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Experiencing Collapse: Tibor Eckhardt's Career in Transylvania (1914–1918)

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Abstract

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This study examines the early career of Tibor Eckhardt (1888–1972) through his administrative and political activities in Transylvania during the First World War. Drawing on official records, memoirs, and contemporary press reports, the paper reconstructs his movements across the wartime bureaucratic and social landscape—from government service to local administration and militia organization amid imperial collapse. By situating Eckhardt's experiences within the broader dynamics of displacement, social disintegration, and state transformation, the study argues that these forms of administrative and political mobility shaped his later worldview. The paper also serves to illuminate how local actors experienced and interpreted the disintegration of empire.

Tibor Eckhardt (1888–1972) was a well-known, significant figure in Hungarian politics between the two world wars, first making a name for himself between 1920 and 1922 as press chief to the Prime Minister, later as a member of parliament for the ruling party, and eventually for the so-called “Fajvédő Párt” or “Race Defender Party,” (officially: Hungarian National Independence Party, 1922–1926). Primarily an organiser, he rose from a powerful figure in the far-right camp to become leader of the anti-Nazi Független Kisgazdapárt (Smallholders' Party) in the early 1930s before leaving for the United States in 1941 where he founded the Független Magyarorszáért Mozgalom (Movement for an Independent Hungary). Eckhardt's early career has not been addressed in available literature to date, even though the early days of his public involvement and the experience gained at that time contributed greatly to his socialisation as a politician.

In this study, Eckhardt's early career through his administrative and political activities in Transylvania—the eastern part of historical Hungary—during the First World War will be summarized in brief. In these years, hundreds of thousands of people were displaced in Transylvania, with Eckhardt's life greatly affected by the outbreak of the Great War (military mobilisation) in 1914, the Romanian invasion of 1916, and above all, the collapse of the Austro–Hungarian Empire at the end of 1918. Drawing on official records, memoirs, and contemporary press reports, the paper aims to reconstruct his movements across the wartime bureaucratic and social landscape—from

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government service to local administration and militia organization amid imperial collapse. Through situating Eckhardt's story within the wider dynamics of displacement, social disintegration, and state transformation, it becomes clear how these forms of administrative and political mobility shaped his later worldview. Moreover, additional light is shed on how local actors experienced and interpreted the disintegration of empire. Biographical research can thus provide useful information on broader historical issues.¹

The Austro-Hungarian Monarchy and the administrative apparatus of Hungary within it was Tibor Eckhardt's defining socializing environment. Despite a family background based in the opposition (Independence Party),² he took on a role in the pro-government Nemzeti Munkapárt (National Party of Work) state administration led by Hungarian Prime Minister István Tisza between 1913 and 1917. Before the outbreak of the Great War, Eckhardt was employed in the county department of the Hungarian Ministry of the Interior as a junior clerk.³ In the summer of 1913, he married Erzsébet Vásárhelyi, also from Csanád County,⁴ a marriage that played an important role in the start of his political career. The union strengthened his family ties with the Betegh family, who were related to the Vásárhelyi's, and Miklós Horthy, who was then serving as Franz Joseph's aide-de-camp,⁵ i.e., the governor of Hungary between 1920 and 1944, became a relative of his.⁶ Although the marriage did not last,⁷ it was a clear step up the social ladder. During the Great War, Horthy's wife's family, the Purgly's, were considered among the most influential landowners in Csanád County, along with the Vásárhelyi and Eckhardt families.⁸

On the side of the Transylvanian government commissioner

On 1 April 1914, the young husband was promoted to assistant ministerial secretary,⁹ though his quiet civil service career and orderly family life were cut short less than three months later due to an assassination in Sarajevo. Eckhardt was sent to Transylvania during the mobilisation at the end of July 1914 and remained there in service until the collapse at the end of 1918. A part of

1 Cf. BARTHA, Ákos. "Non-significant" Historical Figures and the Corrective Function of Biography. In *History–Theory–Criticism*, 2025, vol. 22, no. 1, pp. 12–14.

2 Tibor Eckhardt's father, Oszkár Eckhardt, was active in politics in Makó as a supporter of Gyula Justh's various political parties.

3 Magyar kir. belügyministerium. In *Magyarország tiszti cím- és névtára*, 33. Budapest : Pesti Könyvnyomda, 1914, p. 86.

4 Marriage announcement. Arad, 10 August 1913. Private collection of János Gilicze. Copy. Owned by the author.

5 BARNA, János – SÜMEGHY, Dezső. *Nemes családok Csanádvármegyében*. Makó : Gaál ny., 1913, p. 218. In 1909, Sándor Betegh married Eckhardt's sister, Mária Eckhardt. KEMPELEN, Béla. *Magyar nemes családok*, 3. *Caballini-Ezbar*. Budapest : Grill Károly Könyvkiadóvállalata, 1912, p. 403. On Horthy's family, education and early career: TURBUCZ, Dávid. *Horthy Miklós, a haditengerésztszít*. Budapest : Jaffa, 2022.

6 According to Eckhardt's later recollections, Horthy served as best man at their wedding. KÁDÁR LYNN, Katalin (ed.) *Tibor Eckhardt in His Own Words. An Autobiography*. New York : Boulder, 2005, p. 1.

7 After the divorce, Erzsébet Vásárhelyi remarried in the summer of 1920 to Géza Wekerle, son of former Prime Minister Sándor Wekerle. *Házasság*. In *Budapesti Hírlap*, 22 June 1920, p. 3.

8 GILICZE, János. *A földéaki Návay család története*. Debrecen : Hajdú-Bihar Megyei Múzeumok Igazgatósága; Tiszántúli Történelem Társaság, 2006, p. 237.

9 Hivatalos rész. In *Budapesti Közlöny*, 1914, vol. 48, no. 74, p. 2.

historical Hungary, Transylvania played a special role in the Hungarian public consciousness, also thanks to the successes of the early modern Transylvanian princes; however, by the middle of the 19th century, the Romanian population had already reached an absolute majority in the region. Naturally, nationalism had a strong influence on both the Romanians in Transylvania as well as those in the mother country and by the time of the First World War, occupation of Transylvania had become Romania's primary objective. Sooner or later, the Hungarian political elite had to face up to these trends.¹⁰

First, Eckhardt served alongside a relative, Miklós Betegh, who was appointed government commissioner at the government commission operating in the XII Corps area. Betegh was originally the lord lieutenant of Turda-Arieș (Torda-Aranyos) County in Transylvania and a supporter of István Tisza. After the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy declared war on Serbia, the Hungarian government appointed four government commissioners to facilitate coordination between the administration and the army that had been called up.¹¹ The Transylvanian government commissioner was based in Sibiu (Nagyszeben) until mid-September 1914, then in Turda (Torda). Eckhardt's wife followed her husband to Turda where the couple, who belonged to the local intelligentsia, participated in a variety of charitable activities in support of those who had gone to war.¹²

The change was significant in more than simply geographical terms. Eckhardt had been a low-ranking official in the central government in Budapest where he had no contact with civil society.¹³ In contrast, this position of trust in the Transylvanian wartime administration involved a wider range of tasks. Betegh, who was appointed governor of Transylvania, wrote in his memoirs that in addition to mediating between the military and civil authorities, his responsibilities included investigating certain irregularities and supporting various supervisory bodies, even performing a kind of intelligence role. "In the first quarter of 1916, the military command in Sibiu asked me a confidential question about what could be expected from the Romanian population of Transylvania if Romania took a stand against us in the war," recalled the government commissioner, who had a very high opinion of his diligent and knowledgeable subordinate. According to him, Eckhardt single-handedly performed work that was later done by 25 people—albeit in a larger field.¹⁴

According to surviving documents from the government commission, the young secretary was indeed not at a loss in the new office, where he mostly dealt with applications for state aid and military aid, as well as complaints from locals. Eckhardt corresponded with lord lieutenants (*főispán*), sub-prefects (*alispán*),

10 ROMSICS, Ignác. *Erdély elvesztése. 1918–1947*. Budapest : Helikon, 2018, pp. 15–85.

11 BETEGH, Miklós. *Erdély a háborúban. Néhány erdélyi adat az 1914–1917. évek történetéhez*. Dicsőszentmárton : Erzsébet Könyvkiadó, 1924, p. 25.

12 A tordai segítő akció. In *Aranyosvidék*, 3 October 1914, p. 2; Segítő akció. In *Aranyosvidék*, 18 March 1916, p. 2.

13 BAVOUZET, Julia. A Prosopographical Survey of the High Civil Service Corps of the Ministriaes in the Hungarian Part of the Dual Monarchy. In ADLGASSER, Franz – LINDSTRÖM, Fredrik (eds.) *The Habsburg Civil Service and Beyond: Bureaucracy and Civil Servants from the Vormärz to the Inter-War Years*. Wien : Austrian Academy of Sciences Press, 2019, p. 168.

14 BETEGH 1924, pp. 17, 38, 44, 52 (quoted from here).

mayors and other administrative leaders; he kept minutes, explained regulations, requested reports and even gave instructions. In some cases, he did so in a very self-assured manner, writing to the district chief (*főszolgabíró*) of Turda:

I must label as extremely negligent, even unconscionable, the aid program whereby the aid will be allocated to the family in need on 8 December, even though the breadwinner was drafted on 1 August and the family was left without support. I submitted his complaint to the district chief on 4 November for urgent handling.¹⁵

When the district chief of Luduş (Marosludas) received an anonymous letter stating that the district clerk of Zau de Câmpie (Mezőzáh) was keeping the aid books for himself and deducting tax arrears from the payments, he sent a strongly worded letter to the district chief calling for a “thorough investigation of the facts” as the reported illegality “even with honest handling, causes distrust and suspicion among the population.”¹⁶ The agile assistant also reminded the sub-prefect of Turda-Arieş County in an extremely critical letter that “the task of the welfare committees is not only to remedy the problems arising after the end of the war, but first and foremost to alleviate the misery that has arisen during the war.” In other words, that they should begin their substantive work without delay.¹⁷

Like his superior, Eckhardt also recalled in memoirs a political assignment from this period of his career. According to this appointment, Prime Minister István Tisza instructed Betegh in a letter to endeavour to maintain the Romanians' loyalty to the Hungarian Holy Crown and to consult with the Romanian leaders on this matter.¹⁸ However, cooperation between the Prime Minister and the Government Commissioner was not entirely without conflict. “Please communicate your wishes regarding the maintenance of internal order in the country and the treatment of the Romanian intelligentsia to me, but not to the soldiers, who have nothing to do with it,” the Hungarian prime minister wrote with irritation to the Transylvanian government commissioner on one occasion.¹⁹ Eckhardt's work on the side of the government commissioner as a liaison between the civil administration and the Transylvanian army corps was highly appreciated, even at the highest levels. He was awarded the Crowned Gold Cross of Merit by Charles IV in the spring of 1917, “In recognition of his zealous and effective service.”²⁰

The government dismissed the commissioners in May 1916, and although Betegh received a new assignment from Tisza a month later (this

15 Magyar Nemzeti Levéltár Országos Levéltára (MNL OL), Budapest, K 706, Miniszterelnökségi Levéltár, Torda-Aranyos vármegye főispánja. mint a cs. és kir. 12. hadtest területére kinevezett kormánybiztos, 1168/1915, Letter from Eckhardt to the district chief of Turda, 25 December 1914.

16 MNL OL, K 706, 369/1915, Letter from Eckhardt to the district chief of Marosludas, 30 January 1915.

17 MNL OL, K 706, 1369/1915, Letter from Eckhardt to the sub-prefect of Turda-Arieş County, 25 February 1915.

18 Országos Széchényi Könyvtár, Budapest, Kézirattár Fond 588, Tibor Eckhardt, box 1, File 10, Eckhardt Tibor: Mikor veszett el Erdély? 5 December 1959 (hereafter: Eckhardt, When was Transylvania lost? 1959). Tisza sought to take action against the abuses of the Hungarian authorities in pursuit of these goals. VERMES, Gábor. *Tisza István*. Budapest : Osiris, 2001, p. 269.

19 Letter from Tisza to Betegh. 7 January 1915. Published by: *Gróf Tisza István összes munkái. 4. sorozat, harmadik kötet*. Budapest : Franklin, 1926, p. 20.

20 Hivatalos rész. In *Budapesti Közlöny*, 1917, vol. 51, no. 49, p. 1.

time as government commissioner of Transylvania and Banat), his young relative did not follow.²¹ However, Eckhardt continued to support him beyond his capacity as government commissioner. “For a long time, he performed the demanding duties of secretary to government commissioner Dr. Miklós Betegh, then had to take on most of the work of the lord lieutenant on his own, and did an excellent job everywhere,” wrote the newspaper *Aranyosvidék*, revealing that the agile young man remained with Betegh for a while as the lord lieutenant’s secretary.²²

As district chief

The *Aranyosvidék*’s attention was due to the fact that Eckhardt had been working as district chief of the Iara (Alsójára) district of Turda-Arieş County since the autumn of 1916.²³ The district chiefs embodied state power and the power of the counties in Hungary during the dualist era (1867–1918) under the authority of the sub-prefects. If necessary, they could also command the gendarmerie and perform political functions, especially during elections, when—although this was irregular—they often had to ensure favourable results for the government as agents of the lord lieutenant. During the Great War, the power of the district chiefs increased significantly due to their role in military exemptions and the distribution of war aid, though the potential for abuse also increased.²⁴

Eckhardt later stated that he wanted to “go to the Romanian district” himself in order to become more familiar with the issue of nationality. To this end, he allegedly learned the language and even gave his first speech in Romanian.²⁵ The Iara region was indeed predominantly Romanian but in 1910, Hungarians were still the largest ethnic group in this urbanising large village, with a population around 1800.²⁶ Eckhardt was not to be bored in his new role either. No sooner had the new district chief taken up his position than Romania entered the war on the side of the Entente, and as such, at the end of August 1916, more than 400 000 Romanian soldiers invaded Transylvania. Hundreds of thousands of people fled to escape the unexpected attack.²⁷ Some of the refugees ended up in Iara, where the district chief tried to provide them with work and food.²⁸

21 BETEGH 1924, pp. 59–63.

22 Dr. Eckhardt Tibor kitüntetése. In *Aranyosvidék*, 17 March 1917, p. 2.

23 Vármegye. Őszi közgyűlés. In *Aranyosvidék*, 4 November 1916, p. 2.

24 PÁL, Judit – POPOVIC, Vlad. The Transformation of the Mid-level Civil Servants’ Corps in Transylvania in the Aftermath of the First World War: The High Sheriffs between 1918 and 1925. In BECKER, Peter et al. (eds.) *Hofratsdämmerung? Verwaltung und ihr Personal in den Nachfolgestaaten der Habsburgermonarchie 1918 bis 1920*. Wien : Böhlau, 2020, pp. 157–159; EGRY, Gábor. Loyal, But to Whom? Career Patterns from Minority of Majority and Majority to Minority in Post-WWI Romania. In SZEGHY-GAYER, Veronika (ed.) *Civil Servants under Changing Regimes in Central and Eastern Europe in the First Half of the 20th Century*. Košice : Institute of Social Sciences CSPA SAS, 2024, pp. 21–22.

25 VÁMOS, Magda. Eckhardt Tibor mint alsójárai főszolgabíró. In *Keleti Ujság*, 12 July 1937, p. 8.

26 VARGA E., Árpád (ed.) *Erdély etnikai és felekezeti statisztikája. IV. Fehér, Beszterce-Naszód és Kolozs megye. Népszámlálási adatok 1850–1992 között*. Budapest; Csíkszereda : Teleki László Alapítvány; Pro-Print Könyvkiadó, 2001, p. 597.

27 GALÁNTAI, József. *Az első világháború*. Budapest : Gondolat, 1980, p. 304; ABLONCZY, Balázs – NAGY, Béla. 1916–1918. *A román hadszíntér*, <https://tti.abtk.hu/terkepek/terkepek/1916-1918-a-roman-hadszinter>, [last viewed on 24 October 2025].

28 See, for example: Menekültek tájékoztatója. Három menekült. In *Aranyosvidék*, 14 October

Eckhardt continued charitable work even after the attack was repelled²⁹ and lobbied for new railway developments to include Iara.³⁰ He strictly enforced the law, even at his new post and demonstrated his own incorruptibility by—according to local accounts—refusing to visit members of the local intelligentsia, which was considered an unusual breach of etiquette.³¹ Eckhardt did not forget about his own career either. In the spring of 1917, we find his name on the board of directors of the Iara municipal credit union,³² and he also had a seat on the preparatory committee for the Vasszékely (Iron Szekler) statue in Odorheiu Secuiesc (Székelyudvarhely), which was a symbol of Hungarian supremacy in Transylvania.³³

At the end of August 1917, Eckhardt got into a conflict with the new lord lieutenant, Count Sándor Bethlen, who summoned the district chiefs of the county's six districts and called on them to perform political services for the government and work on behalf of pro-government candidates in the event of a parliamentary election, even though he had no right to do so. This was not at all uncommon at the time, and according to a report in *Budapesti Hírlap*, Eckhardt was the only one to oppose this demand, which was undoubtedly a serious violation of written law. At the same time, he assured Bethlen that “in the face of unjustified national aspirations, he would act in accordance with his intentions.”³⁴ The conflict was finally resolved by the Minister of the Interior, Gábor Ugron Jr.,³⁵ who incidentally was Tibor Eckhardt's cousin.³⁶

The thirty-year-old district chief did not suffer from a lack of self-confidence. He also had a particularly bad relationship with the local district doctor. “He started gathering information against me. He went around the villages and investigated,” recalled Dr. Lajos Nagy.³⁷ Eckhardt creatively defended the products of the command economy, which were not exactly flawless. According to a newspaper article, when the district doctor classified flour purchased from an official shop as unfit for consumption, “he instructed the district doctor in a very stern tone not to meddle in matters he did not understand.” Dr. Nagy did not take kindly to the official interference in his practice and threatened the

1916, p. 3; A menekültek segélyezése. In *Aranyosvidék*, 14 October 1916, p. 4.

29 See, for example: Hadi árvák estélye. In *Aranyosvidék*, 16 June 1917, p. 3; A népünnepély elszámolása. In *Aranyosvidék*, 1 September 1917, p. 2; Alsójára a tudószanatóriumért. In *Aranyosvidék*, 2 March 1918, p. 3.

30 Két év alatt kell kiépülnie a gyalui vasútnak. Monstre ankét a vármegyeházán. In *Ujság* (Kolozsvár–Cluj-Napoca), 3 May 1918, p. 3.

31 GARA Ernő. Eckhardt Tibor, a járai főbíró. In *Ellenzék*, 16 December 1934, p. 2.

32 I. Kivonat a magyarországi kereskedelmi cégjegyzékből. In *Központi Értesítő*, 1917, vol. 42, no. 32, p. 681.

33 Magyarország társadalmához! In *Ellenzék*, 4 October 1917, p. 1.

34 Torda-Aranyosban főszoigabírókkal akarnak választatni. In *Budapesti Hírlap*, 23 September 1917, pp. 7–8.

35 Politikai események. In *Budapesti Hírlap*, 25 September 1917, p. 7.

36 Eckhardt's mother, Róza Ugron, was the sister of Gábor Ugron Sr. His son, Gábor Ugron Jr. was an MP for Marosvásárhely from 1915. Less than two years later, he reached his political peak serving as Minister of the Interior in the grand coalition governments of Móric Esterházy and Sándor Wekerle between June 1917 and January 1918. Between March and September 1918, he was the royal commissioner and industrial commissioner of Transylvania, and after the victory of the democratic revolution, he made his voice heard in the Székely National Council. ANKA, László – MÁTYÁS, Zoltán. *Rendszerváltások szemtanúja. Ifjabb Ugron Gábor élete*. Budapest : Veritas Történetkutató Intézet; Magyar Napló, 2020, pp. 9–43.

37 GARA Ernő. Eckhardt Tibor, a járai főbíró. In *Ellenzék*, 16 December 1934, p. 2.

young district chief with a slap in the face.³⁸ In one of his later memoirs, Eckhardt himself recalled the public food supply problems in Transylvania in 1918, which he, like many others, blamed on the Minister of Public Food Supply, Prince Lajos Windischgraetz.³⁹

A few years after these events, he also recalled that in September 1918, “when the danger of revolutionary collapse was already on the horizon,” he had made a proposal at the general assembly of Turda-Arieş County that “all Hungarian parties should unite to defend against the danger.”⁴⁰ According to a later recollection, he also reported to Government Commissioner József Széll that “collapse is inevitable because the military administration has already resigned from service” and the mountains are full of deserters and escaped prisoners of war. He also recalled a hunting trip to Transylvania in the autumn of 1918 by two influential Hungarian politicians, Mihály Károlyi and Gyula Andrássy.⁴¹ The hunt in Dobrin⁴² was interrupted by Eckhardt’s cousin, the now former Minister of the Interior, Gábor Ugron Jr., who arrived at the Andrásy Castle with news of the Bulgarian armistice. Ugron and Károlyi first went to Cluj-Napoca (Kolozsvár), from where they left for Budapest. “Ugron assessed the situation without any optimism, his view was also that peace should be concluded quickly and if the Germans were unwilling to come with us, a separate peace,” Károlyi recalled.⁴³ Ugron returned to the capital and became involved in politics accordingly. He was considered a supporter of the democratic revolutionary government that came to power at the end of October 1918 under the leadership of Mihály Károlyi. His cousin remained in his district, where he attempted to preserve the old order with a militia he had organized.

The militia leader

While the political leaders left Transylvania, the district chief of Iara remained at his post. He was not in an enviable position, as the population primarily blamed officials of the old regime for the deteriorating public conditions. At the time of the collapse of the old state administration, the chief magistrates were often chased away—if they did not flee on their own. Those who remained in their posts had to face a reduction in power, mainly due to the lack of adequate law enforcement. Power struggles now arose not with other established public bodies, but with the newly formed national councils.⁴⁴ The collapse of historical Hungary and the personal struggle against it—which was ultimately unsuccessful—was a lasting personal experience for Tibor Eckhardt. Before his death, he stated bluntly, “Of all my actions, I am most proud of this struggle to

38 The conflict ended with the doctor’s suspended fine. Cf. *Az alsójárai járási orvos és a főszolgabíró háborúsága*. In *Ujság* (Kolozsvár–Cluj-Napoca), 3 May 1918, p. 5.

39 Eckhardt, *When was Transylvania lost?* 1959.

40 *Az 1922. évi június hó 16-ára hirdetett nemzetgyűlés nyomtatványai. Napló. XXIX*. Budapest : Athenaeum, 1924, p. 65 (3 February 1925).

41 Eckhardt, *When was Transylvania lost?* 1959.

42 The so called “Andrássy-havas” (Dobrin) was a mountain in the Gyalu Mountains in Kolozs County.

43 KÁROLYI, Mihály. *Egy egész világ ellen*. Budapest : Gondolat, 1965, p. 293.

44 PÁL – POPOVIC 2020, p. 159.

this day.”⁴⁵ Since no documents relevant to our research were preserved in the records of the chief magistrate of Iara between 1916 and 1919,⁴⁶ an attempt to reconstruct the events with the help of available literature, Eckhardt's memoirs recorded at different times, other memoirs, and relevant Hungarian and Romanian press material will be made.

The situation in the autumn of 1918 was much more serious than what Eckhardt had experienced during the Romanian invasion in early autumn 1916. According to his memoirs recorded in 1934, as soon as the telegram on the political changes in Budapest was received, he forwarded it to the notary offices and gendarmerie stations, stating that although “the mob” had taken over in the capital, anyone who “disturbed the peace would be punished!” As a result, he claimed that “not a single national council was formed and not a single revolutionary celebration was held” in his district. However, it is questionable what can be called a “revolutionary celebration.” Eckhardt himself described the situation as follows:

Armed Romanian crowds were pushing their way home on foot or by train into the snowy mountains, there was senseless shooting on the roads, volleys were fired from passing trains, and real mass hysteria took hold of the chaotic stream of people rushing home.⁴⁷

According to another memoir, the riots here were caused by the unfounded but rapidly spreading rumour that large quantities of zero-grade flour had been stockpiled in the state warehouse in Iara. Starving people from the surrounding villages flocked to the district centre where they attacked the warehouse, wrote János Kemény, who had no personal experience of the armed atrocities as he left Iara with his family the next day. However, he later learned that the district chief first shot one of the looters in the palm of his hand, then organised a guard of four or five young men who fired a few shots from pistols and shotguns. “Everyone fled from the unexpected attack, including those who were looting the warehouse and those who were just standing around. I heard that there were a few wounded victims of the clash,” Kemény said.⁴⁸

Contemporary press sources indicate that the riots in Iara began on Saturday, 2 November 1918, escalating into a series of bloody events over the course of two days. This caused serious trouble for Eckhardt, as the Romanian National Council received a report that eight people had been shot dead by gendarmes using weapons under the unlawful orders of the district chief. According to the report of the Romanian–Hungarian joint commission investigating the riots,⁴⁹

45 Speech by Tibor Eckhardt. In ECKHARDT, Tibor. *Államférfi a száműzetésben*. New York : Amerikai Magyar Könyvtár és Történelmi Társulat, 1971, p. 21.

46 A big thank you to Attila Gidó for the information provided based on archival records. Cf. Direcția Județeană a Arhivelor Naționale Cluj, Pretura Plășii Iara. Sándor Szent-Iványi knew (perhaps from Eckhardt himself) that “during the collapse” of 1918, the district chief of Iara “transported his entire archive to Kolozsvár and Budapest in a railway freight car, accompanied by his horses and a machine gun.” SZENT-IVÁNYI, Sándor. Bevezetés felé. In ECKHARDT 1971, p. 4.

47 TISZA, Miksa (ed.) *A menekültek könyve. A megszállott magyar területről kiüldözött magyar testvéreink kálváriája*. Miskolc : Fekete Pál és társai, 1940, p. 58.

48 KEMÉNY, János. *Kakukkfiókák. Önéletírás*. Budapest : Kriterion, 1972, p. 310; cf. pp. 305–311.

49 At the local level, cooperation between the Hungarian and Romanian national councils was common practice. For several examples of this: EGRY, Gábor. Negotiating Post-Imperial Transitions: Local Societies and Nationalizing States in East Central Europe. In MILLER, Paul – MORELON,

strangers appeared in the village on Saturday demanding grain and money citing “a new law.” During the night, there was a clash between deserters and the local gendarmes, but the latter eventually retreated in the face of superior forces. The most serious atrocities took place on Sunday. As a prelude, in the morning hours, a dismissed Romanian judge broke into the district chief’s house and “asked” him for shoes. Eckhardt hesitated, but the guest, Jakab Iliana, became increasingly threatening and he wanted to “avoid confrontation,” he finally asked the municipal judge for shoes himself, which he then handed over to Iliana. However, this failed in disarming the crowd and in the afternoon, people arriving from Cacova Ieri (Aranyosivánfalva) set fire to the Hangya cooperative premises. According to a press report based on the joint committee’s report, at this point, the district chief:

[...] armed himself and, at the head of several citizens and gendarmes, marched against the looters [...] He called on the crowd to stop looting and pillaging and to disperse quietly. The looters did not obey the order, so the chief constable ordered his men to open fire, after which the perpetrators fled. The district chief set up posts at both ends of the village to maintain order.

Eckhardt then requested assistance from the Hungarian National Council, the sub-prefect and the gendarmerie in Turda.⁵⁰ Finally, István Dénes, newly appointed chairman of the Hungarian National Council’s Turda committee, sent a twenty-strong squad led by gendarmerie captain Albert Vincze to his aid.⁵¹

The district chief, who was haunted by the horrific image of the 1849 massacre in Iara,⁵² recounted a series of events in his memoirs worthy of an action movie:

I rushed home to get my hunting rifle, filled my pockets with ammunition, and hurried back to the village square. On the way, I called on a few farmers who had rifles to join me. When we reached the Unitarian church, flames were already bursting out of Hangya’s cellar. I saw that there was nothing to lose, so I ordered the crowd to disperse immediately, and when they did not obey, we fired into them. There were six of us against a crowd of several hundred, but the crowd retreated after the first volley and ran away after the second. Within an hour, we had cleared the village of, and within another hour, so many people had come forward that we formed a twenty-strong force from among the peasant boys. We held the village all night, while nine Romanian villages launched attacks against us.

According to Eckhardt, the gendarmerie in Turda was reluctant to help him that evening, and the sub-prefect ordered him to leave the district. However, with the help of reinforcements which finally arrived, they managed to repel the attacks and even disarm the Romanian-dominated villages in the area from which their attackers of the previous day had come. Eckhardt demonstrated his counter-revolutionary stance in 1940:

Claire (eds.) *Embers of Empire. Continuity and Rupture in the Habsburg Successor States after 1918*. New York : Berghahn, 2019, pp. 15–42.

50 Az alsójárui zavargások epilógusa. In *Kolozsvári Hírlap*, 9 November 1918, pp. 3–4.

51 LENGYEL, László – VIDOR, Gyula (eds.) *Nemzetgyűlési Almanach, 1922–1927*. Budapest : Pallas, 1922, pp. 53–54. Vincze was also a member of the committee. *Hírek*. In *Aranyosvidék*, 4 November 1918, p. 2.

52 In January 1849, Romanian guerrilla forces burned down Iara, “murdering 54 of its Hungarian inhabitants with particular cruelty, including women and children.” SEBESTYÉN, Kálmán. Az erdélyi Alsójárui demográfiai metamorfózis. In *Honismeret*, 2014, vol. 42, no. 4, p. 36.

We only encountered serious resistance in the village of Fildu de Sus [Felsőfüle], where we caught the armed looting mob in the act of robbing a Jewish innkeeper. One of the robbers fired at me from close range, but I shot him down in the next moment, and he remained there in the ditch. There were several dead here, but the example had an effect, and the October revolution in the district was over within twenty-four hours.⁵³

The 1918 joint committee report does not mention Eckhardt's participation in the events in Filea de Sus. According to the report, Vincze's platoon—allegedly very tired—marched to Iara and then to “Füle,”⁵⁴ where three men jumped out in front of them at the local pub with weapons aimed. Before they could shoot, Captain Vincze ordered his men to open fire. The gendarmes and national guardsmen fired, killing three people. The crowd of bystanders, including children, then began to run, and when they did not stop at Vincze's orders, the gendarmerie captain ordered his men to fire again. Eight people were killed and several others injured in the riot. According to the joint committee's report:

The joint committee concluded beyond any doubt that the district chief had acted lawfully. The district chief only wanted to stop the looters. It was also established that the armed intervention was provoked by the looters.⁵⁵

Moreover, the joint committee “warmly congratulated” the district chief of Iara, who had acted in a conciliatory manner and whose arrest had been prevented by a local Romanian priest. István Apáthy, president of the Transylvanian National Council, named gendarmerie captain Vincze as the cause of the “Alsófüle bloodshed.”⁵⁶ In 1929, the Hungarian member of the joint committee also wrote appreciatively about the “aristocratic-looking, exclusive-mannered young man in hunting clothes,” that is, Eckhardt, who, although known to be counter-revolutionary, was nevertheless seriously considered for appointment of government commissioner in November 1918.⁵⁷

In the end, Tibor Eckhardt was not appointed governor of Turda-Arieș County.⁵⁸ He remained in Transylvania where he was struck by a serious family tragedy. His brother-in-law (the brother of his former superior), Sándor Betegh, a landowner from Sânger (Mezőszengyel), had been killed, becoming “a bloody

53 TISZA 1940, p. 59. During the counter-revolutionary Horthy era (1919–1944), the dominant view was that Hungary's territorial and population losses in the First World War were the result of the “defeatist” policies of the democratic government of 1918. Due to the Treaty of Trianon, signed in 1920, Hungary's population dropped from 20.8 million (or 18.2 million discounting Croatia) to 7.9 million. “Out of a total of 10.6 million people in the detached lands, 3.3 million or 30.2 % were ethnic Hungarians (Magyars).” ROMSICS, Ignác. A Trianonhoz vezető út. Historiográfiai áttekintés. In *Magyar Tudomány*, 2020, vol. 181, no. 6, p. 727.

54 No such village existed at the time, only Filea de Jos (Alsófüle) and Filea de Sus (Felsőfüle). Some press sources situate the deadly atrocities in the former location, others in the latter. A later series of Romanian articles, which also includes a map supplement, clearly locates the atrocities in Filea de Sus, citing archival records found in Torda, and even names the victims. GOMBOȘIU, Veniamin. D. Eckhardt Tibor e un asasin. In *Curentul*, 24 December 1934, p. 7; GOMBOȘIU, Veniamin. Eckhardt Tibor, asasinul. In *Curentul*, 25 December 1934, p. 29.

55 Az alsójárai zavargások epilógusa. In *Kolozsvári Hírlap*, 9 November 1918, pp. 3–4. Cf. PÁL – POPOVIC 2020, p. 170.

56 APÁTHY, István. A Románul tendenciózus sajtómanővere az erdélyi atrocitásokról. In *Kolozsvári Hírlap*, 24 November 1918, p. 2.

57 KERTÉSZ, Jenő. A tíz év előtti Erdély napjai. In *Korunk*, 1929, vol. 4, no. 2, p. 92.

58 A teacher in Turda, Gábor Kemény was appointed on 6 December 1918. PÁL, Judit. Főispánok és prefektusok 1918–1919-ben. A közigazgatási átmenet kérdése Erdélyben. In *Századok*, 2018, vol. 152, no. 6, p. 1191.

victim of the shaken social order” on 5 November 1918.⁵⁹ Since the pacifist revolutionary Hungarian press—somewhat surprisingly—clearly mentioned Romanian perpetrators,⁶⁰ it can be ventured that the self-conscious pacifism of the early Károlyi government and the “brotherly alliance of equal peoples” mentioned in the proclamation of the National Council in Budapest were difficult to reconcile with Eckhardt’s own contemporary perception.⁶¹ He may have experienced political pacifism as a violation of his personal grief, which also contradicted his own experiences.⁶²

According to Eckhardt’s later recollections, he “purchased machine guns and ammunition from the passing Mackensen army” for the resistance to the new order at the end of 1918 and had the weapons positioned in church towers. The pacifist revolutionary government ordered his arrest, he was only saved by the intervention of Apáthy, who had helped him to arm himself and feed his men.⁶³ The nationalist politician made a dramatic statement in 1925, “I stood alone on the Transylvanian mountains against the Károlyi government, the Romanian army, and the Romanian rebels, defending Transylvania with my weapon.”⁶⁴ In 1940, he added:

In my district [...] Until New Year’s Eve 1919 [sic], no decree was issued on behalf of either the Hungarian or Romanian national councils, only on behalf of the legitimate Hungarian kingdom. The Károlyi government, like the Romanian national council, tried several times to arrest me, but my power was already so strong that all such attempts were thwarted.⁶⁵

According to the 1959 version, which is essentially the same as earlier accounts, at the beginning of December 1918, “a peculiar situation had arisen in which, after the departure of all other Hungarian authorities from Kolozsvár [Cluj-Napoca] to Nagyenyed [Aiud] and Gyulafehérvár [Alba Iulia], I maintained Hungarian sovereignty and order on my own responsibility.”⁶⁶

On 12 December 1918, after Romanian troops were given permission to cross the demarcation line established in the Belgrade Armistice Agreement—the Mureş (Maros) River⁶⁷—Eckhardt left Iara and went to Aiud (Nagyenyed) to see Captain Gyula Toókos, who refused to comply with the Romanians’ demand for retreat. According to Eckhardt, the successful Hungarian resistance

59 Obituary of Sándor Betegh of Csiktusnád, https://www.e-tar.oszk.hu/gyaszjelentes/kep/4319369/4319369_00663.jpg, [last viewed on 24 October 2025].

60 Fosztogatások és rablások egyes erdélyi községekben. In *Kolozsvári Hírlap*, 8 November 1918, p. 2.

61 A nemzeti tanács megalakult! Proklamáció a nemzethez és a külföldhöz. In *Somogyvármegye*, 27 October 1918, p. 2.

62 Eckhardt only learned later that his brother-in-law’s murderers were Hungarians. Proceedings were initiated against one of them in October 1921, but the offender, György Ercse, escaped from custody. A sajtófőnök sógorának gyilkosai. In *Budapesti Hírlap*, 26 October 1921, p. 5; Betegh Sándor gyilkosa az ügyészségen. In *Az Est*, 13 November 1921, p. 5; Budapest Főváros Levéltára. Budapest, Hungary, Budapesti Királyi Büntetőtörvényszéki Fogház iratai. Fogolytörzskönyvek – VII.102.a – prisoner – 1921–5415.

63 Eckhardt, When was Transylvania lost? 1959. Apáthy had no problem combining his “progressive” views with his fierce Hungarian nationalism. HATOS, Pál. *Elátkozott köztársaság. Az 1918-as összeomlás és az őszirózsás forradalom története*. Budapest : Jaffa, 2018, pp. 158–160, 281–282.

64 *Az 1922. évi június hó 16-ára hirdetett nemzetgyűlés nyomtatványai*. *Napló*. XXXV. Budapest : Athenaeum, 1925, p. 64 (20 October 1925).

65 TISZA 1940, pp. 59–60.

66 Eckhardt, When was Transylvania lost? 1959.

67 RÉVÉSZ, Tamás. *Nem akartak katonát látni? A magyar állam és hadserege 1918–1919-ben*. Budapest : Bölcsészettudományi Kutatóközpont Történettudományi Intézet, 2019, p. 142.

to Romanian territorial aspirations organised here was only prevented by the destruction of publicist-politician László Fényes, the national guard government commissioner. “The meeting in Gyulafehérvár and the abandonment of the Maros line sealed the fate of Transylvania. I witnessed this mournful retreat. The disappointed soldiers retreated angrily,” said Eckhardt, who was also present at the grand assembly in Cluj-Napoca on 22 December 1918 where participants protested against the Alba Iulia (Gyulafehérvár) declaration annexing Transylvania, Banat, Partium, and Máramaros to Romania.⁶⁸ Two days later, however, Romanian Royal Army troops marched into Cluj-Napoca, and thus the change of empire took place de facto. Eckhardt later claimed that due to the bloody events, the Romanians had “sentenced him to death,”⁶⁹ or at least “issued an arrest warrant against him”⁷⁰—in any case, he decided it would be better to leave Transylvania. He left in a wagon, hidden among straw yet determined to fight against the “unpatriotic, despicable press, raised in a spirit of revolution and subversion.”⁷¹ Meanwhile, the Hungarian national guard and gendarmerie in Iara were disarmed by invading Romanian royal troops, who had organised a national guard from the local Romanian population instead.⁷²

Conclusion

Tibor Eckhardt was one of the 400 000 to 500 000 people who fled to Hungary between 1918 and 1924 from the successor states of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy after the First World War.⁷³ We do not know whether he received a salary after leaving his post during the democratic revolutionary governments—or perhaps during the first weeks of the Hungarian Soviet Republic⁷⁴—when salaries and benefits were still being paid to refugee officials.⁷⁵ What is certain is that the violence sweeping across the country in January 1919 also reached his homeland.⁷⁶ This certainly had a strong influence on his counter-revolutionary attitude, as did the fact that the Eckhardts' other family estate was located at the intersection of the Serbian-Romanian-Hungarian demarcation line.⁷⁷ Finding

68 Eckhardt, When was Transylvania lost? 1959. The large gathering in Cluj-Napoca on 22 december 1918 was also recorded on film. Available at: <https://erdelyikronika.net/2021/12/22/filmfelvetel-az-1918-dec-22-en-tartott-kolozsvari-nagygyulesrol/> [last viewed on 24 October 2025].

69 LENGYEL – VIDOR 1922, p. 53.

70 HAEFFLER, István (ed.) *Országgyűlési almanach, 1935–40*. Budapest : Magyar Távirati Iroda, 1940, p. 246.

71 *Az 1922. évi június hó 16-ára hirdetett nemzetgyűlés nyomtatványai. Napló. XLII*. Budapest : Atheneum, 1926, p. 274 (4 May 1926).

72 MNL OL, K63, Külügyminisztériumi Levéltár, Politikai Osztály – 69 – 1919, p. 15. Apáthy István: A fegyverszüneti katonai egyezmény végrehajtásában az erdélyi román királyi megszálló hadsereg részéről felmerült sérelmek, 10 January 1919.

73 Regarding problems with accurate quantification: KOLOH, Gábor. A trianoni menekültek száma. In ABLONCZY, Balázs (ed.) *Úton: Menekülés, mobilitás, integráció Közép-Európában és Magyarországon az első világháború után*. Budapest : Bölcsészettudományi Kutatóközpont, Történettudományi Intézet, 2020, pp. 11–22.

74 On 21 March 1919, a communist coup overthrew the democratic government and remained in power in Hungary until 1 August 1919.

75 ABLONCZY, Balázs. “Budapest cannot provide decent accommodation”. Refugee Civil Servants in Pest-Pilis-Solt-Kiskun County after World War I. In SZEGHY-GAYER 2024, pp. 117–118.

76 On the atrocities in Földeák, which culminated in the assault on the district chief: MAROSVÁRI, Attila. *A vidék lázadása 1918 őszén: Erőszak és hatalomátrendezés Csanád vármegyében*. Budapest : Erőszakkutató Intézet, 2023, pp. 300–301.

77 Speech by Tibor Eckhardt. See in: ECKHARDT 1971, pp. 18–21.

himself in an existentially difficult situation, the young man entered the service of the counter-government formed in Arad in April 1919, thus beginning a meteoric political career between the two world wars. Therefore, Eckhardt's political work also illustrates how states—both imperial and successor—played a key role in generating social mobility among the elites in early 20th-century Central and Eastern Europe,⁷⁸ providing opportunities for those who have the right skills, qualifications, and connections, and were in the right place at the right time.

Successful resistance to Romanian territorial aspirations “could have been carried out everywhere in Transylvania if the wretched Károlyi government had not deliberately destroyed the country's lawful and traditional order.”⁷⁹ This was a lesson that Tibor Eckhardt carried with him for life, which became an axiom in the official interpretation of the recent past in interwar Hungary, but which posterity can hardly describe as anything other than a delusion based on the absolutisation of a distorted subjective experience. The collapse of the Monarchy and the imperial change in Transylvania were hardly caused by deliberate destruction by the Mihály Károlyi government.⁸⁰ Moreover, Eckhardt received assistance for his—undoubtedly courageous—personal resistance from the representative of the Károlyi regime, the Hungarian National Council in Turda, whose leader planned to defend the “achievements of the revolution” two weeks later with the Social Democratic Party as per his pacifist article.⁸¹ However, neither István Dénes nor Tibor Eckhardt, who both joined the Hungarian National Assembly in 1922, had any interest in remembering this unpleasant episode. In fact, Eckhardt's political socialisation—along with that of many others—was shaped by the distorted interpretation of reality cited above, which left a lasting mark on his political career.⁸²

78 POPOVICI, Vlad – VELKOVÁ, Alice – KLEČACKÝ, Martin. Social Mobility of Elites in East-Central Europe in Historical Perspective. Introductory Study. In POPOVICI, Vlad – VELKOVÁ, Alice – KLEČACKÝ, Martin (eds.) *Climbing up the Social Ladder?: Social Mobility of Elites in East-Central Europe in the Long 19th Century*. Berlin; Boston : De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2024, pp. 22–23.

79 Eckhardt, When was Transylvania lost? 1959.

80 For a more nuanced interpretation: ROMSICS 2018, pp. 85–309.

81 DÉNES, István. A tordai szociál-demokrata párt népgyűlése. In *Aranyosvidék*, 16 November 1918, p. 2.

82 For his emigration conflicts, see: KÁDÁR LYNN, Katalin. *Eckhardt Tibor amerikai évei, 1941–1972*. Budapest : L'Harmattan, 2006.