

## The number of Trianon refugees

*'So Joseph stored up grain in such abundance  
– like the sand of the sea –  
that he stopped measuring it;  
it was beyond measure'.  
(Genesis, 41:49.)*

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This study summarises the knowledge on the number of Trianon refugees. The study argues that one do not and will not have the opportunity to determine the number of refugees with approximate accuracy. The figure of 350,000 people published by the National Office for Refugees is only a partial result and the situation is complicated by the fact that it cannot be verified due to the disappearance of official documents. The reliability of the data has already been criticised by prominent statisticians of the Interwar Period and there have been several attempts to calculate using census data. However, not only were these materials unsuitable for establishing the exact number due to their staticity, but the data recordings for 1930 are no longer available in the archives.

The study also summarises the experience of the county archives. Excavation of the source in the Esztergom branch archives of the Hungarian National Archives revealed the names of refugees who were not included in the previously compiled refugee database, but those whose names appeared in newspapers as refugees could not be found in the archives. The literature and archives conclude that an uncertain calculation of 450,000 to 500,000 is the best one can do when discussing this issue. The study also reflects on the administrative burden of Hungary's administrative offices in the country in 1919–1920.

**Keywords:**  
Trianon treaty,  
refugees,  
Interwar Period,  
Hungary

## Introduction and objectives

‘Trianon refugees’ refers to those who moved from the territories occupied during the 1918–1920 ‘change of empire’ toward the interior of Hungary. In a narrower sense, this includes forced refugees (Kovács 1989), and in a broader sense, everyone who left their original place of residence in the hope of a better livelihood and a higher quality of life. World War I refugees are treated separately from Trianon refugees, given that they had left their homes earlier, that is, not as a result of the change of empire, even if they would not return home later because of it. In the strictest sense, ‘Trianon refugees’ is typically but not exclusively used to mean native Hungarian speakers and does not include those who moved from the remaining territory of Hungary to that of any of the successor states. The main reason for this is the problem of statistical tracing of refugees, but new research is already moving in this direction (Bereznay 2020, Elekes–Szilágyi 2020, Hajdú 2020, Kókai 2020, Péntzes 2020, Szilágyi–Elekes 2020).

The National Office for Refugees (*Országos Menekültügyi Hivatal – OMH*) was established in 1920 upon the proposal of the Transylvanian group of the Peace Preparation Office (*Békeelőkészítő Iroda*) to ‘subsidise, support, and manage the affairs of all refugees in a uniform manner,’ which operated with six provincial offices and eight border bureaus in addition to the Budapest headquarters (Petrichevich Horváth 1924, Bárdi 2011, Pálvölgyi 2018). In addition to assisting refugees and dealing with their grievances, as well as supporting Hungarians living on the other side of the borders, the aim of the office was much more to ensure the refugees’ permanent settlement and, ultimately, to achieve their complete integration (Jándy 1924, Kovács 1989, Bárdi 2011, 2013, Szűts 2012). Prior to its establishment, several Hungarian organisations dealt with refugees’ affairs (such as the Upper Hungary League (*Felvidéki Liga*), the Southern Hungary League (*Délvidéki Liga*), or Peace Preparation Office). After it ceased its operation in 1924, the Ministry of Social Welfare and Labour took over its responsibilities (Kovács 1989, Bárdi 2011).

Both actual figures and estimates are available for the number of Trianon refugees. In its final report issued in 1924, the OMH determined the number at exactly 350,000 (Table 1). However, the values given in the report of the OMH are not even rounded to tens, so the still overly round result gives rise to suspicion as we know that the institute ‘registered only refugees who arrived after October 1919, and they could only have had estimated data on those arriving earlier’ (Szűts 2018). There was also less emphasis on the fact that the office ‘took care of those refugees who reported’ to them. Thus, ‘it would be difficult to estimate the number of those expelled to Hungary who had sound and serious family or business relations here, so they were not forced to manage their affairs through the OMH’ (Kovács 1989).

Table 1

**Report of the National Office for Refugees on those moving to Hungary  
from the 30th October 1918 to the 30th June 1924**

Year of seeking refuge	Number of refugees				Total
	Eastern Hungary (from Romania)	Northern Hungary (from Czechoslovakia)	Southern Hungary (from Serbia)	Western Hungary (Austria)	
1918	40,952	12,373	5,459	0	58,784
1919	33,551	57,783	19,239	0	110,573
1920	79,773	31,606	10,551	0	121,930
1921	19,879	1,722	4,023	499	26,123
1922	13,651	2,310	4,705	576	21,242
1923	7,536	852	541	112	9,041
1924	1,693	195	385	34	2,307
Total	197,035	106,841	44,903	1,221	350,000

### Literature review

Although he accepted the numbers given by the Office, the statistician Dezső Laky (1929) noted that ‘the report on refugees by years suffers from minor errors’. However, he did not venture to go into more details. In his study entitled *The issue of pensions for public service employees and possible solutions*, Hollós (1940) raised the opinion that the Office’s data collection was defective, that the figures could not be considered reliable, as well as that ‘under the transitional conditions at the time, no accurate record was made in relation to staffing numbers, which now makes it virtually impossible to accurately determine the so-called Trianon pension burdens related to the expulsions’. Nevertheless, among those dealing with the subject, the figure of 350,000 has become widespread for the past nearly one hundred years (in particular because Lajos Thirring (1938), who was highly regarded among statisticians, also accepted this number without major reservations), even if reliance on the estimated value of around 426,000, which is more than 5 percent of the population of Hungary at the time, calculated by Mócsy (1983) has also been frequently cited in recent decades (Gyáni 2001, Karády–Kozma 2002, Csóti 2002, Zeidler 2009, Faragó 2011, Ablonczy 2011, Szűts 2012, 2017, Szilágyi 2018). Sweeping away any doubts and verifying the published number of refugees are complicated by the fact that the documents and files of the OMH were notoriously destroyed and not even copies survive. However, the index books of the departmental documents of the Budapest Municipal Council (Budapest City Archives IV. 1407. b.) did escape destruction, and these show the names of the files related to refugee affairs from 1917 and to the operation of the OMH from 1921. It is worth highlighting some of the items that originally helped to determine the number of refugees. These include documents relating to the repatriation of

refugees from Transylvania and Galicia (the latter having Austrian citizenship) from 1918, to those arriving from Croatia–Slavonia from 1919, to the census from 1920, documents from 1921 and 1923 that still pertained to the census, and documents of a statistical nature compiled by the office.<sup>1</sup> However, the only factor in connection with this that can be known for certain is that these documents existed, because even if there are some actual documents behind the shelfmarks, they are mostly very incomplete, lacking the appendix that describes the figures. According to the Budapest City Archives, the systematic absence of the documents of the OMH may be because they were not entered in the central files of the Archives in the first place but remained with the competent official at Department I of the Budapest Municipal Council, and eventually went missing there, or were destroyed during the war. In this way, no further knowledge will be gained regarding the exact figures and especially the summary calculations made by the OMH. This statement is underlined by the fact that the report submitted to the Minister of Finance, Tibor Kállay in February 1923 (Hungarian National Archives OL K 275. 10. 11.), which published exact data of the Office regarding the number of emigrants for the years 1919 to 1922, determined the number of refugees fleeing in 1918 from Eastern Hungary (i.e., the Romanian-occupied territory) as 23,043, which is 17,909 fewer than reported by the OMH in 1924. In the case of occupational structure, further anomalies can be highlighted in the report. Nevertheless, following István Gergely Szűts (2012), who has been researching the issue for a long time, it can be established that ‘the data of the OMH carries an important source value, as the figures therein, to the best of our knowledge, are the only macro-level dataset to date’.

## Data and methods

While researching for numerical data, due to the unreliability of the figures of the OMH discussed above, it was appropriate to proceed along a different path, approaching census values. Regarding the published values, Kovács (1929) highlighted some calculation difficulties already in the era, which arose from the unsettled conditions existing at the time of taking the census. Thus, by comparing

<sup>1</sup> From 1918: Repatriation of Hungarian-speaking population fleeing from Csík and Háromszék Counties: IX 41647, 44701, Change of repatriation routes of Transylvanian refugees: IX 57314; Repatriation and subsidization of Austrian refugees: IX 68731, Homecoming and subsidization of Austrian refugees: IX 68203, 96546; Homecoming and subsidization of refugees from Bukovina: IX 69095. From 1919: The case of Hungarians fleeing from Croatia–Slavonia: IX 2076. From 1920: Employing refugee civil servants for the census: I 128047-131094, Organising the registration of refugees on the occasion of the census mentioned above to be conducted between 1 and 10 January 1921: I 130522. From 1921: Census of refugees arriving from the occupied territories: 9,932/20. ME szrB 1. National Office for Refugees registration of refugees on the occasion of the census: I 3126; Permanent settlement of the refugees, the stateless and the former prisoners of war: VII 80740. From 1923: cen[sus] of refugees as above: VII 100490. Hernád Str. refugee office the number of refugees: VII 129637.

the population of the post-Trianon territory of Hungary between 1910 and 1920, despite the war years, we can establish an actual increase of almost 5%, which can be explained by the large number of refugees. The value of actual increase consists of natural increase (the difference between births and deaths) and the extent of migration. With accurate knowledge of birth and death data, it would be relatively easy to calculate a value of acceptable order regarding the extent of immigration. However, the multidirectional population movements as a result of the acts of war, the inaccuracy of casualties of the war, the registration problems mentioned by Kovács (1929), as well as the unknown extent of unmeasured remigration to Western Europe and America or repatriation to America or the annexed territories make it impossible not to obtain distorted values regarding immigrants arriving between 1918 and 1924 (Faragó 2011). Regarding the volume of repatriation from America, Laky (1929) also considers it probable that ‘upon hearing the news of the end of the World War, there were some repatriation from even far away emigration territories in 1919 and 1920 to the land of Csonka-Magyarország (‘Stunted Hungary’), even if this kind of remigration was unlikely to move extraordinary masses of people (...)’. According to his calculations, the number of such people can be estimated at twenty thousand. Post-war emigration also affected the so-called ‘wagon-dwellers,’ but the restrictions on immigration that came into effect in the United States in 1921 obviously applied to them, so many such families were forced to return or choose another destination (Pálvölgyi 2018).

Table 2

### Values of the 1920 and 1930 censuses

Number of population	1920	1930
Total population	7,980,143	8,688,319
Born locally	5,036,965	5,203,946
Born elsewhere in the current territory of Hungary	2,253,563	2,865,258
to Austria	21,416	12,768
to Czechoslovakia	265,145	224,740
to Poland	452	76
Born in a territory annexed from Hungary	197,181	192,933
to Romania	74,412	74,242
to Yugoslavia	2,206	2,222
in total	560,812	506,981
Born in the historic territory of Hungary, in total	7,851,340	8,576,185
Born in historic Croatia-Slavonia	23,231	22,371
Born in the historic Kingdom of Hungary, in total	7,874,571	8,598,556
Foreign born or unknown	105,572	89,763

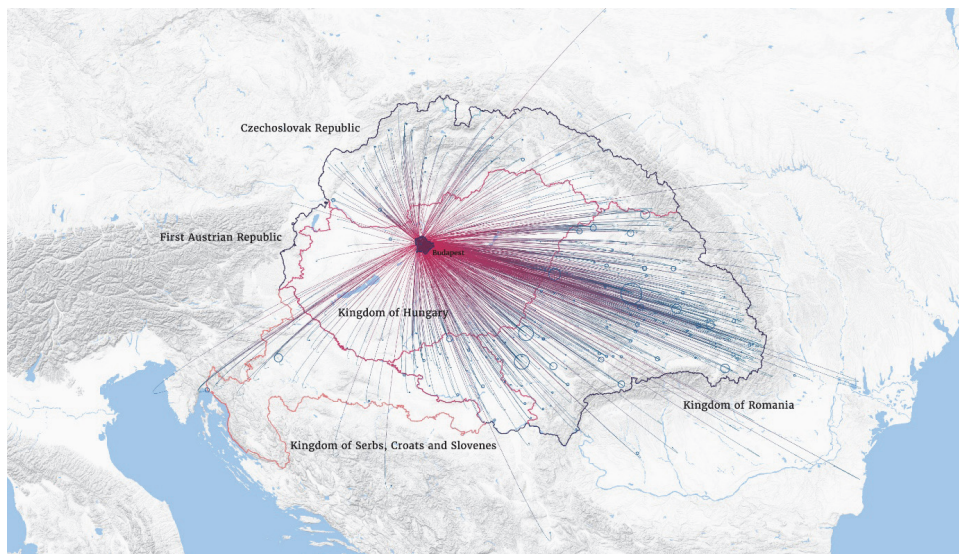
Table 2 summarises the place of birth of the then-present population, published in the 1930 census, which shows more than half a million Hungarian citizens born abroad (roughly 50,000 less than in 1920). However, this does not contain a

breakdown of the years in which they moved to the territory of post-Trianon Hungary (i.e. it could have happened at any time between the mid-19th century and 1929).

The census processing tables are the intermediate primary summary sources of the published census data and the data collection during the census. However, questions 20 and 21 of the 1920 census (*If you had your usual place of residence elsewhere before the World War, where was it, when and why did you change it? If you were not counted at your usual place of residence, for how long have you been residing at the place of the census?*), the data of which should have been included in processing table *Place of birth* and table *Place of birth vs. language and religion*, cannot be found in the archived material of the Central Statistical Office, located at the Óbuda research site of the Hungarian National Archives. The published values apply only to the counties that preserved their territorial integrity. In addition, a thorough examination of other materials related to the records in the archives has not yielded any results.<sup>2</sup>

Figure 1

### 'Trianon refugees' in Budapest (1918–1924)



Source: Bátorfy–Szabó (2021).

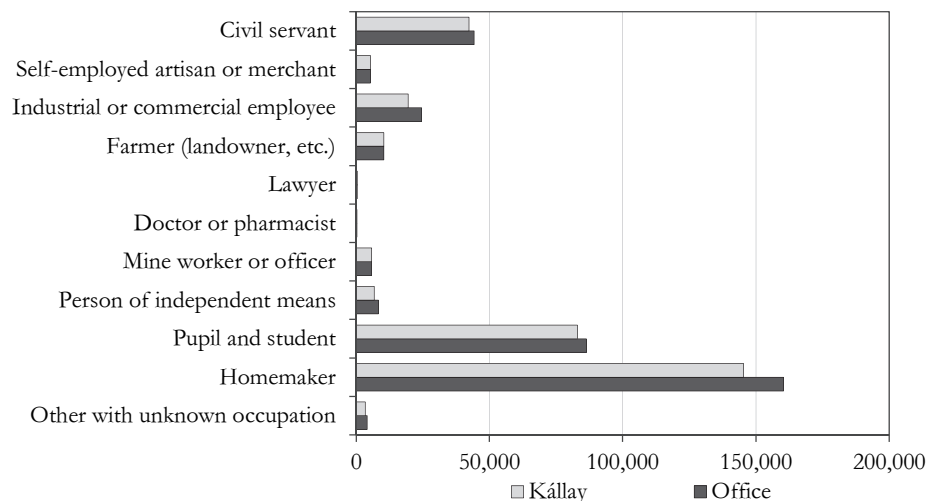
<sup>2</sup> The following materials were examined: Manuscripts and proofs of census volume (of year 1920) (Shelfmark: XXXII-23-h-E-241). The estate of Artúr Némethy (Benisch) (Shelfmark: XXXII-23-j-2). Extract from the manuscript archives of the library (Shelfmark: XXXII-23-i-C-IV). Census-related documents and forms (Shelfmark: XXXII-23-m-B-II-1). Census Publications (Shelfmark: XXXII-23-j-7.3-VI). Publications of population, social, and cultural statistics (Shelfmark: XXXII-23-j-7.3-VII).

One of the consequences of the migration that preceded the military collapse, which significantly worsened the situation of the Trianon refugees, was the housing shortage that had developed by 1918, which brought about the rigorous yet inevitable lives of the masses of expelled families in ‘wagon homes’ (Pálvölgyi 2018). During the war, Budapest was continuously and increasingly exposed to the waves of migration compared to the already not insignificant trends of the peace years. At the time of the Russian attack in 1914, there was a significant influx from Galicia. Part of this population moved out or was forced to leave the city during the war, another after the war. The migrants arriving from Galicia, then from Bukovina were considered Austrian citizens due to the right to rule over these territories, so they can be more easily separated from the Hungarian population. However, during the Romanian invasion in the autumn of 1916, Hungarians fleeing Transylvania also made chiefly for Budapest. In their case, in contrast with the former group, ‘the possibility of large-scale reshipment did not arise, but their accommodation was no small task for the authorities’ (Pálvölgyi 2018). The goal was definitely repatriation to Transylvania, but it was implemented in a slower and more prolonged manner than desired. Meanwhile, the resettlement of Jewish refugees from Galicia also met with difficulties. Hence, at the end of the war, following the break-up of Austria-Hungary, their situation also became unstable, and it was not until the 1920s that most were finally moved out of the country as Polish citizens (Pálvölgyi 2018). Thus, when determining the number of Trianon refugees, if sticking to the definition made at the beginning of the study, we must, or at least should, omit the Galician and Transylvanian people and families who came here during the war and partly stayed from our calculations. (At this point, I would like to complement István Gergely Szűts’s earlier finding that states that ‘The OMH report does not include those who were at some point in Hungary or settled here during the war’. They are not included, but the Office paid attention to them, which is proven by the cases found in the index of the departmental documents of the Budapest Municipal Council, such as the cases of Austrian and Bukovinian refugees noted above.) The impossibility of doing it with surgical precision is explained by the fact that the number of this population cannot be determined either. As Laky (1929) summarised, ‘There was a very large volume of immigration to Budapest even during the war, obviously larger than what (...) could be inferred from comparing the actual and natural increase. Those immigrants who happened to be still in Budapest at the time of the 1920 census became Budapest residents’ (Figure 1). With this solution, the subtle differences researched herein have become balanced. Laky’s volume on the demography of Budapest between 1900 and 1920 was published in 1929. Considering that the Hungarian capital was the most important, either permanent or temporary, destination for refugees, he placed particular emphasis on the presentation of post-war events. Laky had reservations about the figures of the OMH, estimating these values higher (about 110,000 living in

Budapest instead of 7,860 wagon-dwellers). However, he himself already emphasised the distorting effect of the mentioned problems, such as the migrants who moved to the capital during the war, then moved forward. Furthermore, the complexity of the calculation problems regarding housing is also highlighted by Zeidler's (2006) finding that states that, depending on their luck and financial means, refugees could also stay with relatives, or in rented places and shelters in addition to wagons.

Figure 2

**Summary of the occupation of refugees fleeing the annexed territories  
between 30 October 1918 and 15 June 1924\***



\* According to the data published by the National Office for Refugees and the report submitted to Minister of Finance Tibor Kállay in February 1923 (Hungarian National Archives OL K 275.10.11.).

In its report, the OMH specifically addressed the refugees' peculiar occupational structure, namely that 'members belong mostly to the intelligent middle class, who have become exiled for loyalty to the state, as well as the disabled, soldiers, and students returning from captivity' (Petrichevich Horváth 1924). In this case as well, the published data totals exactly 350,000. Comparing this with the above-mentioned report to Minister of Finance Tibor Kállay (and, considering the fact that the former makes its calculations until the summer of 1924, while the latter until February 1923), the earlier suspicion about the source is confirmed by the fact that while the number of people belonging to the individual occupation structures mostly increased over time, the number of artisans and merchants remained suspiciously the same, while the number of industrial and commercial employees increased (furthermore, as if no more lawyers, doctors or pharmacists, as well as mine workers had arrived in the country, which again seems unrealistic). However, the fictitious nature of the data is best confirmed by the fact that while in 1923 there



were 3,554 civil servants classified in the other category, this figure was 1,554 in 1924, which is unrealistic given the direction of the trends. I believe enough evidence has already been found to prove that the OMH manipulated the figures, but no attempt was even made to fully harmonise the data in the report to Kállay, which is clearly shown by the fact that the alleged final result of 321,857 is also incorrect, as the values should add up to 322,307 people.

At the same time and in more significant volumes, there was a migration of population also within the post-Trianon territory of Hungary, of which finding or changing dwelling places for the refugees was only a part. According to Laky (1929), the background to this process was the fact that following the wartime economic boom, and in particular, the growth of the industry in the capital, 'there began a great movement backwards, out to the countryside, to the abandoned old places of residence, mainly to the villages or more often also to smaller rural towns (...)'. Schuler (1936) thought that the revival of agricultural production after the war, as well as housing conditions encouraged the population to leave the capital. However, Szilágyi's (2018) recent research questions Laky's and Schuler's statements. Szilágyi describes migration from small towns expressly as a consequence of the post-Trianon events: 'the masses of refugees arriving mainly from the east, who undoubtedly found temporary homes also in these towns, triggered a 'chain reaction' that also prompted locals to migrate'. Among the directions of migration, we can also take the one towards the successor states, which mainly consisted of the return of minorities living in the country to their motherland into account. However, according to Thirring (1938), this did not cause a major population shift.

### Estimations

When determining the number of refugees at 426,000, Mócsy (1983) took the figures published by the OMH and the census values as a basis, supplementing these with the statistical figures of the successor states and relying on strong estimations (Zeidler 1997, Bereczki 1997, Popély 2003, Ablonczy 2011, Bárdi 2013). Despite all the uncertainties, Mócsy's (1983) calculation is still a value which anyone dealing with the issue has since been using more willingly than the figure of nearly 500,000 estimated by Kovács (1989), which she determined as more of an impression than as a result of a different calculation. In terms of scale, there is a general consensus that refugees were arriving in the greatest volume and for the longest period from territories that came under Romanian rule, followed by arrivals from Czechoslovakian, then Yugoslavian occupation. Numerically, the Hungarian population decreased the most in Czechoslovakia, while proportionally, that of Burgenland (Bárdi 2013). Bereczki (1997) calculates a total of about 366,000 refugees leaving Transylvania during the interwar period, some of whom settled at the eastern frontiers of the post-Trianon territory of the country (Szilágyi 2018).

Kovács (1989) calculates that about 105,000 people left the Czechoslovak state during the same period, while Popély (2003) estimates about 120,000 people for the years 1918 to 1930. Furthermore, Popély (2003) estimates that there were about 100,000 Hungarians in Slovakia with dual ties who were identified as Slovak after the change of empire. Considering the above values, we can see that Kovács' (1989) estimation of nearly half a million people is far from being far-fetched, even if we can only achieve this number in a very hypothetical and indirect way.

After failing to determine the number of refugees more precisely, nor their scale, either starting from the OMH or the censuses, I turned to the county archives and museums for help. In response to my circular, in which I inquired about aggregate statistics at the county level, I received helpful information and several tips, but none of the places knew of any summary documents. Obviously, earlier researchers have already drawn attention to the difficulties of researching the Trianon refugees (Kovács 1989, Szűts 2017, 2018). Regarding Szűts' (2018) statement 'documents created at ministry, county, town, or village level found in public collections, still largely unexplored and existing often only in a fragmented form, could be considered, as their systematic evaluation and analysis could confirm, or refute, the only OMH report about the official number of refugees,' I believe that we cannot even hope that much. As a test, I examined the relevant records of the old Esztergom County in the Komárom-Esztergom County Archives of the Hungarian National Archives.<sup>3</sup> The town clerks reported a total of about 16 refugees (35 together with their family members) from just three villages, namely Dömös, Sárísáp, and Süttő. Furthermore, Dékány's database, recently published by the Trianon100 research group, which is based on the processing of the weekly paper *Erdélyi Hírek* and was also supplemented by the members of the research group (available at <http://trianon100.hu/menekultek>), lists about 65 people (185 together with their family members) settled in Dorog, Esztergom, Kenyérmező, Lábatlan, Nána, Nyergesújfalu, Piszke, and Tokod (while the database is known to contain data of a total of approximately 15,000 people, or 37,000 together with family members, which makes up less than one tenth of all refugees). There is not a single match between the people found in the database and my own collection.

## Conclusions

In summary, it can be concluded that it is not possible to determine the exact number of Trianon refugees, not even in the order of tens of thousands. As has already become accepted in the literature, their number significantly exceeded the figure of 350,000 reported by the OMH. Mócsy's (1983) calculations have become generally referenced due to their seemingly more convincing appearance; however,

<sup>3</sup> Komárom-Esztergom County Archives of the Hungarian National Archives (MNL KEML) V-3. 4693/1920–5468/1920; MNL KEML IV. 303. 2733/1920–2919/1922

Kovács' (1989) estimate of half a million people cannot be considered unlikely either. The exact number of refugees is therefore likely somewhere between the two values. By accepting this, we may not be on the wrong track, considering the fact, and referring to the biblical motto, that being beyond measure is also a statistical value.

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