

Theodore Brentano – The first American minister for Hungary, 1922–1927

Zoltán Peterecz*

Eszterházy Károly Catholic University, Eger, Hungary

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ABSTRACT

The history of American-Hungarian relations has enjoyed renewed interest in the past thirty years. Despite this fact, there are still many uncovered or poorly documented episodes and persons concerning this academic territory. This article wishes to shed some light on one such character and period. It was in 1922 that the United States and Hungary established official diplomatic relations for the first time. Consequently the two countries exchanged ministers; thus, a long line of American ministers began to come and reside in Hungary. The very first of them was Theodore Brentano, who served five years in Budapest, between 1922 and 1927, but who seems to have disappeared from historical memory in both countries. Since 2022 marks the centenary of establishing diplomatic relations between the two countries, this article will introduce Theodore Brentano, the first American minister for Hungary and his work there. Brentano's years coincided with momentous events in Hungary in the post-Trianon era and were a time of relatively active relations between Washington and Budapest. Using primary and secondary sources alike, this article will hopefully illustrate a sorely missed part of the history of American-Hungarian history and rekindle interest in what took place a century ago.

KEYWORDS

Theodore Brentano, American-Hungarian relations, League of Nations, 1920s

* Corresponding author. E-mail: zpeterecz@yahoo.com

INTRODUCTION

American-Hungarian relations have a long history. Ever since the birth of the United States, the two nations have had informal and indirect connections, most of which were manifest in Hungarian immigrants, some of whom became quite well known in the New World. It is calculated that until the outbreak of World War I, between one and half to two million people had immigrated from Hungary to the United States, many of whom were not Hungarians but ethnic minorities such as Slovaks or Romanians.¹ Hungarians in general looked with fascination at the overseas country and their information most typically came from travelogues written by Hungarians visiting America.² Between the Compromise of 1867 and the end of the First World War Hungary was the junior partner of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy and as such it still could not have independent bilateral relations with the United States. When in late 1918 Hungary finally became a truly sovereign country, among the turmoil of domestic revolutions and Romanian military occupation, the post-war peace conference and the concluding peace treaties—and partly on account of them—, Hungary sought to establish official diplomatic relations with Washington. One of the main reasons was the Treaty of Trianon Hungary had to sign in 1920. Budapest hoped that the economic power, the enormous prestige and the impartial position of the United States might provide both possible protection against antagonistic countries within Europe—mainly the newly formed Little Entente of Czechoslovakia, Romania and the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes—and economic-financial help to climb out of the terrible situation Hungary found itself in.

The adverse circumstances were only somewhat alleviated by the Herbert Hoover-led American Relief Administration, which provided highly sought-after relief to Hungary in the post-war period, although in meager amount compared to other European countries, such as Austria.³ America also undertook to finance the main part of the repatriation cost of 13,000 Hungarian prisoners of war from the Soviet Union.⁴

When in April 1921 István Bethlen assumed the post of Prime Minister of Hungary (a position he held for the following ten years)—with support from Admiral Miklós Horthy, the governor of the Kingdom of Hungary—the political consolidation of Hungary began and with it the economic and financial rehabilitation of the country started to seem ever more pressing and possible. To this end the United States and its much awaited support or outright help was of

¹For more detail, see, Tibor Frank, “From Austria-Hungary to the United States: National Minorities and Emigration, 1880–1914,” in. Tibor Frank, *Ethnicity, Propaganda, Myth-Making. Studies on Hungarian Connections to Britain and America, 1848–1945*, (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó), 1999, 73–91.

²Tibor Glant, *Amerika, a csodák és csalódások földje: Az Amerikai Egyesült Államok képe a hosszú XIX. századi magyar utazási irodalomban* [America, the Land of Wonders and Disappointments: The Image of the United States in Hungarian Travelogues in the Long Nineteenth Century], Debrecen: Debreceni Egyetemi Kiadó, 2013.

³For more detail about the ARA’s work in Hungary, see Tibor Glant, “Herbert Hoover and Hungary, 1918–1923,” *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 2 (2002), 95–109. On the general Central and Eastern European relief work, which in the greatest part was provided by American sources, see Herbert Clark Hoover, *The Memoirs of Herbert Hoover*. vol. 1–3, (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1951–1952), vol. 1, 282–430.

⁴Ulysses Grant-Smith to Charles Hughes, December 10, 1921, 864.00/482, Roll 6, M. 708, National Archives and Records Administration (hereafter cited as NARA). Washington, D. C., USA.



crucial importance to Budapest. Consequently the Hungarian side urged the establishment of official diplomatic relations between the two countries as soon as possible.

Since the two countries had fought on opposite sides in World War I, relations had to be normalized first in order to pave the way for diplomatic recognition. Ulysses Grant-Smith was appointed to take care of the delicate task of conducting this process. Since the United States was no party either to the League of Nations or to the Treaty of Trianon, it had to conclude separate peace treaties with the countries of the Central Powers. As the two countries at this point still had no official relations, Grant-Smith was not accredited as a diplomatic representative. His main task was to try to ensure that political order in Hungary was stable and that the peace treaty between the two countries would follow American wishes. As a sign that Hungary was not the most important country in Europe to American interests, the United States made it clear through Grant-Smith that it was willing to negotiate with Hungary only if the text of the planned peace treaty was based on the similar treaty with Germany.⁵ Hungary was basically blackmailed, sugar-coated in fine diplomatic terms, that acceptance of the terms agreed to by Germany was the condition necessary for reestablishing diplomatic relations.⁶ Hungary had no real choice but to accept the treaty on offer without reservations. The Hungarian Parliament passed the resolution on August 12, 1921, the treaty was dated August 29, 1921, while the US Congress ratified the treaty on October 18, 1921 and ratifications were exchanged on December 17, 1921, when the treaty came into force.⁷ Although Grant-Smith aspired to become the first American minister for Hungary when diplomatic relations were resumed early next year, it was not to be. Despite having done what he was entrusted with and having considerable local experience, his conduct was not always deemed as distinguished or acceptable and the incoming Republican establishment wanted to send its own man.⁸ As a result, instead Theodore Brentano was named the first ever American Minister for Hungary. For a short interim period from February 1922, Charge d'Affaires Eugene C. Shoecraft took over the conducting of bilateral affairs in Budapest until the minister arrived in May. The first Hungarian minister for the United States, Count László Széchenyi, presented his credentials in January 1922 and remained at his post for the next eleven years.

BRENTANO'S LIFE

Theodore Brentano was born in Kalamazoo, Michigan, in 1854. After grade school he visited Europe and studied at high schools in Switzerland and Germany. After returning to the United States, he enrolled at the National University Law School in Washington, D. C. and became a successful lawyer in Chicago. In 1890 he was nominated for the bench and later he became the first superior court judge of Cook County, Illinois, then Chief Justice, which position he held

⁵Charles Hughes to Ulysses Grant-Smith, July 9, 1921, 711.64119/1, Roll 1, M. 709, NARA.

⁶Charles Hughes to Ulysses Grant-Smith, July 23, and July 28, 1921, 711.64119/1 and /2, Ibid.

⁷Ulysses Grant-Smith to Charles Hughes, August 12, and December 14, 1921, 711.64119/8 and /36, Ibid.; Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States (hereafter cited as FRUS): 1921, vol. 2, (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1936), 258–59. The text of the treaty is in FRUS: 1921, vol. 2, 255–58.

⁸See Tibor Glant, "Ninety Years of United States-Hungarian Relations," *Eger Journal of American Studies*. Volume 13, (2012), 166–168. Grant-Smith was soon appointed minister for Albania, then Uruguay.



until 1921.⁹ As superior judge he did a lot for Chicago and Illinois to take property on the shore of Lake Michigan for public purposes which helped the development of the lake front at the Windy City.¹⁰ He took part in the famous trial of the assassin of Chicago mayor Carter H. Harrison in 1893.¹¹ He must have been somewhat controversial in his work, or perhaps too closely related to the Republican political machine in Chicago, because an assassination attempt was made on him and his family, but it was not clear who was behind the would-be crime and what the motive may have been.¹² A muckraker who wrote a short book about prostitution also cited a case that involved Brentano—in an unfavorable light. He, as Supreme Court Judge of Cook County, Illinois, secretly married Fred A. Busse, mayor of Chicago between 1907 and 1911, to a black woman. Later the Republican forces, of which Brentano was a prominent member in Illinois, did everything in their considerable power to hush the incident—quite successfully.¹³ Between 1899 and 1921 Brentano was also treasurer of the *Illinois Staats-Zeitung*, a German-language Republican paper whose editor earlier had been his father during the Civil War.¹⁴ He was thus a reliable member of the Republican political machine in the Windy City, therefore he was seen as a trusted man usable for smaller missions in and out of the field of law. Consequently, after retiring from the bench, he was chosen to be the first minister for Hungary by the Harding administration. His knowledge of German must also have played a role, since this was the foreign language the Hungarian political elite spoke. After the five years he spent in Hungary, he remained a faithful Republican but led a retired life. Theodore Brentano died in Chicago in 1940.

Hungary was not an important diplomatic post by any means in the United States. Naturally, the successive American governments had a stake in the political and diplomatic landscape of post-war Europe, but Central Europe—aside from Germany, of course—was not deemed as crucial to American interests. Geopolitical or financial interests did not motivate the White House to pay close attention to the region. That, however, does not mean that the State Department did not follow closely what was going on in the area in general, as well as in individual countries such as Hungary. As the priority for Washington was to see stability in the region, Hungarian political and economic-financial questions sometimes did reach the threshold of curiosity and more serious consideration and, with the 1920s unfolding, certain American financial circles did see possibilities in post-war European financial and economic rehabilitation—Hungary included. But in general, it must be stated that Hungary was a white dot for the overwhelming majority of Americans.

⁹For Brentano's biography, see, *Sketches: Judiciary Candidates*, (Chicago: The Hehrt O. Shepard Co., Printers, 1903), 6; *New York Times*, July 3, 1940.

¹⁰*New York Times*, July 3, 1940.

¹¹See, Richard Allen Morton, "A Victorian tragedy: The Strange Deaths of Mayor Carter H. Harrison and Patrick Eugene Prendergast," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society*, Vol. 96, No. 1 (Spring, 2003), 6–36.

¹²*New York Times*, September 30, 1894.

¹³H. G. Creel, *Prostitution for Profit. A Police Reporter's View of the White Slave Traffic*, (St. Louis, Missouri: The National Rip-Saw Publishing Co., 1911), 19–22.

¹⁴*Fourth Estate: A Weekly Newspaper for Publishers, Advertisers, Advertising Agents and Allied Interests*, Issue 281, July 13, 1899; *The Chicago Tribune*, April 24, 1876.



Brentano's nomination came before the Rogers Act of 1924 which piece of legislation tried to reform the diplomatic service of the United States. The Act unified the diplomatic and consular services, created a tier system for officials with fixed salaries and also a system where the various diplomats were to rotate after three years' work in one place and set up a retirement age of 65. Thus, the way for a merit system was open in the reformed diplomatic service and also thanks to the launch of the Foreign Service School the following year, professional career diplomats got to the forefront.¹⁵ However, as any reforms, the Rogers Act suffered from flaws and political nominees have remained a regular feature of the American diplomatic service. It must also be noted that sometimes political appointees served just as well if not better than career diplomats. At any rate, Theodore Brentano represented the classic political appointee in 1922 being a lifelong Republican and having built an illustrious legal career. He was seen as well qualified to a post that apparently did not demand either a lot of work nor would it offer any complications beyond easy solutions. According to a certain source, it was Brentano's old friend, the Spanish Consul-General, Singer Berthold, who recommended the ex-judge to President Warren G. Harding for the post in Budapest.¹⁶ The first Hungarian minister for the United States, László Széchenyi was informed upon arrival that Brentano was 'a very good friend of the Hungarians' and supposedly 'Hungarian-Americans living here are very much delighted to note that Judge Brentano will be our next Minister in Budapest.'¹⁷ This information might have trickled down to the Hungarian press as well, since on his arrival one of the Budapest dailies wrote that partially owing to his many Hungarian friends in the United States, Brentano was arriving with sympathy to Hungary.¹⁸

BRENTANO'S WORK IN HUNGARY

Before his departure to Budapest, Brentano was the guest of honor at the American Hungarian Chamber of Commerce, where he spoke careful words about his upcoming diplomatic service. Caution was demanded since before him speakers mentioned Hungary's past suffering and its bright future that alluded to the hope for altered circumstances, that is, territorial revision. In his speech, Brentano emphasized America's neutrality, desire for peace, and friendly relations with Hungary, which had 'lasted ever since our own independence was achieved.'¹⁹ He also touched upon what Hungarians interpreted as a hopeful sign for possible revision: "The whole world

¹⁵On the Rogers Act, see, Waldo H. Heinrichs, *American Ambassador: Joseph C. Grew and the Development of the United States Diplomatic Tradition*, (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966), 95–106, 115–117; Robert D. Schulzinger, *The Making of the Diplomatic Mind: The Training, Outlook and Style of United States Foreign Service Officers, 1908–1931*, (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1975); Richard Hume Werking, *The Master Architects Building the United States Foreign Service, 1890–1931*, (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1977); Lawrence E. Gelfand, "Towards a Merit System for the American Diplomatic Service 1900–1930," *Irish Studies in International Affairs*, Vol. 2, No. 4 (1988), 49–63.

¹⁶*Egyenlőség*, April 1, 1922.

¹⁷Unknown person to László Széchenyi, March 2, 1922, Folder 1, Bundle 5, K 106, Papers of the Washington Legation, Hungarian National Archives (hereafter mentioned as HNA).

¹⁸*Pesti Napló*, vol. 73, no. 103, May 7, 1922.

¹⁹*New York Times*, April 14, 1922.



turns to us as arbitrator and our ideal will ever be to serve as the preserver of world peace. Arbitration, indeed, is an American doctrine.²⁰ Ever since the armistice, Hungarians had considered America as a possible savior. This was a trend that was characteristic of most states in the region, but because of its defeated status and its heavily decreased territory and population, Hungary perhaps more fervently than others looked to the United States as *arbiter mundi* and a beneficial judge, despite the fact that Washington made no steps or allusions, official or other, to the revision of the relevant details of the peace treaties. However, since the United States did not sign the Treaty of Trianon, many in Hungary had the misguided conviction that America would help rectify what was seen in Hungary as an unjust peace dictate.

Naturally, Brentano's arrival as the first official American minister for Hungary was a watershed event. This meant for most Hungarians that the United States deemed the country important and had an interest in its future. The minister's main job was to represent his country's interest, part of which was to monitor and check possible immigrants from Hungary to the United States. This was crucial especially after the first Quota Act was passed in 1921 by the US Congress, which drastically curtailed the number of immigrants admitted from Eastern, Southern and Central European countries. The Act limited the number of possible immigrants from countries to equal 3% of their numbers according to the 1910 census. In the case of Hungary, for example, this meant a 96% decrease compared to 1914, the last year of free immigration. Three years later the second Quota Act further limited immigration especially from Southern, Central and Eastern Europe again. In order to ensure that immigrants would primarily be Western and Northern Europeans, the quota was pushed down to 2% of the 1890 census, when far fewer people arrived from the Eastern and Southern areas of Europe.

Brentano happily mingled with the upper echelons of the Hungarian elite and other diplomats but at the same time carefully chose to avoid politics, because he understood what dangers lurked there. Hungary was a totally unknown place to the retired Chicago judge. According to the assistant of Grant-Smith in Budapest, prior to his departure Brentano was not even sure that Charles IV was a member of the Habsburg family.²¹ This goes to show that Brentano, like most political appointees, was not very clear about the local circumstances of his future station.

When Brentano arrived in May 1922, the most outstanding issues concerning Hungary were the domestic political landscape; the economic and financial situation of the country; and the foreign relations, especially with the neighboring countries. They were all necessarily intertwined. Following the conclusion of the war, revolutions and then governments replaced one another in quick succession, therefore political stability was the most acute goal to achieve. It was also the evolving American foreign policy view with regard to other countries in the world to prioritise stability, so there would be little chance of political upheaval. Once political change took off in a country, the outcome was never a given and was hard to predict, and therefore might be detrimental to American interests. The US clearly remembered revolutions in Russia, China, or Mexico, let alone the French revolution in the late eighteenth century, with their initial hope and later disappointment. Experience dictated that in a stable environment it was much

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Memorandum of the Secretary of the Western European Division, April 22, 1922, 864.00/630, Roll 7, Microcopy No. 708, NARA.



easier to predict short and long-term goals without having to fear sudden exigencies. Closely related was the fact that a country could only be politically stable if its finances and economy were healthy to the degree that it kept its society sufficiently satisfied. If a certain standard of living was guaranteed, there was only a reduced possibility of social turmoil, while the outcome of potential hostilities was never a given and did not bode well for a quiet and productive home base. Beyond domestic tranquility, good and productive international relations were also a must, both in the field of diplomacy and trade. And since Hungary came out of political confusion, financially and economically it was a shambles, and it was surrounded with inimical countries in the shape of the Little Entente, all three aforementioned aspects were on the American radar, although it must be stressed one more time that American interests in Hungary were meager at best. It was, however, clear to everyone that the entirety of the post-war Central European region was volatile, and only peace could ensure and provide a harmonious environment conducive to trade and stability—the overall American goals.

After Hungary successfully became a member of the League of Nations in September 1922, the country's international situation solidified. Belonging to the new international organization automatically meant that it was somewhat protected against the Little Entente's possible bullying and the Hungarian government could also keep on the agenda the problems of the three million Hungarians living in the successor states.²² This did not mean tangible protection but made the neighboring countries at least more conscious of the possible international consequences of neglecting minority rights within their borders. One such issue, for instance, was the Optants question. The Romanian government promulgated a law in 1921 in which they basically confiscated the land of those ethnic Hungarians who had opted for Hungarian citizenship following the peace treaty. Hungary claimed that this Romanian law was violating certain aspects of the Treaty of Trianon, to which Romania was a party, however, the Romanians argued that their state's sovereignty came first and stood above the protection of any treaty. In 1923 Hungary turned to the League for help in establishing which party was right. That was the beginning of a long and arduous legal process that was ultimately fruitless but which refused to go away for seven years and ended with mixed results.²³

One of the most crucial aspects of post-war Hungary, however, was its economic and financial situation. The country seemed incapable of finding its way out of its calamities and in the end approached the League of Nations to help put its financial house in order. Since the

²²On the relationship between Hungary and the organization, see, Zoltán Peterecz, "Hungary and the League of Nations: A Forced Marriage". In Peter Becker and Natasha Wheatley, eds., *Remaking Central Europe. The League of Nations and the Former Habsburg Lands*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2020, 145–165.

²³On the Optants question, see, Francis Deák, *The Hungarian-Rumanian Land Dispute*, (Columbia University Press, 1928); Ferenc Matheovics, *A Magyar-román birtokper* [The Hungarian-Romanian Optants Case], (Grill Károly, 1929); Elek Nagy, *Magyarország és a Népszövetség* [Hungary and the League of Nations]. (Franklin Társulat, 1930), 57–82; Gábor Aradi, "A San Remo-i tárgyalások magyarországi előkészülete," [The Hungarian Preparations for the San Remo Talks] *Levéltári Szemle*, Vol. 42, No. 3 (2002), 24–38; Holly Case, *Between States: The Transylvanian Question and the European Idea during the Second World War*, (Stanford University Press, 2009), 27–30; Antal Berkes, "The League of Nations and the Optants' Dispute of the Hungarian Borderlands: Romania, Yugoslavia, and Czechoslovakia," In *Remaking Central Europe. The League of Nations and the Former Habsburg Lands*, edited by Peter Becker and Natasha Wheatley, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2020), 283–314.



topic has been dealt with in detail elsewhere, a short summary will suffice.²⁴ Following the example of Austria, Hungary asked the organization to orchestrate an international loan for Hungary of 250 million gold crowns (\$50 million), most of which came principally from Great Britain, but the United States also contributed. For the time of reconstruction lasting two and a half years, an American, Jeremiah Smith, Jr. became the Commissioner-General to supervise the execution of the League plan. The success of Hungarian reconstruction became a paragon of League-sponsored financial rehabilitation for a string of countries in the 1920s and 1930s. Brentano regularly informed the State Department about the financial reconstruction program but since only private American banks took part in the endeavor, Washington was satisfied with being informed along general lines, especially that the whole program was a success story and there was nothing to worry about.

Brentano kept a low profile in Hungary. He mixed with other diplomats and took part in social gatherings, but other than that he was almost invisible, which suited him well. When after two years of stay in Budapest a Hungarian daily managed to have an interview granted, the journalist had the strong impression that the American minister was withdrawn and restrained. Aside from his personal character, however, Brentano did not mind mentioning the continuous improvement in the general conditions of Hungary and his attraction to Hungarian fine arts, especially embroidery.²⁵ He also spoke fondly of the theater as his favorite pastime in the Hungarian capitol. Since he did not speak Hungarian though, nor did he make any effort to master the basics of the language, these visits were usually restricted to the Opera.²⁶ This projected image is somewhat colored by the remark of an American serving in Hungary during these years. Royall Tyler, who was on the League of Nations' payroll, commented upon the minister's leaving Hungary in 1927 that Hungarians would 'miss the kind old Brentanos and their Sunday cocktail parties.'²⁷

When he could not avoid speaking publicly, he reverberated the usual mantra. For example, at the annual Fourth of July celebration in the City Park of Budapest, where George Washington's statue was situated, the incumbent American minister was always invited. In 1926, at the 150th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence and a few days after the successful conclusion of the League-orchestrated financial reconstruction, it was almost obligatory for Brentano to be present at the memorial service. On the occasion, he spoke of the traditional good relationship between the two countries and the help provided by the United States to Hungary in bringing home prisoners of war or giving direct financial aid.²⁸ On this occasion, naturally, recognition of the famous act took place at the highest level. While Admiral Horthy wrote to President Coolidge and thanked the United States for its 'philanthropic work' in

²⁴On the history of the financial reconstruction of Hungary, see, League of Nations, *The Financial Reconstruction of Hungary. General Survey and Principal Documents*, (Geneva, 1926); György Péteri, *Global Monetary Regime and National Central Banking. The Case of Hungary, 1921–1929*, Boulder, (Colorado: Social Science Monographs, 2002); Zoltán Peterecz, *Jeremiah Smith, Jr. and Hungary, 1924–1926: the United States, the League of Nations, and the Financial Reconstruction of Hungary*, (London: Versita, 2013), 80–204.

²⁵*Az Est*, vol. 15, no. 150, July 25, 1924.

²⁶*Színházi Élet*, vol. 16, no. 29, July 19–25, 1926, 20.

²⁷Royall Tyler to Mildred Barnes Bliss, February 21, 1927, Budapest, "Bliss-Tyler Correspondence," <https://www.doaks.org/resources/bliss-tyler-correspondence/letters/21feb1927>, accessed December 9, 2015.

²⁸*Nemzeti Újság*, vol. 8, no. 148, July 4, 1926.



Hungary after the war, Prime Minister Bethlen expressed his gratitude for the ‘charitable work of your Red Cross and the many Americans interested in our fate-stricken people, as well as the most valuable cooperation of an American working towards our financial reconstruction.’²⁹ Brentano, through Bethlen, officially thanked the kind message sent on the same occasion by the Hungarian National Assembly.³⁰ These were formal acts with little meaning, but in Hungary they were always magnified and interpreted as somewhat significant events.

During his tenure in Budapest, Brentano was the target of a partisan attack back in the United States on one occasion, news of which reached Hungary, as well. Former progressive Republican Robert M. La Follette entered the 1924 presidential elections as a third-party candidate. A few days prior to Election Day, he had two paragraphs appear in the *New York Times*, suggesting that Alanson B. Houghton, the American ambassador to Germany and Brentano had acted unethically in the campaign and therefore they should be subpoenaed.³¹ The accusation was that both were brought home to give speeches at political rallies in favor of the sitting president. Although the affair eventually came to nothing, two days after an easy Coolidge victory, a Hungarian daily also mentioned the incident. The paper inquired about the accusation at the American Legation. The official response was that this was a customary practice in the case of political appointees, but Brentano first and foremost had traveled home to take care of some of his business interests and would not be back in Hungary before December.³² Also in line with the prevailing customs for political appointees, Brentano supposedly handed in his resignation after a new president had been sworn in.³³ The circumstances were, however, extraordinary in the case of Coolidge since he had been president since August 1923, when he succeeded Harding, who died in office. Still, tradition dictated to offer to resign and let the new president decide if changes were required at various posts. The *New York Times* might have been onto something, since they reported that Joshua Butler Wright was mentioned as the most likely successor, who was indeed to become the next American minister for Hungary, but not until 1927.

The ministerial reports sent from Budapest diligently and in quite a detailed fashion informed Washington about the most momentous events concerning Hungary. The monthly reports gave a cross-section of every possible angle of Hungarian domestic issues and foreign affairs that could be of interest to the State Department. Regarding Hungary’s domestic political arena, the elections, the composition of government, the various voices coming out of the different major political parties and newspaper reports ruled this section of the reports. Another such regularly occurring subchapter was the question of the king. This was a very curious point for Americans. Always seeing kingdoms both as a harmful relic of history and also as a romantic European feature, this question was extremely important and sometimes entertaining for

²⁹Miklós Horthy to Calvin Coolidge, July 3, 1926, and István Bethlen to Calvin Coolidge, July 3, 1926, Box 15, 1926–1941 USA, Papers of the Protocol Department, 1918–1944, K 62, Foreign Ministry Archives, HNA. This became a typical practice on the part of the Hungarian leadership especially Horthy, while the Americans always sent their good wishes on August 20, the main Hungarian national holiday.

³⁰Theodore Brentano to István Bethlen, July 24, 1926, Bundle 3, 1921–1928 B/2, Files Relating to Foreign Policy, Bethlen Papers, K 468, HNA.

³¹*New York Times*, October 23, 1924.

³²*Az Est*, vol. XV. no. 235, November 6, 1924.

³³*New York Times*, March 31, 1925.



American ministers and observers. Hungary was officially a kingdom without a king. After Charles IV, the last king of Hungary, failed to retake the throne twice over the course of 1921, then soon died, the question became more of an academic one, but legitimist powers in Hungary were never tired of campaigning for young Otto, the legitimate heir to the throne, to take his rightful place. Brentano regularly reflected on the ‘monarchical tendencies of the Hungarian people.’³⁴ As on the question of the king, Brentano wrote in 1925 that ‘the Legitimist movement is strong and awaiting a favorable moment to effect the return of ‘King’ Otto,’ but there was no possibility in the foreseeable future of his ascending to the throne although the American minister believed that ‘fully half of the population of Hungary is Legitimist in its feelings and desires.’³⁵ Washington must have been relieved when Brentano reported that ‘the Bethlen Government appears today to be in a firmer position than ever.’³⁶ Since the American government always favored stability in the volatile region of Central Europe they appreciated that the Hungarian regent and prime minister could provide solid leadership. They trusted that Bethlen would play a constructive or moderating part in these three most important areas, the financial situation of Hungary, the possible revision of the Treaty of Trianon, as well as the question of the king.

There was, however, also ample room for criticism. For example, Brentano complained of unsatisfactory relations between the American Legation and the government. He identified two causes. He blamed the incompetence of the Hungarian officials since answers to inquiries were almost always slow in coming, and he also accused the Hungarian government of trying to avoid living up to various points of either the Treaty of Trianon or the separate American-Hungarian Treaty of 1921.³⁷ On another occasion, when the franchise bill was passed in 1925, which did not operate along democratic lines, excluded many people from voting and also restricted the secret ballot to the capital city and a few larger cities, Brentano wrote of ‘a disappointing exhibition of the functioning of the legislative branch of the Hungarian Government,’ and the lack ‘of constructive statesmanship.’³⁸ In addition, the reports coming out of the American legation often spoke of anti-Semitism in Hungary.

Brentano closely watched the process of financial reconstruction that unfolded during his tenure in Hungary. During the latter phase of the reconstruction process an awkward episode disturbed the seemingly calm waters of diplomacy surrounding the League-orchestrated effort, which is remembered as the forgery scandal. On December 14, 1925, a Hungarian officer by the name of Aristid Jankovich was arrested in the Netherlands when trying to pay with a forged French 1,000 franc note. In the ensuing political and criminal drama, beginning with the end of January, Bethlen too was compromised, but Horthy and Apponyi, as well as Great Britain and Italy were backing him.³⁹ First, some officials in the French foreign policy establishment wanted

³⁴Theodore Brentano to Charles Evans Hughes, March 4, 1924, 864.00/573, Roll 6, Microcopy No. 708, NARA.

³⁵Theodore Brentano to Charles Evans Hughes, February 17, 1925, 864.00/615, Roll 7, Microcopy No. 708, NARA.

³⁶Theodore Brentano to Frank B. Kellogg, June 4, 1925, 864.00/652, Roll 7, Microcopy No. 708, NARA.

³⁷Theodore Brentano to Charles Evans Hughes, July 15, 1924, 864.021/1, Roll 16, Microcopy No. 708, NARA.

³⁸Theodore Brentano to Frank B. Kellogg, July 15, 1925, 864.0131/8, Roll 16, Microcopy No. 708, NARA.

³⁹For more about the scandal in detail, see Ignác Romsics, “Franciaország, Bethlen és a frankhamisítás,” [France, Bethlen, and the Franc Forgery] *Történelmi Szemle*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (1983), 67–86, Balázs Ablonczy, „A frankhamisítás. Hálók, személyek, döntések”, *Múltunk*, Vol. 53, no. 1 (2008), 29–56.



to make use of the scandal and cause a government crisis or change in Hungary, but nothing came of it and during the League session in March the forgery scandal was not dealt with on an official level. When the reconstruction came to its conclusion in the early summer of 1926, the French and the Little Entente wanted to use the forgery scandal again as a reason to postpone the termination of financial control in Hungary. Thanks largely to British opposition to such a scheme the League of Nations accepted that the Hungarian financial reconstruction be deemed as finished.⁴⁰ Finally the alleged perpetrators received their sentences, which were not too heavy, that summer. Concerning the forgery scandal, of which he always sent detailed accounts, Brentano took issue with the weak performance of the press bureau of the government and also emphasized ‘the pride and self-sufficiency of the Hungarian character’, an observation that his successors also shared.⁴¹

Hungary’s foreign relations naturally took an important place in Brentano’s reports, as well. Predictably, there was the popular and never ceasing clamor for revision in Hungary. Having spent less than a year in Hungary the American minister judged the situation in a positive light at least with regards to the revision of the treaty. Although he agreed that every Hungarian wanted and believed in revision, for the time being the country had to concentrate on finding its own salvation in a peaceful way.⁴² In the domain of foreign affairs Hungary gave no real reason for worry. In this field perhaps the Treaty of Friendship, Commerce and Consular Rights with Hungary, which was concluded in 1925 between Hungary and the United States deserves mention. This treaty was needed because the peace treaty between the two countries did not rule every aspect of the bilateral relations satisfactorily. The most-favored-nation principle prevailed, while the Hungarian consulates could now carry out their efforts based on a treaty and were therefore able to better represent the rights of Hungarians in the United States.⁴³ Right after the signing of the treaty, however, Secretary of State Frank B. Kellogg signaled that the Senate would add certain reservations concerning Hungarian immigration to the United States and how long the treaty would remain in force. Hungary accepted such reservations.⁴⁴ In a similar fashion to the separate peace treaty with the United States in 1921, Washington once again unilaterally reserved the right for possible reservations because the US Congress often came up with various points that the State Department had to take into consideration. After the exchange of notes and Hungarian ratification, the US Senate did indeed add some reservations concerning immigration. Bethlen proved to be pragmatic as always and the possible roar of the Hungarian

⁴⁰On the British viewpoint concerning the franc forgery and French intentions, see, Robert Crewe-Milnes to Austen Chamberlain, June 2, 1926, C6443/433/21 and Otto Niemeyer to Miles Lampson, June 4, 1926, C6392/443/21, 11370, FO371, The National Archives, London, UK. For the League’s Financial Commission take on the forgery scandal, see Report of the Financial Committee to the Council, June 6, 1926, Financial Reconstruction of Hungary, Deliberations at the 40th Session of the Council, June 1926. Doc. No. 52083, Registry Files, R. 302, League of Nations Archives, Geneva, Switzerland.

⁴¹Theodore Brentano to Frank B. Kellogg, March 31, 1926, 864.00/671, Roll 7, Microcopy No. 708, NARA.

⁴²Theodore Brentano to Charles Evans Hughes, February 6, 1923, 864.20/34, Roll 19, Microcopy No. 708, NARA.

⁴³For the text of the treaty, see FRUS, 1925, vol. 2, (United States Government Printing Office, Washington, 1940), 341–54.

⁴⁴Frank B. Kellogg to László Széchenyi and László Széchenyi to Frank B. Kellogg, June 24, 1925, and Theodore Brentano to Lajos Walkó and Lajos Walkó to Walkó Brentano, September 4, 1926, *Ibid.*, 354–57.



opposition was smoothed.⁴⁵ The final exchange of ratification eventually took place on September 4, 1926, more than fourteen months after signing said treaty.⁴⁶

Early in Brentano's tenure, the State Department commended him on various occasions for his reports concerning the Hungarian political situation and affairs in general.⁴⁷ This is an interesting fact especially in light of what the chief of the division of Western European affairs, William R. Castle wrote at the end of 1923 regarding the reports emanating from Budapest. He complained about the haphazard manner of the reports, but he did not blame Brentano 'because he is a fairly old man thrown into a totally unfamiliar job.'⁴⁸ Instead he found the root of this trouble in the first secretary, Eugene Shoecraft and also in the lack of cooperation between the Legation and the Consulate in the Hungarian capital. In the wake of the Rogers Act, this latter fault was largely corrected. While Brentano was on leave in the United States, George A. Gordon usually sent reports to Washington.

Brentano confined his monthly and other reports to the State Department strictly to the facts as they came to him from various sources. He and his colleagues had to rely on English-speaking Hungarians for this, otherwise the Hungarian language would have proven too big an obstacle. The sending of factual reports is commendable on the one hand, since his main job was to report what was happening in Hungary without necessarily interpreting events or characters. On the other hand, his predecessor, Grant Smith, or his successors, for example Joshua Butler Wright or Nicholas Roosevelt, peppered their reports with various personal insights as to the Hungarian events and characters, which allows one a more in-depth perception, understanding and their personal opinion of Hungary and its people. Brentano seldom expressed his thoughts, however, there are a few examples of the contrary.

When he did express such opinions, however, he opened a window onto his thoughts regarding his host country. A few months after his arrival, for instance, he described the Hungarian political landscape in harsh terms. He was of the opinion that in a country which finds itself under almost devastating economic circumstances, 'mutual tolerance and political broadmindedness is of vital importance. This primary necessity however seems completely absent at the present critical period.'⁴⁹ He also thought that the Hungarian big landowners were 'autocratic, self-sufficient and intensely egotistical', but from an economic point of view they were indispensable to the country, so even if democratic principles were circumscribed, this class had to be helped by the government.⁵⁰ Despite these examples, all in all Brentano very rarely expressed his true feelings about Hungary and the Hungarians.

⁴⁵Theodore Brentano to Frank B. Kellogg, August 11, 1926, 711.642/24, Roll 1, Microcopy No. 709, NARA.

⁴⁶Theodore Brentano to Frank B. Kellogg, September 4, 1926, 711.642/25, Roll 1, Microcopy No. 709, NARA.

⁴⁷William Phillips to Brentano, (no date on letter, but it was early 1923), 864.00/536; Leland Harrison (for the Secretary of State) to Brentano, September 15, 1924, 864.00/586, Roll 6, Microcopy No. 708, NARA.

⁴⁸William R. Castle, Jr. to Charles B. Curtis, December 6, 1923, William R. Castle, Jr., Papers, Countries Correspondence: Box 8: Hungary (1923–1926), Herbert Hoover Presidential Library and Museum, West Branch, IA (hereafter cited as William R. Castle, Jr., Papers).

⁴⁹Memorandum, September 17, 1922, in Theodore Brentano to Charles Evans Hughes, September 20, 1922, 864.00/511, Roll 6, Microcopy No. 708, NARA.

⁵⁰Memorandum, in Theodore Brentano to Charles Evans Hughes, October 1, 1922, 864.00/517, Roll 6, Microcopy No. 708, NARA.



Brentano also commented in a private letter on cheap alcohol and its abundance in Hungary, where people could not get over the American ban on alcohol.⁵¹ Although rumors reached Washington that Brentano was often inebriated and supposedly had an affair with a dancer of the Budapest Opera, Charles B. Curtis, who had served almost a year and a half at Budapest Legation, denied the substance of them.⁵² At the same time, it was an open secret that Brentano wished to resign from the post and the State Department would have been happy to accept it and replace him with a career diplomat, but in the end he stayed on.⁵³ When Brentano spent considerable time in the United States in the fall of 1925, Castle had a long talk with him. The conversation convinced the chief of division that although the minister was ‘not a bad old fellow’, he was ‘an awful ass’ and that the brunt of the work was done by George A. Gordon, secretary of the Legation at Budapest.⁵⁴ In conclusion, Castle admitted that ‘I am afraid we do not very much need Mr. Brentano.’⁵⁵ It was already known at this point in time that after the midterm elections in November, Coolidge wanted to do a shake-up at the less satisfactory missions, such as Budapest.⁵⁶

The aforementioned George A. Gordon, in sharp contrast to his boss, expressed an analytical summary of Hungarian affairs in a report at the time of his departure from Hungary following two years of service. Since he was a career diplomat, his views are perhaps important and show more clearly what the State Department was interested in regarding Hungarian affairs. He pointed out three major areas he saw as crucial for Washington. The first was the financial policy and situation of Hungary, the second the efforts to achieve the revision of the Treaty of Trianon and finally the question of the King. This reinforces the three previously identified points that the United States were interested in concerning Hungarian affairs. Gordon also expressed his belief that as long as the present government remained in power, order and moderation would govern the Horthy-Bethlen regime concerning these issues. He had one cautionary point to make, however. Hungary was still a risk for American capital of which a considerable amount had arrived in recent years. In the case of a Legitimist takeover, however unlikely that may be, —perhaps in the person of Otto—, Washington should disapprove of any further loans to Hungary. The reason being—in Gordon’s view—that despite some notable exceptions, ‘on the whole they are not only Orientals at bottom, but also still thoroughly mediaeval and feudalistic; as corollary to this I do not hesitate to register my opinion that the Magnate class here—which of course, generally speaking, is synonymous with Legitimism—is arrogant, egotistical, narrow and subjective minded to a high degree.’⁵⁷ This kind of opinion was rather typical among American observers in the discussed period.⁵⁸

⁵¹Theodore Brentano to Dorothy Brentano, April 16, 1923, Folder 11, Dorothy (Dodie) Brentano, 12 Aug 1921–24 May 1925, n.d., Box 2, Brentano Family Papers, Chicago History Museum Research Center, Chicago, USA.

⁵²William R. Castle, Jr. to Charles B. Curtis, May 6, 1925, and June 9, 1925, William R. Castle, Jr., Papers.

⁵³Ibid. and William R. Castle, Jr. to George A. Gordon, January 14, 1926, *ibid.*

⁵⁴William R. Castle, Jr. to George A. Gordon, November 11, 1925, *ibid.*

⁵⁵William R. Castle, Jr. to George A. Gordon, August 8, 1926, *ibid.*

⁵⁶William R. Castle, Jr. to George A. Gordon, August 23, 1926, *ibid.*

⁵⁷George A. Gordon to Frank B. Kellogg, June 3, 1927, 864.00/702, Roll 8, Microcopy No. 708, NARA. On Gordon’s career until 1930, see, Bernard V. Burke, *Ambassador Frederic Sackett and the Collapse of the Weimar Republic, 1930–1933*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 71.

⁵⁸In more detail, see, Zoltán Peterecz, “Reflection of and about Hungary in the English-speaking World in the Interwar Years”, *Hungarian Studies*, vol. 31, no. 2, (2017), 237–249.



CONCLUSION

Theodore Brentano's five years in Hungary as the United States' first ever minister was by all means a defining moment in the diplomatic history of the two countries. What is more, these years brought almost only success to Hungary both in the domestic and the foreign arena. Its finances were put in order and strengthened, the economy started to climb out of its post-war calamity, relations with neighboring countries were also largely normalized and Hungary seemingly became a trustworthy member of the post-Versailles political system in Europe. Although territorial revision and the question of the king were always on the menu, Bethlen kept these forces in check. Therefore, Brentano had few challenges during his tenure and had all the reason to be satisfied when he left Hungary in May 1927. Upon arrival in his home country, he told the *New York Times* that during his five years in Budapest he had witnessed the phenomenal recovery of Hungary from a defeated country to the most prosperous of the Balkan States.⁵⁹ He also believed Hungary would assume a more important role in European affairs. Relations between the United States and Hungary, he said, were most cordial and he had always found the greatest appreciation of America by Hungarians, officially and otherwise.⁶⁰ His two immediate successors had to work in a different country: there were diplomatic incidents and, especially following the end of 1929, the effects of the Great Depression were felt ever more acutely. Brentano's tenure, however, despite himself, was a success and a successful first stint of the official diplomatic relations between Hungary and the United States.

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⁵⁹Hungary was often mentioned as one of the Balkan States by the State Department officials.

⁶⁰*New York Times*, May 10, 1927.

