Documenting Life and Destruction
Holocaust Sources in Context

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DOCUMENTING LIFE AND DESTRUCTION
HOLOCAUST SOURCES IN CONTEXT

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THE HOLOCAUST IN HUNGARY
Evolution of a Genocide

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addressing a pressing issue. Jews within the Hungarian army were few, even in the years prior to the war: in April 1939 just 2,292 Jews were in its ranks (2.24 percent of the force), and of these, only forty-one held a rank.84

As the bill was being drafted, the Ministry of Justice indicated that it wanted to follow the German example and exempt Jews from the military service requirement. The Ministry of Defense wanted just the opposite, to make military service compulsory for them. The soldiers argued that, on the one hand, the country should utilize the Jewish workforce to the maximum, while on the other, Jews should not be allowed to stay behind the front lines, engaging in “activities against the nation.” The draft submitted by General Staff headquarters sought to subject to compulsory labor service even those non-Jews who had a Jewish spouse. As the act was debated in parliament, the far-right opposition put forth even more radical proposals, for example, the establishment of labor camps and ghettos for the Jews.


[. . .]
The bill upholds the principle that Jews cannot perform armed service in the Hungarian army and must fulfill their military obligations through auxiliary military service. This principle and the declaration and implementation thereof with respect to the Hungarian army ensures uniformity with the provisions of the so-called “Jewish Laws,”85 which are intended to secure the exclusion of the Jews from government, as well as public employment, and keep them from assuming the intellectual leadership of the country. Thus, no argument or extended explanation is needed to justify this bill’s goal that the Jews should likewise be excluded from the armed sections of the Hungarian army. After all, the individual and the corporate life of the armed forces is the primary realm in which in every respect the requirements of the Hungarian national movement and the Christian moral conception must prevail uninterruptedly.

85. See chapter 1.
It would, however, be misguided to opt for a decree that at this time would remove the Jews’ military obligations, specifically, their obligation to serve in the army, and would thereby relieve them of the associated burdens. For this reason, auxiliary military service within the Hungarian army is the area in which training Jews can be of public utility; it is here that their physical disciplining and moral education can be carried out afterward with results that are—hopefully—not unfavorable from the public’s point of view.

[...]

§ 3

(1) Jews do not receive “levente” training. 86
(2) Jews who are subject to compulsory military service cannot perform armed service in the Hungarian army or in the gendarmerie.

[...]  

§ 5

(1) Jews subject to compulsory military service will fulfill their military obligations through auxiliary military service.
(2) Those assigned to perform auxiliary military service will do so without rank or arm badge, 87 even if they previously held the rank of a commissioned officer or noncommissioned officer, or junior noncommissioned officer, or wore an arm badge; they may not sign up for reserve officer training. [...]  

Between September 1942 and June 1943, anti-Nazi general Vilmos Nagybaczo Nagy headed the Ministry of Defense; document 2-10(A) excerpts his postwar memoirs. Nagy tried to improve conditions for labor servicemen and attempted to put an end to incidents of arbitrary, cruel treatment. He strenuously insisted that individuals over age forty-two and those unable to work should be relieved from duty or not drafted at all. Going against previous practices, he made discharge after six months possible for Jewish labor servicemen and those from ethnic minorities. In his speeches in parliament, he demanded uniform treatment and humane methods, arguing—justifiably—that these served the interest of warfare. He initiated court-martial proceedings against officers who abused their powers. 88 In his decree issued in December 1942,

86. See the glossary.
87. An arm badge was a distinguishing mark on the uniforms of enlisted soldiers holding a high school diploma.
excerpted in document 2-10(B), he also imposed regulations concerning the
rights of and social provisions for labor servicemen’s family members.89

DOCUMENT 2-10(A): Memoirs of Minister of Defense Vilmos Nagybacsoni Nagy

[... ] A few days after I assumed my duties, I already saw that the Jewish
question was one of the toughest and gravest of problems that manifested
all of its features within the army. [...] Labor Service companies were
established for the Jews. The recruitment was not by age group, however,
but with rounds of the so-called “SAS” call-up summons: “Hurry,
Immediately, Hurry.”90 This gave rise to abuse of the gravest form. If some-
one had a conflict with a Jew, he would handle it by having that person
called in for labor service, regardless of the person’s age or social status.

This anti-Jewish sentiment reigned in the Ministry of Defense. And
this sentiment became even more extreme as a result of the order regulat-
ing military duty relief from battlefield service. The order declared that
Romanians, Serbs, and Jews were not allowed any form of preferential
treatment and could not be relieved of their duties. [... ]

Had the higher-ranking commanders supervised their deputies, making
them feel that their superiors did not regard the labor servicemen as having
been sentenced to death, as pariahs consigned to the ranks of animals, then
the cruelties that led to the death of so many labor servicemen on Russian
fields would have stopped or would not have happened at all. [... ]

Jewish members of the workforce were removed at many firms due
to pressure from military agencies, particularly Department 17/a of the
Ministry of Industry. During these operations, even the department of
mobilization of the Ministry of Defense was used. As a result, shortages
arose at every juncture. For example, following my resignation, the pro-
duction of rocket launchers only began after an eight-month delay; Jewish
skilled workers in the machine industry had been removed from the facto-
ries, and it took a long time before new workers were recruited and trained.

The case of doctors is instructive here: Jewish doctors were called
in without any deliberation. While the order specified that only one

90. In Hungarian: siess, azonnal, siess. It meant that those who received the summons had
to report for duty within a very short time.
Discrimination, Radicalization, and the First Mass Murders

A doctor could be assigned to each Labor Service company, which consisted of about 220 men, it still happened on several occasions that 10 to 12 doctors ended up serving in a single unit. And instead of saving lives, they were assigned to ordinary physical labor. Meanwhile, some villages remained wholly without a doctor. Military units also experienced a shortage. As a result, many Hungarians in active combat did not receive appropriate treatment or medical assistance fast enough; many died because of minor injuries because trained doctors were elsewhere, breaking stones, digging trenches, cutting down forests, carrying lumber, working in railroad construction, or sweeping mines in front of the lines.

[. . .]

I would receive reports of the brutal treatment day after day. In many places, the Labor Service guards went wild—unfortunately, the reserve company commanders followed suit—they introduced such cruel treatment that decent Hungarian soldiers were appalled and filed reports. Because of the beatings, the extremely strenuous work, and the lack of adequate food, many labor servicemen died. These atrocities were established during military court investigations, and I tried as best I could to put an end to them.

[. . .]


Hungarian Royal Ministry of Defense
Decree no. 121.480, eln. KMOF—1942.91

Confidential!
To be opened by the commander only!

[. . .]

Budapest, December 19, 1942.

At the end of this past November, I surveyed the Jewish labor service-men working on the Transylvanian railroad construction.92 I conducted

91. KMOF (National Superintendent of the Public Interest Labor Service System): head of the labor service system within the ranks of the Ministry of Defense.

92. This refers to construction of the “circular railroad” connecting the so-called Székely Land with other parts of the reannexed Northern Transylvania.