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**Living in the Vicinity of the
Yugoslav–Hungarian Border
(1945–1960): Breaks and
Continuities. A Case Study
of Hercegszántó (Santovo)**

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Living in the Vicinity of the Yugoslav-Hungarian Border (1945–1960): Breaks and Continuities. A Case Study of Hercegszántó (Santovo)

The history of Hungarian–Yugoslav relations was characterized by frequent changes after 1945. The rapid improvement of bilateral relations was abruptly interrupted by the escalation of the Soviet–Yugoslav conflict in 1948–1949. Tensions eased only after 1953 when a slow and time-consuming process of normalization started between the two states. These often-dramatic twists and turns had a profound and often intense impact on the everyday lives of those Hungarians and ethnic South Slavs who lived in the vicinity of the Hungarian–Yugoslav border. Breaks, changes, and continuities can all be observed at the local level. In this article, I will examine these factors in the case of South Slavic minorities living in Hercegszántó (Santovo), a village located in an area known as the Baja triangle. In the first part of the paper, I will provide the reader with some background information on the history of Hungarian–Yugoslav relations, with a particular emphasis on minorities. Then in the second part, I will analyse the ethnic and social composition of the village, its history after World War II, the effects of rapidly deteriorating Hungarian–Yugoslav relations after 1948 and, finally, the hopes and fears of the local Magyars and South Slavs during the period of normalization (1953–1956). My conclusions are based on archival research mostly carried out at several Hungarian archives.

KEYWORDS:

Hungarian–Yugoslav relations after 1945, Soviet–Yugoslav conflict, South Slavic minorities in Hungary

The development of Yugoslav–Hungarian relations after 1945 were particularly influenced by internal developments within the Soviet sphere of influence. Rapid improvements in bilateral relations were abruptly interrupted by the escalation of the Soviet–Yugoslav conflict in 1948–1949. Tensions eased only after 1953 when a slow and time-consuming process of normalization started between the two states. However, the Hungarian Revolution in 1956 again halted this normalization, and it took years for bilateral relations to become exemplary.

These often-dramatic twists and turns had a profound impact on the everyday lives of Hungarians and ethnic South Slavs living near the Hungarian–Yugoslav border. The changes in circumstances facilitated new strategies of adjustment, and a certain amount of innovation was required to adapt to them. Some people, who had become members of the local elites after the communists came to power, lost their privileged status, while others took on more successful strategies of adaptation and conformity. Based on my previous research, I also suggest that some kind of continuity can be observed at the local level. However, it is impossible to provide the reader with an in-depth exploration, analysis, and comparison of these questions for the entire border area in a single article. Therefore, I have narrowed the scope of my interest to a smaller region, known as the Baja triangle, and to one village in particular, Hercegszántó (Santovo). The Baja triangle geographically consists of roughly the area between Baja in the north (in Hungary), Subotica in the east, and Sombor in the south (both in Serbia), and it was part of the larger Bács-Bodrog County before 1918. The reason I chose this region was partly because it was a multi-ethnic area where Hungarians, Serbs, Croats, and Germans lived side by side, and partly because the new world order following World War I destroyed the economic, hydrographic, and transportation unity of the wider region. Different ideas, intentions, and desires concerning the unity of the region and whether it should belong to Hungary or Yugoslavia regularly appeared in later decades.

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During my research, I realized that there were more divisions within the local communities of Hercegszántó than I had previously expected, as not only ethnic elements but economic and social factors, and standard of living determined individual views and opinions concerning Hungarian–Yugoslavian relations. The ethnic divisions between Hungarians and South Slavs (and in some cases, between Serbs and Croats, too) was further complicated by economic and social tensions between smallholders and more wealthy ones, between those who lived in the center of the village and those who lived at the outskirts, and the supporters and opponents of the new regime. It is also worth mentioning that the first round of collectivization and the nationalization of denominational schools also took place at this time, which would require further research to fully see its complexity.

I have divided this paper into two sections. In the first one, I provide a brief history of Hungarian–Yugoslav relations after World War II, with a particular emphasis on its effects on South Slavic minorities in Hungary. In the second section, I narrow the scope to Hercegszántó, and analyze the

ethnic and social composition of the village, its history after World War II, the effects of rapidly deteriorating Hungarian–Yugoslav relations after 1948 and, finally, the hopes and fears of the local Magyars (ethnic Hungarians) and the South Slavs during the period of normalization. My conclusions are based on archival research carried out at the National Archives of Hungary (Magyar Nemzeti Levéltár Országos Levéltára, Budapest) and the Archive of Yugoslavia (Arhiv Jugoslavije, Belgrade) for the general history of Hungarian–Yugoslav relations, and at the Historical Archive of the State Protection Authorities (Állambiztonsági Szolgálatok Történeti Levéltára, Budapest) for the case study of Hercegszántó. During my research at the Historical Archive, the *objektum dossziék* (files of location) were especially useful for me, as they provided relevant information for a specific administrative unit and for a longer period of time.

A Brief History of Hungarian–Yugoslav Relations

The history of Hungarian–Yugoslav relations after 1945 was marked by frequent changes, and the re-establishment of party and state relations between the two countries after World War II was not between equal partners. Yugoslavia emerged from the war as an ally of the victorious Great Powers and regained its complete sovereignty, while Hungary ended the war on the losing side. According to the cease-fire agreement signed in Moscow on 20 January 1945, the country came under international control and Soviet military occupation. Its sovereignty was restored *de jure* only after the Hungarian parliament ratified the peace treaty signed in Paris on 10 February 1947.¹ In the interim period, real power was placed in the hands of the Allied Control Committee (ACC), which was dominated by the Soviet Union. It also had a meaningful say not only in foreign affairs but also in economic and internal affairs. As a winning power, Yugoslavia had the right to claim reparations for damage caused by the occupying Hungarian authorities between 1941 and 1944 and thus had the right to send a permanent delegation to the ACC, which was headed by Colonel Obrad Cicmil.

Although events from the recent past seriously burdened bilateral Hungarian–Yugoslav relations, the new democratic Hungarian leadership honestly tried to reach out to Yugoslavia and sought to normalize Hungarian–Yugoslav relations. They believed that, of all the country's neighbors, Yugoslavia would be best able to help alleviate Hungary's international isolation. Moreover, Mátyás Rákosi, the general secretary of the Hungarian Communist Party (HCP), particularly urged establishing contact and promoting good neighborly relations with Yugoslavia, as he regarded it as the country best able to assist him in his domestic goals that would gain him power in Hungary. The leadership of the HCP regarded the Yugoslav internal political structure as exemplary, and the Hungarian communists expected to strengthen their own positions and to establish their own hinterland with the help of comradely inter-party relations. In this

¹ For the Hungarian–Yugoslav aspects of the Paris peace treaty in Hungarian, see: Péter Vukman, "Jugoszlávia és a magyar béke," in *Az elfelejtett béke. Tanulmánykötet a párizsi magyar békeszerződés életbelépésének 70. évfordulójára*, ed. József Fülöp (Budapest: Dialóg Campus, 2018), 197–211.

sense, in addition to Sovietization, the “Yugoslavization” of Hungary was also a possibility.²

Yugoslavia, on the other hand, pursued regional ambitions on the Balkan peninsula. To realize this aim, securing the country’s northern borders seemed indispensable. Thus, besides articulating their “winning superiority,”³ Josip Broz Tito and the Yugoslav leadership were also interested in normalizing Hungarian–Yugoslav relations, and wished to see an allied Hungary led by the local communist party and cooperating closely with Yugoslavia. The real aim of Yugoslav political pressure on Hungary was to thus cement the position of Mátyás Rákosi and the Hungarian communists. Therefore, it was ready to help Hungary, as Colonel Cicmil made clear to the foreign minister, János Gyöngyösi, on September 17, 1945. During their meeting, Cicmil informed Gyöngyösi that “for its part, the Yugoslav government is ready to support Hungary in every matter during the preparations for the peace conference and at the peace negotiations, as well as in other cases, as long as it is not contrary to the aims of Yugoslavia,” and provided that Hungary would support Yugoslavia in the Trieste question.⁴ Even before that, Rákosi had made it also clear to the Yugoslavs on August 30, 1945 that the coalition government in Hungary took an overall favorable position toward Yugoslavia. In contrast to Rijeka, in the case of Trieste, Hungary had no direct interests; therefore, they would be ready to support Yugoslavia at the peace conference. Rákosi also seemed ready to convince his coalition partners to support the Yugoslav claims. In exchange, he asked Tito to receive a delegation of Hungarians from Vojvodina.⁵

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In my opinion, the positions and policies of the Hungarian and Yugoslav governments toward the South Slavic and Hungarian minorities, as well as the possibilities for the South Slavic minorities in Hungary and the Hungarian minority in Yugoslavia, can be understood in this wider context. It is also worth noting that Hungarian historiography is of the opinion that both Hungary and Yugoslavia saw the national minorities living in the other country as a diplomatic instrument to be used to achieve their political aims. This was especially true for the Yugoslav leadership after 1945, which followed the living conditions and political rights of the South Slavic minorities in Hungary

² For this, see: Enikő A. Sajti, “Tito 1947-es magyarországi látogatásának előzményei,” in *A történettudomány szolgálatában. Tanulmányok a 70 éves Gecsényi Lajos tiszteletére*, ed. Magdolna Baráth and Antal Molnár (Budapest: Magyar Országos Levéltár, 2012), 589.

³ The term “guilt and victory” is aptly used for the relationship between the two countries by Enikő A. Sajti: “Bűntudat és győztes fölény: a magyar–jugoszláv kapcsolatok 1944–1947,” in *Bennünk élő múltjaink. Történelmi tudat-kulturális emlékezet*, ed. Richárd Papp and László Szarka (Zenta: VMMI, 2008), 203–10. and Enikő A. Sajti, *Bűntudat és győztes fölény. Magyarország, Jugoszlávia és a délvidéki magyarok* (Szeged: SZTE Történettudományi Doktori Iskola Modernkori Program, 2010), 133–44.

⁴ Feljegyzés, September 17, 1945, MNL OL XIX-J-1-k-Jugoszlávia-9/c-sz.n./1945. (16.d.), Budapest: Magyar Nemzeti Levéltár Országos Levéltára (The National Archives of Hungary, henceforth: MNL OL).

⁵ Izveštaj o sastanku sa Rakošijem, August 30, 1945, AJ, F. 836 KMJ I-3-b/403, 9. Belgrade: Arhiv Jugoslavije (henceforth: AJ).

with keen interest. It used them to put pressure on the Hungarian leadership,⁶ and it considered the substantial improvement of their conditions, including (1) establishing and maintaining their own primary and secondary schools, (2) the dismissal and resettlement of ethnic Hungarian and German gendarmes from the vicinity of the Yugoslav–Hungarian border and (3) extending the South Slavic minorities’ political rights as a prerequisite for improving bilateral relations – as Tito informed J. Lavrentiev, the Soviet ambassador to Belgrade, on April 29, 1946.⁷

Although Yugoslavia formulated no *official* territorial claims against Hungary at the peace conference, it did prepare some proposals, sometimes contradictory in nature, in this regard. The Yugoslav propaganda machine, which was connected to developments in Hungarian domestic affairs, also kept the case on its agenda.⁸ The Yugoslav communists also used the South Slavic minorities in Hungary as an instrument of political pressure. For example, Yugoslavia started a propaganda campaign among the South Slavs as early as the autumn of 1944 to persuade them to envisage their future in Titoist Yugoslavia. In effect, Yugoslav armed forces challenged the jurisdiction of Hungarian authorities along the Hungarian–Yugoslav border: Yugoslav troops occupied the villages around Baja and Letenye (Letinja), and on January 14, 1945, the delegation of South Slavic minorities living around Pécs (Pečuh) asked Tito to annex the so-called Baranya (Baranja) triangle.⁹ The Yugoslavs remained uncommitted on this territorial question up until March 1946, and Tito informed Stalin during their last meeting in Moscow between May 27 and 28, 1946 that Yugoslavia would not raise territorial issues regarding Hungary at the peace conference.¹⁰

It is therefore not surprising that the Yugoslav communists closely followed the well-being of South Slavic minorities in Hungary, or that they wanted to have a say even on a personal level. One example of this was the case of János Osztrovics, a policeman from Százhalombatta with a Serbian ethnic background. According to Yugoslav diplomats, Osztrovics was beaten in Érd (probably by local ethnic Hungarians) due to his ethnic background, and was then handed over to the secret police for an investigation. Together with other supposed grievances, the Yugoslavs intervened in his case by speaking with János Gyöngyösi, the foreign minister.¹¹ The Yugoslav embassy did not accept the conclusions of the official investigation, which had found that Osztrovics was a local leading member of the fascist Nyilaskeresztes Párt

⁶ Ágnes Tóth, “Jugosloveni u Mađarskoj 1945–1948,” *Mađari i Srbi sa dve strane promenjive granice 1941–1948. Tematski zbornik radova*, eds. Árpád Hornyák, Zoran Janjetović and László Bíró (Budapest: Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Research Centre for the Humanities, Institute of History, 2016), 336–39.

⁷ István Vida, ed., *Iratok a magyar-szovjet kapcsolatok történetéhez 1944. október – 1948. június. Dokumentumok* (Budapest: Gondolat, 2005), 208

⁸ For example, Yugoslav propaganda against Hungary intensified in late 1945 after the Hungarian Communists had lost the community elections in Budapest on October 7, 1945 and the parliamentary elections on November 11, 1945.

⁹ A. Sajti, “Tito 1947-es magyarországi látogatásának előzményei,” 590–91.

¹⁰ Géza Mezei, ed., *Európa kettészakítása és a kétpólusú nemzetközi rend születése (1945–1949)* (Budapest: Új Mandátum, 2001), 175–78.

¹¹ Recording by János Gyöngyösi, MNL OL, XIX-J-1-k-Jugoszlávia-8/b-sz.n./é.n. (15.d.).

(Arrow Cross Party), and that the local Serbian minority had magnified and overemphasized the importance of his beating.¹² The Yugoslavs continued to protest, saying that “a Serb was beaten half to death, and [the authorities] later claimed later he was a *Nyilas* [member of the fascist Arrow Cross Party], even though he had proof that he had carried out anti-fascist activities and he was arrested just because of that.”¹³

The Yugoslavs were also particularly interested in the living conditions and educational possibilities for the South Slavic minorities, and especially for those who lived in the villages around Baja, including Hercegszántó. Any improvement in their situation, as was previously mentioned, was regarded as a prerequisite for normalization between the two countries. Upon returning from Belgrade in July 1945, at the meeting of the Political Committee of HCP on August 2, 1945 Rákosi ordered Mihály Farkas, a leading communist politician, and the Ministry of Internal Affairs to urgently prepare a draft on legal arrangements regarding minorities in Hungary.¹⁴ Nearly a year later, in the spring of 1946, a Hungarian–Yugoslav joint committee was set up to carry out an investigation between March 28 and 30, 1946 of the census of the South Slavs, the conditions in their schools, and the behavior of the local notaries in Baja, the Baja triangle and Mohács (Mohač).¹⁵ According to the Yugoslav members of the committee, the local South Slavs considered themselves Magyars in many cases, presumably because the local authorities had pressured them to do so. However, the committee’s official report stated that this had occurred only a few times, and that even if the educational possibilities in minority schools were not always entirely satisfactory, the situation was much better than the previous Yugoslav statements had suggested.¹⁶

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The census of the South Slavs had been ordered to be carried out between March 16 and 23, 1946, but the Yugoslav diplomats expressed their dissatisfaction even before the census started. The diplomats, together with the local minority leaders, objected to the claim that the South Slavs regarded themselves as ethnically Hungarian, even if they stated that their mother tongue was Serbo-Croatian. In Katymár (Kačmar), for example, 1342 people declared themselves to be Croats (Bunjevci) based on their mother tongue, but only 294 people declared themselves Croat by ethnicity (Bunjevci). They were well aware of the fact that the expulsion of the local Germans after 1945 was based on the results of a similar census in 1941. Therefore, they thought it would be better if the authorities saw them as already assimilated with the Hungarians.¹⁷ It is also worth noting that it was the Yugoslav diplomats who suggested this census,¹⁸ and Vladimir Velebit,

¹² Oral note, August 29, 1945, Budapest, MNL OL, XIX-J-1-k-Jugoszlávia-8/b-31.999.pol./1945. (15.d.).

¹³ Recording, August 31, 1945, MNL OL, XIX-J-1-k-Jugoszlávia-8/b-32.254.pol./1945. (15.d.).

¹⁴ Meeting MKP PB, August 2, 1945, PIL, 274/3., 6. ő. E, Politikatörténeti Intézet Levéltára, Budapest (Archives of the Institute of Political History).

¹⁵ Tóth, “Jugosloveni u Mađarskoj 1945–1948,” 336–39.

¹⁶ “Jelentés a bácskai utamról,” June 28, Belgrade, MNL OL, XIX-J-4-a. 1. d., 238–45.

¹⁷ Ágnes Tóth, “Adatok az 1946-os magyarországi délszláv összeírás történetéhez,” *Bács-Kiskun Megye Múltjából* 14 (1998): 301–03 and 308–10.

¹⁸ Tóth, “Jugosloveni u Mađarskoj 1945–1948,” 335.

the Yugoslav deputy foreign minister stated at a press conference in Prague on March 10, 1946 that it would depend on the outcome of the Czechoslovak-Hungarian population exchange whether the Yugoslavs would suggest a similar exchange involving 300,000 ethnic Hungarians in Yugoslavia and 150,000 South Slavs in Hungary.¹⁹ Therefore, apart from putting pressure on the Hungarian government to improve conditions for the South Slavic minorities, the census might also have been part of the preparations for this population exchange.

Members of the Hungarian and Yugoslav communist parties dealt with the results of this census and the issue of education for the South Slavic minorities at a meeting on April 16, 1946, at which the Yugoslav delegates lodged strong accusations against the Hungarian government and held it responsible for the situation. Rákosi repeatedly took the Yugoslavs' side during the discussions and instructed the newly appointed minister of interior, László Rajk, to look into the matter. He wanted to know how well-founded the Yugoslavs' grievances were, and urgently called for the officials who carried out the census to be penalized, relocated, and dismissed. He partially explained this based on Tito's possible reaction and told Rajk, "László, look our old [comrades], everything must be resolved urgently. If we do not resolve it, it will be Tito who resolves it. [...] Yes, exactly, if we don't do anything, Tito will be justified in raising the territorial issue."²⁰ During the meeting, the Yugoslav delegation also asked the HCP to employ someone who would deal with issues related to the South Slavic minorities. If possible, this person should be a communist and member of the Anti-Fascist Front of the Slavic Minorities in Hungary. Rákosi immediately suggested Antun Rob.²¹

The improving bilateral relations reached their zenith one and a half years later when Tito visited Budapest and signed the Hungarian-Yugoslav treaty of friendship and bilateral cooperation in December 1947. However, these friendly relations did not last long. Only a few months passed and a completely new situation emerged as a direct consequence of the deterioration of Soviet-Yugoslav party and state relations.

The intensifying Soviet-Yugoslav conflict in the spring of 1948²² resulted in a complete turn in Hungarian-Yugoslav relations. Mátyás Rákosi soon realized that Moscow's stance toward Belgrade had changed, and it had taken the lead in a propaganda and smear campaign against Yugoslavia. As a result, Hungarian-Yugoslav inter-party and inter-state relations were reduced to nearly zero. One by one, the Hungarian leadership annulled various economic and political treaties that had earlier been signed with Yugoslavia,

¹⁹ Gizella Föglein, "Magyar-jugoszláv népcseres egyezmény tervezet (1946)," *Századok* 130, no. 6. (1996): 1558.

²⁰ Razgovor sa Rakošijem, April 16, 1946, Budapest, AJ, F. 507. CK SK IX-75/I-1, 5-6.

²¹ Razgovor sa Rakošijem. April 16, 1946, Budapest, AJ, F. 507. CK SK IX-75/I-1, 6.

²² For the Soviet-Yugoslav conflict see: Leonid Gibianski. "The 1948 Soviet-Yugoslav Conflict and the Formation of the 'Socialist Camp' Model," in *The Soviet Union in Eastern Europe, 1945-89*, eds. Odd Arne Westad, Sven Holtsmark and Iver B. Naumann (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), 26-46; Svetozar Rajak, "The Cold War in the Balkans, 1945-1956," in *History of the Cold War*, eds. Melvyn P. Leffler and Odd Arne Westad (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 1: 198-220.

launched a fierce propaganda campaign against Tito, who was referred to as the “chained dog of the imperialist powers,” and border incidents often resulting in deaths began occur on a daily basis. With the trial of László Rajk, Rákosi organized a monstrous, internationally publicized anti-Titoist trial in Budapest in the autumn of 1949. Rákosi had at least three motives in mind: (1) with Rajk’s execution, he would be rid of a popular and potential rival within the Hungarian Workers’ Party; (2) he wanted to quiet possible Soviet concerns and dissatisfaction about him and to make the Soviets forget his earlier pro-Tito stance; and (3) he hoped to take Tito’s position in the international communist movement.

The trial itself helped to intensify pressure on Yugoslavia. It served as the ideal pretext for the Soviet Union and its satellites to denounce their treaties of friendship with Yugoslavia (The Soviet Union denounced it on September 28, 1949, followed by Hungary and Poland on September 30, 1949). Moreover, it created a useful picture of the Yugoslav leaders as enemies. Tito immediately became the “paid agent of the imperialists,” “warmongers’ agent provocateur,” “hangman of the Yugoslav youth,” and “the chained dog of imperialism,” just to mention a few epithets from contemporary headlines appearing in the party paper *Szabad Nép*. The “campaign of vigilance” that followed the trial helped legitimize an atmosphere of “permanent preparedness” and curbs on individual and collective rights in Hungary. It also made it possible to arrest real or suspected enemies of the Communist Party. In this sense, it also contributed to the consolidation of the Rákosi regime.²³

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As one of the first signs of a change in attitude toward Yugoslavia, the HCP started targeting bilateral Hungarian–Yugoslav societies and the associations of the South Slavic minorities. For example, the second, and last, congress of the Hungarian–Yugoslav Society (Magyar–Jugoszláv Társaság) became scandalous and the society was reduced to being a mouthpiece for anti-Yugoslav propaganda.²⁴ The leaders of the South Slavic minorities were expected to openly condemn the politics of Tito and the Communist Party of Yugoslavia (CPY). After the Cominform resolution of June 28, 1948 became public, Mihály Farkas immediately summoned Antun Rob, a member of the Hungarian parliament, and ordered him to openly support the resolution and condemn the behavior of the CPY in the official party daily *Szabad Nép*, in the journal of the Hungarian–Yugoslav Society (*Déli Csillag*), and in *Naše novine*, the paper of the nationwide minority organization the Democratic Alliance of South Slavs in Hungary (Magyarországi Délszlávok Demokratikus Szövetsége or MDDSZ). After he had consulted the Yugoslav diplomats, Rob refused to do

²³ For the most detailed analysis of the trial see: Tibor Zinner, “A nagy politikai affér,” 2 vols. (Budapest: Saxum, 2013–2014). For the consequences of the Soviet–Yugoslav conflict in Hungarian–Yugoslav relations without entirety: Péter Vukman, “A fordulat évei. Magyar–jugoszláv kapcsolatok (1948–1949),” *Acta Historica Szegediensis* 141 (2017): 179–94. and Péter Vukman, “Barátból ellenség – ellenségből barát (?): A magyar–jugoszláv párt- és államközi kapcsolatok (1945–1956),” in *Fejezetek a titói Jugoszlávia korai szakaszából*, ed. Tibor Molnár (Zenta: Történelmi Levéltár, 2016), 45–79.

²⁴ A Magyar–Jugoszláv Társaság, MNL OL, XI-B-1-j 37. d. 8. é. e. 559778/48. csomag. For the history of the society see: Enikő A. Sajti, “A Magyar–Jugoszláv Társaság története (1945. október – 1949 vége),” *Forrás* 43, no. 2 (February 2011): 29–56.

so and escaped from Hungary during the night of July 2 with the help of the Yugoslav embassy in Budapest.²⁵

In the meantime, the HCP put pressure on MDDSZ. Its nationwide leadership was dismissed in the middle of July, and some leading members were arrested. Although some of the local branches openly supported Tito, for example at Gara and Bácsalmás (Aljmaš) in the Baja triangle, the nationwide congress of the MDDSZ, in accordance with the official Hungarian position, fiercely condemned the CPY leadership's "erroneous" politics. Although the HCP considered completely dissolving the alliance at a later part of the conflict, in the end it did not happen.²⁶ Still, its prominent role was lost forever, and it became a tool for Rákosi to put pressure on the South Slavic minorities.

The deterioration of Hungarian-Yugoslav relations after 1948 had a profound impact on the life of the South Slavs in the Baja triangle. They lost their previous privileged local positions and were considered the "fifth column" of Yugoslavia. The Hungarian state security organizations were quite fearful that the Yugoslav intelligence services would regard the South Slavic minorities as sources of information, distributors of propaganda materials, or simply as spies. All this resulted in more intense surveillance from the Hungarian side, which further exacerbated the atmosphere of fear among the South Slavs. Moreover, relocation from the borderland²⁷ was an existential threat for them. In the meantime, both the Hungarian and the Yugoslav propaganda machines tried to get the members of the minorities to take their side. Beyond the deterioration of Hungarian-Yugoslav relations, the anticlerical campaign and the first phase of collectivization also had a dramatic effect on the everyday lives of the South Slavs in the Baja triangle, which was similar to that of the Hungarians living in this area.

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Hercegszántó: A Case Study

Hercegszántó (Santovo) is a village in the Baja triangle located right next to the Hungarian-Serbian border and only a few kilometers away from the Hungarian-Croatian border. According to the nationwide census of 1949, 3505 people (Magyars, South Slavs, and Germans) lived within the municipality's administrative boundaries. More than 80 per cent of the population were peasants—the majority of them small land holders.²⁸ According to this nationwide census, 45 people declared themselves Croat based on their mother tongue and 58 people declared themselves belonging to the same ethnic category based on their nationality. As for the Serbs, the

²⁵ Farkas Mihály titkári iratai, MNL OL, M-KS 276. f. 67. cs. 127. ó. e., 1.; Telegram, broj 240., June 30, 1948, AJ., F. 507. CK SKJ IX-75/II-44., 1. and Enikő A. Sajti, "Egy jugoszláv kommunista karrierje a háború utáni Magyarországon: Rob Antal," in *Egyén és közösség. Tanulmányok*, ed. Nándor Bárdi and Ágnes Tóth (Zenta: Vajdasági Magyar Művelődési Intézet, 2012), 287.

²⁶ Farkas Mihály titkári iratai, MNL OL, M-KS 276. f. 67. cs. 127. ó. e., 1-7., 32-34. and 37-38.; and MDP Titkárság 1950. május 10-i ülésének jegyzőkönyve és mellékletei, MNL OL, M-KS 276. f. 54. cs. 99. ó. e., 2. and 13-14.

²⁷ For this see: István Orgoványi, "A déli határsáv 1948 és 1956 között," *Bács-Kiskun megye múltjából* 17 (2001): 253-85.

²⁸ Állambiztonsági Szolgálatok Történeti Levéltára, Budapest (Historical Archives of the State Protection Authorities, henceforth: ÁBTL), 3.1.5. 0-9553, 10.

official numbers were 277 and 261 respectively. A tiny Slovenian community also lived in the village as 2 people declared themselves Slovenian based on their mother tongues and 9 people based on their nationality. However, I am certain that these statistical data are not reliable and underestimate the real number of the village's South Slavic community. I base this on the following statistical data and a report from the State Protection Authority²⁹ on 15 March 1949. According to the official nationwide census of 1941, 3493 people lived in the village. On the basis of their mother tongues, 2078 of them were Hungarians, 1009 of them were Croats, and 319 were Serbs. Based on their ethnicity, 2755 declared themselves Hungarian, 419 declared themselves Croat, and 278 declared themselves Serb (which in itself indicates that assimilation trends mostly affected the local Croat population). After 1949, the next nationwide census was carried out in 1960. By that time, 3895 people lived in the community, and among them were 2770 Hungarians, 805 Croatians, and 231 Serbs based on their mother tongues. The figures based on ethnic affiliation were as follows: 2863 Hungarians, 747 Croats and 224 Serbs. Similarly, according to a contemporary report from the ÁVH, 3628 people lived in the village in early 1949, of which 2360 were Hungarian, 1243 were South Slavs, and 18 identified as Other. Based on this data and its contradiction to the results from the nationwide census of 1949, I suspect there was a similar trend here for the results of the population census among the South Slavs in the region in 1946 (see previous section). At this time, the local Croats and Serbs probably feared the consequences of the ongoing Soviet–Yugoslav conflict and the sharp deterioration of Hungarian–Yugoslav relations. Therefore, they did not choose to declare their true ethnic or linguistic affiliation. The population census of 1949 might also prove this: In 1949, only one person declared himself (or herself) as Other based on nationality or mother tongue (and 17 and 19 people did so in 1960, respectively), but 854 people chose the category “other based on mother tongue” and 589 people chose the category “other based on nationality.”³⁰

In my opinion, the South Slavs' fears were not completely unfounded. When World War II was coming to an end, Yugoslav partisan troops occupied Hercegszántó and disarmed the Hungarian troops and gendarmerie. They also hindered the establishment of the Hungarian postal service and the work of the Hungarian administration in the village.³¹ Understandably, the local

²⁹ Államvédelmi Hatóság (ÁVH; State Protection Authority) was the secret police force and main security agency in Hungary between 1945–1956. It also incorporated the Military Political Department (Katonapolitikai Osztály, Katpol) and the Border Patrol Guard, and from January 1, 1950 it was put directly under the Council of Ministers. Although ÁVH had undergone many structural changes before that (State Protection Department of the Hungarian Police Headquarters, Magyar Államrendőrség Államvédelmi Osztálya, ÁVO and State Protection Authority of the Ministry of Interior, Belügyminisztérium Államvédelmi Hatósága, BM ÁVH), in order to emphasize the continuity of its methods and activities, it is generally referred to as ÁVH throughout the whole period.

³⁰ ÁBTL, 3.1.5. 0-9553, 10. and for the results of the national censuses: “Magyarország mai területének etnikai adatbázisa 1870–2011,” Országgyűlési Könyvtár [Library of the Hungarian Parliament], accessed 27 February, 2020, https://mtatkki.ogyk.hu/nepszamlalas_adatok.php?ev=1941&ev2=1960&megye=&telepules=785&kod=&nemzetiseg=&felekezet=&tipus=mind&keyword=&page=50.

³¹ ÁBTL, 3.1.5. 0-9553/1, 183 and ÁBTL, 3.1.5. 0-9553/2, 74.

South Slavs supported the Yugoslavs in their efforts. Tito was popular among them, and they were not exempt from the impact of the Yugoslav propaganda efforts, either. Their representatives collected signatures in which they asked for the annexation of the region to Yugoslavia, and a similar effort took also place in neighboring villages such as Bácsbokod (Bikić), Csávoly (Čavolj), Gara, and Felsőszentiván (Gornji Sveti Ivan). They also sent a delegation to Tito for the same reason, which was similar to the delegation of the South Slavic minorities living around Pécs that were mentioned previously.³²

If the broader political aims of Yugoslavia are taken into consideration, it is not surprising that, locally, the South Slavic population in general profited from the political changes after 1945. For example, those who participated in the partisan movement during World War II were often given preference during land distribution and were awarded leading positions in the local party and state apparatuses. Based on archival sources, I am certain that they formed a kind of a new local elite. For example, Iván Tomasev became the local chairman of the Social Democratic Party, and Joszิป "Jozo" Szaboljev stood for election in 1947 as a candidate for the Communist Party of Hungary.³³ In Hercegszántó, party affiliation in particular was determined by ethnic factors. While the majority of local Magyars supported the Smallholders' Party, the majority of South Slavs joined the Communist Party. Moreover, in 1949, nearly all of the 420 local members of the Hungarian Working Peoples' Party (MDP), formed by a merger of the Communist and Social Democratic parties in 1948, were South Slavs.³⁴

The outbreak of the Soviet-Yugoslav conflict in 1948 brought another change in their everyday lives. For the local elite, positions held in state or party organizations often became a hindrance and an aggravating circumstance when someone was accused of having committed a seditious act. In other cases, minor incidents were amplified and presented as intentional. It is understandable that in the tense atmosphere of the propaganda warfare against Josip Broz Tito, known as the "chained dog of imperialism," the local South Slavs, both individually and collectively, became rather passive and wanted to wait and see in which direction the political storm would develop. At the regional conference of Orthodox priests on 9 July 1948, for example, the participants pointed out that they were unsure how events would unfold, but they were certain that worsening political relations between the two countries would have deleterious effects on the minorities.³⁵ The contemporary reports also mention that the local branches of the MDDSZ had been dying out as early as the autumn of 1948. The South Slavs did not attend their meetings and conferences, and even if they did appear, they would come and go from the assembly hall, showing a lack of interest, just as they had during the assembly of the Democratic Alliance

³² ÁBTL, 3.1.5. 0-9553, 38. and ÁBTL, 3.1.5. 0-9553/2, 74.

³³ ÁBTL, 3.1.5. 0-9553, 38, 222. and *Szabad Nép*, August 1, 1947, 5.

³⁴ ÁBTL, 3.1.5. 0-9553, 10.

³⁵ ÁBTL, 3.1.5. 0-9553, 58.

on February 13, 1949 when Ozren Krstonošić, a leading *i-beovci* emigrant³⁶ in Hungary, and Milán Ognjenovics, a leading cadre in the MDDSZ, delivered speeches emphasizing “Tito’s treasonous act.” Only around 350 people turned up, and they remained “entirely passive” during the speeches. They did not applaud when the names of Stalin and Rákosi were mentioned and, instead of listening to the speaker, they went to another room where a dance party was taking place. (These meetings were often held in local pubs.)³⁷ This passivity continued throughout the later years of the conflict, for example in 1951 and 1952.³⁸ Of course, in private, many South Slavs expressed their sympathies toward Tito and Yugoslavia, saying, for example, that the “Serbian youth must support Tito,” or that “Tito’s policy is what’s right because it is a nationalist policy meant to improve the living conditions of his own peoples.”³⁹

There were also some forms of silent opposition. For example, Tito’s portrait hung on the wall of a tavern for months after the Soviet–Yugoslav conflict became public in June 1948,⁴⁰ and someone painted “*Živio Tito* [Long live Tito]” on the walls of many houses in June 1949.⁴¹ After the border was closed and fenced off, the local South Slavs started to fear expatriation or deportation, which was not unfounded. Some of them were in fact deported in the early 1950s to other parts of the country, and they fought as partisans during World War II or had relatives in Yugoslavia who worried the most. According to archival sources, the rumors reached the villages in waves, with the first in August 1950 when the locals were counted and listed as part of the preparations for the municipal elections held later

³⁶ As a consequence of the Soviet–Yugoslav conflict, communities of people who fled Yugoslavia, known as *i-beovci* emigrants, were established in the Soviet Union and in the Eastern European communist countries. They actively participated in propaganda warfare against Yugoslavia through writing and distributing various printed materials (e.g., journals and leaflets) and working at the South Slavic departments of national radio stations. They took steps in order to establish an alternative communist party with the possibility of a government-in-exile and carried out various subversive activities in Yugoslavia. Their political organizations were dissolved as part of the process of normalization between the Soviet camp and Yugoslavia. For the history of *i-beovci* emigrants in Eastern Europe, see Ivo Banac, *Sa Staljinom protiv Tita. Informbirovski rascjepi u jugoslavenskom komunističkom pokretu* (Zagreb: Globus, 1990), 145–239; Momčilo Mitrović and Slobodan Selinić, “Jugoslovenska informbirovska emigracija u istočnoevropskim zemljama, 1948–1964,” *Tokovi istorije* 17, no. 1–2 (2009): 31–54; Petar Dragišić, *Jugoslovensko–bugarski odnosi 1944–1949* (Beograd: INIS, 2007), 232–50; Slobodan Selinić, *Jugoslovensko–čehoslovački odnosi 1945–1955* (Beograd: INIS, 2010), 355–444; Ondřej Vojtěchovsky, *Iz Praga protiv Tita: Jugoslavenska informbirovska emigracija u Čehoslovačkoj* (Zagreb: Srednja Europa, 2016). For the *i-beovci* emigrants in Hungary see: Péter Vukman, “*Harcban Tito és Rankovics klikkje ellen*” *Jugoszláv politikai emigránsok Magyarországon (1948–1980)* (Budapest: ÁBTL; Pécs: Kronosz, 2017); Péter Vukman, “Jugoslovenski politički emigranti u Mađarskoj (1948–1949),” in: *Mađari i Srbi sa dve strane promenjive granice 1941–1948. Tematski zbornik radova*, eds. Árpád Hornyák, Zoran Janjetović and László Bíró (Budapest: Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Research Centre for the Humanities, Institute of History, 2016), 351–83; Péter Vukman, “Political Activities of *i-beovci* Emigrants in Hungary (1948–1953),” *Tokovi istorije* 25, no. 3. (2017): 35–58; Péter Vukman, “Social Composition and Everyday Life of Cominform Emigrants in Hungary (1948–1980),” *Istorija* 20. veka 36, no. 1 (2018): 133–46.

³⁷ ÁBTL, 3.1.5. O-9553, 80.

³⁸ ÁBTL, 3.1.5. O-9553/1, 159. and 167.

³⁹ ÁBTL, 3.1.5. O-9553/2, 158.

⁴⁰ ÁBTL, 3.1.5. O-9553, 71.

⁴¹ ÁBTL, 3.1.5. O-9553, 85.

that year. Some of the South Slavs feared that they would be expatriated in the near future and refused to sign documents.⁴² The fears returned in late 1951, and especially in late December, when many of the South Slavs packed up their most important belongings as advance preparations. Others said farewell to their friends in the evenings, as they were not sure if they would have to leave the village during the night.⁴³ However, it is also true that, contrary to the expatriation of ethnic Germans after 1945, at least some of the Hungarians were sympathetic toward the South Slavs. One stated during a conversation that “all the Slavs are so kind and still so many misfortunes befell them.”⁴⁴

Apart from fear and passivity, the local South Slavs were also building castles in the air. For example, some of them believed that Tito had gone to Moscow in the autumn of 1948 and had come into terms with Stalin, and that they had agreed to divide Hungary and that the Baja triangle would belong to Yugoslavia in the near future.⁴⁵ Similar rumors were also heard a year later during the Rajk trial, an anti-Titoist show trial. This time the rumors were based on a program aired on Belgrade radio. During the program, Eduard Karagity, formerly a leading member of MDDSZ, made it clear that the Baja triangle would belong to Yugoslavia in the future, and there would thus be a need for well-qualified teachers familiar with local circumstances.⁴⁶

It is also important to mention that local and nationwide politics were not always congruent. Probably the best example of this I found was from the Liberation Day parade on April 4, 1950, during which the state security rounded up and arrested many South Slavs who were marching with the Yugoslav flag in addition to the Hungarian one. Even the local, ethnically Hungarian secretary of the Hungarian Workers’ Party objected to the reaction of the local members of the State Protection Authority. He pointed out that they had only recently managed to normalize relations between the two nationalities, and he feared tensions would escalate.⁴⁷ These inter-ethnic tensions were mostly related to two particular problems. One was related to *Budzsák tanya*, an area on the village outskirts, where the local Hungarians had protested the opening of a Croatian/Šokci minority elementary school in September 1948. They criticized the decision because they had lobbied unsuccessfully for decades for an elementary school in area, and the local Magyar pupils had to attend other far-away schools even though there were three times more of them than the South Slavs.⁴⁸ The other sensitive issue was the question of cooperatives, as it seemed to the local Hungarians that the local Croats were overrepresented in both membership and in decision making.⁴⁹ Unfortunately it is impossible to say whether this overrepresentation was the result of the social structure of the South Slavs

⁴² ÁBTL, 3.1.5. 0-9553, 145.

⁴³ ÁBTL, 3.1.5. 0-9553/1, 100-03.

⁴⁴ ÁBTL, 3.1.5. 0-9553/1, 101.

⁴⁵ ÁBTL, 3.1.5. 0-9553/2, 85.

⁴⁶ ÁBTL, 3.1.5. 0-9553, 336-37.

⁴⁷ ÁBTL, 3.1.5. 3.1.5. 0-9553, 120-23. and 291.

⁴⁸ ÁBTL, 3.1.5. 0-9553, 71.

⁴⁹ ÁBTL, 3.1.5. 0-9553, 78 and 263.

and/or their earlier support of the Communist Party. It might have been that they simply feared retaliation if they did not join the cooperates in sufficient numbers. Some archival sources from other villages also indicate that at least some of the South Slavs truly believed in collectivization.

It is true, however, that after 1948, the local ethnic Hungarians had mixed feelings toward the South Slavs. Some of the Magyars sympathized with them and their attitude remained favorable toward Yugoslavia, while others feared a Yugoslav military attack and the “vengeful nature of the Serbs.”⁵⁰ Reports from the ÁVH also indicate that there was also some minor tension among the local South Slavs, as the Croats thought that the Serbs made their dominance felt, for example, regarding the issue of minority schools or when the Croatian youth boycotted the balls and dance parties held in taverns owned by Serbs.⁵¹

Stalin’s death in March 1953 brought another turning point in local everyday life, activities, and strategies as well. The mood in the Baja triangle in general, and in Hercegszántó in particular, can be best described as a dichotomy between hope and fear. The local South Slavs were confident in the future and hoped that life would be easier for them. They hoped they would be allowed to listen to Yugoslav radio broadcasts. Those who owned land on the other side of the border hoped that they would be allowed to cultivate it, and that in general, it would be much easier to visit and have contact with long-unseen friends and relatives in Yugoslavia. They also hoped that the railway line between Baja and Sombor would be in service again.⁵² They also thought that life in general was much easier in Yugoslavia where people paid fewer taxes and were able to spend more from their monthly wages, and where there also were no shortages.⁵³

Many local ethnic South Slavs were also sure that there would be some kind of realignment of the border. For this, there had been a clear trend of continuity since 1945. Some thought that the Baja triangle would belong to Yugoslavia in the near future, while others expected that the new border would be drawn around Kalocsa (Kaloča), 40 km north of Baja and 70 km north of the Hungarian–Yugoslav border. These expectations were particularly high during the summer of 1954, probably not without influence from the two current processes of normalization. Earlier in 1953, an agreement was signed in Sombor concerning the border incidents, and the Subotica Agreement on January 20, 1954 regulated the maintenance of border signs. These and other agreements surely had an impact on the mood of the local South Slavs. They also resurfaced in the spring of 1956 in connection with Tito’s impending visit to the Soviet Union. The locals might have heard about the talks before and after the agreement was signed, but they were not sure of or did not believe

⁵⁰ ÁBTL, 3.1.5. 0-9553/2, 60 and 68.

⁵¹ ÁBTL, 3.1.5. 0-9553, 65.

⁵² See for example: ÁBTL, 3.1.5. 0-9553/1, 378. and ÁBTL, 3.1.5. 0-9553/2, 188. For the process of normalization between Hungary and Yugoslavia, see: Katarina Kovačević, “Yugoslav–Hungarian Relations 1953–1956,” in *Great Powers and Small Countries in Cold War 1945–1955 – issue of ex-Yugoslavia. Proceedings of the International Scientific Conference, Belgrade, November 3rd–4th, 2003*, ed. Ljubograd Dimić (Belgrade: Katedra za istoriju Jugoslavije Filozofskog fakulteta, 2005), 140–57.

⁵³ ÁBTL, 3.1.5. 0-9553/2a, 592.

in its content. Instead they projected onto it their already existing hopes and expectations.⁵⁴

It is not surprising that the local South Slavs maintained a favorable opinion of Tito, even though they had previously endured years of a propaganda campaign against the Yugoslav leader. Moreover, the process of normalization and a change in attitude regarding the official Hungarian stance toward Yugoslavia seemed to justify their feelings. They also compared the Yugoslav and the Hungarian leaders, and a favorable attitude toward Tito nearly always appeared in the context of some unfavorable remarks about Rákosi.

The ÁVH's reports on the locals' mood clearly support this. For example, in June 1954 a local South Slav openly stated, "Now, when Imre Nagy re-appeared [as prime minister in 1953] and the bald-headed Matyi [pejorative for Mátyás Rákosi] died, the mood of the people immediately improved. Now, that he [Rákosi] has been resurrected, people have once again become exasperated. But it's not a problem; Tito will be here soon."⁵⁵

Additionally, the principal of the local minority school was quite well-informed about the development of bilateral Hungarian–Yugoslav relations and did not hesitate to express his personal view. Because he was an important person in the traditional village community, an ÁVH informant regularly reported his views. For example, he reported on December 14, 1954 that the principal "also knew that comrade Rákosi had visited the Yugoslav embassy and bowed before the Yugoslav people in front of the 'chained dogs.'"⁵⁶ Again, referring to the well-known propaganda phrase two weeks later, he mentioned that "nowadays there's a different wind blowing in from the south. We cannot hear the dogs barking."⁵⁷ He was well aware of the importance of Yugoslavia and highly critical of the Hungarian policy of the recent past: "After all, Yugoslavia has more prestige than Hungary in the eyes of the 'Russians.' Tito actively fought against the fascists, suffered along with the people, and hid in the mountains with them. This has earned him prestige in the eyes the Yugo people. [...] We won't admit it, but our [Hungarian] press and radio were just hurling insults and cursing him. Even in our schoolbooks. Tito will not forgive Rákosi for this. [...] Maybe even Rákosi needs to be dismissed in order to continue the discussions with new faces and in a new direction."⁵⁸ In this, he was absolutely correct..

On the other hand, the local Hungarians had rather mixed feelings about the developments, and many of them were worried about the prospect of a border realignment. Many of them also feared that the South Slavs would again achieve dominant local positions and would take revenge on them for the hardships of the last five years. "Terrible times will come if the municipal elections [on November 28, 1954] result in the outcome that those [the South Slavs] are preparing for. It would be better if we leave Hercegszántó

⁵⁴ ÁBTL, 3.1.5. 0-9553/1. 376., 378. and ÁBTL, 3.1.5. 0-9553/3, 143.

⁵⁵ ÁBTL, 3.1.5. 0-9553/1, 376.

⁵⁶ ÁBTL, 3.1.5. 0-9553/2a, 394.

⁵⁷ ÁBTL, 3.1.5. 0-9553, 396.

⁵⁸ ÁBTL, 3.1.5. 0-9553/2a, 552.

in good time,” one of the locals feared.⁵⁹ Similar voices were also heard half a year later in August 1955: “These Šokci are wild nowadays because Tito ‘told Rákosi off.’ He will not forgive Rákosi, not even the Hungarians that much cursing and insults. [...] The Šokci also say that the border incidents were always caused by Hungarians. They also say that the meeting of foreign ministers in October will decide, among many things, whether an exchange of population will take place or if the border will be moved to Kalocsa.”⁶⁰ At the same time, they hoped that improving relationships between the two countries would result in Rákosi’s downfall, the severity of the Communist regime being eased somewhat, and the emergence of a local Titoist leader.⁶¹

Conclusion

The frequent changes in Yugoslav–Hungarian relations had a profound impact on the South Slavic minorities in Hungary. The new democratic Hungarian leadership made honest attempts to improve bilateral relations. Josip Broz Tito and the Yugoslav leaders, however, wished to secure their northern borders in order to play a more active role on the Balkan peninsula. As a result, they were also interested in normalizing and strengthening the position of the Hungarian communists. The Yugoslavs were particularly interested in the everyday living conditions and education of the South Slavs and considered these improvements prerequisites for improving bilateral relations. Locally in Hercegszántó, the local South Slavs generally profited from these changes and were elected to leading positions in the local and state apparatuses. Their support for the HCP is especially noteworthy.

As the Soviet–Yugoslav conflict began to escalate and the Hungarian–Yugoslav relations consequently began to deteriorate, Rákosi and the leadership of the Hungarian Workers’ Party immediately put pressure on the South Slavic minorities, their leaders, and their associations. In Hercegszántó the local elite of the South Slavic minorities lost their privileged positions, even if they remained respected authorities in the eyes of individuals. Fearful of the consequences of the anti-Titoist propaganda campaign, they developed a kind of a “wait and see” approach. However, their support for Tito remained unbroken, and many of them continued to hope that their village and the Baja triangle would become part of Yugoslavia, even after 1953 when Hungarian–Yugoslav relations were again beginning to normalize.

As this short case study illustrates, a more detailed analysis of the effects of Hungarian–Yugoslav national politics on the everyday lives of Hungarians and South Slavs living in the Baja triangle can be fascinating and fruitful topic for further research. Such an analysis could be extended to other areas in Hungary and might be compared to other border areas in Yugoslavia.

⁵⁹ ÁBTL, 3.1.5. O-9553/2a, 346.

⁶⁰ ÁBTL, 3.1.5. O-9553/2a, 553.

⁶¹ ÁBTL, 3.1.5. O-9553/2a, 492 and 498.

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