

LAJOS VARJASSY: FROM SECRETARY OF THE ARAD CHAMBER OF COMMERCE TO MINISTER OF HUNGARIAN COUNTER-REVOLUTIONARY GOVERNMENTS

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Keywords: Lajos Varjassy Jr., Great War, World War I, Arad, Szeged, Hungarian Government, Lodge of Unity.

(Abstract)

Lajos Varjassy Jr. (1879–1935), a Hungarian politician, is often confused with his identically named father, who was the mayor of Arad during the city's heyday, even by historians specializing in that era. If the Austro-Hungarian Empire and historical Hungary had not collapsed in the autumn of 1918, he might have remained a second-rate figure even at the local level, someone we would only read about in the footnotes of local history works.

At barely 39 years old, he suddenly rose from being a simple provincial chamber of commerce secretary to the governor-prefect of the city and County of Arad, because he had the trust of both the new Hungarian political system and the Romanian leaders of his homeland, as he had already shown friendship towards the Romanian minority before 1918. As a cosmopolitan and francophone, he easily communicated not only with the local Romanians but also with the soon-to-arrive French occupiers. In the following months, he had a dizzying career; first, it was rumored that he would become a minister, and then he actually held these high positions in the counter-revolutionary governments of Arad and Szeged. In fact, he was the only minister who could be a member of all the cabinets.

This lightning career lasted just over a year: in its final act, he barely managed to save his own life from the military officers with whom he had worked not long before to overthrow the communist regime.

He spent the last decade and a half of his life in Romania. He was inexorably drifting down the slope of his life, his influential Romanian allies turned away from him, and the Hungarian politicians in Romania and Hungary considered him a traitor. This latter accusation was even reinforced by his death: he was buried in London at the expense of the Romanian embassy.

Hungarian and Romanian historiography alike owes us the life of Lajos Varjassy. Several scientific publications¹ confuse him with his similarly named father, the mayor of Arad. From the perspective of the Romanians, it is important that he was the first to hoist the Romanian flag on the Arad County Hall in 1918 as the Hungarian government commissioner-prefect. From the perspective of Hungarian history, it is significant that he was the only one who served as a minister in all three Hungarian counter-revolutionary governments formed in 1919.

Family background, life until 1918

Dr. Lajos Béla Varjassy de Csejthe – that is Lajos Varjassy Junior – was born on September 13,

1879, in Arad². Lajos Varjassy Senior (1852–1934) led „factory owner Mittelman's³ charming daughter, Josephine”⁴, to the altar as a deputy clerk in the autumn of 1878, and then, having climbed the ranks of public administration, served as the city's mayor from 1907 to 1918⁵ – according to contemporary gossip, also smoothing the path for his son's career. In public life, not only the titular character's father but also his uncle, Árpád Varjassy de Csejthe (1854–1915), played a significant role, the latter serving for several decades as the school inspector of Arad and Arad County and as a member of the city's law committee⁶. Lajos Varjassy Senior and Árpád Varjassy were both Freemasons, and mem-

² Himpfner 1897, 28.

³ His family name was spelled Mittelman. Lived: 1853/1854/1860/1862/63[?]-1923.

⁴ *Pesti Napló*, 29, no. 279 (November 19, 1878), 3.

⁵ *Pesti Napló*, 58, no. 10 (January 11, 1907), 6; *Városok Lapja*, 13, no. 24 (November 30, 1918), 191.

⁶ Gyászjelentés, Csejthei Varjassy Árpád. Arad (December 30, 1915).

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¹ Imre-Szücs 1986, 61; Mócsy 1983, 240.

bers of the Arad Lodge of Unity⁷. Interestingly, their father, József (1826–1900), a veteran of the 1848 War of Independence, government commissioner secretary, who in 1887 received the title Csejthe and changed his name from Vranovits to Varjassy after the revolution, was also a member of the county committee and appeared on the early 1870s list of the Fraternitas (Brotherhood) Lodge⁸. That is, including Lajos Varjassy Junior, at least three generations of the family participated in the city's public life and the Freemason movement.

Lajos Varjassy Jr. completed his secondary education in his hometown between 1889 and 1897⁹. He learned several world languages, French, English, German¹⁰, and even took Romanian language classes, „because he knew it would soon become indispensable”¹¹. After obtaining his *matura*, he pursued legal studies in Budapest (where he became a Doctor of Political Science at the University of Budapest in the 1901–1902 academic year)¹², Vienna, Berlin, Leipzig, and Paris – according to an entry in an interwar lexicon, he held a doctorate in administrative and legal sciences¹³. For two years, he worked for Crédit Lyonnais in Paris¹⁴. In early 1905, he launched the biweekly magazine *La Hongrie* in France, which aimed to strengthen French-Hungarian relations with an anti-Pan-German tone¹⁵. The newspaper survived only a few issues.

In the summer of 1905, Varjassy became a clerk at the school inspectorate in Caraș-Severin (Krassó-Szörény)¹⁶ County¹⁷, and subsequently a police clerk in Arad¹⁸. From March 1908, he was the secretary of the Arad Chamber of Commerce and Industry¹⁹, and later that same year, the Minister of Agriculture appointed him as the economic advisor to the city's administrative committee²⁰. In the

years leading up to World War I, he participated in the international congresses of the chambers of commerce and industry in Boston (1912) and Paris (1914)²¹.

Not only his enemies but also his own memoirs and contemporary press sources indicate that he was a Freemason, like his father and grandfather. During the Great War, he continued to serve as the chamber secretary and as the Grand Master of the Lodge of Unity²². The lodge's headquarters was converted into a military hospital, where Varjassy's wife worked as a volunteer head nurse, for which she was awarded the Decoration for Services to the Red Cross, Silver Medal with war decoration in April 1916²³. As early as June 1914, a national newspaper referred to it as a radical party, meaning that it had already established contact with Oszkár Jászi's circle before the outbreak of World War I²⁴.

During the years of the war, he continued his publication activities on economic topics²⁵, and made proposals regarding the review of food price increases and the customs union²⁶. He was a member of the National Industrial Council, the Permanent Committee of the National Congress of Hungarian Cities, and the management of several cooperatives and companies²⁷. In the autumn of 1916, he, along with his father, received a letter of commendation from the Minister of Finance for his efforts in promoting war loans²⁸.

Governor-commissioner of the city of Arad and Arad County

The significant leap in his career came with the October Revolution, when Mihály Károlyi was appointed Prime Minister. Although Béla Barabás, the governor of Arad city and Arad County, was a party member of the new prime minister and

⁷ Berényi 2007, 461–462.

⁸ Berényi 2007, 460; Gyászjelentés, csejthei Varjassy Árpád. Arad (May 28, 1900); Kempelen 1932, 33; Lakatos 1881, 90.

⁹ Himpfner 1897, 28.

¹⁰ *Brassói Lapok*, 33, no. 101 (May 7, 1927), 2.

¹¹ *A Hét*, 11, no. 48 (November 25, 1983), 9.

¹² Adatbázis, doktori fokozatot szereztek 1950-ig.

¹³ *Irodalomtörténet*, 25, no. 1 (1935), 104.

¹⁴ *Brassói Lapok*, 33, no. 101 (May 7, 1927), 2.

¹⁵ *Pesti Hírlap*, 27, no. 10 (9378) (January 10, 1905), 8.

¹⁶ The geographical names of the areas that belonged to Hungary before 1920 and to Romania afterwards are written in Romanian, but I also included the contemporary Hungarian names in parentheses at the first mention.

¹⁷ *Budapesti Közlöny*, 39, no. 164 (July 19, 1905), 2.

¹⁸ *Irodalomtörténet*, 25, no. 1 (1935), 104.

¹⁹ *Pesti Napló*, 59, no. 74 (March 25, 1908), 21.

²⁰ *Budapesti Közlöny*, 42, no. 235 (October 14, 1908), 1.

²¹ *Irodalomtörténet*, 25, no. 1 (1935), 104; *Honi Ipar*, 13, no. 23 (December 1, 1912), 9.

²² *Félegyházi Hírlap* egyesült *Félegyházi Hiradó*, 32/20, no. 3 (January 18, 1914), 8; *Kelet*, 27, no. 3 (March 1915), 11; *Vágóhid*, 13, no. 40 (October 3, 1926), 10.

²³ *Budapesti Közlöny*, 50, no. 118 (May 23, 1916), 3; *Kelet*, 27, no. 3 (March 1915), 11.

²⁴ *Erdélyi Futár*, 1, no. 7 (May 1, 1927), 22; *Világ*, 5, no. 135 (June 11, 1914), 11.

²⁵ Varjassy 1914a; Varjassy 1916a; Varjassy 1914b; Varjassy 1916b.

²⁶ *Délmagyarország*, 4, no. 254 (October 21, 1915), 3; *Magyarország*, 25, no. 282 (October 10, 1915), 7; *Az Újság*, 15, no. 51 (February 20, 1916), 20.

²⁷ *Központi Értesítő*, 43, no. 18 (March 3, 1918), 431; *Magyar Kereskedők Lapja*, 38, no. 37 (September 14, 1918), 9; *Magyarország tiszti cím- és névtára*, 1914, 289; *Városok Lapja*, 10, no. 42 (October 16, 1915), 334.

²⁸ *Budapesti Közlöny*, 50, no. 276 (November 26, 1916), 6.

even a travel companion during his 1914 trip to America, he still had to leave²⁹. In November 1918, under pressure from the local Romanian community (including Ștefan Cicio Pop, a Romanian parliamentarian from Hungary, who called Budapest), the Károlyi government appointed him as the government commissioner-prefect of Arad County and Arad City³⁰. His appointment was also welcomed by the Transylvanian Romanian press³¹. From then on, we encountered his name more and more frequently in the national press, and he was also considered a candidate for the position of Secretary of State for Commerce, but he ultimately did not become a member of the Károlyi cabinet³². His father, the mayor of Arad, also retired at that time³³.

He was present at the Arad negotiations between Iuliu Maniu and Oszkár Jászi on November 14, 1918, and according to him, he enjoyed the trust of both Jászi and the Romanians. According to his report, the Romanian side had a positive attitude towards the Hungarian radical minister, but they were disturbed, on the one hand, by the presence of István Apáthy, the Transylvanian government commissioner, and, on the other hand, they found „the large statistical material and preparedness that Oszkár Jászi brought to the conference to be an „unpleasant moment”³⁴. According to Varjassy, the Romanian side did not accept the latter as credible and did not trust that the Hungarians were not offering concessions only temporarily³⁵. In truth, the breaking point was that the Hungarians offered autonomy too late, and the Romanian side could only accept complete separation³⁶.

On November 21, the *Aradi Közlöny* published Lajos Varjassy's statement regarding the proclamation of the Romanian National Council of Arad County, in which the Romanians announced their intention to become independent from the Hungarians and to live in a separate state entity. Varjassy stated that he understands the Romanians' distrust towards the new Hungary. He emphasized that „nowadays, Hungarian chauvinism is equal to treason,” and regarding Romanians, he remarked,

„I consider it natural that a proud people does not want to endure servitude, we did not endure it either with Austria”³⁷. The nationalist-communist historians of the Ceaușescu era presented the latter quotation in such a way that Varjassy was among those Hungarians who supported the unification of Romania and Transylvania³⁸. However, this was a latter misinterpretation of the commissioner's words: Varjassy emphasized in the interview that in the new, canton-divided Hungary, the Romanians would find what they were looking for, and in response to the more understanding behavior of the Hungarians, „the Romanian nation in Hungary does not need to maintain the part of the manifesto that desires destruction rather than servitude, if it does not receive autonomy and independence.” And the manifesto will be nothing more than a „historical relic”³⁹.

Varjassy, it seems, truly tried to take the Romanian side's interests into account. At the beginning of his tenure as government commissioner, he banned the „Iron Guard”⁴⁰, which, after the collapse, shot dead several Romanian peasants in the countryside⁴¹. He established a mixed commission to investigate grievances, in which the Romanian National Council was also represented. After the armed incident with military casualties that occurred at the Romanian-Hungarian demarcation line near the village of Brănișca (Branyiszka)⁴², Ștefan Cicio Pop asked him to mediate with Budapest⁴³. He did the same in reverse: when the Romanian authorities captured the Hungarian stationmaster of the Ilia (Marosillye) railway station, he informed the Sibiu (Nagyszében) Governor's Council and the Arad Romanian National Council, and finally, with the help of the commander of the Zam (Zám) Romanian National Guard, he managed to secure

²⁹ Barabás 1929, 185–195.

³⁰ Barabás 1929, 153–154; *Budapesti Közlöny*, 52, no. 258 (November 10, 1918), 3; *Világ*, 9, no. 259 (November 5, 1918), 2.

³¹ *Gazeta Transilvaniei*, 82, no. 238 (November 14, 1918), 4.

³² *Pesti Napló*, 69, no. 260 (November 6, 1918), 4.

³³ *Pesti Napló*, 69, no. 265 (November 12, 1918), 2.

³⁴ Varjassy 1932, 18.

³⁵ Varjassy 1932, 17–23, 26–32.

³⁶ Köpeczy *et alii* 1986, 1711–1714.

³⁷ *Aradi Közlöny*, 33, no. 265 (November 21, 1918), 1.

³⁸ For an example see: Mușat 1983, 33.

³⁹ *Aradi Közlöny*, 33, no. 265 (November 21, 1918), 1.

⁴⁰ *Alkotmány*, 23, no. 268 (November 15, 1918), 11.

⁴¹ According to the Romanian side, the killings were ethnically motivated, while the Hungarians claim it was because they were looting. Based on the example of the neighboring Csanád County – regardless of the nationality of the village's population – the village clerks and the owners of the general stores were mainly attacked in the autumn of 1918. The former position was generally held by Hungarians, while the latter shops were owned by Jews. The commander accused of the massacre, First Lieutenant Ferenc Gábor, was a Hungarian of Jewish faith, and according to the press, he fled. In the spring of 1919, he returned to Arad as a representative of the counter-revolutionaries from Budapest.

⁴² For the Romanian and Hungarian explanations of the armed incident, see Olivér Fráter's book. Fráter 1999, 62–63.

⁴³ *Népszava*, 46, no. 298 (December 17, 1918), 3.

the release of the Hungarian railway worker⁴⁴. However, he was not always successful: at the end of January 1919, Hungarian newspapers reported that Varjassy had managed to secure the release of István Apáthy, the Transylvanian government commissioner, who had been arrested in mid-January by the Romanians⁴⁵ – In reality, the professor from Cluj (Kolozsvár) remained a prisoner for another year and a half.

In December 1918, following the approval of the Minister of the Interior, the Romanian flag was hoisted on the County Hall at the request of the Romanians. Not long after, the Romanian side allegedly responded positively to the proposal for a Hungarian minister to be delegated alongside the Sibiu Governor's Council, but this did not materialize. He received the Serbs who occupied Aradul Nou (Újarad) and gave a toast in their honor⁴⁶.

Alongside Romanian politicians, he also collaborated with the Arad Workers' Council, which was under the influence of Hungarian social democrats; nevertheless, he was unable to avoid ethnic disturbances. In order to bring the two nations closer, he established a Romanian-Hungarian propaganda committee on January 1, 1919, at whose meeting both the Romanian and Hungarian National Council leaders of Arad spoke⁴⁷.

He was accused, especially in 1919–1920, of being a communist sympathizer, but in reality, he was already attacked in the first issue of the Hungarian communists' first daily newspaper, the *Vörös Újság*⁴⁸. However, he continued to cooperate with the Social Democrats, and in January 1919, at the request of the Workers' Council, he removed Mayor Rezső Lócs from the city's leadership in mid-January 1919. He appointed his successor, Ferenc Sárkány, his former secretary, in March, also at the suggestion of the Social Democratic body⁴⁹.

According to his memoirs, Oszkár Jászi wanted him to be the Minister of Nationalities after his resignation⁵⁰, and his name also appeared as a candidate in the contemporary press⁵¹. However, in the end, it was Dénes Berinkey, also associated

with the radicals, who became the Prime Minister and also served as a minister without portfolio⁵².

Varjassy in French-occupied Arad

In the last days of 1918, news spread that Romanian troops would occupy the city of Arad within two weeks. This caused concern among the predominantly Hungarian population of the city at the time, so Varjassy tried to reassure the residents: it would not be a political but simply a military occupation, and the French would soon replace the Romanians. Finally, due to the Serbian-Romanian war that broke out over the status of Banat, the concerned French did not allow the Romanian troops into the city, but occupied it themselves on December 30⁵³. Thanks to Varjassy's Francophone past, he also established good relations with the French soldiers⁵⁴, both with their commander, General Gondrecourt, and the general's aide-de-camp, Captain Saint-Laumer.

Varjassy claimed in his memoirs that following the proclamation of the Hungarian Soviet Republic on March 21, 1919, he immediately submitted his resignation and intended to hand over power to the Workers' Council. However, the leaders of the council, considering the French occupation, did not accept this and requested him to stay. He mentions as his own merit that he convinced the otherwise royalist city commander, General Gondrecourt, that the occupation could not be purely military, but had to become political. Thus, he became the prefect of the city and the county, and the leftist Hungarian soldiers, politicians, and their sympathizers voluntarily, but under French pressure, left the region⁵⁵. In contrast, Béla Kelemen emphasized that, on the one hand, Varjassy was desperate and confused when appearing at the French command, and on the other hand, the Workers' Council indeed aimed to establish the Directory and expel the French military, but Gondrecourt was aware of the plan thanks to the established French military intelligence service. Thanks to this, he acted before its execution, gathered his officers in the Aradul Nou fortress, stationed machine-gun-equipped soldiers and vehicles at key points in Arad, issued a proclamation, and then allowed the communist sympathizers to leave. In the aforementioned proclama-

⁴⁴ *Az Est*, 9, no. 297 (December 19, 1918), 3.

⁴⁵ *Budapesti Hírlap*, 39, no. 26 (January 20, 1919), 2.

⁴⁶ *Délmagyarország*, 7, no. 304 (December 18, 1918), 4; *Pesti Napló*, 69, no. 288 (December 8, 1918), 9; *Pesti Napló*, 69, no. 290 (December 11, 1918), 7.

⁴⁷ *Az Est*, 10, no. 28 (February 1, 1919), 6.

⁴⁸ *Vörös Újság*, 1, no. 1 (December 7, 1919), 3.

⁴⁹ *Az Est*, 10, no. 19 (January 22, 1919), 5; *Pesti Napló*, 70, no. 57 (March 7, 1919), 5.

⁵⁰ Varjassy 1932, 42.

⁵¹ For an example see: *Az Est*, 10, no. 19 (January 22, 1919), 2.

⁵² *Székely Nép*, 37, no. 7 (January 22, 1919), 1.

⁵³ *Délmagyarország*, 7, no. 313 (December 31, 1919), 3; *Magyarország*, 25, no. 305 (December 29, 1918), 4.

⁵⁴ *8 Órai Újság*, 4, no. 306 (December 31, 1918), 1; Varjassy 1932, 46–49.

⁵⁵ Varjassy 1932, 46–49.

tion, the general announced that „from March 22, 1919, the supreme command in the city of Arad will be exercised by the French military authorities.” The civil authorities continued their operations, and the laws and regulations in effect before the period of the council republic remained in force in Arad and its surroundings⁵⁶. The contemporary sources rather confirm Kelemen and not Varjassy. From the newspapers, we know that the French were preparing to take political power even before March 21, 1919: for example, Varjassy, on the orders of Gondrecourt, had already introduced French-supervised Hungarian censorship two days earlier, and shortly before that, the general had ordered the removal of the Hungarian military from the city⁵⁷.

On March 25, Lajos Varjassy declared martial law⁵⁸. A governor’s council was formed to assist in his work, which included Dr. Mayor Ferenc Sárkány, Dr. Deputy Mayor István Angel, Dr. Lajos Baross (commercial affairs), Gábor Fehér (finance), Rudolf Zerkovitz (transportation affairs), Géza Nemes (public catering affairs), and 6 members from the Arad Workers’ Council⁵⁹. The committee made daily decisions, which came into effect after French approval, but according to Varjassy, the occupiers never vetoed any of them⁶⁰. His then political colleague and later opponent, Tibor Eckhardt, accused him of the welfare fund created by Varjassy being, in fact, a base for corruption. After continuing to rely mainly on the working class, an opposition group emerged from the former supporters of the assassinated Prime Minister István Tisza, who demanded greater political influence for the middle class⁶¹.

However, this did not mean that the communists had grown fond of him: due to the governor’s involvement, Béla Szántó, Deputy People’s Commissar of War, suggested in the Revolutionary Governing Council that an order be given for Varjassy’s arrest, but the decision was never carried out – due to the aforementioned circumstances⁶².

Lajos Varjassy and the Arad counter-revolutionary movement

In Belgrade, he negotiated with General De

Lobit, the commander of the Hungarian army, and from there he intended to continue to Paris, but ultimately he only made it to the Serbian capital. Varjassy presented his plans for carrying out an armed counter-revolution against the communists in Hungary here – however, he was later accused of actually presenting a memorandum he had obtained through indirect means from his political opponents (who later became his ministerial colleagues) as his own work⁶³. On April 14, during De Lobit’s visit to Arad, he also presented his plans. During the recent negotiations, the formation of a national unity front was outlined, which was strengthened by the fact that revolutionary-minded individuals opposing Varjassy were also involved in the personal discussions⁶⁴. De Lobit, who had previously wanted to oversee the creation of a Hungarian counter-government with the support of the Vienna Antibolshevik Comité (ABC), now cast his vote for the Aradians⁶⁵.

On April 17, the Defense Committee was established, which, with its donations, was able to set up the „Arad County Gendarmerie” consisting of a few hundred (approximately 200–400) members, which was intended to be the nucleus of a future army – Varjassy emphasized his own role in its establishment and the support of the French, while his critic, Béla Kelemen, highlighted the contributions of civilian donors. It seems that Kelemen Béla’s data might also be correct here, as the prefect’s opponents organized it, and only after its establishment did they go to Varjassy’s office, who complained that he was presented with a *fait accompli*⁶⁶.

On April 21, 1919, he proposed, at Saint-Laumer’s request, to establish the Arad Union Sacrée. Their goal was to represent the unification of broader social strata of the bourgeoisie⁶⁷, which is why the Social Democrats also issued a statement in advance declaring their distancing from the Bolsheviks⁶⁸. At the inaugural meeting on April 25, Varjassy delivered a speech in which he emphasized the importance of anti-communist unity and reminded everyone of the expectedly strict peace treaty, the severity of which could only be mitigated if the Hungarian people themselves partici-

⁵⁶ Kelemen 1923, 215–216.

⁵⁷ *Pesti Napló*, 70, no. 66 (March 18, 1918), 4; *Pesti Napló*, 70, no. 68 (March 20, 1918), 3.

⁵⁸ Timbus-Caciora 2008, 141.

⁵⁹ Kelemen 1923, 216.

⁶⁰ Varjassy 1932, 48.

⁶¹ Tóth 2024, 22.

⁶² Imre-Szücs 1986, 61.

⁶³ Tóth 2024, 41.

⁶⁴ Barabás 1929, 156–158; Kelemen 1923, 217; Varjassy 1932, 49–50, 54–55.

⁶⁵ Romsics 1985, 580.

⁶⁶ *Egy Ellenforradalmár* 1920, 25–26; Kelemen 1923, 219; Varjassy 1932, 50–52.

⁶⁷ Kelemen 1923, 219; Paál 1919, 17–18.

⁶⁸ *Délmagyarország*, 8, no. 93 (April 25, 1919), 4.

pated in the elimination of Bolshevism⁶⁹. Captain Saint-Laumer, an officer from Gondrecourt, also spoke, announcing that „the French support this social movement most warmly.” The French officer Varjassy was proposed as the president of the organization: the participants unanimously supported the proposal, knowing that this was the will of the occupiers⁷⁰.

The counter-revolutionary movement was joined by some Timișoaran politicians, as well as two mysterious figures, István Augner and Ábel Bartha, who arrived on behalf of the French command in Belgrade. It is not surprising that the idea of the Arad counter-government, according to Varjassy's memories, was proposed by these two individuals⁷¹. Nevertheless – due to the abduction and murder of Lajos Návay – Count Gyula Károlyi was invited. In the legally illegitimate government, the ministers did not belong to the prime minister, but rather the prime minister received a ready-made list of ministers⁷².

Lajos Varjassy, minister of the Arad counter-revolutionary government

Varjassy became the Minister of Commerce in the cabinet. The other members of the government are: Dr. Béla Barabás, Minister of Religion and Public Education; Elemér Bársony, Minister of Welfare; Ábel Bartha, Minister of the Interior; Baron Gyula Bornemisza, Minister of Foreign Affairs; Dr. Béla Fülöpp, Minister of Transportation; Dr. János Hemmen, Minister of Nationalities; János Kintzig, Minister of Agriculture; Dr. Lajos Pálmai, Minister of Justice; Dénes Pálosi, Minister of Food Supply; and Zoltán Szabó, Minister of War⁷³.

Based on the latest research, the cabinet was not formed on May 5, 1919 (as accepted by Hungarian historians), but rather a day later⁷⁴. The government included politicians from the major Hungarian parties that operated during and immediately after World War I, who were indeed more prominent figures locally, but this symbolized that Hungarians unite in times of trouble. Lajos Varjassy, together with Tibor Eckhardt, drafted the cabinet's manifesto. The leaflet promised action against communists, the restoration of legality, and good relations with neighboring peoples and

the Entente. They did not mention the planned form of government, but Romanian, Serbian, and Hungarian sources also confirm that they intended to crown Archduke Joseph August as king⁷⁵.

Since the Romanian army had surrounded Arad, it was decided at the very first meeting that they would relocate to Szeged⁷⁶. On May 7, Interior Minister Ábel Bartha ordered the abolition of the so-called trusted-men system at all offices, and from then on, those with complaints could turn to Government Commissioner Lajos Varjassy regarding the affected officials and other employees⁷⁷. In truth, the government members barely managed to achieve any results: no state recognized the government, the ministers who returned to Timișoara were placed under house arrest by the occupying Serbs, and the Romanian army's intelligence service was aware of all their movements⁷⁸.

On May 9, the government and the gendarmerie set off for Szeged by two trains. Dr. Romul Veliciu, the Romanian prefect of Arad County, issued a transit permit and a Romanian official, as well as a French officer, accompanied the ministers. Nevertheless, in Mezőhegyes, the Romanian army interned the ministers, the soldiers, and the escort. Officially, it was justified by the fact that the Hungarians carried more weapons than permitted, but in reality, they were captured for political and military reasons. Several ministers blamed Varjassy for their capture because they knew he had good Romanian connections and had even avoided internment. The accusation was probably unfounded. On one hand, Varjassy's Romanian connections were politicians and journalists, not soldiers; on the other hand, he did everything to free his companions.

Namely, when the government relocated to Szeged, Varjassy, unlike most of the ministers, did not travel by train but by his own car, and he was followed by a French military convoy. He was already in Szeged on May 10, 1919, at which time the local counter-revolutionaries did not yet recognize his government and ministerial position. He negotiated several times on behalf of the Arad cabinet and eventually became a member of the Governor's Committee established on May 21, which included politicians from Szeged, Arad, Timișoara, Vienna, and Budapest⁷⁹.

On May 22, the interned politicians were

⁶⁹ Varjassy 1932, 53–54.

⁷⁰ Paál 1919, 18; *Szeged és Vidéke*, 18, no. 97 (April 27, 1919), 1.

⁷¹ Varjassy 1932, 54–56.

⁷² Varjassy 1932, 49–60.

⁷³ HU-MNL-OL-K 32, 1–1919.

⁷⁴ Tóth 2024, 33–35.

⁷⁵ Tóth 2024, 37–38.

⁷⁶ Tóth 2024, 37.

⁷⁷ HU-MNL-OL-K 573, 15.

⁷⁸ Tóth 2024, 42–43.

⁷⁹ Tóth 2024, 48.

released from Mezőhegyes and Gyula Károlyi, along with his companions, returned to Arad, where Romanian soldiers had meanwhile entered. A few days later, the ministers traveled to Szeged, where all members of the government resigned. Béla Kelemen, the leader of the Antibolshevik Committee in Szeged, and Gyula Károlyi agreed during their negotiations that although they did not like Varjassy, they had to include him in the new government because of the French⁸⁰.

Lajos Varjassy in the Szeged governments

It soon became clear that the Arad prefect and the politicians of Szeged – including Béla Kelemen and Captain Gyula Gömbös, who was in Szeged from April 25 – had different views on politics. A conflict arose because the people of Szeged recognized that the French were more sympathetic to Varjassy's liberal viewpoint, and they were also displeased that the Arad minister tried to find allies, relying on his old commercial and industrial chamber connections and attempting to establish contact with the local social democrats⁸¹.

As I mentioned earlier, despite this, there was an agreement between Kelemen and Károlyi that Varjassy was needed in the new cabinet. On May 30, he was also present when the members of the Arad government resigned in Szeged. The next day, Gyula Károlyi's new cabinet was formed, in which he once again became the Minister of Commerce. He indicated his openness to cooperation by appointing a politician from Szeged as his deputy.

Varjassy, along with a colleague, fought until the last moment to ensure that their Jewish ministerial colleague, Lajos Pálmai, would not be excluded from the ministers, but they were unable to impose their will against the anti-Semitic politicians from Szeged. Despite the debates, he collaborated with Tibor Eckhardt and Béla Kelemen to prepare the new government's manifesto, which was made public on June 2 after revisions by the French city governor Béatrix and was similar in content to its Arad counterpart⁸².

In June, the outbreak of an anti-government general strike in Szeged caused a serious crisis, paralyzing the city. Varjassy attempted to pacify the workers through preliminary negotiations – unsuccessfully. When the trouble occurred, he remained loyal to the Károlyi government and even persuaded János Dettre, the former chief commissioner of Szeged, who had played a significant role

in the downfall of Kelemen Béla and his associates, to try to influence the workers. Meanwhile, he participated in the establishment of the propaganda committee to assist the government⁸³.

By the end of June, the French's trust in Gyula Károlyi's government was increasingly diminishing. In Szeged, the rumor was that Varjassy primarily had issues with Gyula Gömbös, the Undersecretary of War, Miklós Horthy, the Minister of War, Béla Kelemen, the Minister of Interior and later the Minister of Religion and Public Education, and Pál Teleki, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, and that he criticized them in front of the French. Not long after, a minister told Kelemen that Varjassy would exclude several of his fellow ministers known from Arad from the government⁸⁴.

Among those mentioned, he did indeed get into a significant conflict with Gyula Gömbös, which was related to the increasing power given to Captain Pál Prónay and his white terrorist officers. These soldiers had already committed several murders in Szeged, and the notoriously radical Varjassy was quickly categorized as one of their enemies. Although they intended to take action against the Minister of Commerce, due to his high position, they only planned his physical elimination for the time being. Although Varjassy and Gömbös temporarily reached a ceasefire, contemporaries rightly believed that the minister played a significant role in the French expulsion of the then-former state secretary-military officer from Szeged on July 25⁸⁵.

Varjassy wanted to see some members of the Arad government who were missing from the Szeged cabinet in a new government, and partly the leading politicians of Mihály Károlyi's regime (he also suggested Sándor Juhász Nagy and Aladár Balla as prime ministers). His opponents accused him of wanting to be the prime minister himself, but even the left-wing members of the counter-revolutionaries did not support him in this, and therefore he gave up on it. Varjassy vehemently denied this in his memoirs regarding the earlier period – according to him, if he had wanted to be, he would have achieved his goal with the support of the French⁸⁶. However, this was not entirely true: for example, on June 30, 1919, General Charpy, the French sector commander, himself reprimanded Gyula Károlyi, the Prime Minister, when Varjassy announced that he wanted to be the Minister of

⁸⁰ Kelemen 1923, 209–210.

⁸¹ Kelemen 1923, 136, 139–140, 153.

⁸² Kelemen 1923, 189, 196, 199–202.

⁸³ Kelemen 1923, 235–236, 244, 253–255.

⁸⁴ Kelemen 1923, 300.

⁸⁵ Gömbös 1920, 56; Kelemen 1923, 398–399; Prónay 1963, 96–100; Varjassy 1932, 87–88.

⁸⁶ Kelemen 1923, 302, 313, 323; Varjassy 1932, 61.

the Interior. Despite the minor setbacks, he was the intermediary of French ideas within the government and undoubtedly the transmitter of information discussed in cabinet meetings to the occupiers⁸⁷.

Alongside Pál Teleki, he was the only one to be included in the P. Ábrahám Dezső's government from the previous cabinet. Several individuals proposed by Varjassy were included among the ministers, including Aladár Balla and Lajos Pálmai. He played a significant role in the preparation of the government – both in the old cabinet and before the French. We know, for example, that General Charpy consulted him about the personalities of certain counter-revolutionary or potentially counter-revolutionary politicians⁸⁸. Although the new government was less „reactionary” than the previous one, it was still unable to achieve results. In practice, the Hungarian Soviet Republic collapsed without their involvement, and instead of the Hungarian National Army, Romanian troops occupied Budapest. In this situation, Commander-in-Chief Miklós Horthy obtained the government's consent for the Hungarian National Army to be independent and moved the soldiers to Siófok. Thus, the cabinet was left without an army. At the last ministerial council meeting held in Szeged on August 12, Lajos Varjassy suggested that instead of resigning, the cabinet members should go to the capital as soon as possible, negotiate the formation of a transitional government in Budapest, and if this is established, the members of the old cabinet could act independently⁸⁹.

The P. Ábrahám government announced its resignation in favor of István Friedrich's cabinet in Budapest on August 19, 1919 – Varjassy was also present at the meeting⁹⁰.

Lajos Varjassy's political involvement in Hungary after the fall of the Hungarian Soviet Republic

Varjassy, who remained in Budapest, was entrusted by Prime Minister István Friedrich with maintaining contact with the French mission and the Romanian embassy⁹¹. One of the newspapers of the Hungarian communist emigration in Vienna claimed that Ioan Ardelean, the president of the Romanian National Council in Budapest and later the „ambassador” of the Sibiu Governing

Council, wanted to make Varjassy a government member in August 1919⁹².

The politician from Arad ultimately did not become a minister again, but he played an active role in politics. He facilitated the contact between Friedrich and the Social Democrats, but ultimately failed to involve the moderate elements of the Social Democratic Party of Hungary⁹³ in the government. He founded the Peace Party, which shortly thereafter merged into the National Democratic Party in the autumn of 1919⁹⁴. Saint-Aulaire also negotiated with the French ambassador in Bucharest in the company of several opposition politicians. He suggested that Hungary should cooperate with the successor states, and primarily, close Romanian-Hungarian economic cooperation is necessary⁹⁵. He was there when Vilmos Vázsonyi, a liberal Hungarian politician, tried to convince Sir George Clerk, a British diplomat, to first establish a government recognized by the Entente, to which the Hungarian army would be subordinated, and only then allow Horthy and his troops to enter Budapest. However, Clerk supported Horthy and did not accept the proposal⁹⁶.

On November 16, 1919, under the command of Miklós Horthy, the Hungarian National Army entered Budapest. That same night, Hungarian officers who knew him from Szeged visited him for a night. Varjassy suspected that they wanted to kill him, so without glasses and shoes, in his stockings, he jumped out of the window. He was injured during the escape but managed to hide in a nearby house. They helped him reach the French mission, where his wounds were treated and from then on a French officer guarded his apartment. Clerk was also approached by opposition politicians, who expressed their outrage to the foreign minister of the Friedrich government, but he could do nothing more. Varjassy eventually fled to Timișoara in Romania, first to Szeged with the help of the French, and then through Subotica (Szabadka) and Kikinda (Nagykikinda)⁹⁷.

Lajos Varjassy in Romania

In the last decade and a half of his life, he became a constant figure in public news for various reasons: in the summer of 1920, news appeared in the Hungarian and Romanian Hungarian press that

⁸⁷ Kelemen 1923, 323–324, 335–341.

⁸⁸ Kelemen 1923, 361–377.

⁸⁹ Tóth 2019.

⁹⁰ Kelemen 1923, 511–512.

⁹¹ Varjassy 1932, 94.

⁹² *Az Ember*, 3, no. 24 (May 1, 1920), 16.

⁹³ Varjassy 1932, 96–97.

⁹⁴ *Szózat*, 1, no. 6 (October 4, 1919), 2.

⁹⁵ Varjassy 1932, 104–105.

⁹⁶ Garami 1922, 175.

⁹⁷ Garami 1922, 182–184; Varjassy 1932, 112–119.

he would become the Minister of Nationalities in Alexandru Averescu's government. In these articles, Lajos Varjassy was portrayed as the traitor of the Hungarian community in Transylvania and the Partium⁹⁸.

However, Varjassy did not become a minister again, but probably with the help of his connections, his name appeared as the initiator of the first Hungarian-language newspaper in Bucharest after the Treaty of Trianon in September 1920⁹⁹. In January 1921, the Romanian and Hungarian press reported that Varjassy had been trading with the papers he had obtained, causing with his partner a loss of 10–50 million¹⁰⁰ lei to the Romanian government¹⁰¹. He later claimed that he merely launched the *Bukaresti Hirlap*, which ceased publication shortly thereafter due to a dispute between the editorial office and the company's commercial director.

He did not give up his political ambitions, although he lived in Bucharest and worked as a lawyer¹⁰². In the autumn of 1922, he allegedly wanted to be the prefect of Arad, but the newspaper article reporting on this considered him unlikely to obtain the position¹⁰³. In 1926, the Hungarian press reported that the proceedings against him for the 1921 „paper scam” had been terminated, and as a result, he would restart the *Bukaresti Magyar Hirlap*¹⁰⁴ – this was likely influenced by the fact that the Averescu government was in power again. At the same time, several media outlets accused him of breaking the unity of the Hungarian community, claiming that he appeared on the opposition list rather than the local list of the National Liberal Party and the National Hungarian Party in the Arad city elections¹⁰⁵. In reality, he was confused with his father, who eventually did get into the council¹⁰⁶.

After 1926, he became an increasingly frequent subject of contemporary political gossip news.

⁹⁸ *8 Órai Ujság*, 6, no. 123 (May 23, 1920), 5; *Nemzeti Ujság*, 2, no. 132 (June 3, 1920), 2; *Székely Nép*, 38, no. 8 (April 26, 1920), 3.

⁹⁹ *Szeged*, 1, no. 24 (September 14, 1920), 1.

¹⁰⁰ Different sources report varying amounts. In the trial that started in 1925, Varjassy and his associates were accused of causing 20 million lei in damages. *Szamos*, 57, no. 44 (February 24, 1925), 2.

¹⁰¹ *Friss Ujság*, 26, no. 25 (February 1, 1921), 2; *Szeged*, 2, no. 22 (January 28, 1921), 4; *Uj Kelet*, 4, no. 19 (January 28, 1921), 3.

¹⁰² *Aradi Közlöny*, 40, no. 173 (August 18, 1925), 5.

¹⁰³ *Ellenzék*, 43, no. 249 (November 4, 1922), 4.

¹⁰⁴ *Pesti Hirlap*, 48, no. 34 (February 12, 1926), 10.

¹⁰⁵ *Aradi Közlöny*, 41, no. 31 (February 10, 1926), 2.

¹⁰⁶ *Aradi Közlöny*, 41, no. 88 (April 20, 1926), 2.

He was mentioned several times in connection with the Palugyay Champagne Factory in Arad, where he was accused of representing the interests of the Bucharest Bank that joined the partnership instead of both parties¹⁰⁷. His name first came up in the case of the embezzlement of the estate of the underage Erzsébet Juhos, who lives in Hungary¹⁰⁸, as the heroic lawyer of Juhos's mother, who defended the estate from those who wanted to acquire it in a vile manner¹⁰⁹, then as the accused person who attempted to deprive the aforementioned child of her property¹¹⁰, and deceive people¹¹¹. The years-long trial contained quite extreme twists, which would still be fit for the pages of tabloids today – in a „negative obituary,” it was claimed that a shy local farmer had said in court that he had seen the widow and the lawyer walking naked in the woods¹¹². Nearly a hundred years later, it is difficult to untangle the truth from the contradictory reports and articles, but it can be fundamentally established that Varjassy emerged as a negative figure from the years-long affair.

While love rumors surrounded him, which were regularly leaked by the Hungarian press in Romania, pairing him not only with Mrs. Juhos¹¹³, but with his father's young second wife, we know little about the official part of his private life. His wife was Mária Ilona Lukács, a kindergarten teacher and the daughter of a landowner from Kaszaper (1889–1966), whom he married around 1907–1909. In 1927, they were still likely living together, as his wife¹¹⁴ fiercely defended him in the press. However, the following year, the *Erdélyi Futár* reported on their divorce, even naming the reason: the widow Mrs. Juhos¹¹⁵. Nevertheless, Maria Lukács kept her married name until her death¹¹⁶. They had two children: Ilona Varjassy in 1909 and Lajos in 1923¹¹⁷.

Dr. Lajos Varjassy was considered an agent of

¹⁰⁷ *Temesvári Hirlap*, 24, no. 131 (June 15, 1926), 10.

¹⁰⁸ *Temesvári Hirlap*, 24, no. 204 (September 10, 1926), 4.

¹⁰⁹ *Temesvári Hirlap*, 24, no. 204 (September 10, 1926), 4; *Vágóhid*, 13, no. 38 (September 19, 1926), 18.

¹¹⁰ *Déli Hirlap*, 3, no. 91 (23 April, 1927), 2.

¹¹¹ *Aradi Ujság*, 29, no. 207 (September 14, 1928), 3.

¹¹² *Temesvári Hirlap*, 33, no. 17 (January 24, 1935), 6.

¹¹³ The author of the *Temesvári Hirlap*, Sándor Cseresnyés, directly claimed that he married Mrs. Juhos, but there is no other evidence besides his claim. See: *Temesvári Hirlap*, 32, no. 267 (November 28, 1934), 4.

¹¹⁴ *Aradi Közlöny*, 42, no. 97 (May 3, 1927), 7.

¹¹⁵ *Erdélyi Futár*, 2, no. 20 (November 15, 1928), 8.

¹¹⁶ Family Search, Budapest, District VIII, Death certificates, 1966, 2898; *Fővárosi Közlöny*, 58, no. 13 (April 5, 1947), 258.

¹¹⁷ Kempelen 1932, 33.

the Romanians in the Hungarian press after 1920: for example, during his 1934 Paris lecture promoting the „Danube Confederation”, Ferenc Honti, the Paris secretary of the Hungarian Revisionist League, rejected Varjassy’s statements¹¹⁸. In his memoirs, which were published at the end of 1932 and later discussed in more detail, he strongly criticized both Horthy and his regime during the revolutionary period¹¹⁹. From the French edition of the work, titled „Révolution, Bolchevisme, Réaction,” the right to postal delivery was revoked¹²⁰.

He died on January 21, 1935, in the British capital, while preparing for new lectures. His body was not brought back to his homeland; it was buried in the Catholic section of St. Pancras Cemetery in London at the expense of the Romanian embassy¹²¹.

Conclusions

From the moment of his birth, Lajos Varjassy had every opportunity to pursue a significant career in his birthplace, Arad: on his father’s side, political influence; on his mother’s side, wealth; and on his own part, diligence and ambition. Even his opponents acknowledged that he could have played a significant role, both as the secretary of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry and as an influencer on his father, who served as mayor, in the development of Arad’s industry in the years leading up to World War I – the most notable sign of which was the start of automobile manufacturing.

In the autumn of 1918, with the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, he became an important figure almost overnight. He was appointed as the governor of the city of Arad and the county of the same name, and due to his old friendships, he became a key figure in Romanian-Hungarian relations, believed to be capable of smoothing over any disagreements between the two parties. The newspapers wrote about his expected appointment as state secretary, and then as minister. The French occupation of Arad at the end of 1918 did not change his situation; due to his past in France, he quickly found common ground with the local officials representing the Entente. He portrayed himself as an independent entity, but in reality, he was primarily an executor of the occupiers’ will, with

¹¹⁸ *Brassói Friss Ujság*, 3, no. 184 (July 5, 1934), 2; *Pesti Napló*, 85, no. 143 (June 27, 1934), 4.

¹¹⁹ Varjassy 1932.

¹²⁰ *Magyar Királyi Államvasutak Hivatalos Lapja*, 49, no. 55 (December 30, 1934), 2.

¹²¹ *Ellenzék*, 56, no. 32 (February 8, 1935), 8.

whom his political opponents collaborated mainly under French pressure.

On May 6, 1919, his dream came true: he became a minister, albeit in a powerless opposition government in Arad. He was the only one to retain his position in all subsequent Szeged cabinets, which clearly indicated that the French considered him their most important contact. His political colleagues considered him a French informant. In Szeged, he got into conflicts with several politicians who were able to build significant careers between the two World Wars. Although he achieved partial successes – such as the removal of Gyula Gömbös, who later became Prime Minister, from Szeged – he could not remain in Hungary in the long term. Due to his French and Romanian connections, he could still be one of the opposition leaders in Budapest in the autumn of 1919, but after the entry of Miklós Horthy’s troops, it became clear that he had no future either in the capital or in the country.

In Romania, he tried to continue his career, but he could not become the first minister of Hungarian ethnicity here either; after the „paper scam” affair, even his influential Romanian supporters turned away from him. From here, his path practically only led downward: political, economic, and even romantic scandals were associated with his name.

In his later years, both the Hungarian and Romanian political elites viewed him as a traitor to the Hungarian nation, as he weakened the cause of Hungarian territorial revision with Romanian state funds.

The accusation certainly had some basis, but we must not forget about Varjassy, who in 1918–1919 did everything he could for peaceful Romanian-Hungarian relations in his narrower party region, Arad County, which had a significant Hungarian minority in a predominantly Romanian population, and in the city of Arad, known for its exactly opposite ethnic composition. Unfortunately, his example did not find a sufficient number of followers on either side.

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