

## The Social Changes of Szolnok County in the Period of Socialist Industrialization

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### Introduction

For centuries, Jász-Nagykun-Szolnok County – or Szolnok County as it was called in the socialist era – was traditionally an agricultural county with only a small industrial presence. In most settlements of Szolnok County, industry could only be described as a small-scale industry serving the needs of the population and agriculture. Until the beginning of the socialist era, significant large-scale industry – on the Great Plain – was only established in the county capital, Szolnok, and its immediate neighbours Martfű and Törökszentmiklós. In the socialist jargon of the time, Szolnok County was one of the industrially backward counties, with little existing industry, which was geographically centralised and clustered in the immediate vicinity of Szolnok. The other five counties of the Great Plain and several counties of South Transdanubia were also included in the group of industrially backward counties. After the communists took power in Hungary, they set the goal to develop industry on a large scale, following the Soviet model, and the counties that had been lagging behind in this area were not exempt from this. Stalinist industrialisation often did not take into account existing local conditions, which allowed heavy industry to be set up in lowland areas. Industrial relocation was seen at the time as a universal solution that would create jobs and eliminate unemployment, raise living standards and make living conditions more predictable, while bringing about the much sought-after transformation of society, in which the working class – as it was then called – would play an increasingly important role. The transformation of society was, therefore not a side-effect of industrialisation, but a specifically planned and desired objective of the communist leadership.

In our study, we will describe some of the typical processes of social transformation in the first two decades of the socialist period. In addition to the events in Szolnok County, we will illustrate the social changes that took place through the example of Jászberény, the most industrialised county in the region.

## **Szolnok County**

The direction of industrialisation was clearly determined by the Soviet model; therefore, the so-called agricultural industrialisation, which was focused on local conditions and was formulated by Rezső Ruisz in the period between the two world wars, could not be realised. Ruisz generally advocated industrial development to be adapted to the natural endowments of the agricultural towns of the lowlands, bringing local agriculture and the industry to be established in harmony (Ruisz, 1943).

As a result of the agricultural collectivisation that took place in parallel with socialist industrialisation, the population structure of Szolnok County underwent a significant transformation. As the labour force in agriculture became less and less necessary, a large part of it was channelled into the industry. However, for the reasons given above, there were not enough jobs in the industry sector to absorb the workers released from agriculture, so some of the people understandably moved into the industrialized areas of other counties, mainly the capital and the industrial axis of the country. The surplus labour force of Szolnok County, unable to find work, found a livelihood mainly in Budapest. In the first decade of the socialist period, migration from the industrially underdeveloped counties was largely offset by natural increase, although Csongrád, Békés, Bács-Kiskun, Tolna and Zala counties were already experiencing a real population decline. In Szolnok County, on the other hand, despite the significant migration, the population grew by 2.6% in 10 years. The only significant location in the county with a high number of residents was the county capital, and Szolnok's population growth was well above the national average. In contrast, the population of the other towns in the county showed a stagnating or even decreasing trend, according to the Hungarian Central Statistical Office (Központi Statisztikai Hivatal, 1960; Pál, 1980).

After the first decade of the socialist planned economy, the population structure of Szolnok County changed significantly: the number of agricultural workers decreased by about 25%, while the proportion of workers in industry and construction increased. In addition, the proportion of workers in trade, "other" sectors, and retired persons increased. In parallel with the loss of agricultural land, the share of the urban population continued to grow, rising from 35.4% in 1949 to 38% in 1960. With this increase, the proportion of the urban population was the third most dynamic in the country, after Komárom and Csongrád counties (Központi Statisztikai Hivatal, 1960; Gácsi, 1963).

During the 1960s not only migration from the county, but also commuting between work and home took on massive proportions. The place of work and the place of residence were no longer the same, but workers did not always move.

One reason for this was attachment to the place of residence, another was the lack of housing. The industrial towns and cities soon became overcrowded, and it was not only difficult to find a permanent home, but often even rental properties were not available. In Hungary, Szolnok was the most affected by commuting. In 1960, more than a quarter of the people working in Szolnok, nearly 9,000 people, were commuters coming to work in the town from 72 settlements in Szolnok County and 120 other settlements in other counties. Half of the commuters to Szolnok worked in the industry and in construction, while a quarter found work in transportation. Commuting to Szolnok was particularly high in 14 settlements close to Szolnok, two of which belonged to Pest County (Abony and Jászkarajenő). The scale of commuting to Szolnok is illustrated by the fact that the proportion of commuters was higher than that of local workers, as in the case of Miskolc, for example, which had a larger catchment area than Szolnok (Nagy, 1988). Workers from Szolnok County commuted mainly to Budapest and the counties of the industrial axis, while the largest number of commuters came from the other counties of the Great Plain. In 1960, 69.2% of the 18,045 commuters worked in Budapest, 6.8% in Heves County, 6.2% in Pest County and 5.2% in Borsod County, but they also commuted to Komárom County (3.1%) and Nógrád County (1.4%). It should also be mentioned that the transformation of the employment structure in Hungary has been even faster than average, as Szolnok County can be considered the first fully cooperative agricultural county. At the end of 1959, 96.1% of agricultural workers were employed in collective farms, while the national average was only 38.6%, and in Bács-Kiskun the collectivisation rate was only 11.1%, according to a report by the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party (Magyar Szocialista Munkás Párt, 1960).

During the following decade, between 1960 and 1970, Szolnok County also experienced a decrease in population (-2.7%), as the loss of 29 thousand people due to the fact that migration could not be compensated by natural increase (17,000 people). The migration of the working-age population and the relatively low birth rate caused the ageing of the county's population, with the proportion of underage residents falling from 26% to 23%, while the proportion of people aged 60 and over rose from 15% to 18%. The proportion of the population working in the industry and construction continued to increase, while the number of residents working in agriculture decreased. Nevertheless, the agricultural character of Szolnok County remained, although it lost its predominance. More people than the national average continued to live from agriculture, but fewer people worked in the industry and in construction (Makula, 1971). As a result of industrialisation and the collectivisation and mechanisation of agriculture, the suburban population of Szolnok County continued to decline in relation to the total population (19.5%→12.3%). Furthermore, during the two decades

of socialism, more than 16,800 farm buildings were closed down or became uninhabitable. It is interesting to note that Jászberény, the town that was most involved in farming and had significant industry still had one fifth of its population living in the countryside, while in Szolnok, another major industrial town, the figure was less than 3%. It is also interesting to note that, despite the significant industry, the population of Jászberény decreased by about 5,000, but in this decade the population of only seven settlements in the whole of Szolnok County increased. Three of the county's industrial hotspots, Szolnok, Martfű and Cserkeszőlő, achieved a dynamic population growth of over 25%. The population of Martfű, by a unique measure, grew by 46% in this decade and by 225% (!) in the two decades of the socialist era (1970 census).

The population growth rate of Szolnok was not surpassed by many cities in Hungary (e.g., Pécs, Dunaújváros, Székesfehérvár). With a population of 61,500, Szolnok was already the 11th most populous cities in the country, and it stood out among the cities of the Great Plain because its development was not characteristic of other agrarian towns. Here, the creation of almost every new industrial job required an external workforce, and as a result, the town's attractiveness for the less industrial towns of Nagykunság increased enormously (Zoltán, 1980). During the rapid growth of Szolnok in the 1960s, the concept of "Szolnok will be a city of 100,000" – was formulated by the town's leaders, as well as by planning institutions and national authorities. According to a 1969 report by the Urban Planning Institute, by the turn of the millennium the county seat would have been home to 100-120,000 people (Hegedűs-Tosics, 1988, p. 207-208).

Town	Industry, construction industry (%)		Agriculture (%)	
	1949	1970	1949	1970
Jászberény	14.8	54.4	64.0	20.6
Karcag	15.5	34.8	64.5	35.2
Kisújszállás	11.5	28.9	68.4	41.4
Mezőtúr	19.5	39.6	60.2	32.9
Szolnok	30.6	46.6	20.5	9.1
Törökszentmiklós	16.4	47.4	64.8	26.2
Túrkeve	10.7	34.5	76.2	45.2
<b>Szolnok county</b>	<b>12.3</b>	<b>38.1</b>	<b>70.8</b>	<b>34.3</b>

Table 1

*The % distribution of active earners in Szolnok County towns by economic sector 1949 and 1970 census*

Table 1 shows that between 1949 and 1970, Szolnok County underwent a major social transformation. This transformation seems even more drastic if we look at the data on the active labour force rather than the population. In terms of the proportion of the active labour force, industrial and construction workers were already in majority in Jászberény, a town which two decades earlier had been described by the county press as a backward, rural ‘farming town’, where people had never even seen a factory (“Jobb munkával”, 1951). It is interesting to note that Szolnok has moved from first to third place in terms of the proportion of industrial and construction workers, as it was already ahead of Jászberény and Törökszentmiklós. However, Túrkeve remains the most agricultural settlement in the county. It is also worth mentioning that by the end of the 1960s, one of the most pressing social problems was the exodus from agricultural land, which was reaching alarming proportions and which should have been prevented. That is, the agricultural workforce, especially young people, should have been motivated to remain in the countryside.

### **Jászberény**

The county’s growth and the living conditions of industrial workers in Szolnok County are illustrated by the example of Jászberény, the most industrialised town in the county. With the establishment of socialist industry and the subsequent increase in the production of two large factories, the number of industrial workers in Jászberény grew steadily and rapidly. Most of the new workforce was made up of day labourers and small landowners in the industrial plants. This was one of the reasons for the high fluctuation in the initial period, as this first generation of workers, who still lived in the same household, worked in the factories from autumn to spring, but in the spring, many left to be contracted for agricultural work, such as vineyard work, harvesting, or threshing. Some of these industrial workers saw industrial work more as a temporary job during the winter and the factory as a place to get through the winter with a steady income. Those who stayed at the factory were often absent for heavy agricultural work, which led to their termination from the agricultural job. (Sebők, 2017).

Overall, more and more agricultural workers were entering the industry, aided by the violent collectivisation of agriculture by the authorities. Within the growing workforce, the number of skilled workers increased (although there was constant dissatisfaction on the part of the council, the party leaders and the factory management for lack of sufficient skilled workers). Looking at the data from the Jászberény Metal and Sheet Iron Works, between 1952 and 1955, the number of workers increased fourfold, and the number of skilled workers

increased fivefold. The large-scale industry continued to draw labour from agriculture and young people and women gradually entered the workforce. The previous occupational ratios of the town were thus disrupted and the occupational structure was fundamentally reorganised. The most significant component of this was the gradual convergence of industrial wage earners towards agricultural wage earners (Nagy-Tóth, 1970). At the end of the first decade of the socialist transformation, the town's party committee wanted to understand the situation of the working class and the transformed lives of the residents. To this end, information was collected by interviewing some 500 people in 19 factories in the town. The goal of the interviews was to prove that the living conditions and the opportunities for the working man had improved greatly during the socialist years. The document stated as evidence that in the pre-1945 period "there was practically no interest in providing services for workers" (Sebök, 2017, p. 256). Among the changes of the socialist period was the introduction of the public water supply, which was then mainly limited to residences. Unfortunately, in the absence of a water tower of sufficient height, the water pressure in the upper floors was inadequate and, initially, no meters were provided for consumers. Work had also begun on the town's sewer system, which was expected to stop the pollution of the Zagyva River that served as a waste water disposal system. In the summer when the Zagyva was shallow, the air quality was rather poor in its surroundings and therefore, building a dam on the river was considered. The extension of the local clinic, construction of an open-air stage, and modernisation of the cinema were also planned to improve the quality of the life for the residents. Many kilometres of pavement were built and the electric system was extended to the outskirts of the town. A new dairy (a company supplying milk products) and a building supply store called "TÜZÉP" were also set up (Magyar Szocialista Munkás Párt, 1959). Still, the significant increase in living standards that gave rise to nostalgia for socialism did not take place in the 1950s.

The data of the 1970 census clearly showed that the social changes of the previous two decades had resulted in the transformation of the once agricultural county into an agricultural-industrial county. The National Archives of Hungary Jász-Nagykun-Szolnok County Archives keeps records that in the few more industrialised municipalities, the majority of the labour force was employed in industry and construction. The latter included Jászberény, which was categorised as a "moderately developed industrial town, where the working class, even in terms of its numbers, became the most important social stratum of the town" (Magyar Szocialista Munkás Párt, 1971, Jelentés a város munkásságának). In 1971, 55% of the town's active earners worked in the industry and only 21% in agriculture. The town's workforce numbered 7,300, although some of them were not residents of Jászberény, i.e., also commuters.

Since the socialist regime, partly for ideological reasons, attached great importance to the high number of industrial workers, a detailed analysis of them was made by the party committee in 1971 and in 1973. The studies revealed that more than half of the industrial workforce, 3,584 people, were concentrated in one place, the Refrigerator Factory, the largest industrial unit in the town (formerly known as the Metal and Sheet Iron Works until 1964). Another feature of the era is that nearly half of the women who had entered the workforce, 46%, were also factory workers, many of whom had to work three shifts. There was still work to be done to equalize wages between men and women, as in many jobs, men earned significantly more than women. In 1971, men earned on average 2152 HUF per month, compared to 1650 HUF for women. The gender pay gap was largely due to the difference in qualifications. That is, while 58.4% of men were skilled workers, the figure for women was only 8.5%. It had to be acknowledged that men were more likely to be employed in manual jobs because of their greater stamina, the greater overtime they could be expected to work, and their greater work intensity. It is also true that the ‘male bias’ of some managers often unduly favoured men, both in recruitment and in determining wages. An example of this bias was given at town party committee meeting when companies insisted on a male/male workforce even when they submitted their applications for apprenticeship places at the local vocational school (606-os Ipari Iskola). This, however, was criticised, by the party. The working class, as the most important segment of Jászberény society, “needs to increase its participation in elected bodies because it is not reaching the optimum level” (Magyar Szocialista Munkáspárt, 1971, Jelentés a város munkásságának). In terms of numbers, this meant that only 14.9% of the 47-member town party committee were physical workers, but their weight in the basic organisation leaderships was almost 30%, and even within the Hungarian Socialist Workers’ Party (Magyar Szocialista Munkás Párt, MSZMP) town party membership their share was more favourable than the national average (40.3%). In the 80-member Town Council; however, only 11.3% of the members were physical workers, a very low figure which, as they put it, “should be taken into account in the next elections” (Magyar Szocialista Munkáspárt, 1971).

Since the socialist transformation of society took place in a very short period, it should come as no surprise that most of the workers of the time were formerly agricultural workers, or their parents worked in agriculture. However, ‘pure working-class families’ were also emerging, although “their living conditions were still influenced by old habits and attitudes” (Magyar Szocialista Munkáspárt, 1971, Jelentés a város munkásságának). The latter remark meant, for example, that a significant proportion of factory workers were still attached to the land and to backyard farming; 45% had land more than 100 square hect-

ares where they mainly grew fruit and vegetables. 74% said they did farm work and more than half were happy to do so. A further 10% said that they would like to do agricultural work if they could, but they did not have the opportunity. Party Committee staff explained this phenomenon as follows: “To a certain extent, agricultural work is also necessarily relaxing and recreational. But for many workers, it is still primarily a source of supplementary income” (Magyar Szocialista Munkáspárt, 1971, Jelentés a város munkásságának). Between 1960 and 1970, another 1.400 suburban residents moved into Jászberény, but by the early 1970s, this process had clearly slowed down, and a certain return flow became noticeable as a result of the mechanisation of agriculture. The proportion of the population living outside Jászberény was then well above the county average: at around 19.4%. Since the five-day workweek was introduced nationally at that time, the party committee wanted to know how to direct this extra leisure time. A report says that “In the last 2 years, industrial plants have introduced a 5-day work week, switching to a 44-hour week. This directly affects 4/5 of industrial workers [...] Having Saturdays off allows time for rest and education” (Magyar Szocialista Munkáspárt, 1971, Jelentés a város munkásságának). Interestingly, only 18% of workers said they relaxed or had fun on their Saturday off, while 74% preferred to work on that day, too. In terms of access to consumer products, only one in four workers owned a refrigerator, but most owned television sets. (80%). The motorisation of the working class was still a long way off, with only 8% of workers owning a car (Magyar Szocialista Munkáspárt, 1971).

As has become common practice over 2 decades, there was a high job turnover, which has particularly affected the industry, at national, county, city and levels. In a single year (between November 1969 and November 1970), only in Jászberény there were 1963 terminations of employment for physical workers. This amounted to 27% of the number of workers at that time, which was a very high figure considering that it was typically below 15% in developed industrial countries. Leaving the workplace affected men more, while women were slightly more loyal to the place where they worked. Among the reasons given for leaving jobs, differences in earnings, different working environment, easier job after a harder one, better working conditions, proximity to home, and family reasons were most often cited. However, 42% of workers had rather poor working conditions. 18% of the workers in the town, 1,300 of whom were rural, commuted daily between home and work. However, the duration of the journey was mostly less than 30 minutes, and the buses used by commuters remained crowded. The vast majority of commuters (61%) went to work at the Refrigerator Factory, compared with only 8.4% of commuters at the other large socialist plant, the Copping Machine Factory. For some small plants, the per-

centage of commuters exceeded that of the Refrigerator Factory. Most of them came to work in Jászberény from Jászfákóhalma and Jászárokszállás (Magyar Szocialista Munkáspárt, 1971). The highest level of education of the workforce remained tragically low. 41% of them completed less than 8 grades and only 5% had a school leaving certificate. Many had completed a six-grade education under the previous system, so for these workers, the statistics could not show an eight-grade education. In addition, not many people could be persuaded to complete the missing two grades: in the academic year of 1969/1970, only 28 people in the town had completed their schooling, of whom 21 were workers. The party committee concluded that “The number of students attending the evening school for workers each year is negligible” (Magyar Szocialista Munkáspárt, 1971, Jelentés a város munkásságának).

The situation was no better for the training of adult workers as skilled workers, which was not significant and even showed a downward trend in Jászberény. For example, in 1969 and 1970, only 5 people received a skilled worker’s certificate. It was, however, a welcome development for the students that the local copping machine factory called (Aprítógépgyár) paid regular grants to 72 students at the local vocational training school (Magyar Szocialista Munkáspárt, 1971).

## **Summary**

Socialist industrialisation, social transformation, and the entire course of socialist development have remained controversial. During that era, Hungary in fact embarked on the path of industrialisation. Due to economic planning, regions and municipalities previously known for their one-sided agricultural character received large-scale industrial investment. The flagships of socialist industry that survived the regime change and privatisation have determined the direction of economic development in a given region for many decades, right up to the present day. However, as a result of social transformation, the traditional “peasantry” has essentially disappeared, while women joined the workforce. The social phenomenon of women entering the labour market has significant demographic consequences. The controversial nature of the four decades of state socialism continue to generate debate to this day.

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### **Abstract**

The study gives a brief overview of the first two decades of the socialist era in Szolnok County. The study focuses on the social consequences of industrialisation, presenting data and examples of socialist industrialisation in the county and its main objective to transform society. In addition to the events in Szolnok County, the author illustrates the social changes through the example of Jászberény, the most industrialised town in the region. The study summarises the results of the author's archival research conducted in Budapest, at the National Archives of the Hungarian National Archives, and in Szolnok, at the Jász-Nagykun-Szolnok County Archives of the Hungarian National Archives.