

Hungarians Fighting for France in Indochina

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After the Second World War, hundreds of thousands of young Hungarians became prisoners of war (POW). Most of them were transported to the east, to the Soviet Union, but still large numbers were captured by French, British or American troops after the collapse of the Third Reich. Hungarians and Germans joined the French Foreign Legion (FFL) in large numbers due to the terrible living conditions of the prison camps. Thousands of former Honvéd soldiers and members of the Hungarian Royal Levente Movement joined the Légion Étrangère to escape those camps, just to die for France in Indochina, from the mountains of Cao Bang to the fields of Dien Bien Phu. This period of the FFL is less researched than the well-known “période hongroise” (Hungarian Period), the wave of refugees after the ill-fated 1956 Revolution. This article is about those young men, who went from a war to another just to fight on an even more lethal battlefield.

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After the collapse of the Nazi regime, hundreds of thousands of Hungarian soldiers, relatives, government members and supporters of the far right Arrow Cross Party became prisoners of war. The unstoppable Red Army marched west, so the soldiers of the Royal Hungarian Army, and the pro-Nazi government had to withdraw from Hungary to southern Germany and Austria (also part of the Third Reich in 1945). They were there at the time of the armistice, and most of them were captured by American troops. The allies later agreed about the creation of a French led occupation zone in southern Germany close to the river Rhine. With this decision, some of the former American prison camps became French led ones.

The Hungarians suffered heavily in those camps, the conditions were harsh. However, the French offered an option, to cut short their suffering – they allowed them to join the ranks of the French Foreign Legion (Légion Étrangère). The worse the conditions, the more people joined the Légion. What they did not know was that France had already been at war in Indochina.

This short, post-war era is a less researched topic in our history and the researchers mainly concentrate their efforts on the political events of the Communist takeover. The important connection between the prisoners of war and the Foreign Legion is often overlooked, however it has a direct link to thousands of our former military members. Every period of the twentieth century has its distinctive mark on the FFL. It is called the Polish, the Russian, and now, the German, later the Hungarian period. The influence and importance of the refugees after 1956 often took all the spotlight when we talk about the relationship of the Légion and Hungary – which is understandable, since those legionnaires, the veterans of the Algerian

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war are still living among us. But the post-war period, and the memory of the Hungarians fighting in the Far East is only available from the Foreign Legion's archives – which are mostly closed for the common researchers.

Hungarians in French Captivity

The French made no difference between the nationalities of their captives. From their point of view every POW was simply German. And they were cruel with the Germans. It was something like a revenge for the humiliation of France during the war. They made no difference between Germans and Hungarians – although during the war the few French prisoners of war were held in very good conditions in Hungary. [1]

After the war, the American forces held more than 2 million POWs all around Southern Germany and Austria, but according to the agreements between the Allies, they handed over parts of their occupation zone and also a large number of captives to the French during the summer of 1945 to help them rebuild their country. This included 50,000–60,000 Hungarians too, [2: 201] along with Germans, Austrians, some Romanians and also a few Italians. The French asked for more than 1.5 million POWs, but the Americans handed over only 600,000 due to the lack of living conditions and infrastructure. Usually former officers or clerks helped the American officials to decide who to hand over to the French – and in most camps, they were ethnic Germans. They usually sent everybody – other than their fellow countrymen – to France, since they knew that the Americans would release them soon to help rebuild Germany.² [3: 22]

In general, people think the prisoners of war of the Western camps (or in short: “the Westerners”), who spent months in captivity in Germany or Austria were simply more lucky than the ones who were captured by the Soviet troops. However, everybody agrees that the French camp conditions were terrible, the worst of all Western Allies' camps. After a few months, the captives from the Rhine area and Austria were moved to camps all over France where they were forced to work on the rebuilding of the country's economy. These road marches went through hostile territory because the frustrated citizens of this once proud country often threw rocks on the slow moving columns of the POWs, spat on them, sometimes even beat random people to death. [2: 203] They never heard about the good living conditions of the French POWs in Hungary during the war, nor were they aware of the fact that Hungary was not at war with France. Everybody was simply German for them, the enemy who deserved their fate.

The colonial African troops were brutal guards. They harassed, abused or sometimes simply shot them without much reasons. The food was far from enough, people starved. They slept on the ground, without any cover for months and they suffered because of the weather. In the infamous Dieppe camp where most of the young Levente boys were

² The Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Forces (SHAEP) planning for operations at the end of the war in Europe expected only approx. 900,000 German POWs, but their number rose to more than 5 million in May 1945. To avoid the logistical nightmare, general Dwight D. Eisenhower, the commander of SHAEP allowed the creation of the category Disarmed Enemy Forces (DEF) or Surrendered Enemy Personnel (SEP, in British terminology). This made it possible for the Allies to disregard the rights of the Prisoners of War granted by the Geneva Convention, and the International Committee of the Red Cross.

imprisoned, the guards raped and sexually abused them to make things even worse for the 14–16-years-old kids. [2: 212] The situation only started to change when the Hungarian Catholic Mission started to supervise the living conditions of these camps. Almost all of the survivors remembered the fact that the guards and even the commanders of those camps stole all their belongings, the supplies sent by their home countries or the Red Cross and sold them on the black market. Sometimes they even took their Hungarian uniform, and gave them German instead.

The prisoners of war were forced to do heavy physical labour which was inadequate for the weakened people. The conditions were so bad that after the signing of the peace treaty in Paris, but before the release of the prisoners of war, the Americans had to create camps to feed and hospitalize the living skeletons to avoid international scandal. [2: 216]

A lot of people died due to the harsh conditions but some of them chose another option. The recruiters of the French Foreign Legion showed up in the camps day by day, sometimes twice or more times a day. They offered good food and good conditions for the volunteers and they kept their word. They gave the fresh recruits meat and fruits but they made them eat these in front of the other camp members to make the choice even more desirable. Those who decided to join the Légion were sent to special camps for up to 6 months to get some weight, rebuild their health and to make them an ideal recruit for the organization. Most people chose the FFL as the only possible escape from the living hell of the prison camps – although some of them were aware of the fact that the Soviets were still occupying Hungary, so they decided to accept the offered contract to serve for five years to get a French citizenship. However, almost none of the new recruits were informed about the rising conflict on the other side of the world, the Indochina war. [1]

The War in Indochina

The events started to worsen for the French forces in the spring of 1945 – the Japanese disarmed the colonial troops, and sent them to prison camps. In the meantime, the Communist backed Viet Minh, led by Ho Chi Min, started a successful uprising against the Nipponese occupation forces. In the last days of World War Two, the British-led Allies embarked close to Saigon, and finally overthrew the Japanese rule. The French Government wanted to re-establish its colonial rule, but faced fierce opposition, as the communists wanted to create their own independent state.

The leaders of the Fourth Republic did not want to sacrifice more French blood for a conflict far away after the bloody world war but still, they wanted to regain the country's former glory and to show force for the other colonies. [4: 547] France already had a large colonial force in the area built up with Vietnamese, Laotian, and Cambodian troops led by French colonial officers, but this force was unable to fight successfully with the Viet Minh, even with the help of the growing number of African units. They decided to build up the numbers of the Foreign Legion, France's foreign mercenary force, since their losses were far from a sensitive topic for the French people.

This all volunteer, mixed colonial and mercenary force was fighting for the country for almost 10 years, from 1945 to 1954. The French nation did not sacrifice its young men in the conflict but they bore its economic consequences. On its climate, the French Far

East Expeditionary Corps (Corps Expéditionnaire Français en Extrême-Orient – CEFEO) consisted of more than a quarter million people.

To supply this force, the post-war French state was not economically strong enough but they were not able to get foreign support for a colonial conflict. Due to the Korean war, the United States finally realised the threat of the spreading South-East Asian communism, and decided to support France's war in Indochina. In the last years of the conflict, the USA was the greatest supporter of the fighting with paying most of the expenditures of war.

Even with this huge financial support and supplies the French forces started to lose ground. On the other side, the communist Viet Minh was supported by the newly born communist China, and had an infinite pool of reserves. In the last phase of the South-Asian-type communist uprising,³ [5: 443] they stood on an even ground with the French, and they managed to achieve a sound military victory at the valley of Dien Bien Phu. This final battle was also the bloodiest one for the Foreign Legion, its most elite units perished in the fighting and in the following death marches. Dien Bien Phu broke the Legion's core.

The French Foreign Legion

The French Foreign Legion was the heir of the centuries old tradition of the Monarchy. The King of France used mercenary units to fight for his flag from the middle ages. This tradition survived the foundation of the standing armies – the Kingdom of France had many foreign regiments in its ranks even in the eighteenth century. After the fall of the Ancien Régime, Napoléon Bonaparte also had many nations under his army flag. From the Polish to the Swiss, half of Europe fought for his First Empire, as far as the outskirts of Moscow. It was well accepted in France even after nationalism appeared in the nineteenth century and other countries turned to their own people to build “national” armies.

The king founded the Légion Étrangère or the French Foreign Legion in 1831 just after France conquered Algeria, the cornerstone of its new colonial empire. It was a mercenary force led by French officers to guard its provinces. The FFL was open to everybody, who wanted a new start – in the first decades of its existence it welcomed criminals, former nobles, almost anybody, from all over the World. It was a melting pot for all its members, who wanted to fight for the French flag; that was the only sacred rule of the Légion. They were among the fiercest fighters of the country's history, although they were mostly foreigners, not even native French. [6: 64–67]

After WWII, the Foreign Legion was low in numbers due to the heavy fighting from North Africa to Germany. On the other hand, the French had hundreds of thousands of possible new recruits in their prisoner of war camps. The experienced veterans of the war were the first targets of the recruiters. They were the desired target group.

³ According to Mao Ze Tung, the three phases of revolutionary warfare are: guerrilla war, fight with mixed regular and guerrilla forces and the last phase is marked by large scale regular operations.

Although there was an unmentioned rule that none of the participating nations were allowed to cross a percentage per capita to avoid the possible “Pretorian Guard” effect.⁴ No soldiers from the same nation were allowed to be more than one quarter of the total number to avoid a single national character to dominate the unit. [7: 280] This was hard to keep since it was not necessary for a new recruit to tell his real nationality – Germans and French usually joined the Legion as Swiss or Dutch, maybe Belgian.

However, there were some decisions simply dictated by common sense. The former German paratroopers, the Fallschirmjäger became the nucleus of the 1st and 2nd Foreign Paratrooper Battalions (1re/2e Bataillon Étranger de Parachutistes – BEP), and the prisoners of war from the Panzer Divisions became members of the 1st Foreign Cavalry Regiment (1re Régiment Étranger de Cavalerie – 1REC). [8: 98] The presence of the eastern front veterans among the ranks of the 3rd Foreign Infantry Regiment (3e Régiment Étranger d’Infanterie – 3REI) was also a distinctive feature.

The total number of legionnaires in the late 1940s and early 1950s was around 35,000 strong, with half of the units of the FFL deployed to Indochina. The 1st and 2nd Foreign Paratrooper Battalions, the 2nd, 3rd, and 5th Foreign Infantry Regiments, the 13th Half-Brigade of the Foreign Legion (13e Demi-Brigade de Légion Étrangère – 13e DBLE), the 1st Foreign Cavalry Regiment and some supply and engineer units, totalling a number around 20,000 legionnaires. Among that number 7,000–8,000 Germans fought for France in Indochina at that time. [7: 280] So not every member of the French Foreign Legion was German or Austrian but the legionnaires fighting in Indochina were predominantly (more than a third of the total) of German origin. [7: 280]

In March 1946, when the 3REI deployed to Indochina with 1,740 legionnaires, 33% of its members were Germans, 17% were Swiss, 7% were Spanish, 6% were Polish, 5–5% were French and Italians. [9: 12] However, anecdotes tell that among the members of the paratrooper battalions, the common talk was about the comparison of the sieges of Dien Bien Phu and Monte Cassino. The truth is, that at Dien Bien Phu (1954) the average age of the enlisted legionnaires was 23 years – so it was less likely to find WWII veterans in the ranks of the frontline units. [7: 280]

The new recruits rarely came from units blamed with crimes against humanity, namely the Waffen SS. It is a common misconception that whole units joined the Foreign Legion after the war. Hungarian survivors of the prison camps (wherever they were) remembered that the guards commonly checked the arms and armpits of the POWs looking for SS tattoos and that recruiters often refused to allow them to join the organization. They were allowed to join only if they had special experience or military qualification and they were not put on trial before a public court.

After the Germans, the French were the second largest group to join the FFL. A lot of clerks and officials involved in the collaborationist Vichy Government were treated like war

⁴ This effect was named after the late roman Pretorian Guard, the Emperor’s bodyguard. They were often a force with a power to influence political leaders and their decisions or simply interfere with the political leadership, murder emperors, etc. They were a closed military type of unit, with the best equipment and quality of troops available, and they were faithful to their own leaders instead of the state. This nightmare scenario took effect in Algeria, 1961 when the most elite unit of the French Foreign Legion, the 1st Foreign Parachute Regiment (1er Régiment Étranger de Parachutistes – 1er REP) joined the coup d’état against general de Gaulle. After this incident the FFL lost most of its power and de Gaulle disbanded the 1er REP on scene.

criminals by the majority of the French society. Joining the legion as a Belgian or Swiss was a viable option for them to get a new and clean identity and a chance to reintegrate into the society. To get a tabula rasa was even harder for the soldiers of the Charlemagne (French) SS Division or the fighters of the Legion of French Volunteers Against Bolshevism (Légion des Volontaires Français – LVF) who were clearly outcasts of the society at that time. [10: 273]

Another misconception is that the Legion was open for criminals after the war; it was impossible for somebody with a civil court sentence to join the legion. Only people with military court martial sentence were allowed to join the official military. A special unit was created for the criminals, collaborationists and Nazis: The Overseas Light Infantry Battalion (Bataillon d'Infanterie Légère d'Outre-Mer – BILOM). Their service time was based on the duration of their sentence in prison. After the first two companies deployed in Indochina, the program was closed due to public outrage fuelled by the French communists.

During the Indochina war, the French Foreign Legion was always at the places where the fighting was the heaviest. Its units fought along the Colonial Road 4 and at the valley of Dien Bien Phu. From the 72,833 legionnaires deployed in Indochina during the war, 380 officers, 1,082 non-commissioned officers and 9,092 legionnaires never came back to France. [11: 13] The fierce battles were just one reason of the high loss rate of the Foreign Legion. The other was the deadly jungle battlefield and the tropical climate. The average legionnaire came from Central Europe and was not prepared for the Far Eastern environment. Hundreds of miles of death marches followed the lost battles and the members of the FFL had the worst chance to survive it – comparable only to the mainland French soldiers. 70% of the legionnaires needed medical treatment after the liberation of the French prisoners of war in 1954 but only 24% of the African unit members [7: 301] were hospitalized. The Foreign Legion lost 12% of its deployed numbers, which compared to the losses of the whole French Expeditionary Corps average (7%) is the highest total loss rate of the war.

Hungarians in Indochina

The Hungarians joined the Legion for multiple reasons. First in 1945–1946 to escape from the French prison camps. The second wave arrived when they realized the Soviet takeover in Hungary. From the Second World War until the end of the Algerian war, 3,136 Hungarians joined the Légion – approximately 330 died in Indochina (and 120 in Algeria). [6: 587] One third of the new recruits in 1945–1946 were very young teenagers, former Levente members and military school students who sometimes lied about their age to join the FFL. [11: 13] They mostly came from the returned Hungarian territory outside of the so called “Trianon border” (the pre-1920 state border of Hungary).

The other large group of recruits was the members of the former Royal Hungarian Gendarmerie, Hungary's paramilitary police force. [2: 219] Since some of their members were heavily involved in the Jewish holocaust and were far right sympathizers, the whole organization was unwelcomed in the new Democratic Hungary. After the war they fled to the west or joined the Foreign Legion to avoid public punishment and humiliation.

During the war the North Vietnamese used propaganda to target the multinational or supranational Légion more than any other unit type. The Viet Minh offered safe return to

home for the Central European legionnaires – if they left the Legion; they allowed them to return home, from a communist country to another. [12: 120] After the end of hostilities in 1955, 1,234 legionnaires were still missing. Some of them died in captivity, but the others possibly deserted. 58 Hungarian POWs returned to their home country before the end of the war thanks to the agreements between the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and the Peoples Republic of Hungary. [13: 5]

Conclusion

Most of the Hungarians joined the Foreign Legion because they were in a desperate situation – it was especially true for the teenagers, or the supporters of the old regime. Central and East Europe was always the primary recruiting ground for the FFL but after the Second World War this area provided the organization with the much needed experienced manpower to have a chance to win the war on the Far East. In the end, the war was lost on the political ground in Geneva and also on the fields of Dien Bien Phu. The French Foreign Legion did its best and suffered heavier losses in Indochina than any other unit during the conflict. Among its ranks the many Hungarian recruits also lost their lives fighting for France.

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