

# Fort Komárno: vast, closed, and abandoned

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## Abstract

Due to its geographical position, town Komárno, situated in south-western Slovakia on the River Danube, 150 km from Vienna, used to have a rich military heritage. Fort Komárno, situated at the outskirts of the town, is one of the biggest fortification systems in Central Europe. The oldest parts of the fortress were built in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. During the Napoleonic Wars the Fort was renewed, and a system of bridgeheads to the fortress was created. The troops of the Soviet Army stayed at Fort Komárno for 23 years, between 1968 and 1991. Today this fortress, which in the late-19<sup>th</sup> century had a capacity to garrison tens of thousands of soldiers, is a vast ruin: empty and abandoned.

**Keywords:** fort; fortress; garrison; Komárno; military heritage; Slovakia; Soviet Army; tourism

**Subject-Affiliation in New CEEOL:** History – Recent History – Post-War period

## Introduction

Unfortunately, the history of Fort Komárno has not been researched to the scale it would deserve. The presence of the Soviet Army in Komárno is surrounded by historical amnesia, which basically means that earlier periods of its military past (the Habsburg period and especially the years of the 1848/1849 revolution) are much more remembered by the locals than the 23 more recent years of the Soviet presence. Despite 23 years spent in Komárno, written accounts, contemporary memorabilia, and even photographs about the ex-presence of the Soviet Army is very weak. It is without any mention or reference in the local museum, the Danube Region Museum in Komárno, which since 2010 has arranged many spectacular exhibitions but not a single one on the Fort as a military garrison, including the Soviet times (Podunajské múzeum v Komárne, <https://www.muzeumkn.sk/index.php?cat=87&page=article>, last accessed on January 5, 2018).

In the Fort itself, there is not a single room re-arranged to look like in the Soviet times. To my best knowledge, there is no systematic archival research on Fort Komárno, and there is not a single monograph written about it. Exceptions are three recent works written by military historians which contain valuable references to the Fort Komárno, such as Baka – Maskalik – Medvecký – Minařík 2016, Tomek – Pejčoch 2018, and Germuska 2010; there is also an unpublished doctoral thesis specializing in the architectural transformations of the Fort (Ozimy 2018).

On the one hand, the present paper is one of the first attempts to analyze the

current situation at Fort Komárno within the context of the Soviet military presence in Central Europe. It surveys the pros and cons as well as the obstacles, challenges and possibilities which are hidden and so far undiscovered in this vast post-military building with a specific stress on its Soviet military past.

On the other hand there are many issues which this study does not include; in fact, it is not able to. To my best knowledge, there is no handbook on the post-Soviet military buildings in Czechoslovakia which would explore these places in their political, military, architectural etc. complexity. As to Komárno, due to the lack of basic research, including, among others, in Slovakian and Russian military archives, there are at least three specific topics related to the topic this paper is dealing with, which can only be mentioned briefly here: (1) The detailed presence of the Hungarian, Czechoslovak, Slovak, and the Soviet armies at the Fort; (2) the elaboration of how the Municipality of Komárno handles the issue of the fortress, including its (so far) failed attempt to include the Fort into a specific UNESCO project; (3) as well as the analysis of the attitude of the locals to the ex-presence of the Soviet military – these topics would require specific attention, each of them would deserve separate research, so I name and count them in my paper only as fields of potential research.

## Fort Komárno – General Facts

Due to its geographical position, town Komárno (in Hungarian *Komárom*, in German *Komorn*) has had a rich military heritage. In addition to the Fortress, which is situated in a 10-minute-walk from the town centre, Komárno used to have a military hospital and a military church (the military hospital was dismantled in the inter-war period; the military church still exists though it is out of service). Thus, town Komárno used to serve as the north-western gate of the pre-1918 Hungarian Kingdom, situated 150 kilometres south-east from Vienna, and 100 kilometres north-west from Budapest. Presently one can reach Komárno from Vienna by driving 170 kilometres by car, or by taking a 150-kilometre-long waterway on the Danube.

Fort Komárno is a part of one of the biggest and most preserved military fortification systems in Central Europe. The fortification – in fact, a carefully designed system of fortifications – reaches over both banks of the River Danube. Besides Fort Komárno, there are three major forts along the River Danube: Fort Monostor, Fort Igmánd, and Fort Csillag (Enyedi – Sikos 2008, 29–30). In this paper, I focus on the northern part of the fortification system, situated in Slovakia, and even within this, I analyse its major item, the centrally situated Fort Komárno.

Fort Komárno consists of two major parts. The Old Fortress was built in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, while the New Fortress came to existence as a Habsburg stronghold between 1663–1673 (Enyedi – Sikos 2008, 26–27, 67) when the Old Fortress was fortified according to the plans of an Italian architect of fortresses, Pietro Ferabosco [cca. 1512–1588]. During the Napoleonic wars, at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Habsburg emperors renewed both the Old and the New Fortresses and created a complex system of bridgeheads to the fortress. Among others,

six new bastions were erected which add up to the so called Linea Palatina (in Hungarian *Nádor vonal*). During the 1848 anti-Habsburg revolution and the Austrian-Hungarian Dual Monarchy (1867–1918) further building developments were achieved (Enyedi – Sikos 2008, 27; Gráfel: undated).

In the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, roughly between 1850 and 1880, the Fortress went through general reconstruction works, within the military modernization process of the Austrian-Hungarian Monarchy. Despite these works, the complex of buildings lost its military significance. This happened mainly for technical reasons, because the fortifications were renewed by using identical building materials which had been used earlier, i.e. earth, chalk and bricks, which were already outdated building materials of the time, and not by the most up-to-date construction materials of the late-19<sup>th</sup> century such as concrete and iron.

Despite this, Fort Komárno served military functions even in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It was used for active military purposes between 1942–1945 when the Hungarian Army used it as headquarters for preparing soldiers ahead of their service on the Soviet front. The Soviet Army occupied it in 1968, and stationed there between 1968–1991. After the Soviet Army left, the fortress was taken over and used by the (Czecho-)Slovak Army between 1991–2003. In 1991 it was still the Czecho-Slovak Army, until Slovakia set up its independent republic and army commencing from January 1, 1993 (see Enyedi – Sikos 2008, 29; Swains – Onderčanin – Thomson 2018). In 2003, Fort Komárno was sold by the Ministry of Defence of Slovakia to the Municipality of Komárno.

## The Soviet Army in Komárno (1969–1991)

The troops of the Soviet Army stayed at Fort Komárno for 23 years between 1968 and 1991 (on a wider outlook on the ex-presence of the Soviet military in CEE see Seljamaa – Czarnecka – Demski 2017 and other articles in *Folklore: Electronic Journal of Folklore* 70. Available at <https://www.folklore.ee/folklore/vol70/>, last accessed on April 5, 2019). After the Second World War, the Soviet Army stayed in Czechoslovakia, the World-War-winner country, only for a short period of time after 1945. Nevertheless, after the 1968 August invasion, the Soviet Army settled permanently both in Czechoslovakia as well as in Komárno (Baka – Maskalik – Medvecký – Minařík 2016, 246; Tomek – Pejčoch 2018, 18–25). Beyond the Old Fortress and the New Fortress, which were used by the Soviet Army as their ammunition depot and garrisons, the Soviet Army occupied two more military spots in the neighbourhood of Komárno, such as a shooting range at Modrany, and a pontoon-bridge system at Iža, both villages within a range of a one-hour-drive from Komárno (Tomek – Pejčoch 2018, 465). One of the peculiarities of the situation in Komárno is that the Soviet Army had already been *nearby* prior to 1968 in Fort Monostor, Hungary, on the opposite side of the River Danube, just 3 kilometers, where the Soviet Army settled in right after 1945. There used to be the Soviet tank division plus a vast ammunition depot there (Germuska 2010, 231; Tomek – Pejčoch 2018, 467).

At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the maximum capacity of Fort Komárno was designed to 200,000 troops. During the 1968 and 1991 period, the number of Soviet soldiers garrisoning at Fort Komárno in a military readiness position at any given time is estimated from 7,000 to 8,000 (Ozimy 2018, 1; to my best knowledge specific figures have never been published).

Today, Fort Komárno is a vast ruin: empty, and most of the time abandoned, since there are many days, especially in winter and spring, when there is no interest for guided tours at the Fort at all. There is not much there to see or at least nothing to remember the presence of the Soviet Army. Back in the 1970s and 1980s, groups of Pioneers visited 'our Soviet friends' at the 'garrison' in Komárno during organized school trips, where kids could see soldiers' neatly kept dormitories, their tightly pulled bedsheets and the cleanly swept courtyard. These school trips were part of a carefully organized 'ideological training' for the Slovak youth in order to engage them in cordial relationship with the Soviet soldiers (as 'our liberators') in particular, and with the Soviet Union (as 'our beloved friend') in general.

There are some interesting sources in the local county archive on the presence of the Soviet Army. These written sources, produced by the Mestský národný výbor (MsNV, i.e. Town Council of the municipality during the one-party-system), capture the very first days and weeks when the Soviet Army came and settled in Komárno in August 1968. At the XXVI Plenary Session of the Okresný národný výbor (ONV = National Committee of the Komárno County) on September 6, 1968, the complete political leadership of the county was present. The session included Pavol Sádovský, the Head of the ONV; Anton Kostanko, the Leading Secretary of the Okresný výbor Komunistickej strany Slovenska (OV KSS, i.e. County Committee of the Slovak Communist Party); comrade Kolárik, the Head of MsNV Komárno; and the complete body of all 34 representatives of Komárno municipality.<sup>1</sup>

As we can read in the minutes of the meetings, the "illegal presence of the Soviet Army and all the harm caused by them" was the major topic on the daily agenda. As Pavol Sádovský's account says:

We have very difficult days behind us. [...] First, we had to treat foreign citizens who were trapped in our town due to the fact that they could not leave, for the access to Hungary was completely halted. Then, the intervention of the Warsaw Pact militaries caused in our county an extraordinary situation as far as the food supplies for the local citizens are concerned. During the first days our inhabitants started to buy up flour, rice, sugar, salt, grease, etc.<sup>2</sup>

On the one hand, the Head of the ONV did not hide his own disappointment and national pride when he said that "we negotiated with the representatives of the armies who illegally occupied our land". Yet, on the other hand he was already on the side of those who worked for "calming" the situation, and bring it back to 'normality' (as this pro-occupant process was called later). In front of the complete body of

1 Štátny archív v Nitre, pracovisko Archív Komárno. Fond: ONV KN, Zápisnica PL, September 6, 1968, pp. 32.

2 Štátny archív v Nitre, pracovisko Archív Komárno. Fond: ONV KN, Zápisnica PL, September 6, 1968, pp. 31.

political representatives of the Komárno County, Sádovský had to explain some of his activities during the peak days of the invasion.

We were criticized [*the written source does not say by whom – B. V.*] that we negotiated with the representatives of the Soviet Army. On August 22, 1968 gen. Smokovský, the commander of the Soviet Army, visited comrade Kostanko with a wish to negotiate. We had a meeting at the ONV, where we offered them some coffee. They negotiated with us very fairly, which did not surprise us since we had known them since the great flood [*in 1965 – B. V.*] when they had helped us a lot. They said they had come to occupy us but promised that the military will be deployed outside the town. And they kept their promise since from then on, Soviet soldiers stayed only on the bridge [*between Slovakia and Hungary – B. V.*].[...] I can confirm that Soviet military commanders were with us [*in the building of the ONV – B. V.*] from 21:00 until 22:30 p.m. of that day.<sup>3</sup>

On September 6, 1968 the Plenary Session of the ONV was called together in order to evaluate the “political situation in the county”, and after a “discussion” the political body of the county was expected to express “a statement toward the political and economic situation in the county”. So the members of the highest political body of Komárno County declared their concern over the material and spiritual damage caused by the 1968 Soviet intervention in their locality surprisingly overtly:

There was a major damage done especially at the railway lines between Komárno and Komárom due to the fact that heavy [*Soviet – B. V.*] technology crossed over the bridge. At that spot all rails had to be completely replaced. The drawbridge [*as part of the border crossing road – B. V.*] was also damaged by heavy military machines which highly overrun the technical capacity of the bridge. The material damage is significant especially in the roads and the rails; we estimate them to ca. 56 million Kčs [*Kčs = currency Koruna československá – B. V.*]. These material damages are repairable, however, the moral damage is irreparable.<sup>4</sup>

## An Abandoned Place

The fascinating Fort Komárno, once the largest and the most powerful construction in the whole Austro-Hungarian Empire, is a stark and magnificent example of military solidity; a structure of prodigious scale, at one time besieged by the Tartars, Ottomans, Napoleonic troops, countless floods and two earthquakes – but never conquered; always rebuilt, strengthened and enlarged each time.

However, this military past has gone. In 2003, when Fort Komárno was purchased by the Municipality of Komárno, the original intention was to make it become an integral part of the town and its cultural life.<sup>5</sup> Judged from some frag-

3 Štátny archív v Nitre, pracovisko Archív Komárno. Fond: ONV KN, Zápisnica PL, September 6, 1968, pp. 33.

4 Štátny archív v Nitre, pracovisko Archív Komárno. Fond: ONV KN, Zápisnica PL, September 6, 1968, pp. 35.

5 The details of the purchase, including the initiator of the sale, the price, and the technical conditions

mented contemporary declarations and pledges, the Municipality as the official handler of the Fort as a property, had a declared vision of a busy Fort used first and foremost for intensive tourism (see for instance news articles in the Slovakian daily newspaper “Új Szó”, January 10, 2003: 7.; see also the official website of Municipality of Komárno, [http://komarno.sk/content/necarte/svk/sucasny\\_stav\\_pamiatkova\\_obnova.htm](http://komarno.sk/content/necarte/svk/sucasny_stav_pamiatkova_obnova.htm); last accessed on January 5, 2019). Today, however, apparently the ‘Let’s revive the Fort!’ project is struggling. And we can raise the question of why the attempts of including or organically involving this major and magnificent historical sight, the Fort Komárno, into a living space of Komárno are struggling?

Formulating the question through the prism of history and cultural memory: What can we say about the transformation of this ‘selected cultural space’, a massive military fortress, which, among others, used to be a Soviet garrison? Does this historical site carry in itself any emblematic or par excellence representations? (Demski – Czarnecka 2015, 96, 98). If yes, then what kind of interpretative layers does it have? What I mean here, is the link between the physical space and its both symbolic and practical utilization, such as using this truly historical site for everyday life, economy, education, tourism, etc.

It would probably be a mistake to call the current Fort Komárno project a complete failure, since there have been indeed serious achievements we can take into consideration (I will list them further below). Why is it that even though Komárno is neither a ‘forest town’ nor a ‘mysterious Borne’, it is “Empty, alien and menacing” (Demski – Czarnecka 2015, 99)? All in all, it is fair to say that although in 2003 the whole Fort Komárno, as a property, went into the legal possession of the town (Enyedi – Sikos 2008, 29), the town is struggling to handle this unique possession.

On the one hand there has been a firm will to handle it as an object of international significance and pride, but on the other, it seems to be too big (and costly) to find the most appropriate ways of utilization.

## What Is the *differentia specifica* of Fort Komárno?

The current question of Fort Komárno as a ‘selected cultural space’ has to be looked at from two major viewpoints: on the state level and on the local level.

On the state level, the case of Fort Komárno is a ‘case closed’. After some 380 troops of the Slovak Army left the fortress in summer of 2000 (Ozimy 2018, 6–7), the one and only issue regarding the Fort Komárno on the national level used to be the problem of the environmental pollution. What I mean

here is the fact that the Soviet Army placed a huge amount of rubbish they produced during their presence into the cellars within the ramparts of the fortress (Ozimy 2018, 5). To get a rough idea of the immense physical space in question, one must imagine underground corridors, channels, holes, and pits that are approximately 20 metres wide, and some 12 metres high, while their total length might be measured in kilometres! What makes the issue even more serious is that some of the rubbish, including crude oil barrels, rubber tires, etc. were considered

as environmentally dangerous pollution.

During the negotiations between Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union (later Russia) over the legal and technical issues of the presence of the Soviet Army, there were at least two 'hot' issues. Other than the financial compensation required by the Czechoslovak government, the other key issue was the environmental pollution caused by the Soviet Army in and around the garrisons it occupied in Czechoslovakia throughout the country. Since 1993, the Slovak Ministry of Environment has had a register of 33 so called 'polluted areas of national importance' and these are only those which have been inherited from the Soviet Army. Most of the rubbish left behind by the Soviet Army was sorted out, or 'asanated' in Slovak terminology. By mid-2017, 24 out of the 33 such places have been sorted out, and Fort Komárno is luckily one of them. The remaining 9 are still waiting for professional and quite expensive 'asanation' (TASR news, August 21, 2017). So, from the point of view of the Slovak Ministry of Environment, Fort Komárno is a 'case closed'.

Nevertheless, this is only the environmental harm. We should also take into consideration the harm caused by the Soviet Army in the physical construction of the Fort itself, which was carried out very carelessly and many times unprofessionally, and which alterations (in walls, roofs, windows, etc.) resulted in serious changes in the historical outlook of the Fort. Naming only one example: the Soviet soldiers threw out the porcelain toilet bowls from Austrian-Hungarian times and replaced them with so called bowlless Turkish toilets (Ozimy 2018, 3–4).

On the local level, the issue of Fort Komárno has been a constant problem since it was purchased by the Municipality. Nevertheless, before we look into the depth of the problem, and the potential breaking-out points which surround this huge, valuable but unexploited town property, let us make a list of things that have already changed in and around Fort Komárno since it was purchased by the Municipality of Komárno in 2003.

Let us start with some very positive changes. Good news is that Fort Komárno can be visited by tourists. Visits are operated by Komárno Municipality. Guided tours are available in Slovak, Hungarian, English, and German languages. Tours last for 90 minutes; a shorter version is also available. It is very important to note that only guided tours are allowed which means that individual visitors without a designated guide are strictly prohibited. In fact, Fort Komárno is currently a locked and protected area. Indeed, the city police has been quite busy chasing away intruders who break in and cause harm such as smashing in windows, etc.

Certain parts of the Fort have been nicely restored, namely:

- the beautifully decorated Entrance Gate to the Old Fortress, the so called Ferdinand Gate has been lavishly renewed;
- the Commander's Building/Pavilion inside the New Fortress has been covered with a new roof;
- the former Gunpowder Storage Building has been completely restored in its full beauty; exhibitions, conferences, scientific workshops take place there occasionally.



Measured at the end of 2018, in my estimation, the recovered parts of the Fort add up approximately some 5% of the total area. The Municipality has been pro-actively seeking ways for funding these aforementioned reconstruction works, including funding from the Slovak Ministry of Culture and some European grants, too.

It is also important to point out the fact that Fort Komárno is not one building, i.e. it is not only the central Fort, but there has always been a system of civilian buildings outside and around the Fort. Some successful restoration works recently accomplished have involved these civilian building and spots. Regarding the buildings formerly used by the Soviet Army outside but rather close to the Fort, here is a list of some further positive changes.

The former Officers' Canteen was transformed into a campus of the J. Selye University; in fact, the University Library, the Main University Cafeteria, the Great University Auditorium, and many rooms for teaching have been arranged in this building since 2004.

The former Soviet Officers' Block House, an 8-storey concrete building, was completely transformed into modern flats. As in most similar cases, the Soviet officers and their spouses used to live separately, and only they were allowed to visit the town when off-duty, while ordinary soldiers were locked in their dormitories (McCauley 2017, 260; Tomek – Pejčoch 2018, 66–67), most of them and most of the time heavily isolated from the residents of Komárno. Up until now, the total restoration and modernization of the former Soviet Officers' Block House, as a privately financed enterprise, driven by commercial interest, is one of the most successful parts of the general restoration efforts.

Finally, the area around the main entrance of the Fort was nicely arranged; here a Town Market and a parking place were established.

Now, turning to the problems, failures, and setbacks around the utilization of the Fort, probably the greatest fiasco was the unsuccessful UNESCO application in 2007. As part of probably the most significant attempt to utilize Fort Komárno so far, there was a joint application by the governments of Slovakia and Hungary, in early 2007, to include the complex Fortress system on the UNESCO World Heritage List. The application to have the Fortress included on the UNESCO World Heritage List was initiated by the municipalities of Komárno (Slovakia) and Komárom (Hungary), and put forward to UNESCO authorities, as a joint effort, by the Hungarian and the Slovak government on January 26, 2007. Nevertheless, according to unofficial and unconfirmed information, just before the decision that was supposed to be made by a specific UNESCO committee, sometime in 2008, the application was withdrawn by both governments (Enyedi – Sikos 2008, 67). Even though the accessible information on the UNESCO application is scarce at this stage of research, judging from the known circumstances, and knowing the political and financial conditions of the two countries and the two municipalities (Komárno in Slovakia and Komárom in Hungary) involved back in 2007 and 2008, we can rightly suppose that one of the decisive factors of the setback was that the renovation of such a huge physical space would have meant an unbearable costly endeavour for both governments. In other words, the sheer size of the Fortress as a complex



had meant that a full renovation would have been very costly.<sup>6</sup>

## Historical Conscience

It is also worth analysing the struggling Fort Komárno project from the point of view of the historical conscience, or public history, i.e. from a point of view of a matter that concerns both history and the wider local public.

First, it is important to consider the multicausal character of the problem, i.e. to understand its several layers. The observation of the current situation in Komárno; the knowledge on the local circumstances at the Municipality (certainly, as an outsider I can have access to relevant documents and decisions on the Municipality level only to a limited extent); and having gathered small pieces of information in the last decade – clearly these help to understand the complexity of the problem which has minimally three major components, such as financial, technical, and cultural. In the endeavour in dealing with the Cold War or the Soviet legacy/heritage?, it is indeed important to consider all these factors. We can not neglect them since such special cultural places are used (or utilized) “by political, economic and social forces” (Demski – Czarnecka 2015, 98).

The core of the problem, in my understanding, is the basic condition of the Fort that is isolated. I mean the ‘isolation’ both as physical/technical and mental isolation: the area of the Fort which is isolated from the residential area of Komárno, and the mental environment of the Fort which has failed to become an integral part of the everyday life of Komárno and its inhabitants.

As to the physical isolation, I can explain through two specific examples how and why Komárno has been subordinated to other goals rather than fully renovating the Fort. In the last decades the town has been in the spotlight for its economic and traffic potential. Slovakia is Hungary’s third major export country (after Germany and Austria), and Komárno is a major traffic gate to Slovakia. Komárno is indeed a major crossing point, on road, railways, and water. Komárno has long been used as a major state border crossing point. In the post-1945 period, it used to be an important inside-the-socialist-bloc border crossing during the Cold War times, and it is still an important one in the Schengen Area. Komárno has old ‘maritime’ traditions due to the River Danube, since it has a river harbour right in midway from Vienna to Budapest, with a direct access to the Black Sea. This is the reason why we can call Komárno as a the “Gibraltar or Midway of the Danube”: a symbolical link right halfway on the Danube between Vienna and Budapest.

Beyond this, when we look at the physical environment of the Fort we can discover that the tip or edge of the peninsula where the Fort is situated, locally called as ‘The Spitz’, is in fact the backyard of the Fort, and has long been used as an oil supply station for river tanker ships, making the backside of the Fort entirely inaccessible for civilians. Thus it is not an exaggeration to say that the aesthetic and/or touristic considerations around the Fort have been heavily subordinated to

<sup>6</sup> Research in order to reveal details of the UNESCO project is in progress. I have contacted Mr. Ľudovít Gráfel, the person who has been in charge at the Municipality of Komárno of handling the issue of the Fort, for information. I have also contacted the regional office of UNESCO to provide written documentation of the project. To date, the research is in a phase of collecting data.

particular industrial utilization of the spot nearby the central Fort. (On this complex problem, including the problem of 'bad visibility' and 'insufficient accessibility to the River Danube' ["neither parts of the divided towns have good visual relationship with the Danube"] see Enyedi – Sikos 2008, 31; also Tamáska – Fekete 2015, 141–144). One may wonder if the presence of a commercially and strategically important oil supply station in a very close neighbourhood of the Fort had an impact on the decision over the UNESCO project?

As we know it from Edward Casey, places become alive through bodies, i.e. human activities (quoted by Demska – Czarnecka 2015, 97). At the Komárno Municipality, they know this rule from direct experience, so a major series of cultural events take place regularly every year in late April or early May. These cultural events are called the 'Komárno / Komárom Days'. Exhibitions, cultural events, concerts and a traditional fair of local handcrafts, street-food-and-drink-parade etc. take place within the framework of this event every year (Enyedi – Sikos 2008, 68). The number of events during these festivals can reach a hundred, and yet, only their small fraction takes place directly in the Fort. The overwhelming majority of events takes place on the main Klapka square of the town. Why? In fact, because the main square can easily be reached by visitors of the festival; and the Fort is more difficult to access.

The Fort perfectly fits into the places of touristic interest in Komárno, which include the 18–19<sup>th</sup> century buildings of the town centre, the historical Town Hall, many public statues and churches, several museums, shops and cafés, plus a place called "the Court of Europe", a designed and decorated set of buildings representing different architectural styles and European national architectural traditions.

Within the 'Komárno / Komárom Days' (which is a joint series of cultural programs organized by the two Municipalities) there is a special day, a Day of the Old Fortress, usually on May 1. Then, for this particular day, the gates of the Old Fortress, which is the most remote part of the Fort, are open for visitors. Martial arts and archery exhibitions, plus a traditional fair of local handcrafts take place in this framework every year – however, only for one single day in the year.

Besides the successful attempts I have already mentioned above, indeed, there have been some serious attempts to bring the two cultural places – the fortress and the town closer to each other. The former Officers' Canteen was transformed into a campus of the J. Selye University in Komárno, and the History Department of the University is making efforts to engage its undergraduates in the Fort: during the so called 'University Days' (usually in March) each year the university staff organizes collective visits to the Fort. These are special 90-minutes-long guided team building tours offered explicitly to history undergraduates in order to engage them in the most spectacular local historical sight. As we know it from our post-visit surveys, without these tours and without this personal involvement many (if not most) undergraduates would never ever have visited the Fort.

A further significant factor is a major discrepancy between how Komárno and Komárom deal with their respective parts of the Fortress. On the Hungarian side, both major parts of the fortification system are operational, and serve as organic

and vivid cultural landscapes: Fort Monostor has long been a major exhibition area; and Fort Csillag is being renovated in full swing for similar cultural purposes at the time of writing this study. Whereas in Slovakia, which hosts a much bigger part of the whole big system of the fortresses, it is only one single part, 'Bastion IV' which is fully operational and serves cultural purposes (Enyedi – Sikos 2008, 29). All the remaining parts on the Slovakian side, 9 bastions altogether, are either neglected and unkept, or serve as industrial-commercial depots, or their walls are used as garages, etc.

## Conclusions

It would be important to consider both strategic considerations and the physical and spiritual isolation of the Fortress in order to answer the questions: What might be the way out for Fort Komárno? What can be done with it? What could and what should be done? How could the town municipality utilize the spot at best?

As urban development experts have pointed out to it earlier, "the relationship between the town and the Fortress is highly problematic" in terms of strategic planning (Enyedi – Sikos 2008, 29). Until the owner of the property, namely the Municipality of Komárno does not make up its mind about its strategic goals regarding the Fort, the core of the problem will remain, and the relationship between the citizens and the Fort will be unclear. One of the main proofs that the Municipality does not have a clear vision over the final utilization of the Fort is the fact that no general plan for final utilization has ever been published; rather, partial repairs and restorations have taken place so far which seem rather uncoordinated for an outside spectator.

Currently, Komárno as an urban environment, and the Komárno Fort are two completely different issues; the urban arrangement is one thing, and the Fort is another. To coordinate and harmonize them, not only hardware (money, investment) but also software (good ideas) is needed. Even if "the fortress system [still] plays a key role in the morphologic picture of the (divided) towns" (Enyedi – Sikos 2008, 29), at this moment there is no true correlation between them, and the coercion is nonexistent. Despite the fact almost all experts involved see a huge potential and attractive power in the Fort as a cultural and historical sight, no authority has been able to utilize it so far.

So what can be done? What should be done in order to bring the Komárno Fort and the people closer to each other? Once again, acknowledging the multilateral/multicausal character of the problem, I think that tourism is one possible way out. No doubt that Fort Komárno has a significant degree of tourist-attracting power, and it should be an attraction for active tourism (Enyedi – Sikos 2008, 66), especially since figures show that almost two thirds of the tourism of Komárno county is concentrated in Komárno town.

Certainly, in the last decade, several ideas popped up: a military museum, a military training centre, a paintball pitch, a conference centre, a hotel, a renewable energy show house, etc.

As a first step, the Fort, which is permanently closed, and it can exclusively be

visited during guided tours, should be opened for public. For example, the Fort should be opened for bikers. Since the area is flat, bikers could use it. The demand for this kind of active tourism seems real. Especially for active senior tourists. One can regularly see ships in the Danube harbour, with well-equipped bikes on board, typically for seniors who are keen cycling around the town. River ships regularly anchor in Komárno: on route from Vienna to Budapest and back, and foreign visitors, coming to the region, often bring their bicycles with them. Combined with a carefully designed network of cafés, restaurants, and restrooms, and also involving the small electric engine, called 'Dotto', which can carry some 50 passengers for sightseeing around the town – the strategic goal of increasing active urban tourism does indeed seem possible. The Fort should be a natural part of this leisure endeavour. But until it is locked and inaccessible, one can not expect a serious change. I think the Fort should be opened, at least partially, in certain parts, for public use. Minimally its certain parts should be accessible, or in optimum case, it should be entirely accessible for bikers. Bikers should have access riding thorough, including its dungeons for those bikers who insist on extreme experiences. In addition, well-kept biking roads, and bikers' road maps would be needed. Of course, human supervision, medical and technical aid (e.g. bike repair service), plus proper lighting in the underground rooms and premises, and all-around video surveillance would also be needed.

*Present study was written in the framework of the scientific scheme: VEGA 2019–2021, No. 1/0163/19: Rôzne podoby slobody v totálnom štáte – politický život, náboženstvo, turizmus a média v (Česko)Slovensku, Maďarsku a Východnej Európe 1938–1968 [Certain forms of freedom in a totalitarian state – political life, religion, tourism, and media in Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Eastern Europe 1938–1968]*

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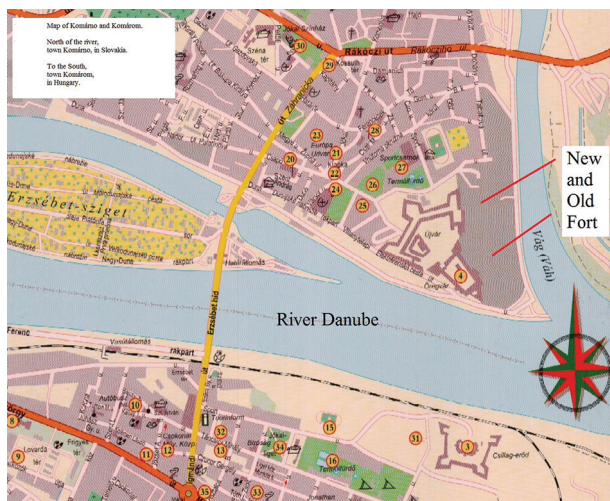


Fig. 1 A map of Komárno and Komárom

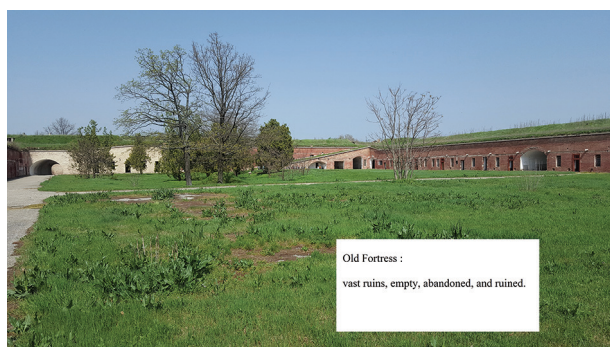


Fig. 2 The yard of the Old Fort (source: author, 2018)



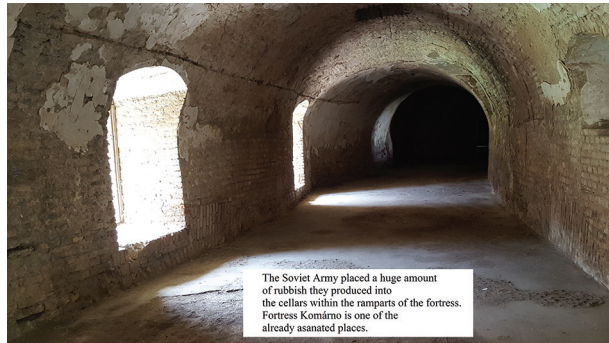


Fig. 3 One of the underground parts of Fort Komárno (source: author, 2018)

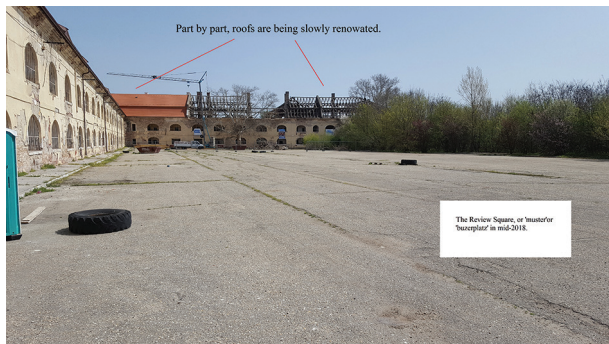


Fig. 4 The Review Square (or 'buzerplatz') in Fort Komárno (source: author, 2018)



Fig. 5 A view onto the River Danube, from Komárom to Komárno (source: author, 2018)

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