

**Thesis of University Doctorate (PhD) Dissertation**

**FERENC SZOMBATHELYI  
HEAD OF THE GENERAL STAFF OF THE  
HUNGARIAN ROYAL ARMY**

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## **1. The object of the doctorate thesis, the circumscription of the subject**

From September 1941 to April 1944 Ferenc Szombathelyi was the Head of the General Staff of the Hungarian Royal Army. During the Second World War he has been one of the most remarkable characters of the Hungarian military history due to his situation and position. Out of those who held the same position, he served the longest (in a war time) period. This fact and the changing understanding of Szombathelyi's character in relevant military literature drew my attention towards this subject. I was also interested about the Hungarian role in the Second World War and the inherently close relationship between political and military leaders, with further consideration of a small country with its own military strength in the shadow of a great power. I was captivated by the negative and one-sided manner in which pre-democratic era authors described Szombathelyi's character, and how more recent authors of the democratic era have re-evaluated this perception. After World War II, historical records describe his character over a broad range. During the People's Court trial the state prosecutors described him as German-friendly Chief of Staff who was greatly responsible for the catastrophe in the country due to his role and involvement within the state governing policy. In those articles Szombathelyi was accused of serving the Hungarian Fascist regime by unconscientiously sacrificing a large number of soldiers for the aims of the ruling class. Accordingly, he was portrayed as the leader of a great terror organization responsible for devastation of the resistance by all means and also greatly responsible for the atrocities-resulted degeneration of the military-raid on the southern parts of the country, which he firstly did not stop, then let the main responsible escape justice. Only in the latest democratic era has his role been presented without political-ideological influence. Since then the authors have approached the relevant historical sources with a new attitude, thus increasing the number of those. Notwithstanding no monograph focusing on Chief of Staff Ferenc Szombathelyi's activities has ever been written. For these reasons, I have decided to choose Ferenc Szombathelyi's evaluation as the subject of my dissertation in order to create a sophisticated elaboration on it, using the latest range of sources.

## **2. The method of the examination, sources and structure**

I have used primary and secondary sources during my research. The gravity of my research was placed on the official books of the record office of the Chief of Staff of the Hungarian Royal Army. However, most of the relevant records have been destroyed – from

the time in question, only the records of the military operation office and the war operational division have stayed intact – and the rest were not satisfactory in assisting me in a complex reconstruction on the performance of the Chief of Staff. Therefore additionally I had to rely on remembrance, study collections and the personnel records of those who were in a working relationship or in close personnel contact with Szombathelyi. (Among those documents the most exclusive is the legacy of the defence lawyer of the Colonel-General, which includes several original documents in addition to the entire crime procedure documentation.) Several other sources have assisted my researches such as the records of People’s Criminal Courts, documentations of the proceedings and documentations of agents and all publications from that time which could be useful to describe one part of the researched era. Among those relevant documentations I used primarily Hungarian and German written sources according my language knowledge.

During the writing of my doctorate thesis I have tried to combine approaches of war and historical sciences. I managed to put the examined war history occurrence into the window of the universal and Hungarian history, listing and comparing historical events with the performance of Chief of Staff Ferenc Szombathelyi was indispensable and necessary.

In the second chapter I shortly outlined the historiography. The third chapter is a short, essential summary of General Szombathelyi’s career. The dissertation is written in chronological order, thus the first presented course of proceedings describes the causes and process of his promotion. I paid special attention to Szombathelyi’s memorandum. In this he laid down his core principles which accompanied him most of the time during his service period as Chief of Staff. The core subject of the fourth chapter and as well one of the cornerstones of the dissertations is that Memorandum, including the presentation and analysis.

The fifth chapter covers the following period: from Szombathelyi’s promotion to Chief of Staff until the negotiations in Budapest in January 1942. In this chapter I intend to present how the German foreign and military policy changed due to growing difficulties, in particular by the effect of the first important defeat. The presentation also covers the acts of the Chief of Staff who was engaged to preserve the remaining military forces which had taken him on a forced path. This chapter includes an analysis on how effectively this concept (preserve the military forces) was realized and what reasons and compromises concluded the decision to bring home the “Quick Army Corps.”

The following chapter gives a detailed presentation on the discussions between Ribbentrop and Keitel in Budapest, January 1942. It is imperative to highlight the role of the

Chief of Staff during the discussions, including the reached compromises which resulted in sending the Second Hungarian Army to war operational territory. Another crucial novelty of the dissertation is the use of the never before elaborated remains of the hand-written notes of Keitel and Szombathelyi.

The seventh chapter presents the performances of the Second Hungarian Army from the moment of its conception until the catastrophe by the river Don. Through the analysis of the events, focus is on the performance of the Chief of Staff, who was wholly engaged in the general improvement of the military supply and on the amelioration of the conditions of the army's operations. Shortly I outlined the contrasts between the Hungarian and the German army's leaderships in connection with the causes which led up to the army's suffered defeat.

The ninth chapter discusses the circumstances of the German military occupation of Hungary including the discharge of General Szombathelyi. Above all, my main intention has been to analyze the danger of the German occupation, the process and the result of the negotiation in Klessheim, and to concentrate on the response to the new situation. This analysis is based on the unpublished personal notes of General Szombathelyi.

Everything is written in chronological order (as I declared earlier) with the single exception of the military-raid on the southern parts of the country, and its consequences. This change was necessary, in order to follow a logical path and allow a better understanding of the issue. Within chapter eight I have described the turn of events in chronological order, creating subchapters for each course of development. In time line: the course of the military-raid, the role of the Chief of Staff, the initial stages of examination and finally the legal process itself.

The hypothesis which I laid down at the beginning of the research was to continue and complete the re-evaluation of Szombathelyi's image, using the most recent sources since the change of the political system, synthesizing them with the old sources. I have tried to answer the following questions:

1. Taking into consideration Ferenc Szombathelyi's pre-military career I intended to examine the conditions of his promotion to Chief of Staff and his exact concept about the future of Hungary. What sort of possibilities did he have in realizing his concept in accordance with events of regarding military policy?

2. Taking into consideration General Szombathelyi's view on the preservation of the military forces, what amount of influence did he wield during the negotiations on decreasing the strength of the Hungarian Army as it faced war?

3. Following the fate of the Second Hungarian Army I primarily intended to reveal the extent of his personal responsibility for the mistakes of the German and Hungarian war supreme command, which led to their catastrophic end. What sort of tools did Ferenc Szombathelyi have that might have stopped it from happening? What could he have done as the Chief of Staff in order to save the Second Hungarian Army?

4. What was the role of the Chief of Staff during the launching of the military-raid on the southern parts of the country? How clear was the information he could get about it during it was executed? What sort of responsibility lies upon the Chief of Staff for the bloody events?

5. What steps did the Chief of Staff make in order to clarify what occurred? What was his personal persuasion over the military-raid and on the responsibility of the commanding officers? In addition to those points I wanted to make a detailed examination of the war-crime trials process for the raid's ringleaders, including the international and domestic judgments.

6. Regarding the preparation of the German occupation in Hungary, I intended to examine what sort of information General Szombathelyi had. Why did he make the trip to Klessheim and why was he thus supporting the negotiation manner? Was any alternative to the possible resistance or was there any alternative to the acceptance of military occupation? How did his general performance change after the occupation?

### **3. The enumeration of the dissertation's results**

The following short answers can be done for the questions which are listed at the beginning of this dissertation.

1. The promotion of General Szombathelyi was a clear result of his principles on the preservation of the military forces, which was entirely different compared to his predecessor. The guiding principle, which can be interpreted into the military-decision making terminology as Hungarian self-preservation, focused on the 1918-20 tragedy and concentrated on avoiding it from happening again. Naturally, that aim could not be achieved, as when General Szombathelyi was appointed, Hungary had already been at war against the Soviet Union for more than two months. Additionally, Hungary has been caught in a political and military alliance with Germany for a long time, which forced Hungary down a path of consequences which could not be avoided, only the effects could be diminished.

2. During the negotiations, which resulted in sending the Second Hungarian Army to the frontline, the Chief of Staff still stood for the preservation of the military forces, however,

the Hungarians could not ignore the consequences of the changed foreign and military policy environment. In this context – regarding all examined relevant points – the agreed compromise was acceptable. General Szombathelyi used all of his arguments and negotiation skills in order to achieve the above described compromise.

3. The destruction of the Second Hungarian Army was caused by necessities: the promises of the adequate outfits and supplies were not kept by the Germans, so the insufficiently equipped Hungarian troops had to take operational tasks which far exceeded their capabilities. The Chief of Staff was well aware of the situation and within his limited opportunities within the German military management he tried to arrange an improvement of the Hungarian army's supply, tried to acquire up-to-date weaponry, and tried keeping the army's assignments within its operational capabilities. In the end, Hitler's order put an end to the debate. All of the abovementioned conditions together have had a synergic effect leading up to the catastrophic defeat of the Hungarian Army.

4. The launched military-raid on the southern parts of the country was initiated by the Minister of Interior, while the Chief of Staff carried it out, by which he simply was fulfilling his duty obligations. During the raid he did not receive clear and exact reports about the situation as his subordinates were forging the reports, lying about heavy fighting and reporting misleading facts about the increasing number of partisans. So the Chief of Staff was not in a clear decision-making position as he was not personally informed about the ongoing operation and he never made any field visit which was his responsibility. Even by the end of the event, he only sent his (close) subordinates to the spot for first-hand information. His acts could be excused by several facts, like reflecting on the first anxious news he issued his order to maintain the operation within its legal framework. On the other hand he had placed his trust in the leaders of the operation and additionally there would not have been opportunity to arrange a personal inquiry as at the same time he was busy in negotiations with the Germans in Budapest.

5. After the cleansing operation had been concluded he was still receiving news about its degeneration which caused him to order the operational commander to make clearer reports. Since he could not get clear picture of the operation through that report, he decided to send his personal delegate to the spot in order to carry out the inquiry.

Impelled by the facts, General Szombathelyi ordered an attorney's investigation process which was later put aside due to fear of publicly exposing details of the operation. Neither the General, nor the political leadership, nor the governor wanted to deal with the consequences. Years later several conditions of the case had been changed causing another inquiry order,

thus the case reached the judicial stage. At that moment the Chief of Staff transferred the case under his own authority. General Szombathelyi, using the testimonies of the involved staff officers, wanted to gain assurance for a full and final call to account, however he did not order the arrests of the ringleaders. Besides on his personal conviction (he believed that it would be an inappropriate act with the highest ranking military officers) internal and external pressure also kept him from arresting any of the generals.

Due to this situation the ringleaders could get away with the committed acts, which made the Chief of Staff order the arrests of all additional accused personnel. Moreover, other military officers were also charged. The whole procedure was then interrupted by the German occupation.

6. The Hungarian political and military leadership did not have clear and unambiguous information regarding Germany's planned occupation. The German intention of occupying the country was even more questionable in regard to the war situation on the eastern frontline. Related to this, it was unclear, if the German military leadership would tempt to organize a strong German force concentration next to the Hungarian border for occupation tasks, or if it was only a tool for political extortion.

Since under the given circumstances General Szombathelyi did not consider the Hungarian forces to be able to stand up against the German forces, he was arguing to achieve solution by negotiations, and made the same recommendation to the governor as well. The negotiations in Klessheim were carried out in this context, in which the Chief of Staff played a crucial role, since he was working again for a reasonable compromise. The consequences of the rejection of the German occupation would have immediately ruined General Szombathelyi and all his previous personal achievements in one step. This idea led him throughout the course of the negotiations, and in order to ensure possible future settlement, he became more willing to fulfill German demands. However, his previous acts, from the time when he was not Chief of Staff yet, resulted in the loss of confidence from the Germans and finally he was discharged from his position and further proceeding was launched against him.

The legal rehabilitation of Ferenc Szombathelyi was conducted on 16 March 1994 when the Supreme Court of the Hungarian Republic invalidated the previous verdicts made by the People's Court of Budapest and by the Highest Commission of People's Court. He was acquitted of all the charges of war crimes.<sup>1</sup> It is time for General Szombathelyi to finally take

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<sup>1</sup> The Supreme Court of the Hungarian Republic has conducted a new hearing on the procedure of Ferenc Szombathelyi. Bfv. X. 3628/1993. 1-25. HL Officer Ferenc Szombathelyi's personal records, 3137/1890.

his own merited position in the Hungarian historical literature, neglecting one-sided presentations but not ignoring the contradictory attributions of his and this historical era.

My novel, in-depth view has increased the role that Ferenc Szombathelyi played, putting him into a different light. His role and the crucial happening of the Hungarian military policy in the time frame of 1941 till 1944 points out the relationship of the political and military context, presents the attribution of its collaboration. Additionally, my work provides further aspects to the complexity of military capabilities of a great power and its small “allied” analysis. The elaborations of this subject is naturally not complex, this research could be further developed on several points.

### **3. Released publications and lectures on the subject of this dissertation**

#### A, Publications

1. József Kaló: Ferenc Szombathelyi and the “cold days”. In: *Studia Militaria – Hadtörténelmi tanulmányok*, Editor: Lajos Lisznyai – József Kaló. Debrecen, 2004. page 227-263. ISBN 963-460-018-2.
2. József Kaló: Ferenc Szombathelyi in front of the Hungarian People’s Court. In: *Publication of the 10<sup>th</sup> Spring Wind Conference of the National Association of Doctorate-candidates*. Editor: Tamás Mankovits – Sándor Károly Molnár – Sarolta Németh. National Association of Doctorate-candidates, Budapest, 2007. page 449-454 ISBN 978-963-87569-0-9
3. József Kaló: “I was standing entirely alone” - Szombathelyi at the Hungarian People’s Court . In: *General survey and prospective: The Hungarian society during the “years of turning-point” conference publication of doctorate-candidates*, organized by: Eötvös Loránd Tudományegyetem Bölcsész tudományi Kar Új- és Jelenkori Történelmi programja, Debreceni Egyetem Bölcsész tudományi Kar Történelmi Doktori programja, Pest Megyei Levéltár
4. József Kaló: Ferenc Szombathelyi and the deportation of “Galícia” In: *Magyar Napló* edition number 2008/8, page 27-32, ISSN 08652910
5. József Kaló: The Hungarian Chief of Staff and the Second Hungarian Army (1942-1943). In: *Társadalom és honvédelem*, edition number 2009/3. page 69-99. ISSN 1417-7293

6. József Kaló: Memorandum of Ferenc Szombathelyi. In: Hadtörténeti Közlemények, edition number 2009/3. page 747-763. ISSN 0017-6540.

#### B, Lectures

1. Ferenc Szombathelyi and the “cold days” Conference of the Debreceni Egyetem Hatvani István Szakkollégium. December 2004, DAB headquarters, Debrecen
2. Ferenc Szombathelyi in front of the Hungarian People’s Court. Lecture during the 10<sup>th</sup> Spring Wind Conference of the National Association of Doctorate-candidates, in the Pro Patria et Scientia section, 17-20 May 2007, Budapest, Zrínyi Miklós Nemzetvédelmi Egyetem
3. “I was standing entirely alone” - Szombathelyi at the Hungarian People’s Court. Lecture on the conference of doctorate-candidates, organized by: Eötvös Loránd Tudományegyetem Bölcsészstudományi Kar Új- és Jelenkori Történeti programja, Debreceni Egyetem Bölcsészstudományi Kar Történelmi Doktori programja, Pest Megyei Levéltár. November 2007, Pest Megyei Levéltár, Budapest
4. The role of the Hungarian Chief of Staff on sending the Second Hungarian Army to the front. Lecture on the Inauguration Conference of the Géza Perjés Hall on the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first day of Second World War. 17 September 2009. Zrínyi Miklós Nemzetvédelmi Egyetem