



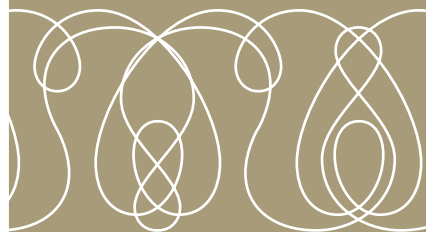
THE

Hungarian Historical Review

NEW SERIES OF ACTA HISTORICA
ACADEMIÆ SCIENTIARUM HUNGARICÆ
Trianon: Collapse 1918–1921

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Trianon: Collapse 1918–1921

Balázs Ablonczy
Special Editor of the Thematic Issue

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ARTICLES

The Flickering Lighthouse: Rethinking the British Judgement on Trianon*

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This article reassesses the official British discourse around the Treaty of Trianon between 1919 and 1921. It studies a range of colorful opinions for and against the treaty, why they emerged at particular times, and why some could prevail over others. Especially it focuses on the rationale of those British parliamentarians or officials who spoke out against Trianon as being unjust to Hungary. These leading voices had varied backgrounds and prejudices, but they all had personal knowledge of Hungary either before or after World War I. The article is divided into three time-periods, thereby highlighting the main shifts in British opinion that were often caused by geo-political changes in Hungary itself. While the key British decisions were taken in 1919 at the time of the Paris Peace Conference, the vibrant and public British debate of 1920–21 also had a long-term impact: it sustained Hungarian hopes and illusions about a future revision of Trianon and about potential British sympathy. In fact, despite the strident voices heard during the British debate, the evidence suggests that there was more agreement among the British elite than some historians have suggested. By 1921, both opponents and supporters of Trianon had reached a certain pragmatic consensus; they recognized both the faults and the fairness of the peace settlement, but most now considered there could be no return to greater Hungary.

Keywords: Trianon, Great Britain, Paris Peace Settlement, revisionism

In one of the compelling spy thrillers which the novelist Eric Ambler wrote in the late 1930s, his stateless hero, Josef Vadassy, is a Hungarian living in France whose life has been dramatically changed thanks to the Treaty of Trianon. It was typical of Ambler to bring East-Central Europe into his thrillers, portraying the region for an English readership as somewhere both exotic and dangerous, where spies competed in the ideological battle of fascism against communism. However, at the start of *Epitaph for a Spy*, his Magyar protagonist makes a gross error. Explaining to the French police that he is from Szabadka, he gives the

* I would like to thank Catherine Horel and Balázs Ablonczy for their help and advice in the original commissioning of this article.

date of the Treaty of Trianon not as 1920 but as 1919.¹ The reason for the mistake is perhaps simple. Ambler had never been to Hungary, and for him the detail was irrelevant: it might well be jarring to a professional historian or any Hungarian reader, but few among his English audience in the 1930s would care, for “Trianon” was unknown to them. On the other hand, if we wish to be generous to Ambler, we might suggest that Vadassy’s Magyar credentials were intact when he assumed that the Treaty of Trianon was in place by 1919. Arguably, the crucial decisions about Hungary’s future borders were made in that year. What was left, in 1920, was a flood of Hungarian protests, with some outspoken British voices of support, but these voices had little effect on the signing and ratification of the peace treaty.

Since 1920, many historians have suggested that Great Britain played a key role (perhaps the most vital among the Great Powers) in drawing up the treaty which shaped Hungary’s new borders and in stabilizing interwar Hungary. In the early 1920s, there was certainly much wishful thinking on the Hungarian side about Britain’s major influence, as well as Britain’s alleged historic sympathy for the Hungarian cause. Gyula Andrassy, for example, spoke in 1921 of “how deeply disappointed he and others had been that England had deserted her old principles [...] It was not the England that Hungary used to know that had made the peace.”² This illusion of special British sentiments towards Hungary always found some echoes in London too. In one British parliamentary debate in March 1920, for example, a garrulous politician who had recently visited Budapest pressed in exaggerated language for his country to intervene and help the Magyars: “It is Britain that is serving as a lighthouse for the whole world, and if it flickers and goes out through our cowardice, half the world will sink in the storm for lack of guidance which this country alone can give.”³

Yet the extent to which Great Britain really shaped the Hungarian settlement remains debatable. Even at the time, some establishment figures could not understand why the severe Trianon Treaty emerged as it did and why it had British approval. In April 1921, the treaty was debated in the House of Lords, and Lord James Bryce commented, “No-one has carried any lamp into these dark corners in which the fate of Hungary was decided.” A few months later, Lord Sydenham agreed. The Supreme Council’s decision concerning Hungary, he said, was “one of the most extraordinary things of which I know. Someday

1 Ambler, *Epitaph for a Spy*, 9.

2 Repington, *After the War: A Diary*, 163.

3 Captain Walter Elliott, quoted in *The Hungarian Problem in the British Parliament*, 50.

it may be explained, and we shall know what was behind this determination, but at present it is unintelligible.”⁴

Over the course of the past forty years, several British and American historians have tried to answer these questions. One conclusion has been the predominant influence on the British Foreign Office of “New Europe” adherents, especially the diplomats or “expert advisers” in Paris who shared the liberal-national outlook of publicists like R. W. Seton-Watson. Seeking to carve out a territorial settlement on the basis (mainly) of national ethnicity, these advisers’ role in 1919 was crucial in fixing Hungary’s borders to the advantage of neighboring states like Czechoslovakia and Romania.⁵ Other historians have approached the British impact on Trianon more broadly, highlighting how and why the Anglo-Hungarian relationship dramatically improved between 1918 and 1922 as Britain aspired to the restoration of political and economic stability. According to Gábor Bátonyi, these years were a unique chapter in British interest in the region. From a position of hostility or at least passivity towards Hungary in the first half of 1919, there was then a “positive shift,” as the influence of the “New Europe” group declined and the stabilization of Budapest became London’s predominant approach. Certainly, Britain was motivated by the desire to penetrate the Carpathian Basin economically, but perhaps as important was the sense that any long-term stability needed to be based on a just or fair settlement too. To some key British observers, the evidence increasingly suggested that the settlement was neither just nor fair to Hungary.⁶

The following discussion, in the centenary year of Trianon, seeks to rethink this shift in British official attitudes. It is primarily a study of the conflicting British discourse about Hungary and Hungary’s borders, with a particular focus on when and why certain voices emerged and why some gained ascendancy. The article is divided into three time periods of the “Trianon settlement.” It also proceeds in reverse chronological order, working from 1921 back to 1918, in order to challenge a rather well-worn historical narrative and to highlight more clearly the trajectory of opinion-formation. Through this approach to the sources, I reassess the continuities or breaks in British perceptions. I also

4 Ibid., 214, 239.

5 See especially Sakmyster, “Great Britain and the Making of the Treaty of Trianon,” and Hugh and Christopher Seton-Watson, *The Making of a New Europe*.

6 Bátonyi, *Britain and Central Europe*, 4, 104. See also Sakmyster, “Great Britain and the Establishment of the Horthy Regime”; and for a study emphasising Britain’s economic agenda in the region: Lojkó, *Meddling in Middle Europe*.

show that the shifting Hungarian geo-political framework itself determined how British observers responded in a positive or negative fashion. Indeed, to a large extent, London was always reacting to events on the ground in the Carpathian Basin, *faits accomplis* which could not be controlled and were usually only of modest concern to British official interests.

A Certain Consensus

The first period to consider, as an introduction, is spring 1921. After Hungary had ratified the peace treaty in November 1920, the focus in London was on British ratification in order to finish the peace process and allow reconstruction across Central Europe. This ratification occurred on May 5, 1921. The British parliamentary debates before this in the House of Lords and the House of Commons reveal well the underlying perceptions and prejudices for and against the treaty. However, we should not simply note the individuals who took a stand as supporters or opponents of Trianon, but also consider the ways in which the ideas of both camps overlapped and converged. Ignác Romsics contends that by 1921, there was still no rapprochement between the “Foreign Office faction” and the “pro-Hungarian faction.”⁷ Yet as we shall see, this is only partially true. This notion, furthermore, implies a strict division in opinion when by 1921 the divide was actually rather artificial.

Certainly, there were basic disagreements in the parliamentary debates from March to May 1921, and these very much echoed the views expressed a year earlier (by many of the same speakers). On the one hand, the British Coalition government in 1921 was pressing for treaty ratification. It claimed that the terms of the treaty could not now be reopened for negotiation, as that would mean another peace conference. Instead, the famous “Millerand note” (sponsored by the British) suggested a way forward for some Hungarian border adjustments in the future.⁸ Fundamentally, however, speakers like Robert Cecil in the Commons and the Foreign Secretary, Lord Curzon, in the Lords justified the dismemberment of historic Hungary as a process that was legitimate because of the ways in which the Magyar rulers had behaved before 1918. They had “grossly misgoverned the subject races.” Moreover, as Curzon put it, the Habsburg Monarchy had been “an artificial system” which had already begun to totter

⁷ Romsics, *The Dismantling of Historic Hungary*, 160.

⁸ See the speech of Cecil Harmsworth (Under-Secretary of Foreign Affairs) in the Commons on 20 April 1921: *The Hungarian Problem in the British Parliament*, 113.

before 1914: the war, which Budapest had helped cause, had simply given the system its *coup de grâce*.⁹ Following this line of argument about Magyar misrule, the speakers also stressed that neither Britain nor the Paris Peace Conference had broken up Hungary. Rather, the peacemakers in 1919 had been faced with a *fait accompli*: at the end of the war, Hungary's "hostile races" had taken matters into their own hands and Hungary had "fallen into its component parts."¹⁰ Great Britain's role, with the other Powers, had been, according to Curzon, to find a compromise when settling the borders. This had been done as far as possible according to the Wilsonian principle of self-determination. He maintained that the Magyar arguments had been given a fair hearing, and it was now time for Hungarians to put the past behind them: "the war may before long become no more than a painful dream."¹¹

Against this optimistic stance, the parliamentarians who spoke out against Trianon also appealed to the lessons of history and then, especially, attacked the way in which the principle of national self-determination had been adjudicated for Hungary. In both areas, however (history and self-determination), many "anti-Trianon" speakers were prepared to accept some of the government arguments: it was not a clear-cut division of views, notwithstanding the contrary contentions of later historians. Among the critics of Trianon, two main loose groups can be identified. One represented new, younger politicians of the parliamentary intake in the immediate wake of the war. A second small group of individuals stand out because of their experience of pre-1914 Europe, including having born personal witness to the relative stability of the old Habsburg Empire. Let us turn to them first.

Most notable in this regard were Lord Bryce and Lord Newton (Thomas Legh). James Bryce had visited Transylvania as early as 1866. He had met József Eötvös in Budapest, and had come to the conclusion that Hungarians were "a courteous graceful people."¹² In a speech in the House of Lords in May 1921, he disputed Magyar responsibility for the war and consistently stressed the sympathetic ties between Hungary and England, which included their alleged mutual crusade for "liberty." Nevertheless, even Bryce was prepared to admit that "old Hungary" now had to bow before the "principle of nationality." Indeed, when travelling in northern Hungary in 1878, he himself had seen how

9 Ibid., 193ff: speech by Curzon.

10 Ibid., 108ff: Harmsworth speech.

11 Ibid., 198–99, 206. Also Bányai, *Britain and Central Europe*, 117.

12 Fisher, *James Bryce*, vol. 1, 119–26.

most of the rural population was Slovak (he described them as “a less advanced and less politically active race” than the Magyars with whom they lived together as friends).¹³ Forty years later, he seems to have acknowledged reluctantly that much of Slovakia wished to escape Magyar tutelage; he also conceded that the half of Transylvania with predominantly Romanian speakers might justifiably fall to Romania. What he disputed was the caricature of pre-war Hungary that had made the country seem as bad as Prussia or czarist rule in Poland. In other words, he claimed Hungary was being treated with disproportionate vindictiveness – most glaringly in the unjust way that the borders had been decided in Paris. Bryce therefore conceded the relevance of the “principle of nationality” to some extent, but he stressed that this principle had been violated, notably in the case of Bratislava (Pozsony) and the Székely communities of Transylvania.¹⁴ His parliamentary performance was noticed by Budapest, and it cemented Bryce’s reputation as a champion of the Magyars.¹⁵

Others who opposed the Treaty of Trianon were less compromising than Bryce. Lord Newton questioned whether Slovaks or Croats really wanted to leave old Hungary; he concluded that the country should be treated with “humanity and justice,” as it was “the least guilty of our ex-enemy powers.” A speedy ratification of Trianon would at least allow the resumption of correct Anglo-Hungarian relations.¹⁶ Newton’s forays on behalf of Hungary after the war were well known to the British Foreign Office, where one official thought him simply a dupe of Magyar propaganda, completely ignorant of Hungarian history and policy. But how true was this? His growing connections with Central Europe are intriguing, for alongside Bryce, he was one of Hungary’s most persistent supporters.¹⁷ Before the war, Newton had been a professional diplomat, traveling widely and acquiring his own understanding of the Habsburg “civilizing” mission in the Balkans. Apart from having seen Vienna and Budapest briefly in 1887, a visit to Bosnia three years later, mainly for trout fishing, left him singularly impressed: “I got the impression that [Bosnia] was well administered and that there was little to complain of in Austrian rule.”¹⁸

13 Bryce, *Memories of Travel*, 102ff.

14 Bryce’s speech: *The Hungarian Problem in the British Parliament*, 213ff.

15 See the pamphlet commemorating the anniversary of Bryce’s birth: Balogh, *A magyar revízió angol előharcosa*.

16 Newton’s speech: *The Hungarian Problem*, 209, 212.

17 Sakmyster, “Great Britain and the Making of the Treaty of Trianon,” 122. See also for Newton’s extra-parliamentary agitation: Barta, “Oxfordi Magyar Liga,” 370–76.

18 Lord Newton, *Retrospection*, 44, 56–57.

If Newton's Habsburg links before 1914 were always tentative, by the end of the war, he was well-acquainted with several fellow-countrymen who were sympathetic to Hungary, including the future British High Commissioner Thomas Hohler, but also his own cousin, Admiral Ernest Troubridge, the British (Allied) commander on the Danube.¹⁹ Most significant was Newton's underlying conservative stance against any radical peace settlement. He wished that the wartime belligerents had negotiated earlier for a stable peace and thereby prevented the destruction of the old order. In this regard, his scorn for Hungary's neighbors was quite clear, mirroring perhaps his contempt for what he termed the "ill-mannered" Irish politicians, who before 1914 had constantly made trouble for Great Britain. In short, at Trianon, Magyars had been handed over "like so many animals, to alien races of an inferior civilization, in flat defiance of the sacred principle of Self-Determination."²⁰

Bryce and Newton viewed Trianon partly through a pre-war lens, in other words a certain nostalgia for what they had observed of the old Hungary, and this colored much of their criticism of the New Europe. However, while one historian has recently suggested that the critics' "inveterate predilection for the old social and political order" was their sole common denominator, it was not in fact the only motivating force.²¹ A second group of critics was formed by some younger politicians, newly elected to the House of Commons, who had experienced the horrors of a European war first hand and did not want hostilities to break out again. For them, the troubling aspect of Trianon was not so much what was being lost (old Hungary, Anglo-Hungarian friendship), but rather the new nationalist instability which was already so evident. One speaker in the House of Commons, a former naval officer, attacked the whole "disease of nationality"; with an eye on other running nationalist sores, he claimed that little Ulsters or Alsace-Lorraines were now being created in Slovakia and Transylvania.²²

Among those who attacked Trianon, a Scottish Conservative, Captain Walter Elliott, was the most vociferous of this new parliamentary intake. According to one witness, as a former wartime doctor and wounded soldier, Elliott had "a wide

19 Ibid., 130, 235. For Troubridge, see Bátonyi, *Britain and Central Europe*, 104. While pro-Serbian, Troubridge clearly approached Hungary with concerns about Romanian aggression in the region; for the background to his stance, see Šarenac, *The Forgotten Admiral*.

20 Buday, *Dismembered Hungary*, vii (introduction by Newton). See also *Retrospection*, 262–63, and Newton's view of "ill-educated and ill-mannered" Irish MPs, *ibid.*, 99.

21 Bakić, *Britain and Interwar Danubian Europe*, 10.

22 Speech of Lieutenant-Commander Joseph Kenworthy: *The Hungarian Problem*, 130–31.

erudition and a fascinating capacity for conversation.” But in debate, “he was too diffuse with an argument insufficiently concentrated, often a fault in those who delight others and themselves delight in conversation.”²³ Nevertheless, the new parliamentarian immediately made a stir with his oratory, and his many qualities led him to a seat in the British cabinet in the 1930s. His stance on Trianon in 1921 can be explained in a number of ways. As a maverick who tended to shirk from any party label, he felt mistrustful of the politicians who had produced the postwar chaos. He himself, with one eye on the Irish and Scottish problems, inclined towards a “national” style for British politics, where in his perception unity should predominate over fragmentation.²⁴

He approached Hungary with the same pragmatism, and here two personal experiences of unabashed nationalism shaped his outlook. First, in the summer of 1919, he had decided to explore the territory of the fallen Habsburg Monarchy. He had motored along the Dalmatian coast (presumably encountering Italian-Croatian nationalist rivalry) and had then visited Budapest, observing the chaotic scenes there precisely in the wake of the regime of Béla Kun. While his biographer lightly dismisses these “trivial tales of excursions,”²⁵ for Walter Elliott they were crucial in clarifying his abhorrence of the nationalist forces which, he felt, had caused the war and then decimated Hungary and the Monarchy. Secondly, this experience reinforced the views he had long held from his native Scotland. Before the war, the liberal commentator “Scotus Viator” (R. W. Seton-Watson) had proposed Scotland-in-Britain as the ideal federal model for national autonomy in Hungary.²⁶ Elliott, though greatly loyal to Scotland, was equally averse to what he viewed as the whining criticisms of Scottish nationalists, and he drew his own lessons from that in the interwar world. In April 1921, in the parliamentary debate on Trianon Hungary, he savaged the “wicked policy of self-determination,” which had swept away a thousand-year-old entity. He then suggested a vivid comparison. If the Serb “immigrants” into southern Hungary could now leave the country and take territory with them, it would be like Belgian

23 Mosley, *My Life*, 273. According to Cuthbert Headlam, another Conservative politician, Elliott was “extremely able and has the gift of making people believe that he is even more able than he actually is.” Ball, *Parliament and Politics in the Age of Baldwin and Macdonald*, 272.

24 Coote, *A Companion of Honour*, 43, 48, 71; Searle, *Country before Party*, 118.

25 Coote, *A Companion of Honour*, 53–57.

26 On Seton-Watson, see Cornwall, “Robert William Seton-Watson és a kései Habsburg Birodalom,” 327–49. Also, for a personal view: Seton-Watson, “R. W. Seton-Watson and the Trianon Settlement,” 43–53.

wartime refugees suddenly annexing the English coastal town of Bournemouth: what ingratitude that would signify to their host nation!²⁷

Elliott took the most radical stance in this parliament, but in the long debates of 1921 there was actually some consensus that Trianon should now be ratified to achieve stability and perhaps also to further British influence in the region. The government side was conceding that the Hungarian settlement had been a most difficult subject: it was already criticizing the reparations imposed on Hungary as unrealistic and implying that small border corrections might be possible. In turn, the “anti-Trianon camp” was composed of men who professed to know about Hungary from personal experience, and they shared a common abhorrence of the nationalist New Europe which had replaced pre-war “stability.” But even here, there were some surprising concessions and some readiness to accept a break with the old Hungary. They agreed that previous Magyar rule over greater Hungary had indeed caused unrest and dissatisfaction; they also felt that it might be justifiable to implement the principle of national self-determination across the region. The big question for them was whether that principle had been carried out fairly, or whether Trianon contained fresh grievances which might be the seeds of a future European war. Behind the parliamentary vote in favor of treaty ratification on May 5, 1921, there was therefore a latent consensus that some future adjustments to Trianon could be necessary, while at the same time, the basic Hungarian settlement should be accepted.

The Debate at Its Height

The second phase to consider is from October 1919 until the signature of the Trianon Treaty in June 1920. These were critical months, when British interest in Hungary was at its height for many reasons. It was a time when, with the rise of the Horthy regime, there were many new British representatives in Hungary, including a High Commissioner, Thomas Hohler, and a special emissary from the Peace Conference, George Clerk (arriving in October 1919). Meanwhile, in Paris, Hungary’s treaty was finally being properly scrutinized. Count Albert Apponyi was able to submit the Hungarian arguments and objections, and in February–March 1920, the “Big Three” of Britain, France, and Italy disputed at least the viability of the proposed Hungarian borders.²⁸ The winter of 1919–20

27 Coote, *A Companion of Honour*, 77; and *The Hungarian Problem*, 156ff.

28 For a still useful older history of this subject, see Deák, *Hungary at the Peace Conference*.

produced a heightened cacophony of British voices for and against the peace terms. In the end, it was the Foreign Office loudspeaker which would triumph, because its “experts,” like Allen Leeper, were deferred to as the key policymakers. They were already insisting that Hungary’s frontiers had been permanently fixed, all the more so, as precisely that message had been sent to the surrounding states in June 1919.

The authority of a contrary set of British opinions owed much to the fact that they came from new men on the spot, located on Hungarian territory from the summer of 1919 due to London’s concern about Romanian military excesses. Notable were those responsible to the Admiralty or the War Office: particularly Admiral Troubridge, who in August moved the headquarters of the Allied Danube Command to Budapest, and Reginald Gorton, who was sent as the British representative on an Inter-Allied Military Commission.²⁹ These critical voices were then echoed in the British parliament by Bryce and others. The question arises whether, if this disparate Magyarophile camp had been more coordinated, it could have challenged the “Foreign Office” clique at this crucial stage. Rumors circulated at the time that support for Hungary was mounting. But as Seton-Watson (correctly) reassured the Czechoslovak President Tomáš Masaryk in March 1920, people like Troubridge and Newton did not really represent British policy:

They are individuals who have been caught up in certain currents and are busily engaged in urging a policy of their own upon our government, but *not* with success [...] I can find no evidence of a serious nature to suggest that the Magyar intrigues have got any hold here in London.³⁰

Indeed, the challenge for any champions of Hungary’s cause was tremendous, because of the Foreign Office “insider advantage” and the prejudices still circulating about Hungary as a German or Bolshevik ally, not to mention the concerted hostile stance of Romania, Czechoslovakia, and Yugoslavia.

Nevertheless, in late 1919, British officials in Budapest began to request a sympathetic hearing for Hungary in London. They did so partly because the new Horthy regime seemed accommodating, even moderate, and it thus offered a contrast with continued stories of Romanian “atrocities” in occupied

29 Bányai, *Britain and Central Europe*, 103–6; Lojtkó, *Meddling in Middle Europe*, 15; Troubridge “retained more leverage over the military situation than any other Allied commander.”

30 Bakić, *Britain and Interwar Danubian Europe*, 18.

Transylvania or the Yugoslav refusal to withdraw from the region around the city of Pécs. The British were also faced for the first time with an onslaught of Magyar petitions against the treaty, coupled with the widespread expectation that England at least would give Hungary a “fair hearing.” Most striking were the reports sent to Paris by Sir George Clerk and members of his mission, for they, after all, were Allied delegates whose designated role was to bring stability to Hungary (ensuring that a stable government was established and Romanian troops were evacuated from the country). One member of Clerk’s mission, for instance, reported to London about a tour of the truncated country: “The universal feeling throughout is that the old boundaries must be restored by some means or other and Roumania made to disgorge what she has taken.”³¹ Another, Percy Loraine, agreed after receiving a mass of petitions that there was widespread opposition to many of the suggested amputations. The loss of Croatia was accepted, but not Slovakia (where it was felt the conference had been duped by the Czechs) and especially not Transylvania.³²

On the subject of Transylvania, Clerk himself felt that, because of the harshness of the Romanian invaders, a special Inter-Allied commission should be sent there. During the war, Clerk had been strongly influenced by the “nationality principle” in the British Foreign Office. But after arriving in Budapest, he quickly agreed with his Magyar hosts, who stressed that the “new rulers” in occupied Hungarian territory were “learners in the art of government” and of a “lower civilization.” One petition submitted to Clerk by the Hungarian Technical University pressed for territorial integrity, arguing that “Hungary has raised culture to a high level on its natural geographical territory [...] On mutilated territory Hungary would be unable to further fulfil this vocation!”³³ Clerk concluded that, while the new states needed firm supervision and guidance from the West, Hungary itself, on the basis of what he had observed, could be expected to be sensible: “They realize, I think, the broad justice of the inclusion of peoples of one common stock in one State, but they feel that the Allies have [...] only heard one side of the case and have naturally given the benefit to those who fought on their side.” He warned against the Allies sowing the seeds of future conflicts.³⁴

31 TNA, FO 371/3518, D.C. Campbell to Leeper (private letter), 29 December 1919.

32 TNA, FO 608/17, Percy Loraine to Leeper, 22 November 1919 enclosing ten petitions.

33 TNA, FO 608/17/20922, Clerk to FO sending petition, 2 December 1919.

34 Ibid., Clerk report to Supreme Council, 29 November 1919.

These reports usually found an unsympathetic ear at the Foreign Office, as they were sent first to Allen Leeper or Eyre Crowe (permanent secretary), key figures on the territorial committees of the Peace Conference, and they could easily be deflected.³⁵ Both Leeper and Crowe were now irritated at Romania's refusal to withdraw to the demarcation lines and were even prepared to send an Allied commission to investigate. But they did not want to reopen *au fond* the nationality questions, which their committees had settled in May 1919. Thus, when in November they were sent a memorandum from the Hungarian government about injustices in Slovakia, both responded negatively. Leeper noted that the memorandum was exaggerated and not worth passing on to the Supreme Council. Crowe remarked simply, "Better leave it alone. These controversies lead to no practical results."³⁶

Despite this, there is good evidence to suggest that by early 1920, the mood in the Foreign Office was indeed slowly shifting away from the Leeper-Crowe perspective towards a more positive engagement with Hungary's complaints. One reason was the replacement as foreign secretary of Arthur Balfour, who fully supported Trianon and had been a member of the Peace Conference, by Lord Curzon, who seemed to have less blatant sympathy for Hungary's neighbors.³⁷ Curzon's introduction to the Central European situation also coincided with the Clerk mission to Budapest, which, as Gábor Bátonyi suggests, started something of a special Anglo-Hungarian relationship in the winter of 1919–20. In addition to a Hungarian Delegation now being invited to Paris, another result of Clerk's mission was the appointment of a British High Commissioner to Hungary. From January 1920, Sir Thomas Hohler was to be an "extraordinarily sympathetic and totally uncritical minister" in Budapest, partly due to his friendship with Regent Miklós Horthy in prewar Constantinople.³⁸

Precisely at the time when the Hungarian delegation under Apponyi was putting its case in Paris in early 1920, Hohler sent several reports to the Foreign Office expounding the Hungarian case. He passed on the views of Horthy and Apponyi that, whatever treaty was signed, the state would eventually be restored "to its old historic limits." Here, there was strong evidence that the Magyar

35 For the impact of Crowe and Leeper on these committees (which effectively delimited the Hungarian borders), see Romsics, *The Dismantling of Historic Hungary*, 76–85.

36 TNA, FO 608/17, Clerk to Crowe, 6 November 1919, with minutes by Leeper and Crowe.

37 For alarming rumours that Curzon might be pro-Magyar, see Seton-Watson, *The Making of a New Europe*, 401–2.

38 Steiner, *The Lights that Failed*, 289; Bátonyi, *Britain and Central Europe*, 114 (for the Clerk mission, 107–14).

leadership hoped especially for British support, all the more so after January 16, when both Curzon and Prime Minister David Lloyd George had shown interest in Apponyi's ethnic map of Hungary.³⁹ Hohler strongly promoted the idea that Britain should support Hungary as a "friendly buffer state" in the region, and he asked Curzon to consider a fresh presentation by Apponyi in Paris. "The present arrangements," he concluded on February 1, "appear to be faulty and incapable of standing the test of time." The treaty was contrary to Wilson's principle of national self-determination and therefore constituted "an immediate menace to the peace of Europe."⁴⁰

It is of course tempting to suggest that Hohler was simply hoodwinked by Magyar propaganda, but like Clerk, he was at least reporting the protests and mood he observed on the spot. These critical winter months require more research to illuminate in detail the close interaction and even confluence of Anglo-Hungarian arguments and networking. Britain was keenly aware at this time that the French too were vying for influence over Hungary; this has been well documented by historians.⁴¹ Budapest in turn was taking new initiatives to highlight in London the benefits of Britain securing influence in the region. For it was precisely now that Miklós Bánffy was sent by the Hungarian government to London to make contact with politicians, including Curzon and Asquith. According to his memoirs, Bánffy had some success after "endless hard work, attention to detail and, above all, tact."⁴² He found willing ears in Bryce, Cecil, and Newton, but also among church leaders, particularly Unitarians and Presbyterians alarmed at Romanian treatment of Transylvanian Protestants, and Jewish leaders like Lucien Wolf, who were anxious about minority rights.⁴³

Bánffy's path into the corridors of power was also considerably eased through the "invaluable help" of the Hungarian-born Rozsika Wertheimstein, the wife of Charles Rothschild. Having met the Rothschild heir, a serious conservationist, in 1906 when he was exploring the Carpathian mountains,

39 Deák, *Hungary and the Peace Conference*, 207–11; Romsics, *The Dismantling of Historic Hungary*, 125–28.

40 TNA, FO 371/3518, Hohler to Curzon, 1 February 1920; and Hohler to Curzon, 28 January 1920 (quoting Apponyi).

41 See for example, Bátonyi, *Britain and Central Europe*, 120ff; and the detailed study of Mária Ormos, *From Padua to the Trianon*.

42 Bánffy, *The Phoenix Land*, 199–201; Romsics, *The Dismantling of Historic Hungary*, 129–30. Something of Bánffy's network in Britain is also clear from the diary of the Hungarian peace delegation kept by Count István Csáky: see Deák, Ujváry, *Pièces et documents relatifs aux rapports internationaux*, Appendix 1.

43 For a discussion of Presbyterian links to Magyar Protestant churches, see Zsuppán, "Hungarian Treaty Revision," 153–60.

the flamboyant Rozsika had moved to England, but she always kept firm ties with her family in Hungary. There, in December 1918, she had led a campaign publicizing the miserable plight of Hungarian children; in interwar Britain, she knew Magyarophiles like Lord Newton, and she actively promoted financial aid to Hungary from Rothschild resources.⁴⁴ “In her house,” wrote Bánffy, “I almost felt I was breathing the air of my own home; and the lion’s share in any success I may have achieved in my mission was thanks to her advice and help and to her mediation on my behalf.”⁴⁵

In the spring of 1920, indirectly through Rozsika Rothschild and other social contacts nurtured by Bánffy, vigorous debates began in the British parliament. Bryce, Newton, and others, having urged the Hungarians to delay finalizing the treaty as long as possible, echoed the language of Budapest when they spoke in the House of Lords: namely, that Hungary was pro-British and had been against the war, and that “civilised human beings” were now being handed over like cattle to the successor states.⁴⁶ According to Newton, Hungary was like a man “who has had a paralytic stroke and is being constantly kicked and cuffed by his former associates and dependents.”⁴⁷ Another Bánffy target, Lord John Montagu of Beaulieu, agreed, contending that the treaty was simply “insane and unworkable.” If Montagu’s own passion for motoring and modern transport perhaps naturally inclined him to criticize the new fragmented communications network in the Carpathian Basin, he had also just visited Budapest. There, he had honed some pro-Hungarian views when staying with his friend, Admiral Troubridge. He concluded that “that country had suffered unfairly in the breaking up of the old Austro-Hungarian Empire after the war.”⁴⁸

Yet this fresh British political momentum of early 1920 also owed much to news reaching London about Romanian misrule in Transylvania and rumors about a White Terror (which a delegation from the Labour Party and the British trade unions would soon investigate). Some eccentric Conservative politicians were encouraged to support the Horthy regime precisely because of Labour opposition to it. Thus, in one House of Commons debate, Walter Elliott pointed

44 Rothschild, *Dear Lord Rothschild*, 94–97, 244. Rozsika notably was also a life-long friend of Count Pál Teleki.

45 Bánffy, *The Phoenix Land*, 201.

46 Speech of Newton, 30 March 1920: *The Hungarian Problem*, 54.

47 *Ibid.*, 57.

48 Speech of Montagu: *ibid.*, 66. See also Troubridge, Marshall, *John Lord Montagu of Beaulieu*, 215, 256. In 1900 Montagu had been the first MP to drive a car into the British Houses of Parliament.

out the prejudices of the left-wing press as he went on to condemn the treaty. Describing the new Slovakia as a “banana-shaped country,” he ridiculed the proposed borders: “The Peace Conference is full of very great and important gentlemen, but they cannot make rivers run sideways across mountains, because they run downhill and not across.” In his view, the iron rules of geography could not be changed.⁴⁹

The Government responded to these criticisms in March 1920 by noting that the expert territorial committees had worked very diligently in 1919, that there was no bias, and that Hungary in January 1920 had had ample time to put its case to the Peace Conference. The critics rightly found this line of defense disingenuous. In fact, it did obscure the differences of opinion that had begun to appear at the Foreign Office. On February 10 in response to Hohler’s reports, Curzon noted that he did not really know why the conference had decided on the proposed borders for Hungary. Allen Leeper, however, quickly jumped in to reject Hohler’s arguments. He stressed that the territorial committees had followed the ethnic principle as far as possible (except in Slovakia and Transylvania, where transport links were necessary). And since the new countries had been told by Britain that this was the final settlement (and in the meantime had signed their peace treaties), future stability was in danger if everything were to be reconsidered. This would simply encourage Hungary to resist, and would constitute a betrayal of the recognition which Britain had given to Czechoslovakia and the other neighboring states.⁵⁰

Curzon’s behavior a few weeks later suggests that he was not wholly convinced by this argument, or he felt at least that the Hungarian question still needed to be revisited. Lloyd George similarly was urging France and Italy that Europe would have no peace if the Hungarian case were not fully scrutinized. A key reason for this governmental shift was that, in early 1920, new opinions had surfaced at the Foreign Office, stemming either directly from British supporters or indirectly from Magyar campaigners in Britain. The Hungarian settlement was suddenly (for the first time) a real focus of public attention.

Nevertheless, Curzon continued to listen to the “expert” Allen Leeper, who stridently expounded his opposition to Hungary’s “anachronistic” arguments. The result was that, during a meeting of Allied foreign ministers in London on March 8, the idea of making any changes to the treaty was

49 *The Hungarian Problem*, 47. Elliott would repeat this in April 1921: *ibid.*, 161.

50 TNA, FO 371/3518, Hohler to Curzon, 1 February 1920: minutes by Curzon and Leeper (11 February 1920).

rejected.⁵¹ The overriding argument, as detailed in writing by Leeper, was that Hungary's borders must be settled quickly and short-term stability must be prioritized over any long-term dangers. Thus, in 1920, the very idea of reopening the treaty was construed as a major obstacle. But there was a small "carrot" which the Powers (especially Britain) still seemed to be offering Budapest and which the Hungarians seemed grudgingly to accept when they signed the Treaty of Trianon (June 6). This was the so-called Millerand note, which was sent to Hungary on May 6 under the signature of the new French premier, Alexandre Millerand. While rejecting the Hungarian Delegation's demand for plebiscites in contested areas, the note suggested that if Hungary had objections to the treaty, it might eventually appeal to the League of Nations over specific border rectifications. It was a glimmer of light that would sustain Hungarian revisionist hopes thereafter, just as the Anglo-Hungarian flirtation of winter 1920 had substantially prepared the ground.

Fixing the Trianon Framework

As we have seen, by 1921 there was growing British official consensus over Hungary, a realization that the new normality of Trianon should be accepted. In 1920, however, the clash of opinions was only too evident, for in the struggle for stability in the region, fresh voices had challenged the official line favoring Czechoslovakia and Romania and had questioned what the new Hungarian frontiers might mean for Central Europe. If we now turn briefly to 1918–1919, the third and best documented phase, this was of course the period when the Trianon framework, which later proved so hard to dismantle, was firmly set in place. First, in the *faits accomplis* of late 1918, the Allies had allowed the successor states to invade greater Hungary and stay there. Second, the Peace Conference's territorial committees, guided by the principle of national self-determination, scrutinized the Hungarian frontiers and had them approved without debate by the Council of Ten on May 12, 1919.

Historians have examined much of this period in depth, showing that Lloyd George was an occasional spokesman for Magyar interests (for example in his Fontainebleau Memorandum of March 25, in which he warned about a draconian peace which could ferment Hungarian irredentism). On April 30, he

51 Romsics, *The Dismantling of Historic Hungary*, 134–37. Romsics suggests that Curzon persuaded Lloyd George to accept the resolution of 8 March 1920.

proposed to the Council of Four that Hungary should be invited to Paris to discuss the peace terms. However, generally he was not interested or engaged enough to push his concerns in the face of the Foreign Office, which dominated in Paris and consistently favored the Czechoslovak and Romanian states.⁵² It is usually noted that Harold Nicolson, Crowe, and Leeper played key roles on the territorial committees, siding with France and defining Hungary's ethnic borders in the narrowest sense possible; in addition, they focused on making the surrounding states economically viable. What is often ignored is the historic continuity in official British thinking: namely, Hungary was consistently seen as a destabilizing element in Central Europe. As I have shown elsewhere, the Foreign Office before World War I had summed up the "chauvinistic" Magyar regime as a key source of instability and had anticipated, even before Seton-Watson began to gain more influence in 1917, that Hungary would have to be restructured in some way.⁵³ In the wartime British press, diverse opinions were ventilated for and against Hungary, but in Whitehall, a viewpoint sharply critical of Budapest was long established.⁵⁴

During the Paris Peace Conference in 1919, this trend persisted. The Foreign Office believed that the old Magyar regime had fought to the bitter end and therefore deserved punishment, while the country's new rulers (or were they really so new?) seemed in their petitions to the West far too obsessed with Hungary's territorial integrity. Moreover, any small sympathy for Hungary's aspirations was weakened by the reign of Béla Kun, which caused major headaches for the peacemakers. As Crowe noted on one occasion, the Allied plan in Central Europe was "to set up free and independent states as a counterbalance to a German-Bolshevik combination."⁵⁵ Hungary, having been Germany's staunch wartime ally, could now for four months be portrayed as a virulent Bolshevik threat. In both cases (whether Hungary was a German ally or a hotbed of Bolshevism), it was natural to them in the regional danger by affirming tighter frontiers. During the key months of the Peace Conference, these concerns formed a steady backdrop to British official thinking, especially

52 See for example *ibid.*, 76–102. An older narrative covering Anglo-Hungarian relations in 1918–19 is Ardaj, *Térkép, csata után*.

53 Cornwall, "Great Britain and the Splintering." See also the seminal work of Géza Jeszenszky, *Az ehveszett presztízsz*.

54 For a clash over Hungary in the British press, see Hanak, *Great Britain and Austria-Hungary during the First World War*.

55 TNA, FO 608/13, Seton-Watson to Balfour (telegram), 9 June 1919; minute by Crowe, 11 June 1919.

when Leeper and others suggested that Magyar nationalism and Bolshevism went hand in hand as a combined threat to Central Europe.⁵⁶

Only a few British observers (apart from Lloyd George) started to become concerned about the future of Hungary. Ironically, Seton-Watson was one of them. In May 1919, having witnessed the chaos there, he wrote, “Little as I love the Magyars or regret the fate they have brought on themselves, I do not wish to see them destroyed altogether.”⁵⁷ Despite this, like most British officials in Paris or London, Seton-Watson was not questioning the notion that greater Hungary needed to be dismembered. What was vital was to ensure stability and security for the New Europe; the new successor states were the allies who needed to keep order (since Britain itself could not contribute any troops). Only in the last months of 1919 was a new Hungarian regime established which tried to present itself to Britain as a respectable force for regional stability and order. As we have seen, this prompted new forms of support for the Hungarian cause and a new British questioning of the peace settlement.

Conclusion

Of course, the British debate on Trianon did not end in 1921. Fresh controversy was stirred through the press campaign of Viscount Rothermere six years later.⁵⁸ During the three phases of the creation of Trianon, it is clear that the Hungarian treaty really became a subject for public discourse in Britain only from late 1919. Until then, the British officials who debated it were working in private on the territorial committees of the Paris Peace Conference. They were chained above all closely to the “nationality policy,” which Britain in mid-1918 had semi-officially adopted towards the Habsburg Monarchy.⁵⁹

In its essence, that vision of a New Europe always had an anti-Hungarian streak based on the firm conviction that the Magyar regime in the old Monarchy had been oppressive and that similar nationalistic chauvinists were still in control of Hungary. It was only in 1920 that the idealistic crusade began to weaken, when the reality of the New Europe became clearer, and when new British

56 For instance, TNA, FO 608/13/13266, Leeper’s minute, 23 June 1919: “Magyar Bolsheviks and Nationalists have been accomplices on many occasions lately.”

57 TNA, FO 608/12, Seton-Watson to Headlam-Morley (private letter), 26 May 1919; also reproduced in Lojkó, *British Policy on Hungary*, 202–5.

58 As an introduction to this, see Romsics, “Hungary’s Place in the Sun.”

59 For the shift in British policy towards Austria-Hungary, see Cornwall, *The Undermining of Austria-Hungary*, chapter 6; and Calder, *Britain and the Origins of the New Europe 1914–1918*.

voices sprang up to counter Leeper or Seton-Watson. Particularly, some new Magyarophiles emerged in the British parliament to paint a different version of modern Hungarian history and even to question the ideal of self-determination. Among these critics, there was a strong sense that an alternative moral dimension to the ongoing Hungarian crisis existed, one which any “fair-minded person” would surely support.⁶⁰

Indeed, this early British debate over the morality of Trianon had some parallels with a later moral contestation over Central European grievances during the Sudeten crisis of 1938. In the early interwar years, the matter of Czechoslovakia’s German minority had received little British attention, or at least justice and morality were mainly felt to be on the Czech side against anything German. By 1936, however, many British observers were inclining towards a moral stance in favor of Sudeten German complaints about discrimination. They did so on the basis of the belief that firm evidence existed to support those grievances; that notion was strengthened by their own personal observations in Czechoslovakia and by the avid campaigning in Britain of Sudeten German political activists.⁶¹ In both cases (the Hungarian in 1920 and the Sudeten in 1938), there was a moral underpinning to the cause that strengthened the arguments of Britons who primarily feared regional chaos or even a new war if the respective grievances were not addressed. The difference in 1938 was that the British government was now prepared to back a (Sudeten) cause, which would reverse the peace settlement of 1919. It viewed that course as both moral and practical for British interests. This, in turn, raised again the matter of territorial revisionism more broadly. Recent research has shown how, parallel to the Sudeten crisis, British equivocation about Trianon naturally resurfaced; in the late 1930s, Anglo-Hungarian relations began to matter again, since key pillars of the New Europe were starting to crumble.⁶²

Yet early 1920, when the Hungarians had first put their case to the Allies in Paris, was the key time when they had looked to the British lighthouse for guidance and aid. New feelers were then sent out from Budapest to sympathetic

60 See *The Hungarian Problem*, 9.

61 For a new take on the Sudeten problem in British thinking, see Cornwall, *The Devil’s Wall*, chapters 8–9; for the diplomacy, see Novotný, *The British Legation in Prague*.

62 See the recent revisionist work of András Becker: “The Dynamics of British Official Policy towards Hungarian Revisionism, 1938–39; “British Diplomacy, Propaganda and War Strategy and the Hungarian-Romanian Dispute over Transylvania in 1939–40.” These stem from Becker’s PhD thesis: *The Problem of Hungarian Borders and Minorities in British Foreign Political Thought 1936–1941* (University of Southampton, 2014).

supporters in Britain. In response, the lighthouse sent back some reassuring messages, but it remained flickering and was never consistent. On the one hand, the British establishment was naturally conservative, wishing to conclude the Hungarian treaty as quickly as possible, gain economic advantages, and ensure regional stability. On the other, many British politicians who were now studying the subject for the first time began to feel uneasy about what had occurred. At most, they could suggest to Budapest that the Trianon borders might be adjusted in the future, if only Hungary would behave responsibly and peacefully on the European stage. By 1921, a certain consensus prevailed across the British political spectrum that the basics of Trianon were now permanent. It is worth emphasizing, especially in this centenary year of Trianon, that even friends of Hungary like Lord Bryce or Walter Elliott were not advocating a crusade to overturn the new frontiers. Theirs was a pragmatic approach: to complain about Trianon Hungary, but largely to accept it despite its imperfections: there could be no restoration of greater Hungary.

The next twenty years saw the Trianon grievance occasionally surfacing in Britain and stirring public awareness. Among those who harped on the subject were mavericks like Rothermere or idealists like Lord Newton. For Newton, Hungary had become a lasting passion, a new chapter in his life, and one that brought him into the company of the “most charming” Rozsika Rothschild. He continued to visit the region (for instance Transylvania in late 1921) and advised the Hungarians to be patient: they should “strive to create a homogeneous state, which will serve as an enviable model to their neighbors and do more towards recovering Hungarian Irredenta than anything else.”⁶³

For others who heard the word “Trianon” in the late 1930s, it surely sparked anxious thoughts. Thus, for the novelist Eric Ambler in 1938, Trianon was above all useful as a small device to enhance the drama and credibility of his espionage thriller. His Magyar protagonist, Vadassy, might well personify one of the sad injustices of Trianon for those who were well-informed. But for most British readers, he probably evoked hazy ideas of chaos in nationalist Eastern Europe in the aftermath of a cataclysmic war. In their minds, the old Hungarian grievances were just some of the many that seemed to be resurfacing in 1938, edging Britain and Europe towards a new period of war and mass death.

63 Newton, in Buday, *Dismembered Hungary*, xiv. See also Rothschild, *Dear Lord Rothschild*, 18; Zsuppán, “Hungarian Treaty Revision,” 155.

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Aims and Scope

The Hungarian Historical Review is a peer-reviewed international journal of the social sciences and humanities with a focus on Hungarian history. The journal's geographical scope—Hungary and East-Central Europe—makes it unique: the Hungarian Historical Review explores historical events in Hungary, but also raises broader questions in a transnational context. The articles and book reviews cover topics regarding Hungarian and East-Central European History. The journal aims to stimulate dialogue on Hungarian and East-Central European History in a transnational context. The journal fills lacuna, as it provides a forum for articles and reviews in English on Hungarian and East-Central European history, making Hungarian historiography accessible to the international reading public and part of the larger international scholarly discourse.

The Hungarian Historical Reviews

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Trianon: Collapse 1918–1921

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