

Education of Ethnic Minorities in Hungary between the Two World Wars

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Abstract

Minority education in Hungary developed controversially during this era. The laws and government decrees ensured relatively broad opportunities to minority education (free foundation and selection of schools) but in practice, a number of obstacles made mother tongue education difficult. In the 1920-ies, and 1930-ies, there were three types of minority schools in Hungary. In one of them, teaching was performed in the language of the minority, and Hungarian was an obligatory foreign language. In the second type, they taught in both languages: literature and science was taught in the language of the minority, while history and civics in Hungarian. In the third type, (in settlements with Hungarians in majority) education was provided in Hungarian, but the minority's language and folks knowledge was an obligatory subject. The leaders of the settlement, the education authority, and the representatives of the parents decided on the used language of education. However, several factors made the operation of the theoretically flexible system difficult. There were not enough native teachers to teach children in their mother tongue, modern student books, and educational resource. Hungarian political circles urging the revision of the peace treaty, especially the ones working at the lower levels of public administration rolled obstacles in the way of minority education, in this way they tried to make the minorities' assimilation faster.

Keywords: Ethnic minorities, Mother tongue education, Ethnic schools, Cultural autonomy

Introduction

From among the various lingual and cultural minorities (820,000 people in 1920), in addition to the Hungarians, 12 communities were regarded to be state-forming nationalities due to their indigenous state, acknowledged cultural and religious representation, and rugged social identity awareness and they got collective rights. Ethnic groups with higher number (more populous than 5,000 inhabitants) that constitute larger language islands include Germans, Slovaks, Romanians, and three Southern Slavic people: the Serbian, the Croatian, and the Slovenian. Polish, Ukrainians, and Ruthenians, Bulgarians and Greek, as well as Armenians were living in Hungary in a lower number and mostly scattered. After World War I, up to 1939, only the first six minorities had ethnic schools from among them. By the reannexation of Transcarpathia in 1939, a large number of Ruthenian schools got maintained in Hungary and after the start of World War II, the Hungarian state established Polish schools for the refugees coming to Hungarian territories from Poland as a result of the German and Soviet attack.¹

Ethnic relations in Hungary after the First World War

There were substantial changes in the ethnic composition of Hungary after World War I. As a consequence of the peace treaty of Trianon, 67% of the country's territory and 58% of its population were allocated to the neighbouring states. The ratio of minorities highly decreased due to the annexation of peripheral areas that were mostly populated by minorities. Between the two world wars, further significant depopulation could be experienced among minority inhabitants. While the number of total population increased by 22% between 1910 and 1941, the number of people with not Hungarian as their mother tongue decreased by 25%, including Serbians by 79%, Slovaks by 54%, and Romanians by 50%. This negative trend affected the least the German minority, where there was only 24% decrease. As a result of the continuous waning of inhabitants with non-Hungarian mother tongue, the ratio of nationality population within the total number of population decreased from 46% in 1910 to

¹ Tilkovszky 1998, pp. 9–10.; Kapronczay 1998, pp. 15–16.

10% in 1920, and to 7% by 1941 (projected to the Trianon-defined territory).²

	1910	1920	1930	1941*
Hungarian	6,730,299	7,155,979	8,000,335	8,655,798
German	553,179	550,062	477,153	475,491
Slovak	165,317	141,877	104,786	75,877
Romanian	28,491	23,695	16,221	14,142
Croatian	62,018	58,931	47,332	37,804
Serbian	26,248	17,132	7,031	5,442
Slovenian	6,915	6,087	5,464	4,816
Other	39,647	33,112	26,787	46,704
Total population	7,612,114	7,986,875	8,685,109	9,316,074

Table 1. Distribution of the population according to nationality (1910–1941)³

* For the sake of comparison, the statistics of year 1941 refers to the Trianon area of Hungary similarly to earlier dates, i.e. it does not contain the population data of the territorial increase between 1938 and 1941.

This significant decline in both the number and the ratio of the minority population could be partly explained by high migration that started out after the world war. Out of ethnic minorities, especially Slovaks, Romanians, and Serbians, relatively many used the opportunity to select citizenship freely and moved to the newly established neighbouring states (to Czechoslovakia, to Romania and to the Kingdom of Serbia–Croatia–Slovenia). The reasons of migration included: earlier limitation of minority rights, grievances suffered during the war and the revolutions, the difficult economic conditions of 1920-ies, problems of earning a living but nationalist propaganda on behalf of the neighbouring states also had a huge impact on minority inhabitants.⁴

The other factor that played an important role in the decline of ethnic inhabitants was the higher and higher rate of assimilation. Due to the identification of new borders, a part of the population seceded from its former economic centres. This forced many people to move towards the inner part of the country and find better living mainly in the bigger cities and the industrial zones that had started to grow. The outflow from a rural environment was fostering the preservation of nationality language, culture, and identity, and the moving-in to towns/cities, and industrial facilities with Hungarian majority, as well as getting jobs in modern industrial, transportation, and service sectors requiring inter-ethnic communications went together with the acceleration of assimilation and the replacement of the language already on short term. Assimilation, however, accelerated not only among city dwellers but also in villages where ethnic population lived in minority. It was mostly possible to maintain using the language and preserving cultural traditions where communities with mother tongues other than Hungarian comprised local majority.⁵

At the territory of the after-Trianon Hungary (in the central zones of the former Hungarian state), various minorities have lived for long relatively without any conflicts, in close interaction. In these areas, the number of mixed marriages was high, what generally entailed taking over the use of the majority language (Hungarian) especially in urban or rural environment of mixed ethnic composition. School education and customs related to religious ceremonies played an important role in the spread of the Hungarian language. Religious ceremonies were generally held in Hungarian in ethnically mixed but denominationally homogeneous (mostly Roman Catholic) settlements. The homily was mostly in Hungarian; people used their minority language primarily during singing in the church. Although Prime Ministerial decree No. 1797/1914 ordered that bible classes were to be taught in the language of the given minority, in case of mixed congregations, many times this was performed in the language of the state, in Hungarian. Consequently, in certain cases, common church also fostered assimilation.⁶

In the years after the war, in spreading assimilation, the following factors played a role: contradictions of the government's minority policy, especially intolerance of local public administration organs, and the effort to force the use of Hungarian in the fields of school education, public administration, and public life. The ethnic policy principles announced by the government and the central regulations built on them generally promised much wider room for manoeuvre and major opportunities to minorities especially in the field of culture, however local authorities often restricted ethnic endeavours, made it impossible to the minority that they practise the rights ensured to them. The revision mood becoming overwhelming in the country and the harsh nationalist actions of the extreme right made the situation of the non-Hungarian mother tongue inhabitants even harder.⁷

² MNL OL ME NKO K-28, 158. 20,119/1940.

³ Népszámlálás 1983, pp. 14., 23., 30.

⁴ Oltvai 1991, pp. 14., 173.

⁵ Horváth 2005, pp. 186–187.

⁶ Kugler 2000, p. 177.; Szarka 1997, p. 405.; Jakab 2005, pp. 17–19.

⁷ MNL BaML Baranya Alisp. 1191/1935.; Szarka 1997, p. 400.

Trianon Peace Treaty entailed severe disadvantages for all the population of Hungary and affected ethnic minorities, too. The ethnic school network suffered significant losses, the majority of educational institutions with ethnic teaching language, including all the secondary schools, got situated over the borders. Due to the annexation of regional centres, big cities, identity preserving cultural institutions (library, theatre, press and printing house) became unavailable. Tense interstate relationship with the neighbouring countries made keeping contact with the mother nation hard for the minorities in Hungary. Breaking up former organic economic structures caused substantial earnings problems. Financial problems made it more difficult to re-build and develop cultural infrastructure. It also entailed severe consequences that in the course of the large-scale migration that took place after the war, first of all groups with higher education left the country, what caused serious lack of white-collars within minority societies. There did not remain enough teachers and priests.⁸

School education had an outstanding role in preserving minorities' national identity, and in nurturing their cultural traditions. The civil government gaining power after the failure of the Hungarian revolutions, in August 1919 passed a new regulation that broadened the educational possibilities of minorities as compared to those before the war. Prime Ministerial decree No. 4044/1919 announced that villages, churches, and foundations were allowed to freely establish schools at any level of education, in which they had the right to determine the language of teaching by themselves. It emphasized where ethnical, religious or language minorities live in significant ratio, reasonable part must be supplied to them from the educational, religious or charity purpose public funds. In settlements where the population did not speak Hungarian, the ethnic language became the official language of teaching.⁹

According to the decrees, the language of teaching of the state-owned and settlement-owned elementary schools was determined on the basis of the students' mother tongue. Where at least half of the population spoke Hungarian, they optionally introduced teaching in mixed languages. In public schools, bible classes, writing, reading, counting, speech and comprehension practices, as well as singing were taught in the given minority's language, the rest of the subjects were taught either in Hungarian or in the minority's language based on the decision of the settlement's leaders and the 'school boards' consisting of the representatives of the maintainer of the school and the parents. Starting from grade 3, it was a must to teach Hungarian writing and reading, as well as speech and comprehension practices in each ethnic school so that students – when finishing the school – were able to understand simple Hungarian texts and could express their thoughts also in Hungarian.¹⁰

However, there showed up serious dissatisfaction on behalf of local authorities, teachers, and various political forces concerning the decree and they put huge pressure on the government in order to modify the regulation. In addition to the shocking effect of the Trianon Peace Treaty and the mistrust towards the minorities, certain existential aspects also played a role in opposing the extension of using ethnic language to teaching. A high number of white-collars, teachers, and pastors escaped from the annexed territories to Hungary. Making teaching in the Hungarian language compulsory in a much larger scale offered them the possibility of prosperity. Having allowed for social pressure, the regulations concerning the language of teaching were modified in a way that where earlier already Hungarian was the language of teaching, it remained based on the parents' request.¹¹

The Ministry of Religion and Public Education passed a decree already in 1920 on the commencement of teacher training in German. The German minority had the highest number (550,000) of people and ethnic schools. Maintaining these schools required the most teachers. At the same time, good relationship both with Austria and Germany also made it politically important to provide German minority education. Under the decree, 5 new German teacher training schools were to be set up. However, implementation of the idea was first hindered by financial problems, and then a comprehensive reform started in public education, what put the transformation of teacher training into the shade for some time.¹²

The Peace Treaty of Trianon stated that language-based and cultural minorities had the right to establish schools owned and maintained by them, where they are allowed to determine the language of teaching. In settlements with ethnic population, both in state-, settlement- and church-owned schools, it was an option to study in the minority's language while the Hungarian language was a compulsory subject. However, lower level public administration authorities and many local school boards urged for the introduction of Hungarian as the language of teaching. This endeavour was, however, rejected both by the government and the higher church authorities. Approx. 65% of public schools was owned and maintained by Church in post-Trianon Hungary.¹³

A chronic lack of textbooks was a huge problem in the field of ethnic education. Textbooks published in the language of a minority before the war got quickly obsolete both with respect to scientific content and educational methodology. Textbooks published in the neighbouring countries could not be used partly due to the

⁸ Szakály 1991, p. 45.; Oltvai 1991, p. 173.

⁹ MNL OL ME K-26, 2. 4626/1921.; Donáth 2008, pp. 105–106.

¹⁰ MNL OL VKM K-507, 6. 20,949/1919.; Szita 1986, pp. 606–608.

¹¹ Lipcsei 2006, p. 23.

¹² Donáth 2008, p. 106.

¹³ MNL OL ME K-26, 2. 4626/1921.; Olay 1935, p. 13.; Szita 1986, pp. 609–610.

different school system, the differing regulation (law, public administration, measuring units etc.), partly due to the radically dissonant evaluation of World War I and the peace treaties.¹⁴

Regulation of ethnic education

A comprehensive regulation of ethnic education took place in 1923, as part of the public education reform. Prime Ministerial decree No. 4800/1923 ensured the right of free school foundation and the right of free school selection. It was the school owner and maintainer who could determine the language of teaching of the institutions in each case, but during the decision making, it should negotiate it with the parents and the settlement's leaders. Ethnic schools not maintained by the state received the same central subsidy than similar educational institutions with Hungarian as their language of teaching. In state-owned or village-owned public schools where the number of ethnic students reached 40 students, upon the request of the parents, the school or the village, teaching could be performed partly or entirely in the language of the minority – naturally, in addition to the must teaching of the Hungarian language. The state also made a commitment to organise ethnic teacher training.¹⁵

As a result of the regulation of 1923, there were three types of ethnic schools operating in Hungary as far as the language of teaching was concerned. In minority schools type 'A', teaching was performed in the language of the minority and Hungarian was an obligatory subject. In the 'B' type schools, they taught in both languages, mixed. Science and skills were taught in the language of the minority, while geography, history, civics, and physical exercises in Hungarian. In both languages, they had speech and comprehension practices, writing and reading. Arithmetic and singing were also taught in two languages. Bilingualism of singing was thanks to the aim of demonstrating the similarity of folk songs in the Carpathian Basin. This was what they used to emphasize the age-long peaceful coexistence of nations living here.¹⁶

It was another important factor in determining the language of education that students should be brought up as Hungarian citizens. In this, getting to know economic and political, geographic questions (borders, resources, international relations), as well as historical events had outstanding role. That was why these subjects were taught in Hungarian, and in Hungarian national spirit. One of the functions of physical exercises was to ensure military pre-training. Since the peace treaty of Trianon prohibited the upkeep of general obligation to defend and the up-growing generations could not receive any military pre-training, certain military knowledge (formalities) were taught during the physical exercises classes at school – in accordance with the command language of military forces, in Hungarian.¹⁷

In 'C' type ethnic schools, all the subjects were taught in Hungarian but the minority's language and the related speech and comprehension practices, writing and reading were obligatory subjects. Minority language was utilised as an auxiliary language in classes run in Hungarian. In 'C' type church schools, bible classes were also held in the language of the minority, what significantly strengthened binding to national culture and traditions. In areas with a nationality in majority, even in state-owned 'C' type schools it occurred that bible classes were optionally taught in minority language.¹⁸

School boards made the decision which type to choose. In case of denominational schools, the final approval was within the scope of authority of the territorially competent bishop. In case of state- and settlement-owned schools, the proposal of the school boards had to be submitted to the Ministry for Education and Religious Affairs (MERA) by having an approval from the county sub-prefect. It often happened, however, that the sub-prefect classified the schools on his own, without the involvement of the owner and maintainer and the parents, and requested the approval of the MERA to this. Issuing the decree of 1923 did not terminate ethnic tensions and debates concerning the language of education in the field of public education. Public administration authorities and local Hungarian political forces generally made endeavours to classify the least ethnic educational institutions possible as 'A' and the most possible as 'C'.¹⁹

As part of the public education reform, a new public school curriculum was issued with Prime Ministerial decree No. 1467/1925. Denominational schools also took over the curriculum issued for the state- and village-owned schools, then based on that the Catholics prepared an adapted version of their own in 1926, the Calvinists in 1932, while the Lutherans in 1938. One of the priorities set out in the curriculum was to familiarise Hungary's history, and geography, and the rights and obligations of citizens with the students. In order to make them easier to understand, they were also taught in the minority languages. It was a curriculum requirement to acquire both languages at speech level. Whatever they learnt in one of the languages, they practised it also in the other language. In the course of being in contact with students, teachers had to use both languages.²⁰

¹⁴ Szebenyi 1994, pp. 610–611.; Rác 2004, pp. 272–273.; Tegzes 1999, p. 208.

¹⁵ MNL BaML Baranya Alisp. 6278/1924.; Olay 1935, pp. 13–15.; Füzes 1979, pp. 386.

¹⁶ Olasz 2015, pp. 239.

¹⁷ MNL OL VKM K-507, 6. 62,800/1925.; Hivatalos Közlöny 1927, p. 262.

¹⁸ Lipcsei 2006, p. 56.; Tóth 1995, p. 23.

¹⁹ MNL BaML Baranya Főisp. Res. 141/1925., 175/1925., 190/1929.

²⁰ MNL OL VKM K-507, 6. 61,784./1927.; Lipcsei 2006, pp. 43., 52.

During the education, similarly to elementary schools with Hungarian as their language of teaching, singing and drawing were separated in the ethnic educational institutions, too. Earlier they were taught within the frames of a common art subject. Writing and composition were similarly separated. As compared to education with Hungarian as the language of teaching, the biggest difference was that while in grades 1–4 of public schools teaching in the state's language there were 3 Hungarian classes per week, in minority schools there were 2 Hungarian and 2 minority language classes prescribed per week. The language class appearing as an extra class was provided by decreasing the number of singing, handicraft, and drawing classes. Prime Ministerial decree No. 1797/1914 was still in effect concerning bible classes which prescribed bible classes should possibly be taught to everybody in their mother tongue.²¹

Minority schools type 'B' taught speech and comprehension practices, writing and reading, composition, grammar, linguistic explanation, science and economy (nature study, physical science, economy, home economics, and hygiene), as well as drawing and handicraft in the language of the minority under the new curriculum. History, geography, and physical exercises, as well as speech and comprehension practices, writing and reading, composition, grammar, and linguistic explanation related to the Hungarian language as a subject were taught in Hungarian. The same curriculum was taught in both languages in arithmetic and singing. For schools with mixed languages of teaching, it was specifically prescribed that any material taught in minority language should be summarised also in Hungarian and any topics taught in Hungarian should be prepared in the minority's language, so that students would be able to summarise what they learnt in both languages.²²

In 1925, the system of approving textbooks was transformed. Within the frames of the MERA, a separate Textbook Committee was set up, including 12 expert rapporteurs. It took over the function of classification as textbooks. This board hired experts and decided on ordering the submitted textbooks' approval, rejection or revision based on their proposals. This new procedure referred to textbooks intended to be used in schools owned by the state, villages, and the Catholic Church. Textbooks of the schools owned by the Protestant Churches were approved by their chief authorities. Following the introduction of the new curriculum, in 1925, a huge textbook revision was performed, the use of compulsory textbook types was prescribed for elementary schools but besides enforcing the new regulation, schools could choose from several publications concerning a subject. In 1932, for the sake of having enhanced control of the textbook market, MERA passed a restricting decree that schools were not allowed to change the textbooks being used for 5 years and were not allowed to start to teach from new publications.²³

In theory, the regulation launched in 1923 made the flexible and differentiated application of minority education related disciplines possible and ensured training adapted to local conditions to ethnic communities. In practice, however, many times minorities were unable to freely use the opportunities listed in the decree. Due to border modifications under Trianon treaty, the number of ethnic majority settlements radically declined. In villages where Hungarians were in majority sometimes it was very difficult to organise the type of minority education that was to be provided by law. Slovaks in Hungary were in local majority altogether in 19 villages and their ratio exceeded 10% in further 49 villages. In this respect, the Germans were in a little bit better position as they comprised local majority in 292 villages and their ratio exceeded 10% in further 111 villages.²⁴

Sometimes it happened that there were not enough students of ethnic origin to maintain a minority school (class). For several small settlements or poor parishes, it was a financially unsolvable challenge to establish and maintain a school type 'A' or 'B', and provides native speaker teachers, appropriate textbook, and teaching aids. Due to advanced linguistic assimilation, one part of ethnic parents regarded it more favourable to enrol their children not in a pure minority language school, but in a hybrid or a 'C' type one. Except for minorities with particularly strong national self-awareness, it was a frequent phenomenon that the minority elite enrolled their children not in an ethnic school but in a school with Hungarian language of teaching which had higher educational standard. Acquiring a higher level of knowledge and more perfect command of the Hungarian language was considered to be important factors from the point of view of further studies in the secondary and higher education. Defection of the better-fixed and more influential group, however, just further increased disadvantages characteristic of ethnic schools.²⁵

It was a special problem that a part of the nationalities in Hungary (Slovaks and Romanians) had seceded from the central block of their nation already earlier when they moved into a Hungarian environment. These communities were left out from the unification process of the literary language and the national culture. With the introduction of minority language education, students learnt a literary language at school that substantially differed from their own dialect what on the one hand made it more difficult to acquire the material of particular

²¹ MNL BéML Békés Alisp. 6278/1924.; Lipcsei 2006, p. 53.

²² Tóth 1995, p. 23.; Lipcsei 2006, pp. 52–53.

²³ Szebenyi 1994, pp. 614–615., 619–620.

²⁴ MNL BaML Pécs Tanker. 147/1932.; Kovács 1936a, p. 37.; Kovács 1936b, p. 7.

²⁵ Petrusán 1995, p. 17.; Tilkovszky 1988, p. 253.

subjects, while on the other hand – in a certain sense – devaluated the dialect and culture that they identified themselves with. In an indirect way, all these also led towards assimilation.²⁶

As a result of ethnic migration, emigration after World War I., there were not enough teachers of ethnic origin who had appropriate qualifications in the case of a few minorities. Until 1918, 21 Romanian ethnic schools maintained by the church operated in post-Trianon Hungary with 25 teachers. In the first half of 1920-ies, however, only 4–6 schools operated, because most of the teachers moved to Romania. The lack of teachers caused a serious problem even in bigger settlements. In 1927, in Békéscsaba (a medium town in Southeast Hungary), 20–25 Romanian students could not be involved in ethnic education, because they failed to employ a Romanian teacher. After several years of intermission in a few schools, church authorities were seeking venturesome teachers in Romania, but their employment was rejected by the Hungarian government by stating that they were the representatives of Romanian nationalism that was conflicting with Hungarian interests. Thus parents enrolled their children either a state-owned school type ‘C’ or the Hungarian language public school of the Roman Catholic Church.²⁷

The situation got even more difficult when there were not enough Orthodox pastors who could hold regular church services and bible classes. Even though bible classes in the mother tongue played an extremely important role in the formulation of children’s national identity awareness, caring about historical traditions, preserving cultural features, as well as practising the language. In this respect, in the Slovakian minority society of the Plain, the Lutheran church played a highly important role.²⁸

Lack of teachers was a big challenge even for ethnic communities being financially in a bit better situation. At the time of publishing the government decree regulating ethnic education, in 1923, there were 419 German minority schools on file. In order to use the full potential of all the educational institutions, a total of 1,400 teachers would have been necessary. In practice, however, there were only 101 teachers with German mother tongue available. In most of schools type ‘C’, a person who was not of German origin or a native German person but without appropriate teacher qualification performed the teaching.²⁹

Government policy ensuring rights – local practice limiting rights

In 1920-ies, in case of teacher’s jobs announced for state-owned and village-owned schools, it was not an obligatory condition to know the minority language typical of the region. Employing a teacher who did not know the minority language or spoke it incorrectly practically made it impossible even facultative education on the minority language. The reason for this was partly the well-known lack of teachers speaking minority languages well. But the intent that could be experienced on behalf of local representatives of public administration to force the use of Hungarian also played a role in it.³⁰

Local authorities and school boards with Hungarian majority urged the introduction of Hungarian as the language of teaching as broadly as possible especially in the first half of 1920-ies, then in the middle of 1930-ies. At several places, the ethnic population had to face the fact that certain political forces regarded the selection of the language of education as a measure of patriotism. In such cases, parents frequently strove to show up loyal and did not insist on minority language teaching or just asked for a ‘C’ type education. Local school boards typically decided for Hungarian educational language schools in villages where Croats lived along the Western border, even at places where 80% of students were Croatian.³¹

As a result of this, in the course of 1920-ies, the minority school network was unable to extend. With respect to types based on the language of teaching, a very unfavourable tendency showed. The ratio of minority schools (type ‘A’) teaching in the mother tongue significantly declined; most of the institutions were transformed into type ‘C’ ones. In 1919, 186 minority schools from among the 217 ones in Southern Transdanubia ran type ‘A’ education and there was no ‘C’ type school. By 1932, however, the situation had changed radically. There were only 13 ‘A’ type schools operating and the education took place with ‘C’ type teaching in 112 schools.³²

Even the government was not satisfied with the situation. According to the survey of the Ethnic and Minority Department operating under the Prime Minister’s office, at the Southern Transdanubia, based on the number of ethnic population, the opportunities of ethnic education should have had been extended at least in 62 villages by launching a higher degree training. As a consequence of the survey, in the case of 44 villages, they urged for ‘B’ type education instead of ‘C’ type and in the case of 18 villages ‘B’ type instead of ‘A’ type.

²⁶ Jakab 2005, p. 15.; Borbély 2001. p. 167.

²⁷ Berényi 1997, pp. 62–63.

²⁸ MNL OL ME NKO K-28, 157. 15,713/1939.; MNL CsML Csanád Főisp. 39/1928.; Tóth 1995, p. 117.

²⁹ Petrusán 1995, p. 17.; Manherz 1998, p. 34.

³⁰ MNL OL ME NKO K-28, 157. 16,900/1938., 180. 15,287/1938.

³¹ Rác 2004, pp. 567–568.; Tegzes 1999, p. 209.

³² Szita 1986, pp. 617–618.

However, besides mentioning the problem, notifying the local public administration and school district organs, the government did not intend to interfere in the situation by opposing its authority.³³

Global economic crisis had a substantial impact on how the number and type of minority schools changed. The number of minority schools had further decreased, including the number of 'A' type institutions ensuring higher level linguistic training due to financial difficulties and escalating social tensions. In 1928 there were still 632 minority schools in operation, the 17% of which was type 'A'. Five years later, in 1933 there was education provided only in 565 minority public schools, including 11% that used minority language as the language of teaching. This situation brought about the case when the ratio of students at least partially studying in their mother tongue decreased among minority school age children. While in 1925 90% of the 6-11-year-old Slovakian children could learn at least to read and write at school in their mother tongue, by 1935, the ratio of Slovakian school age children studying in minority schools decreased to 60%.³⁴

	type 'A'	type 'B'	type 'C'	Total
German	46	139	263	448
Slovak	-	2	51	53
Romanian	-	1	10	11
Croatian	-	4	26	30
Serbian	15	4	-	19
Slovenian	-	3	1	4
Total	61	157	377	565

Table 2. Statistics of minority schools (in school year 1932/33)³⁵

In school year 1926/27, the Germans had the most minority schools type 'A', but most of the educational institutions were type 'C' even for them. The high number of type 'C' schools was also problematic because these institutions were unable to serve the prevention and care about minority language, culture, and tradition sufficiently, could not operate as proper cultural centres by joining the minority's forces, by strengthening its identity awareness. Ethnic inhabitants frequently did not consider these schools as their own.³⁶

Otherwise, changes in the language of teaching taking place in the educational institutions caused serious problems to the cultural governance. It happened, especially in the cases of church-owned schools, that an institution changed the type several times within some years depending on local ethnic power relations, the number and language proficiency of currently enrolled students. This made it difficult to control and keep the changes of minority education on file, to allocate subsidy, and to remedy the claims. Already in 1927, the MERA had contacted the management of the Hungarian Catholic Church who ordered based on the minister's request that each time an approval had to be applied for from the ecclesiastical authorities when public schools owned and maintained by the Catholic Church want to change the type of their used language of teaching.³⁷

The university institution system that fostered the promotion of high level command of minority languages and culture was developed by the beginning of 1930-ies. A total of 18 ethnic faculties (8 linguistics and literature, 1 philological, and 9 lecturer faculties) were set up in five institutions: in the Péter Pázmány and Palatine Joseph Universities of Budapest, as well as in the Universities of Debrecen, Szeged, and Pécs. With respect to minority distribution, 7 German, 3 Romanian, 3 South Slavic, 1 Slovakian, and 4 further university faculties of other Slavic languages operated.³⁸

In the middle of 1930-ies, the enforcement endeavours of the use of the Hungarian language appeared again due to the sharpening international relations and the strengthening of domestic extreme right efforts. In 1933, the school-inspector of County Zala compiled a respective publication to popularise how to find the Hungarian version of names and he urged local teachers to disseminate this brochure as widely as possible. According to his reasoning, creating a unified national image and thinking was inevitable to achieve successful revision and schools could be one of its main platforms. The chief school-inspector of the Szombathely Diocese urged for the exclusive use of Hungarian folk motives in the cases of drawing and handicraft subjects, and drew the teachers' attention that students should possibly only use Hungarian motives in dressing and for the decoration of their environment. Students' Hungarian language command got more and more emphasis, more and more attention was paid on teaching the language of the state.³⁹

³³ MNL OL ME NKO K-28, 216. 3724/1919., 3934/1929., 8616/1932.

³⁴ MNL OL ME NKO K-28, 216. 8134/1932.; NML BaML Baranya Főisp. Res. 198/1937.; Tóth 1995, p. 118.

³⁵ Olay 1935, pp. 18–20.

³⁶ Szita 1986, pp. 617–618.; Tilkovszky 1998, p. 48.

³⁷ MNL OL K ME NKO K-28, 216. 7005/1927., 8134/1932.; Szita 1986, p. 615.

³⁸ Olay 1935, pp. 15–16.; Lipcsei 2005, p. 100.

³⁹ Rácz 2004, p. 568.

Homogenization or introduction of a flexible system

In 1935, the new Minister of Education and Religious Affairs, Bálint Hóman announced a comprehensive education policy reform. Ministerial decree No. 11,000/1935 issued in order to unify public education made type 'B' compulsory for minority teaching. This was, however, significantly transformed as compared to its former state: practically, it was made bilingual instead of using mixed languages. 'A' type education performed purely in the language of the minority was terminated in an ascending system.⁴⁰

Within the frames of education type 'B', the following subjects were taught in the language of the minority: bible class and ethics, mother tongue and motherland (speech and comprehension practices, writing, reading, composition, grammar, linguistic explanation, and singing), as well as science and economy (counting and measuring, nature study, physical science, economy, home economics, and hygiene, drawing and handicraft). The subjects of Hungarian language and literature (Hungarian speech and comprehension practices, writing and reading, reading discussion, composition, grammar, linguistic explanation), knowledge of society and nation (history, geography, civic rights and obligations, and singing), and physical exercises were taught in Hungarian. In the last two (repeating) years of the 6-grade-education, the language of teaching of each subject was swapped, i.e. science and economy were taught in Hungarian, while knowledge of society and nation were taught in the language of the minority, thus students received education in both languages in every important field until the end of 6th grade.⁴¹

Ministerial decree No. 760/1936 regulated the details of how to change over to the new version of education. This time, there remained more time to the full change-over than in 1923. They aimed at finishing the transformation of 'C' type schools to 'B' type ones by January 1938, while the gradual cutback of 'A' type was appointed by September 1938. According to the MERA's intent, school year 1938/39 would have had been the beginning of the country-wide change-over to the new system. But the launch of the unified minority education progressed slower than expected. The necessary new curriculum got only published in 1938. In certain cases, the new regulation also made it possible to provide minority language teaching similar to 'C' type education. Under this decree, where there had been no teaching in minority language before, but 20 students applied for it, there opportunity had to be made available for teaching the minority language.⁴²

The new curriculum executed a substantial reduction of the material to be studied. It rather focused on more thorough imprinting of the elements regarded to be more important, practising the use of the acquired material in both languages, i.e. skill level bilingual communication. It was introduced as a new element that each week, students summarised the newly learnt things in each subject in both languages.⁴³

In the course of the steps taken for the establishment of unified minority education, the MERA had separate negotiations with the churches because even in the cases of church-owned schools, it was the governance that determined the scope of schools to be reorganised. There were plenty of critics concerning the new system's launch. Some regarded the deadline for the reorganisation too short, while political forces emphasising national aspects acted because the reform got prolonged too much. County leaders avoided any conflicts originating from school transformation, so generally did not push reorganisation.⁴⁴

The MERA turned to the Ministry of the Interior in autumn 1937 to accelerate this process by administrative measures. Thanks to the assistance of the Ministry of the Interior, the government made a decision of its own after collecting information on local conditions. In March 1938, Hóman made efforts in the Parliament to protect the unifying endeavours and promised to the representatives that the necessary changes would take place in time. The 1935 reform brought about considerable results despite any problems. The ratio of ethnic students taking part in wider mother tongue education increased. While in 1925, 22% of the minority schools taught under type 'B', by 1938, this ratio increased to 51%.⁴⁵

With respect to each denomination, law ordering the transformation of public education (1935: VI.) management declared that in church-owned schools the ecclesiastical authorities perform the approval of the textbooks and reference books themselves. Among other things, it was essential because 64% of the 6,379 public schools operating at that time was owned and maintained by the church, including 2,848 Roman Catholic schools. This was already in practice at Protestants, so starting from this time, even Catholics used this opportunity. The leadership of Catholic Church also wanted to practise more enhanced control over the content of the educational materials provided to the students, therefore in 1936, based on the Bench of Bishop's decision, they ordered that in the future in catholic schools it was only allowed to use textbooks especially designed to these institutions which were published upon the church's order or approved by the church. If such a publication was not available in any

⁴⁰ Rendeletek tára 1936, p. 1432.; Balogh 2002, p. 17.

⁴¹ Füzes 1979, p. 388.; Szita 1986, pp. 622–623.

⁴² Szita 1986, p. 623.; Rácz 2004, p. 568.

⁴³ Rendeletek tára 1939, pp. 3490–3494.; Füzes 1979, p. 388.; Szita 1986, pp. 622–623.

⁴⁴ Olasz 2015, p. 247.

⁴⁵ Füzes 1979, pp. 393., 398–399.

subject, at any grade, an expert or team with appropriate references had to be requested to write the missing textbook.⁴⁶

In 1938, significant foreign policy changes took place that had direct impact on minority education in Hungary. After Germany had merged Austria, the Third Reich became Hungary's direct neighbour. In this period of time, Berlin already put the surrounding Eastern European states under more and more open pressure in order to extend the specific rights and cultural room for manoeuvre of the local German minority. Even the Hungarian government could not stand off from the endeavour strengthening among the Germany minority in Hungary to rearrange a part of their 'B' type schools into 'A' type ones. However, 'B' and 'A' type German minority schools demanded a larger number of teachers teaching in German.⁴⁷

In 1937, the Hungarian government issued a decree on the arrangement of 1-year-long German teacher further training courses in order to satisfy the teacher needs of minority schools based on the urging of the local minority and Germany. At the same time, exactly to offset the strengthening of the German influence, the governance already deliberately encouraged the expansive use of mother tongue education among the Croatian population living at the Western part of Hungary. Upon the direct instruction of the MERA, the school instructors called up the teachers of schools of villages where Croats lived so that they enrolled in the retraining course in Croatian to be held in Baja so that minority education could be introduced in more places.⁴⁸

In November 1938, the changing of the Hungarian borders had started: re-annexation of the mostly Hungarian-populated areas that had been annexed after World War I. The first Vienna decision gave back the Southern belt of the Highlands to Hungary, but together with this territory, 74 Slovakian language schools also got in the ownership of the Hungarian state. Those conducted 'A' type education even later on, and besides them there were 38 'B' and 7 'C' type Slovakian minority schools. Political debates started to unfold around public schools with Slovakian language of teaching, the number of which suddenly increased. On the re-annexed settlements, the new Hungarian public administration authorities, but especially the armed forces, the army and the gendarmerie handled minority efforts with some impatience and tried to demonstrate the Hungarian features of the region the more areas possible.⁴⁹

In a part of public schools with Slovakian language of teaching, a Hungarian division was set up and first of all Slovaks in public services, too, were often pushed that they enrolled their children to the Hungarian division. Having experienced the problems, the minister of home affairs instructed the shire men of counties situated on the Highlands not to hinder the Slovaks' equitable lingual efforts, not to force the spreading of the Hungarian language. In March 1940, Pál Teleki prime minister even personally committed himself to a consistent compliance and protect to lingual rights belonging to minorities.⁵⁰

Under the autonomy of the German ethnic group issued in 1940, the social organisation of Germans in Hungary, the Volksbund had the right to found schools of their own, in which the language of teaching was German and Hungarian was included as an obligatory subject. This solution was similar to the former 'A' type education. Education was however provided in these schools in the National Socialist spirit. Volksbund first had 17 schools, then from 1940, after the re-annexation of Northern Transylvania, it acquired a further 47 schools from the Saxon Evangelical Church, too. It could not achieve, however, that the rest of the German minority public schools also got under the supervision of the organisation. The Hungarian government consistently refused this claim, which was also supported from Berlin.⁵¹

Huge territories were re-annexed to Hungary in four steps between November 1938 and April 1941: the Southern belt of Highland, Transcarpathia, Northern Transylvania, and Southland. As a result, the territory of the country increased by 85%, while its population increased by 61%. Together with the re-annexed territories, however, not only approximately 3 million Hungarians returned but around 2.5 million inhabitants of other citizenship got under Hungarian supremacy. Thus the proportion of the minority population increased from the former 7% to 23%. In the new situation, it would have caused a serious ethnic conflict, if the Hungarian authorities tried to reorganise the more than two thousand schools that taught in minority language in the re-annexed territories into type 'B', i.e. teaching in mixed languages. That was why the government repealed the regulation concerning the unified 'B' type education of 1935 and restored the original structure of 1923.⁵²

Under the Prime Ministerial decree No. 700/1941, in minority schools newly allocated to Hungary, education could have been continued to be conducted in the minority language but they had to introduce the obligatory teaching of the Hungarian language. After a preliminary survey, the government prescribed the reorganisation of 'B' type schools with mixed language of teaching into 'A' type at 372 places. In schools where earlier only 'C' type education was in effect or where there was no education in minority language, upon the

⁴⁶ Szebenyi 1994, pp. 620–621.

⁴⁷ MNL OL ME NKO K-28, 157. 16,322/1939.

⁴⁸ Donát 2008, p. 111.; Rácz 2004, p. 564.

⁴⁹ Olasz 2015, p. 248.

⁵⁰ Tilkovszky 1998, pp. 81–82.

⁵¹ Seewann 2015, II. p. 288.

⁵² Petrusán 1995, p. 19

enrolment of 40 students, 'B' type education, while with 20 students, 'C' type education should have been provided.⁵³

	1932	1941*
German	448	485
Slovak	53	119
Romanian	11	1,345
South Slavic (Serbian, Croatian, Slovenian)	53	94
Ruthenian	–	704
Total	565	2,450

Table 3. Changes in the number of minority schools (1932–1941)⁵⁴

* The statistics of year 1941 also contain the population data of the territorial increase between 1938 and 1941.

The executive order of the new decree made it possible to apply flexible solutions. It was possible to have multiple education type divisions in a school. In such cases, the parents decided to which division they enrolled their children. They wanted to take the parents' standpoints concerning the language of teaching into account to an increased extent. The government tried to ensure that local authorities and various political groups could not influence the parents openly upon the selection. The MERA ordered that secret voting had to be provided for the parents when they decided about the language of teaching.⁵⁵

Meeting the regulations and the enforcement of the intents included in them, however, faced several kinds of difficulties at this time again. Substantial and livelihood problems increasing due to the war, extraordinary measures introduced in connection with warfare, and the limitations of civil rights significantly hindered the major development of the minority school system. The situation was exacerbated by the strengthening of nationalism during the war.

The question of textbooks remained unsolved. Most of the teaching materials used earlier in the schools of the re-annexed territories was discarded because they were not compatible with the Hungarian conditions and did not fit the curriculum and represented a radically different political standpoint. The new publications ordered to replace them were only accomplished with huge delay. There was a serious lack of teachers because most of the teachers were called up for military service. The activity of extreme political forces intensified, what frequently manifested in open anti-minority statements. All the above made it difficult for the minorities in Hungary to utilise their lawful opportunities concerning minority education more widely.⁵⁶

Conclusion

All-in-all, minority education unfolded more favourably in Hungary between the two World Wars than before World War I. The Hungarian government's decrees ensured cultural autonomy to ethnic minorities – free school choice, free school establishment, creation of church and school youth associations and opportunity of mother tongue education as its part. However, in everyday practice, limited financial resources and confrontational nationalism characteristic of the states of the Eastern-European region made the expansion and development of minority education difficult for the minorities. Because of separation from ethnic cultural centres due to border changes in 1920s, the lack of teachers due to mass migration, the economic difficulties afflicting school maintaining churches and municipalities, the shortage of student books and teaching aids, frequent changes affecting educational principles and curricula, the assimilatory pressure of extremist political groups, and interethnic conflicts related to revisionist endeavours – the ethnic minorities in Hungary could only enjoy the opportunities provided by central decrees restrictedly. However, despite the difficulties, the school network that had been built out between the two world wars played an important role in educating the minorities living in Hungary and preserving their ethnic identity.

⁵³ Szita 1986, p. 325.; Füzes 1979, p. 388.

⁵⁴ Szita 1986, pp. 624–625.

⁵⁵ Füzes 1979, pp. 403–405.

⁵⁶ MNL OL ME NKO K-28, 157. 21,458/1940.; Szita 1986, p. 626.

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