETWEEN 1945 AND 1950**

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## 1 The aims of the thesis and outlining the topic

During my research, my basic aim was to answer major questions by approaching from below, within the frames of a slice of rural Hungary. The microcosmic worlds of archival sources, memories and newspaper articles created at definitely low levels alternate with relatively major stories created from basically the same sources which describe the political changes in Zala County between 1945 and 1950. The chronological frames of my thesis were determined by the history of politics. In many aspects 1945 (together with 1944) is a certain year zero – a first and final year in Hungarian history, but mainly from the point of view of political history, because in my opinion, from a social political aspect, it can hardly be defined as a year zero. I chose 1950 as the final year of my thesis due to the dominance of political history in my work, however, I do not consider 1950 to be a definite closing date as it does not close and does not open a completely new era. At the same time, I defined the introduction of the council system in autumn 1950 as a borderline of a historical stage in the formation of state-party dictatorship. Regarding the locational aspect, I decided upon describing a county rather than one settlement – e.g. Zalaegerszeg, the county centre, because most processes can be shown and depicted more precisely in their complexity if the location is based on a whole county not just on one relatively marginal country town. Due to the fact that in my thesis I primarily aimed at representing a narrative which is based on political history although it is woven with social history, I did not reflect to a number of issues which would have gone beyond the frames of the thesis. Consequently, I did not create large chapters on economic and cultural history, nor did I consider the deeper description of after-war reconstruction or public supplies, only to the extent I considered it sufficient.

## 2 Outlining the methods applied

The present, post-modern construction has involved a number of methodological experience from the problems of quantitative data-collection through the distorted picture given by national sources as far as the relative source value of theoretically evident legal documents. The present thesis is mainly based on archival research carried out in Zala County Archives of the Hungarian National Archives. And it being a topic on rural history I also aimed at researching sources created at a definitely low level, where the distance between the creator of the document and the ones involved in it is relatively little, compared to sources of higher and indispensably more impersonal level.

I have incorporated the documents of several archives, record offices and museums alongside the documents of Zala County Archives. The second main group of sources included contemporary local press, printed non-fiction (official journals and statistical data bases). I could rely on traditional paper-based sources, as well as ones only available in digital form, which format provides hardly accessible sources such as newsreels and films which I also included in my thesis work. I have also applied memoirs as sources from before and after 1990, moreover, to give a wider view, I analysed the historic records of parishes and vicarages.

In addition to the overview of greater events, I aimed at presenting a picture of the everyday life of 'the average man' who are considered to be lacking history. In the process of construction-deconstruction I recorded 'micro-historic' phenomena which give an overview of the era and at the same time, provide a delicate picture of the different underlying layers and their presence in the present.

I aimed at making the analysed documents live by frequently quoting them. My prime mover was not some kind of misunderstood credibility but the attempt to give a vivid picture of the style, phrasing, narrative and mentality so characteristic to the era and especially the central power.

I gave this thesis even more tones, nuances and aspects by enclosing 32 charts, 17 pictures and 3 maps.

### 3 Thesis list of the results

After the many years of systematic analysis of documents, one of the fundamental questions of the era is the evaluation of the events from the point of view of democracy and their relationship to democracy. According to my view, the occupation of Hungary by a hostile and dictatorial power basically excluded the positivistic approach to the existence of democracy. All this was overburdened by the unwritten law of servility and nepotism which survived in the plural political system (especially in the countryside) or by the fact that a historically established law-breaking and corrupt attitude forced people to survive in an economically unstable background, just to mention the most common features. And although the newly established regime had certain advanced, democratic features like the previously

unprecedented expansion of suffrage, I am convinced that a regime has to be evaluated as a whole, and not on the basis of systematically chosen elements showing outstanding features.

I considered it important to show the consequences of the occupation from the first hand, through a few abstract mathematical figures and distinguished sentences alongside with categorised case types. By getting a picture of the types of cases, we can understand the resistance and rejection of the local society which followed the octroyed Soviet regime from the first moment of its establishment. From a quantitative point of view, it is hard to exactly grab the 'social experience' of the Soviet occupation, probably the only number which can be defined relatively objectively is the number of unnatural deaths among civilians. According to these estimations, the number of violent deaths during and after the fights ranges between 584 and 1149, possibly closer to the lower figure. The number of sexual assaults against women cannot even be estimated due to the lack of necessary data, exact numbers are extremely sparse in the sources.

In my approach, the distribution of land in 1945 appeared basically as an event of political and social history, although I enclosed several charts and quantitative features to illustrate its being part of economic history. Immediately after the arrival of Soviet troops did the distribution (or in a different approach sack) of land begin. The process was partly supported by the occupying soldiers, partly by the left-wing party- or ministry-appointed political representatives who arrived a few days after the Soviet troops and primarily concentrated on the political supervision of the operation which was carried out in a few weeks.

The national committees, local, regional and county administration could only notify the fact of distribution of land but they could not influence or reduce its radical and unlawful character, which was not even included in their tasks, but the councils established for the overview of the process could only follow the events from the distance. At the same time, the administrative control was delegated to county estate-supervising councils which became the practical managers of the distribution of land. Due to the fact that in Zala county there were relatively few large estates to distribute, Zala county could experience the smallest structural changes both on a national scale and definitely in the Trans-Danubian region, with an average of 2.9 acres of distributed land. In Zala county 30,695 people were given land, 766 people received a house and 8943 a building plot. Although the local distribution was carried out in the county within a few weeks, its radical character led to long-lasting disputes of ownership.

Theoretically, the transformation of public administration supposed to follow a logical line from the establishment of parties to national committees based on and leaders appointed by them. However, the practical implementation messed up the lines or surfaces as the different processes started from different sides and in interaction with each other. At the end of 1945 or at the beginning of 1946 the widest network in Zala county belonged to the Independent Smallholders' Party (FKGP), which existed in 88% of Zala settlements. The second position was held by the Hungarian Communist Party (MKP) far behind FKGP with 69% the Social Democratic Party (SZDP) had organisations in 47% and finally, the National Peasants' Party in 44% of the settlements.

The political tones of the national committees were determined by the quality and quantity of the legally functioning parties, as the left-wing parties (MKP, SZDP, NPP) benefitted so much from the parity system, especially in major settlements and on a county level, which the FKGP was unable to counterbalance, not to speak about the cases when they were not given the positions that they were legally designed to get. In this structure the 'block-parties' gained a huge advantage in political life, which was the core of the political and social conflicts of the era, especially on a local basis, as the overwhelming influence was not supported by either social or constitutional background. The participants of this situation found themselves in disproportionate and continuously unbalanced political surroundings controlled by unhealthy, party-dominated and limited frames.

The left-wing dominance in the national committees of major settlements could easily be implemented in the boards of representatives. This created a new field of political conflict in the local governments. As a protest against the disregarding of the only supposed social support of FKGP, the party did not participate in the work of county- and town-level political bodies before the elections.

Within the frames of the forming new political structure, the primary field of political seizure was the local administration, aiming at capturing political control over it. One of the first steps in official procedures in public offices was the stigmatization of officials based on their ideological inclinations, with a special attention to their behaviour right before the beginning of the new era and on the question whether or not they had fled. This factor fundamentally defined the fate of the officials during the later political checking and in the period of compiling B-lists.

The affiliated officials survived the above processes without much harm. In Zala county, the county-based checking committees examined more than 23,000 people, which meant exactly 10% of adult citizens. However, the number of people who were condemned or not checked was very low, so in Zala county the administration, the public and private spheres could not be conquered by this method. In two Zala county-based people's tribunals 1097 people were examined, about half of the cases was then investigated by the public prosecutor and 653 cases ended with some kind of conviction, among which 363 involved imprisonment for less than a year. The left-wing parties criticised the functioning of people's tribunals and checking committees as they were unable to uncover the features of the previous regime, and it was contrary to the aims of the left-wing parties.

The first, and in the examined period the last, time when the Hungarian society had to opportunity to give an opinion about the new political system, its credibility or more precisely, about its deficiency, was during the national elections on 4 November 1945. That day 91.34% of the listed electors, 194,845 out of 231,323 people gave their votes. The FKGP won the elections with overwhelming majority (75.13%) with 144,527 valid votes. MKP received 13,946 votes (7.25%), NPP 9,943 votes (5.17%), PDP 1,768 votes (0.92%) and SZDP 22,179 votes (11.53%). In Zala county, FKGP obtained 12 seats, MKP and SZDP 1-1 seats in the national assembly.

The above result, especially the local difference from the national average was determined by the exceptional influence of the female voter's definite dominance and by several other push and pull factors. It included the economic and related occupational structure, namely the predominance of agriculture in producing income, the settlement-patterns dominated by small villages, the relatively secluded features of transport, the lack of major towns, the influence of the Roman Catholic Church, the fact that FKGP was identified with the opposition of the new regime and finally by electoral traditions – the tradition of preferences for conservative and Christian Socialist parties.

The contradiction between the new political structure and the results of the elections was impossible to manage and solve for the ones in power. The new factors of the political system were opposite to public interest, not the speak about the fact that the radical Communist ideas about the reformation of the society and their implementation supported by the occupying Red Army had been definitely opposed to at the polling stations.

After 4<sup>th</sup> November 1945, FKGP wished to transform their results achieved at the elections into the institutional forms of political life. As their aims were impossible to be transformed, they had to stick to boycott and withdrawal from politics.

The party-influence over public administration had a negative and counter-productive influence on the society as a whole. It can be detected how the higher positions on a county level could roll on. The vanguard of the fight on 'old staff' was the political police being under a strong Communist influence. In 1945-46 MKP obtained the major posts in the leadership of the political police, with 69% of the staff being controlled by MKP members.

The result of B-listing in Zala county was extremely drastic: 43% of the civil servants was dismissed. The high proportion compared to the national average of B-listed civil servants in Zala county can be explained by the fact that the earlier checking process could not basically change the pre-war staff.

On 31<sup>st</sup> August 1947 altogether 189,747 people voted in Zala electoral district, i.e. in Zala county. 56.6% of the valid votes went to the Democratic People's Party (DNP) with 106,731 votes, and it meant 7 seats in the Parliament. The party had been established in the county basically by former Smallholder's Party leaders, only a few weeks before the elections. MKP took the second place with 25,373 votes (13.46%), the third place, with 19,323 votes went to SZDP (10.25%). FKGP, which had lost its leadership in the last moment before the elections, only obtained 16,655 votes (8.83%), which was enough for 1 seat – equal to SZDP's results. It seems to be a fair statement that – compared to the 1945 elections - the political preferences in Zala county had not changed. Regarding the electoral fraud in Zala county, it can be stated that the manipulation by 'legal' and illegal deprivation of suffrage definitely exceeded the proportion of the fraud carried out with blue-ballot voting.

As the Democratic People's Party (DNP) remained in opposition, the confrontation between the underlying social background and the political structure approaching towards the party-state system became ever wider. This process was greatly supported by the secret MKP/MDP members who also contributed to the elimination of SZDP, NPP and FKGP. Alongside the party life and the creation of local MDP and the establishment of the party-state character, the purging process continued in all spheres of public life.

I considered the party elite to be a part but definitely only a subset of the political elite, similarly to the political elite only being a subset of the governing elite. Throughout the establishment and legitimisation of their existence, Communist regimes refused any

connection with the previous elite, in fact, they were created as their denial and their ideology was definitely anti-elitist. At the same time, the party-elite functioned as a governing elite, regarding its functional position and its legal enforcement. While examining the party leaders and the apparatus, we can draw the conclusion that these bodies were dominated by young and middle-aged males, whose education and qualification played a marginal role compared to political reliability and flexibility, and where party-based education was predominant.

After describing the structure of the local Hungarian Workers' Party (MDP), I examined the main elements of the expansion of the already established state-party towards a party-state, which included the first attempts of the collectivisation in agriculture, the nationalization of schools and the actions against the Church. All these steps can be listed on a logical chain which represented the aim of the dictatorship to destroy and end with rural society. The basically rural society in Zala county had been considered to be an almost intact and hostile field, but in 1948 they thought it was time they started enclosing, completely owning villages and politically dominating them.

The first wave of collectivization in Zala county obviously ended up with a complete failure. The collective economies functioned as the political organs of state power rather than economic units based on volunteering and autonomy established from down under. This stage of the collectivization aimed at the poverty-stricken agrarian proletariat and newcomer landowners, and they were unable to destroy the multi-generation blocks of small and medium holders which formed the strongest links within the network of village societies.

The state expansion in other branches of economy had a significantly smaller influence on the local society in Zala county compared to the 'landslide' which affected more or less the majority of locals. The secondary – industrial-mining sector in Zala county was mainly represented by the Hungarian-American Oil Industrial Company (MAORT), otherwise the county could mainly boast with minor brick mines, mills, distilleries and other small industries and workshops. In March 1948 the nationalization of industrial companies employing more than 100 workers affected only 5 companies, whereas the nationalization of enterprises employing more than ten people involved 44 economic organizations. The expropriation of MAORT took place in 1948/49 in the first frame-up trial which was tailored to the size and legal importance of the company.

The state(party) wanted to dominate not only the material but also the spiritual world and this attempt had a special aspect in Zala county due to the fact that József Mindszenty had been a



parish priest between 1919 and 1944 in Zalaegerszeg. The biggest conflict broke out during the nationalisation of schools in June 1948 which evoked an unexpected and unprecedentedly various and massive social opposition. The county had 407 elementary and public schools, 249 of which had been run by the Catholic Church, 10 by the Evangelic and 9 by the Reformed Church and they were taken over by the state.

The advance of the MKP/MDP after the 1947 elections had to be legitimised first of all in the Parliament. After the establishment of the Hungarian Workers' Party in the country, the first and most important party-task was to gradually grind FKGP and NPP into the field of MDP thus preparing them for the sublimation once they had completed their tasks. It was made similarly to the process in the Hungarian National Independence Front which gave its place to the local organizations of the Hungarian Independence People's Front in February/March 1949. It established the formal frames which made it possible that in the elections of 15<sup>th</sup> May 1949 parties either only took part apparently or did not even participate at all, which means a one-list election. Of the 230,137 listed voters 219,812 gave their votes, which means a 95.51% turnout.

It is very difficult to unfold the reasons for the 97.64% victory of the People's Front in Zala county, which surprised even the Communists. Different analyses have listed both positive and negative influences, ranging from giving hope in line with threat or the promise of following norms but they all have one thing in common: they do not mention the officially proven main factor, the enforcement of effectively open vote.

Since 1945, public and especially municipal administration which was altered according to constantly changing interests of power showed the syndromes of temporary power, as for the lack of municipal elections officials were appointed and replaced without subsidiarity. By the beginning and middle of 1948, MKP/MDP had felt (omni)potent enough to start the reformation of public administration exclusively on the basis of their political interest, which meant the introduction of the system of councils declared in the Constitution of 1949. To prepare the process, worker's cadres arrived in public administration, many of whom proved their incapability within a short period of time. This – partly consciously employed 'cadre rotation' – created a high level of fluctuation imposing a great burden on different levels of public administration and thus creating a transformational loss, which reduced the effectiveness of this sphere for years.

According to the Council Law, county, regional and town councils were delegated by the appropriate level of People's Fronts, degrading the process of elections into a simple voting. In the 1950 council elections, in Zala county 169,724 people (81,157 men and 88,567 women) were given the right to vote. This number is significantly lower due to the county administrative reform in 1949 which removed three regions from Zala county and added them to the Upper Balaton region. In this election the process of forming a homogenous structure became almost complete as the result was already 99.96%.



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