

HUNGARIAN FOREIGN POLICY IN THE INTERWAR PERIOD

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After June 4, 1920 the objective was nevertheless the restoration of Saint Stephen's Hungary. How can such a program be implemented? There are three things that are definitely needed. 1. A relevant political force in the country. 2. An international situation conducive to the aims and a foreign policy that can make the most of it. 3. Hungary's former national minorities should be willing to return into Saint Stephen's empire.

1. The losers of the treaty of Trianon probably supported the recovery of the lost territories. This discontent supported and at the same time stifled the revisionist movement. The leaders of the country too strengthened the illusion that Trianon was a result of the revolutions of 1918 and 1919.

2. No great powers supported the restoration of Saint Stephen's Hungary. The Germans showed the most receptive attitude, but neither the Weimar Republic, nor Hitler's Germany was willing to follow Bismarck's policy, who had considered it important to maintain a strong Hungary. Mussolini – even if he had wanted – could not have a say in this matter.

3. The Compromise of 1867 with the House of Habsburg maintained the Hungarian empire for another fifty years, but its hour struck in 1918. This is despite the fact that in the demise of Hungary the entente powers's intent, which was proved strong by history, was as important as the desire of the national minorities to secede.

These questions are fully analysed in the study, which then states: *in theory* it would have been possible to follow a way different from the actual event, but *in fact* the tragedy of Hungary in the Second World War had to happen as inevitably as it actually did.

Keywords: Trianon, revisionist movement, Saint Stephen's Hungary, Hungarian foreign policy, nationalities, nationalism theoretical possibility

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If we assume an objective point of view, it can hardly be disputed that the image of a historical period is very much influenced¹ by the period from where we look back on that particular historical period. As far as getting to know the past is considered, the situation is not entirely hopeless, because the many points

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of view provide such a rich array of insights that taken together provide a degree of security for authentically exploring the past.

This is also true for the history of Hungarian foreign policy between 1919 and 1945. The literature discussing what happened could fill a considerable library; and there have been many kinds of interpretation, but there is no accepted agreement. We probably will not be mistaken if we say that the source of many uncertainties is the Treaty of Trianon; and Trianon will remain a wound for many Hungarians until the dominant nationalities of the neighboring countries allow their national minorities to become equal partners in their respective states. Perhaps it is not too risky to say that this will only happen when the European Union is expanded. Then everyday life will be penetrated by the norms of the cohabiting partner nations. This will be quite different from the situation today, when such accommodations occur only done on the legislative level. Put in another way, then there will arise a situation where the fate of a minority does not automatically involve discrimination. So the question remains emotionally charged. But this does not make it unnecessary, indeed, it will encourage the most authentic historical reconstruction possible.

What could be done in the crippled state after June 4, 1919? What could be the aims and what were the possibilities? The aim – as we know all too well – was the restoration of the Hungary of St. Stephen. In the September 1928 issue of the journal *Magyar Szemle* [Hungarian Review] we can read László Ottlik's much referenced article 'Towards a new Hungaria'. In this study the author made an attempt – one must add that he must have been reflecting only his own personal opinion – to redraw a modernized and federalized image of the sunken empire, which might attract the nationalities that are now outside of Hungary's borders. This article began with the sentence: "No good Hungarian would doubt that the territorial integrity of St. Stephen's Empire will be sooner or later restored." Let us not discuss now to what extent this statement was true, or how hard it was for those who considered themselves 'good Hungarians' but were unable to identify with this program, which often brought them inconveniences and discrimination. Suffice it to state that the main significance of this statement was the public declaration of a Hungarian political program, which was not often declared but still existed.

How could a program like this be realised? Three things are surely needed for it: one, adequate support within the country; two, a favourable international situation and foreign policy advantages deriving from it; and three, the wish of the nationalities now outside of the Hungarian borders to be members once again of a state encompassing St. Stephen's Empire. These three main factors may be further divided into important subparts, the observation of which may make the answer convincingly accurate.

1. The losers of Trianon were surely for revision, and it is out of the question that broad strata of the society felt themselves crippled by the peace treaty. The vagabonds living in railway carriages in the Western Railway Station, the clerks made redundant, the landowners who were forced to leave their properties, and those who were separated from their relatives by the new borders and those limited by the new currencies were unified and supported a program that promised the return of a beautiful past, one which must have seemed even more beautiful within the miserable present conditions. The force of this idea was not to be underestimated and could easily be harnessed for mass demonstrations. It proved to be suitable for threatening the democratic forces, such as those that had led to the collapse of historical Hungary; and it was easy to motivate for campaigns against the neighbouring countries and the victorious powers. As the governments were clear about the fact that they could most efficiently serve the distant purpose – in those circumstances – if they preferred *conflict solution to conflict seeking*, the relation of the official government policy to this social force was *contradictory* after the autumn of 1919. This force was a kind of genie to be kept in a bottle and used when needed. But it should be quiet – ‘bottled up’ – when not needed. Nevertheless, such an effort is never without problems; and the history of Hungarian foreign policy between the two wars illustrates these difficulties. Although István Bethlen used Pál Prónay and his team successfully for shaping the success of the Venice talks, it was not simple to ‘disarm’ them. Gyula Gömbös was almost done in, and the liquidation of the Lajta Banat was not an easy matter either. Some years later the franc counterfeiting scandal shook the system fundamentally; and without English help the prime minister would hardly have kept his position. Thus, if there had not been so many links between the counterfeiters and the government officials, there would not have been so much scandal. And it is also true that if these quarrelsome people could have been kept under control, there would not have been a scandal (or at least until later, much later, and not right after the cashing of the first banknote). The price for English support was obviously greater harmonisation with the given European order, and as a consequence, the franc affair did not bring the achievement of the basic goal closer but pushed it into the far future.

Another example was constituted by the revision movement that spread after 1927 and obviously influenced the goals of the government – both hidden agenda as well as the official one. Not much later, in 1928, István Bethlen in a new tone provided evidence of this influence in his famous speech at Debrecen. This speech is usually associated with the greater freedom of diplomatic movement, i.e., the end of the military control system in 1927 and the Italian-Hungarian Permanent Friendship Agreement of the same year. The self-assured voice was further supported by the birth of the Hungarian Revision League and its dynamic activities,

which were also effective abroad.² On the other hand, this movement did not provide an unambiguous driving force because it had no horizon, was not tactful, and did not lend itself to flexible application. It was a 'roaring patriot melancholy',³ which meant that it was impossible to influence by rational arguments.

But was it necessarily so? In practice yes, but in theory no. In practice yes, because this system was a reaction to revolutions. It was openly proud of being 'counter-revolutionary' and rejected everything in connection with revolutions. Although even in the latest Hungarian historiography there are views maintaining that this aspect of the system eroded over the years, nevertheless a number of facts support the idea that even in the autumn of 1939 the founding fathers were proud of the circumstances of the birth of their system. Not much later the whirlpool of the Second World War engulfed the country, and there was as a result even less of an opportunity to change these determinations. From this point of view seeing and reflecting on the tragedy of the First World War and the Trianon catastrophe that emerged from it an unbreakable link appeared between the war, its end, and the revolutions. And one could not successfully question this link. Consequently the ideas of the reform generation at the turn of the century should have been considered anew and at least a little bit of the heritage of the revolutions should have been appropriated.⁴ The counter-revolutionary system fell back on István Tisza and made a cult of his heritage; and when it moved into action against those accused of his assassination it did so as a means to trample the revolutions into the mud. István Bethlen formed a country of the remaining wreckage and created a state on the ruins of historic Hungary, achievements which demonstrate his political abilities. Contrary to the often quoted accusations, Hungary was a capitalist and not feudalistic country; but there were so many *remaining feudalistic* traits (in the social hierarchy, in human relationships, in the system of social values, in customs and in taste) that it was not far from the truth to speak about a feudalistic Hungary. The narrowing of the right to vote – let alone the way it was carried out – drew the country back to the state before the revolutions. It not only created dissatisfaction because it narrowed the circle of those having the right to vote in many respects, but even worse was the virtual restoration of the open voting that was characteristic before 1918. Although the agrarian reform was surprisingly extensive, it did not satisfy the centuries-old hunger of the peasants for land, and it mostly preserved the system of large estates rooted in the feudalistic past. Although the pact with Károly Peyer in 1921 was a beneficial and successful step from the point of view of the system, as it built social democracy into the system, from a broader perspective we see that it also *forced* social democracy into this *compromise*. For the pact integrated the Social Democratic Party (SDP) into politics and into Hungarian society in a way that its significance was less than it had been in the age of Austro-Hungarian dualism. And this remains true despite the fact that social democracy had no votes in parliament under dualism,

while after 1922 it did. As a result, appearance and essence in this question were totally opposed to each-other: the appearance favouring Bethlen and the essence spoiling the chances of Hungarian society to have a properly functioning democracy within the near future and to saturate the broadest strata and circles of the population with democratic thinking.

Although Bethlen's sense for reality dictated the need for making an agreement with the Social Democratic Party, deep in his heart he loathed social democrats, as he loathed the communists.⁵ And this was a grand error. He should have fought this loathing, and, for the good of the whole society, he should have overcome it. The leaders of social democracy of the period were ready to integrate into the system – if it had become more democratic – but Bethlen's worldview did not let him encourage this integration and thereby allowing the whole nation to profit by it. On the other hand, the political strength of social democracy was further augmented by its international social democratic connections, but the attitude of social democracy toward revision was very different from that of the Hungarian government. The SDP identified with the cause of the revision of the borders, but to a degree this identification was tactical. Nevertheless, it should have been the government that employed revisionism as a tactic. It had a broader scope to manoeuvre than the opposition, and this opportunity should have been used for forging and deepening the often-proclaimed goal of national unity.

As for the domestic possibilities, these questions were the most important ones, and theoretically they were the areas where much could have been done for reaching better understanding. Besides these, a number of additional factors must be taken into account. One of them is surely the ability of the country to defend itself. We have to take into consideration the condition of the economy, and we cannot ignore the workings of the diplomatic machinery. When the power and international weight of a state are considered, these are absolutely significant questions.

It is a commonplace that the peace treaty bound the country from a military point of view. The ban of recruitment was humiliating and deeply offended the sovereignty of the state. The professional army, consisting of only 35,000 men, would never have been able to defend the country against a possible attack by the fifteen to twenty times larger Little Entente armed forces, which were equipped with more modern technology. The Győr Program fundamentally changed this situation,⁶ but by the time the signs of this re-arming were recognized, the Little Entente had largely become ineffective. Consequently, Hungarian foreign policy could not be supported by the armed forces. The military leaders restrained rather than encouraged development, and so they constituted an ever present warning of the barren possibilities. It was not merely this restraining role that was fortunate, but also their detached attitude to politics. Most of the army officers had been the soldiers of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, where they had been saturated with

the notion that soldiers must carry out orders and not get involved in politics. Their national loyalty could not have been questioned objectively, but during the time before 1918, when they had to carry out the orders of the super-national monarchy, they acquired a kind of mentality that appeared hopelessly lukewarm during a time of the nationalistic hopes for revision. Nevertheless, it is true that Prime Minister Gyula Gömbös brought about great changes by retiring the old officers, which resulted in the saturation of the military leaders with the ideas of the period. They began getting involved in politics; and politics in those circumstances could only point one way, toward a sensitivity to National Socialism, the Hungarian Nazi (Arrow-Cross) movement and the aspirations of Ferenc Szálasi. All this produced a peculiar situation that could be discerned already during the time of Prime Minister Pál Teleki, and made it very hard for him to govern effectively. Eventually during the time of Prime Minister László Bárdossy the difficulties arising from the peculiar situation would become fatal. This characteristic situation was that the political role of the army emerged before the armed forces proved able to support a revisionist foreign policy. Put in another way, the military leaders supported modifications in foreign policy before such changes could be implemented. When there were favourable territorial changes in the years 1938–39, its role was mainly indifferent. When preparing for the attack on Romania in 1940, the role of the army was positive in that it encouraged the political leadership to reach results through taking the initiative. But between 1940–1945 it did not recognise the trap inherent in the situation resulting from the territorial changes. Indeed, by urging the blindest possible support for the Germans the leadership of the armed forces undermined the opportunities for manoeuvring in foreign policy.

Having written on the diplomatic developments elsewhere, I will only take up some of the questions here.⁷ *In medias res*: let us consider only one aspect of the First Vienna Award. How we got to the First Vienna Award has become a commonplace, but – as will be discussed later – an *accurate* outline of the background to the decision has not become generally known. Now perhaps that connection is of particular importance in that György Barcza the Hungarian envoy in London encouraged several times that the Hungarian government should acquire a written statement on the Vienna decision from the London government in order to support its oral consent. István Csáky, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, at the time did not follow the advice of his colleague in the British capital. It is a great pity, as some months later in 1939, when Hitler terminated what was left of Czechoslovakia, London's logical response was to declare the Munich Agreement null. As a result the First Vienna Award sank into a swampy territory on the international level; and the Hungarian diplomatic apparatus tried to act on the basis of counter-insurance through its colleague György Barcza, who enjoyed a Ballhausplatz background. But the minister of foreign affairs swam with the current rather than prepare for the turn, which was far from being impossible even then.⁸ Although the

apparatus of foreign policy knew what should have been done, it lacked the power to convince its own head. The political line got detached from the intention of the apparatus, which remained far from being able to exert influence in the national interest.

Our other example was the Hungarian diplomatic attitude toward the immigrant Czechoslovak government formed in 1939. These events took place in London, and the way the envoy in London György Barcza responded shows how the apparatus reacted. He observed several times that there was no real role for the Czech immigration.⁹ But he soon realised the importance of the question and, with this in mind, he tried through Cadogan, the permanent deputy for the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, to encourage Britain not to recognise the Benes government. He emphasised that there was no Czechoslovak nation and it seems that he was able to influence the diplomat, because in one of his speeches he mentioned the two nations separately.¹⁰ And when London finally acknowledged the Czechoslovak government, there still might have been some scope for considering the Hungarian viewpoints. For Barcza was told that the acknowledgement was independent of the territorial question.¹¹ Based on all of the above facts one might say that the Hungarian diplomatic service tried to prevent potential future difficulties, but the foreign policy leadership, which proved to be more and more loyal to the Germans, could not be so circumspect and flexible.

So far we have been stressing the positive role of the diplomatic machinery which was weakened by the constraints imposed by the political leadership. However, this diplomatic machinery had a flaw that hamstrung the realisation of governmental policy. It lacked confidentiality, and this lack of confidentiality spoiled the efficiency of Hungarian foreign policy even in peace time. In a time of war it turned out to be fatal. The German intelligence service knew virtually everything about the Kállay government's attempts at drawing up peace agreements and informed Berlin. This is why it was so uncomfortable for the regent to meet Hitler for the first time in Klessheim in spring 1943, let alone the second visit to Klessheim just before the German occupation of Hungary. Unfortunately the tragic effects cannot be said to have resulted from the superior efficiency of German intelligence.¹² The case of the Romanians constitutes a counterexample. Duke Barbu Stirbei, an appointed representative of the Romanian king, took part in secret talks with the Soviet mission in Cairo about Romania's abandonment of Germany and the war, yet the Abwehr knew nothing about it.¹³ This tell-tale mentality played a very important part in the fiasco of the Hungarian attempt at leaving the German side on 15 October 1944 in that it was not only inefficient, but sometimes even tragicomic. At the same time the Romanians had managed to do it successfully on 23 August 1944, and the adequate confidentiality on their part unambiguously contributed to their success.

2

Let us now have a look at the international situation. Here we must note immediately that no great power was for the restoration of St. Stephen's Hungary. The most positive were the Germans, but neither the Weimar Republic nor Hitler's Germany wanted to follow Bismarck and regard a powerful Hungary as important.¹⁴ Mussolini – even if he had wanted to support Hungarian aspirations – was not an important factor in this respect. It is only a sign of the usual Hungarian ignorance in foreign policy that many tended – and some do so even today – to overestimate the significance of the unambiguously friendly declarations of the Duce.¹⁵

Considering the other relations of Rome will help us in evaluating the Italian-Hungarian relationship. There was nothing good in the Italian policy towards Romania for Budapest. Italy's opposition to the southern Slavs was more favorable to Hungary, but for the support to the Croatian Ustasha, which can only be explained up to a point by the self-interests of Hungarian foreign policy, Budapest paid quite a high price. Suffice it to refer to the isolation in foreign policy after the assassination in Marseille, when Gömbös virtually had to blackmail Mussolini to receive some support from Rome in order to overcome this isolation. In the 1920s the Italians had a very good relationship with Prague,¹⁶ but later on they did more and more to bury Czechoslovakia. Mussolini called Czechoslovakia a 'crocodile'¹⁷ state, he named it sometimes a 'crocodile monster', sometimes an 'artificial crocodile' and declared that it must disappear based on history's judgement. The Italians looked on Munich and the liquidation of Czechoslovakia in 1939 negatively because these events integrated the Czech-Moravian territories into Nazi Germany and created Slovakia as a fascist puppet state. But most of them did not oppose the idea that the territories with a Hungarian majority should belong to Hungary. These were later given back to Czechoslovakia because Hungary fought on the wrong side in the Second World War. The First Vienna Award was not annulled later for the same reason that the other decisions were annulled. The latter, with the exception of the Sub-Carpathian territory, were made during the war period and reflected the intentions of the defeated enemy, which was acceptable neither in London, nor in Washington. On January 1st 1993 Prague let Bratislava leave peacefully, an event that had not been earlier anticipated. Prague's reply to Slovak separatist intentions at the time of the peaceful revolution in 1989–90 had been a firm 'no' and, in order to add further emphasis to it, the Czechs stressed that in their attempts to leave Slovaks were questioning the Treaty of Trianon itself. Hence the southern border of the country would be uncertain. And then the great turn, the peaceful separation, took place, and Trianon was covered with the veil of complete silence. What was going on here? There can be little doubt that this secession constituted a partial correction of the Europe created at

Paris after World War I. Two of the favourite children of Versailles, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia, turned out to be incapable of life. But *the fact that they proved to be unfit for life does not necessarily mean that St. Stephen's Hungary may be reincarnated*. We must remember that the initiator of these great changes was nationalism, which created nation-states. This nationalism gave birth to Slovakia, and it was this nationalism that made Prague recognise the fact that although Czech nationalism needed 'Czechoslovakianism'¹⁸ as a crutch in 1919. But in the totally different Europe of the 1990s, and with a completely different Germany, Prague did not need the burden known as Slovakia any more.

In this light it is most unfortunate that the leaders of Hungarian diplomacy did not have the necessary patience in October 1938 to bargain with their neighbours and to draw up a better agreement. Budapest preferred the larger but more risky agreement to the smaller but firmer one. But why? Because, as we noted in point one, they did not reconsider the past after 1919 and were unable to get rid of the past. In particular they could not envisage a future in which the Hungarians were not a leading power but 'merely' one of several nations and countries. This is why they preferred the huge risk of being loyal to the Germans, and this is why they let the decision be made by Hitler. They blindly believed in the illusion that they would get the position of 'primus inter pares' from the grace of Berlin.¹⁹

Here it is worth considering how Hitler was not seen clearly in Budapest, as well as in other places. Few, only a very few people, read *Mein Kampf*, and even those who did, tried to believe that Hitler, the Chancellor, will not identify with the extremist views of Hitler, the movement activist. In this respect the Budapest considerations on the crushing of the Röhm coup d'état are very instructive here. Although the massacre, the liquidation of the old and faithful supporters of the party and the disgusting propaganda campaign that followed – i.e., trying to make people believe that Röhm's movement was a revolution of homosexuals – was received with disgust in Hungarian political circles, when informing the public, they emphasised that Hitler had 'restored order in the empire with an iron fist'. István Bethlen's paper, the *8 Órai Újság* [8 O'clock News], saw the main consequences that crushing the coup would bring as involving the consolidation "necessary to carry out the great responsibilities of Germany." Such a great abstraction from the real bloodshed by official Hungarian policy makers was possible not only because they thought that their purposes might be realised with Germany carrying out its 'great responsibilities', but also because they expected that after Röhm's 'second revolution' Hitler's position would be consolidated in a way that would make the character of German National Socialism more conservative, and consequently more similar to the Hungarian political system. The Budapest judgement that the liquidation of Röhm and his collaborators reinforced Hitler was of course accurate in this respect, but they made a fundamental error in wishfully expecting that a German policy more sensitive to Hungarian needs would emerge

as a consequence. A great part of this grand error was caused by a kind of 'knowledge of supremacy' that was often applied in Budapest to judge the events in German politics. Being able to abstract from the bloody nature of events might even be a virtue, rather than an error, but the given way of abstraction meant an abstraction from the bandit nature of Nazism. In other words, this abstraction was in great part a result of not understanding the essence of fascism.

This incomprehension was the root of the ignorance, and a number of political errors were the consequences. This was why they failed to see the essence even when Hitler hid his territorial demands behind the slogan of ethnic revision. As Mária Ormos has pointed out lately, "the majority of the Hungarian political group recognized only after Hitler's invasion of Prague that Germany did not act on an ethnic basis, but was engaged in 'raw expansion'."²⁰ But let us have a look at this topic from a broader perspective. The English politics of appeasement was caused by a similar blindness. Furthermore, it is also true that the leader of Italy, being a formal partner of Germany, was in a much better position than Hungary, the Duce, "was surely ignorant of the conquering plans of Hitler."²¹ The Hungarian political leaders must be judged in this light, and we may say that the non-transparency of Hitler's plans was a wall that obstructed the sight of the Hungarian political leaders, as well as those of others.

At the same time the Hungarians were much better informed about the activities of the Bolsheviks. The Hungarian political leadership could not get out of the snares of the Second World War because although the Anglo-Saxon powers kept recommending an alliance with Moscow, Hungary stuck to the German ally. This occurred with the consent of the majority of the population. Although the horrible acts of the Germans were already becoming clearer, nevertheless the population understood that there was a fundamental difference between the two countries in respect to ownership of property. While Hitler's political system did not attack private property, and so the acceptance of capitalism kept the two countries close to each-other, the collectivist nature of the Bolshevik system appeared horrible to many.²² In addition, in the question of the Soviet massacre at the Katyn forest the broad strata of the Hungarian population believed the German version. We must also take into consideration that it was the sons of the Polish nation who were the victims of the scandalous massacre, who had been the friends of the Hungarian nation, and then we can better understand why the reluctance to form an alliance with the Russians will be at once plausible. The more so because such a connection would necessarily lead to a capitulation in which one logical consequence would be the appearance of the Red Army on Hungarian soil.

But the Hungarian-Soviet relationship did not begin this time; it had roots going back several decades in the past. And this past was marked by missed opportunities. On the Hungarian part it was the effect of ideological burdens restraining political manoeuvring, while on the Soviet side it was an animosity that arose as

a consequence of Hungarian refusals. The spirit of Rapallo influenced the thinking of some leaders, and István Bethlen did not reject Russia out of hand.²³ Kálmán Kánya, a man with a Ballhausplatz background, who considered things in a relatively detached way in Berlin in 1924, signed the agreement on establishing diplomatic relations, but the forces of Hungarian internal politics, with the Regent as their leader, prevented it from becoming a law. The relations were renewed only some decades later. Although it is true that Hungary revived diplomatic relations with Russia before the states of the Little Entente, the Soviet Union in the League of Nations did not consider the peace system of Versailles from the point of view of the 1920s, and the spirit of Rapallo had already disappeared. Hungary moved closer and closer to Nazi Germany, while the Antikomintern Pact made on the basis of the German-Italian axis put confrontation in the place of the formerly good Berlin-Moscow relationship. Moscow was not against Hungarian revisionist intentions at this time, and as a consequence it wanted to prescribe a kind of sober manoeuvring for Budapest. But the latter was incapable of it. If it manoeuvred, it only manoeuvred against Berlin, and so it was able to avoid the Kiel offer by Hitler in August 1938 to take part in the attack on Czechoslovakia and gain the whole of Upper Hungary (Slovakia) in exchange. As this made the Führer very angry with Hungary, he did not do much for Hungary in Munich. From this point of view it would also have been logical for Hungarian diplomacy to do everything possible for the success of the Hungarian-Czechoslovak agreement. But they did not do this, and Hungary, obliged by the First Vienna Award, tried to comfort the Führer. In this spirit Hungary declared that it would quit the League of Nations and join the Antikomintern Pact. Moscow's answer to cut off diplomatic relations was a clear sign of the fact that the great power was offended. When some months later Hitler signed a pact with Stalin at the expense of Poland, as another move in his grand chess play, Hungary restored diplomatic relations with Moscow. This step was worthy of a trip to Canossa.²⁴

While the Soviet-Hungarian relationship was blocked by a sense of having been offended on the Soviet side and by ideological barriers on the Hungarian side, the relationship between Moscow and Bucharest was openly antagonistic because of Bessarabia. And this antagonism made Moscow put aside its feelings of offense and to seek accommodation with Budapest on the Transylvanian question. If the Transylvanian spirit that 'fought between two pagans for the country' had really existed in Hungarian foreign policy during the twentieth century, it would have been worth considering what the Soviet-German contract of 23 August 1939 about abstaining from attacking each other offered to Hungarian diplomacy. Let us have a look at the facts and observe the Soviet standpoint of the time, which was favourable for us in the Transylvanian question and which could have been utilised by a flexible Hungarian foreign policy stripped of its ideological considerations. The Soviet people's commissary declared on 4 July 1940 at the

Molotov-Kristóffy meeting that his government “considered the Hungarian territorial demands against Romania as grounded and would be ready to second them in an eventual peace conference, should they be solved at such a conference.” In addition to this, he spoke about the fact that “in a possible Hungarian-Romanian conflict, the Soviet Union’s moves would follow from her standpoint on the territorial demands.”²⁵ On 24 August, before the Second Vienna Award, Molotov met the Hungarian representative again and restated that Hungarian demands for Transylvania were grounded, while the Romanians did not manage to get any encouragement in Moscow.²⁶ If Hungarian diplomacy had enjoyed flexibility and adequate perspectives, it would have utilized the opportunity, since this opportunity contained the possibility of *setting up a German-Soviet (or, eventually a German-Italian-Soviet) peace conference*. Judging from the antecedents, it is not too risky to say that the Soviets would have been happy to participate.²⁷ Hitler would have been unhappy for certain, but what could he have done against it? What would the consequences have been of a possible German refusal? We believe it would have produced a situation that would have provided further possibilities for Hungarian diplomacy. But, on the other hand, if the agreement had been drawn up, *Hungary would have been secured for both possible outcomes*. The state of affairs would have been incomparably better in the case of both a German and Soviet victory than the one that really came about after the war.²⁸ If we consider the fact that it was impossible for the Germans to win this war, then we will see that Hungary would only have been secured by the Soviet-American-English coalition. Let us think the matter through further. If Transylvania had been returned to Hungary with Soviet help, then Prime Minister Bárdossy would have had much more scope for operation in June 1941 and would not have had to suffer the pressure of the military leaders. And if this pressure had been smaller, entering the war might have been put off. Entering the war later would have had many advantages, including the reduction of suffering and losses, but at the same time the Soviet leadership would not have turned against Hungary so much. There may be no doubt: the new Molotov declaration of 23 June 1941, which is usually overestimated in historiography, was not a mere reiteration of the former Soviet standpoint. There was a completely new element in it: the reality of being threatened. Earlier it had been very easy for the Russians to speak about it, but in June 1941 the question was much more emphatic. There may be no doubt that the new offer was motivated by the enormous threat to the Soviet empire. So, if the refusal of the former offers left some feelings of offence in the Soviet leaders, this refusal was so harsh that offended Moscow as a great power. The Hungarian ‘reply’ was supported by its entry into the war on the German side. (For the well-known reason Prime Minister Bárdossy simply put the report aside and did not inform the Regent; there was no formal reply.) Bárdossy was right to state at his later trial that he did not consider this message important as it had been motivated by the

contemporary situation. After 1945 not only historians, but also newspapers and schools exaggerated the significance of this telegram. They did so in order to put the Horthy regime on the pillory. And Horthy, in his usual short-sighted way, contributed to this campaign when (not realising the significant dimensions of the question, i.e., that it was discrediting the political system marked by his name), in order to get rid of his personal responsibility, he made Bárdossy accept the odium of the whole affair (and so doing he falsified the way things were).²⁹ One consequence of these various desires was the fact that the frequent weakness of Hungarian diplomatic thinking got even more pronounced in this respect.

All this does not mean that there were no alternatives in Hungarian foreign policy; it only means that the alternative existed only *theoretically*. There was no alternative in the world of realities. We would not like to be misunderstood: these considerations have nothing to do with the world of the rosy ‘What would have happened if...’ and the frequent staring into the past, which not only hinders the real knowledge of the past, but at the same time it also blocks the narrow paths to that direction. For *three objective and two subjective reasons* the theoretical considerations could not have been realised as alternatives.

We see one objective reason in the fact that Hungarian diplomacy, which had oriented itself towards Europe since its foundation more than a thousand years before, did not get any effective help from the representatives of this civilisation. French diplomacy was built on the Little Entente, whose goal was to suppress Hungarian aspirations. As long as it was powerful enough, it had some possibilities. Nevertheless, eventually it got imprisoned by this formation in its Eastern European policy. Although British diplomacy provided a very important help to the Hungary in the 1920s, it was not ready to redraw the borders, and in the 1930s it soon realised that Hungary was not capable of opposing Hitler’s Reich. Sir Orme Sargent, the head of the responsible department in the Foreign Office, advised his superiors on 25 May 1938 to leave Hungary alone to its fate, i.e., not much after the Anschluss and at a time when his country showed unusual strength in making Hitler retreat temporarily from his plans to destroy Czechoslovakia. In what other ways could his words have been interpreted: “let us not get persuaded to waste our time and money, trying to save a country like Hungary where the game is already over.”³⁰ Another objective factor was that the makers of Hungarian diplomacy, left alone by Western civilization and supported by the majority of Hungarian society, preferred to choose Hitler’s to Stalin’s empire.

This is the final explanation for the fiasco of the Kállay government’s attempts at peace agreements. The path before Hungarian diplomacy to successful peace treaties was blocked by decisive factors that meshed together like cogwheels. We must emphasise that the results came about not from any predispositions but a series of bad decisions and an inability to utilise the opportunities. London basically stuck to the agreement made with Washington and Moscow, which may be

summed up as unconditional surrender. “The advantages of supporting the anti-axis Hungarians would probably have been exceeded by the suspicion of the allied partners, especially the Czechs, who were particularly worried about the Hungarian attempts at peace talks.”³¹ It is true that Eden, who was not particularly a friend of the Hungarians, remarked on 12 February 1943, “There may be a turn forcing us to make *some* changes [my emphasis],” but he added at once that “should this happen, we may only act in concordance with the United States of America and the Soviet Union.”³² What benevolence could Hungary expect from the Soviet leaders who were still deeply offended as the leaders of a great power by the refusal of their gesture of 23 June 1941 and who were outraged by the conduct of the Hungarian army in the occupied territories of the Soviet Union? It would have been logical to write ‘Hungarian leaders’ instead of ‘Hungary’ in the previous sentence, but the logic of history makes us write Hungary. The Soviet leadership was consciously not willing to distinguish between the two. Molotov’s statement some months later, on June 7th makes this clear with chilly accuracy. “The responsibility for the war crimes should not only be taken by the Hungarian government, but more or less the Hungarian people as well.”³³ The British standpoint was much milder. “We would not like to mutilate Hungary... and we would not like to punish the people for the stupidity of their government. Our and our allied partners’ standpoint will be inevitably influenced by the practical steps that the Hungarians want to do in order to get out of the power of the Axis...”³⁴ But the Kállay government failed to profit from these possibilities. Indeed, if we are very understanding, we say that it was not able to make profit of it. The country was far from getting out of the imprisonment by the Axis, and after March 19th Hungary was occupied by the Germans in such an unfortunate way that the allied forces regarded Hungary as a satellite of the Germans, as the country’s resources served the interests of the Axis and the majority of the Hungarian Jews were liquidated, which could not have been done without the active participation of the Hungarian state administration.

And now we must mention the question of German occupation and the psychosis that the Hungarian government, and in general: the Hungarian political elite, had in this respect. The country’s independence was already much restrained by the German-Hungarian relations, when the elite still saw it as intact. It saw the independence as intact but felt that the country was in a cage.³⁵ And meanwhile they already feared the sound of German boots, even though there was no real danger of it yet. This emerged as early as in the autumn of 1939 when the government was brave to turn down the German request in the Polish question. Later, the entrance into the war against the Soviet Union was justified by Prime Minister Bárdossy and several other leading figures with the explanation that it would now be possible to avoid the German occupation of Hungary. This way they did not face the need to finish the war on the German side because they were always

coping with the ghost of the occupation, and they mystified it. And they did nothing, really nothing, against it.³⁶ The responsibility of Regent Horthy and the various prime ministers, together with the ministers for national defense deserve mention above all. Of course it is true that the terrible facts of the German practice of occupation abhorred Hungary. But those who observed this must have seen that the practice of German occupation was different in every country. It might have been noted that life in the Czech-Moravian Protectorate went on relatively peacefully.³⁷ The argument is often quoted that they wanted to avoid the occupation at all cost in order to save the great majority of Hungarian Jews. For many people in the leadership this must have been important, but when considering it, we can hardly forget the hard facts of the legal acts against the Jews and the very painful reality of 1944, i.e., the fact that the Jews of Hungary were deported with the active participation of the Hungarian Gendarmerie, the Hungarian State Railways, and in general the Hungarian state administration.³⁸

The third objective factor was the very anachronistic state of Hungarian society and its political system of institutions. On the brink of the war and within its turmoil it acted even more as a determining force against the realisation of a more flexible political practice.

We see one of the above mentioned subjective reasons for the weakness of foreign policy thinking in the role of political public opinion. The essence of the other subjective factor lies in the fact that the Hungarian system was so much bound by its own ideologies that it refused the real possibility of a co-operation with Moscow due to a great sense of self-esteem and 'moral height'.

3

And finally we must consider the question of whether the nationalities cut off from Hungary by the Treaty of Trianon wanted to belong to Hungary again and whether they wanted to live in 'St. Stephen's fatherland'. László Teleki wrote as early as in 1848 that not only Austria had died "but also the Hungary of St. Stephen".³⁹ The wisdom of Ferenc Deák and the ability of Count Andrassy for forging compromises made it possible to draw up the Austro-Hungarian Compromise of 1867, which made the Hungarian Empire survive for a half a century longer, but in 1918 the clock finally struck midnight. Moreover, nothing is changed by the fact that the Entente powers' desire to break up the empire, a desire that turned out to be historically wrong, was just as important as the separation efforts of the nationalities in tearing apart greater Hungary. And during the eight decades after the separation, none of the nationalities has opted for a future within the framework of a greater Hungary. The fact that this is so is mainly influenced by nationalism. So while the nationalities firmly wished to create their own nation

states, the prevailing Hungarian public opinion after the revolutions cursed the excessively lenient policy towards the nationalities and saw it as a reason why St. Stephen's kingdom had collapsed. In so doing it opposed the official laws giving nationalities model rights, and in order to avoid making the same 'error' again, it encouraged the practice of violent assimilation. From all this follows that public opinion was reluctant to accept László Teleki's truth.⁴⁰

The nationalities separated from Hungary after the First World War did not wish to return to the country. This is one of the reasons why it was impossible to restore the country of St. Stephen. There were no signs of this even in the 1920s or 1930s. The above mentioned article by Ottlik was not accepted by the nationalities either. And the minority policy of the country that tried to restore itself reminded them of the Bourbons, rather than the heightened spirituality and the administrative practice embedded in Pál Teleki's intentions.

Hungarian historiography usually stresses that there was no possibility to agree with the neighbours, as they did not want to return any territory, while Hungary wanted all the territories returned. This holds true for the period of the 1920s and 1930s, when there was virtually no possibility for any changes. When the situation changed, both Budapest and the neighbours modified their standpoints. The facts of the redrawn borders show this very clearly. It follows from this that there was a possibility for direct agreements, which would have restricted Berlin's field of operation rather than enlarged it. The historiography of the 1970s and 1980s recorded only the failure of the Komárom Talks and ignored the relevant material in the series *Diplomatic Writings to the Foreign Policy of Hungary* and the relevant memories of *History Mapped* by András Rónay, which state that Prague was ready to accept the border that was very similar to the border drawn in the First Vienna Award, but with the significant difference that it wanted to keep the towns Bratislava, Nitra, Košice, Uzhgorod and Munkačevo and their surroundings along the border. And as far as the peace talks in Turnu Severin are considered, András Hory is incorrect in saying that the Romanians did not want to give back anything. It is true that they wanted to give less than what was given by Berlin, but it was much more than what the Hungarian party thought feasible after the end of the war.

So, hard as it may be, we must state again that we should have drawn up an agreement with our northern neighbour and played the Soviet card. For the disastrous situation of the Kállay government,⁴¹ where there was virtually no hope, was also shaped by the policy of the former governments. And a very important part of this policy was the way these territorial changes were made. There was a possibility of a direct agreement before the First Vienna Award, and – in principle – a German-(Italian-)Soviet jury should have been encouraged instead of the Second Vienna Award. There was hardly any other possibility for Sub-Carpathia and Voivodina.

In conclusion, we would like to stress that we would not like to be misunderstood. When we speak about missed opportunities, we ‘merely’ say that there was a theoretical possibility for a path other than the real one, but practically there was hardly any hope for avoiding the tragedy of the Second World War for our country. For the external circumstances were very serious and the political elite of the time, due to its weaknesses, was not able to utilise the small field of operation left open to it. This remains their responsibility, which would be a mistake not to record. But hopefully the times are over when only their responsibility is taken into consideration, and *the very serious* external circumstances are ignored.

Notes

1. And at the same time it also changes the image traditionally handed down to us.
2. The military committee of the League of Nations terminated on 31st March 1927, Bethlen went to Rome between the 4th and 6th of April and the Hungarian Revision League was founded on 27th June. The Debrecen Speech took place on 4th March 1928.
3. ‘Bömbölő honfibu’, an expression by László Németh.
4. The situation is accurately illustrated by the fact that László Ottlik had to clarify himself because of his above mentioned article mainly because it was seen as a relative of Oszkár Jászi’s ideas of federation. And Ottlik did not take kindly to any of this ‘kinship’; he made every attempt to prove that he had nothing to do with Jászi’s ideas. The second Ottlik article can be found in: Éva Ring, ed., *Helyünk Európában* (Our Place in Europe) (Budapest, 1986), Vol. I, 170–182.
5. Lajos Varga, et al. eds, *A szociáldemokrácia kézikönyve* [Handbook of Social Democracy]. (Budapest, 1999), 129–130.
6. The economy developed at a modest rate in the whole period, so this was not a strong base for an aggressive foreign policy.
7. There would be some point in discussing the role of the apparatus with foreign policy or rather, it would be logical. Still, we believe that the apparatus must be discussed here because we consider it such a social-sociological creature whose make-up, but rather its mentality was formed by the nature of the Hungarian society of the time.
8. György Barcza: *Diplomataemlékeim 1919–1945* [My Diplomatic Memoirs, 1919–1945], Vols I–II (Budapest, 1994), vol. I, 405.
9. Magyar Országos Levéltár (Hungarian National Archives – MOL) K 63. 2/16. 7627/1939. Letter of Barcza to Csáky, 30 October 1939. Thesis by R. J. Tóth: *Barcza György diplomáciai pályafutása* [Barcza’s Diplomatic Career], 2000, p. 53.
10. Gyula Juhász, ed., *Diplomáciai iratok Magyarország külpolitikájához* [Documents in Hungarian Foreign Policy] DIMK Vol. V (Budapest, 1982), No. 201, Barcza 16 July 1940, and MOL K 63.2.1368/1940. Barcza to Csáky, 4 March 1940. In: Tóth, *ibid.*, 53.
11. DIMK Vol. V, No. 214, pp. 349–350, Barcza 23 July 1940.
12. For the looseness of confidentiality see: *Iratok a magyar külügyi szolgálat történetéhez* [Writings on the History of the Hungarian Foreign Service] (Budapest, 1994), 173–179.

13. Géza Herczegh, *A szarajevói merénylettől a potsdami konferenciáig* [From the Assassination in Sarajevo to the Conference in Potsdam] (Budapest, 1999), 440.
14. See István Diószegi: *Bismarck és Andrássy. Magyarország a német hatalmi politikában a XIX. század második felében* [Bismarck and Andrassy. Hungary in German Power Politics during the Second Half of the Nineteenth Century] (Budapest, 1998).
15. The leaders/makers of Hungarian foreign policy knew already in 1935 – when Mussolini suddenly turned to Paris – that nothing could really be built on the support of the Italians, but they did not consider it important to inform Hungarian public opinion about it. And in 1940 Italy's defeats made it clear – to those able to see – that Rome became one of the satellites of Berlin. But meanwhile, Hungarian public opinion did not realise the fact that one of the main pillars of Hungarian foreign policy had collapsed. Herczegh, *ibid.*, (1999) 321.
16. It was especially their mutual interest in preventing a Habsburg restoration, which is totally understandable historically, that brought the two countries together.
17. Quoted by Mária Ormos: *Mussolini*. Second, revised edition. (Budapest, 2000), vol. II, 435.
18. Prague feared even the defeated Germany very much. If we only think of the 3 million Sudeten Germans whose new country was to be Czechoslovakia, we can see that their fears were well grounded. But the so-called 'Czechoslovakianism' was not only needed by the Czech nationalists, but also by the French nationalists. For the French conception of security policy needed the guarantee for the influence of Paris in Central and Eastern Europe, and, as a consequence, for curbing the Germans.
19. It is best illustrated by the (euphemistically put: not too wise) fight for the position of first joiner to the Three Power Contract.
20. Ormos, *ibid.*, 438.
21. *Ibid.*
22. The practice of the Hungarian Council Republic (Tanácsköztársaság) of 1919 kept it in memory with memorable examples.
23. See Mária Ormos, "Bethlen koncepciója az olasz-magyar szövetségről (1927–1931)" [Bethlen's Conception About the Italian-Hungarian Alliance (1927-1931)] in: *A két világháború közötti Magyarországról* [On Hungary Between the Two World Wars], ed. Miklós Lackó (Budapest, 1984), 114–116.
24. Gyula Juhász wrote that the Hungarian Ministry for Foreign Affairs initiated the restoration of the functioning of embassies in March 1939. In: *A moszkvai magyar követség jelentései, 1935–1941* [Reports of the Hungarian Embassy in Moscow, 1935–1941] (Budapest, 1992), 8. The documents were selected, the notes and the index were made by Peter Pastor.
25. Pastor, *ibid.*, 256–257 and Gyula Juhász: *A Teleki-kormány külpolitikája* [The Foreign Policy of the Teleki Government] (Budapest, 1964), 128.
26. *DIMK* Vol. V. No. 318. Pastor, *ibid.*, 182. Antal Czettler, *Teleki Pál és a magyar külpolitika, 1939–1941* [Pál Teleki and Hungarian Foreign Policy, 1939–1941] (Budapest, 1997), 149–150.
27. "The Soviet Union protested in a memorandum against the fact that Germany and Italy alone had decided in the Transylvanian question, which Moscow was deeply involved in". Herczegh, *ibid.*, 313.
28. As Albrecht Haushofer, who was clear about the bandit nature of Nazism and assassinated by SS men in April 1945, had tried as early as 1941 to influence the various circles of the Reich with a peace design that would have annulled most of the territorial changes that were in favour of Hungary and as Hitler himself had no particular interest in the happy fate of Hungarians, it may probably be taken for granted that a final German victory would have restrained Hungary more than the situation after Trianon.

29. Éva Haraszti, ed., *Horthy Miklós a dokumentumok tükrében* [Miklós Horthy as Reflected by Documents] (Budapest, 1993), 68, 86.
30. Quoted by Gyula Juhász: *Magyarország nemzetközi helyzete és a magyar szellemi élet 1938–1944* [Hungary's International Situation and the Hungarian Intellectual Life 1938–1944] (Budapest, 1987), 9–10. And two years later it restated the English standpoint in the same way: "We never wanted to guarantee that country against Germany as we had done with Romania. In other words, we acknowledged that Hungary belonged to the German sphere of interest." Herczegh, *ibid.*, 271.
31. *Ibid.*, 406.
32. Gyula Juhász: *Magyar-brit titkos tárgyalások 1943-ban* [Hungarian-British Secret Peace Talks in 1943] (Budapest, 1978), 87.
33. *Ibid.*, 158–159.
34. *Ibid.*, 102.
35. Miklós Kozma noted probably not only his own conviction in his diary at the end of September 1938 when writing: "There are 9 million Hungarians living in the cage created at Trianon. It is flanked by the Little Entente on three sides and the fourth side has been taken by Germany since the Anschluss. If in the future, and it is doubted by no-one, we get back our territories peacefully or in a bloody way, it only means that we'll live in a somewhat bigger cage. Ruthenia (Sub-Carpathia), on the other hand, means that we manage to break the ring of the Little Entente between Romania and Czechoslovakia and we have a common border with Poland. It is only natural that we must keep on with the friendly policy towards Germany pursued so far, but it is equally natural that in another way than it is done now. The line Warsaw-Budapest-Belgrade-Rome is not opposed to policy of the Berlin-Rome Axis, but it's a great relief to us." However, history proved that the real judgment of the situation was followed by plans built on sand, as the plan of the horizontal axis, which had a long history in the previous years, could not be a real force against Berlin. MOL K 428 Diary entry on 28 September 1938. The text quoted several times was first referred to by Magda Ádám: *Magyarország és a kisantant a harmincas években* [Hungary and the Little Entente in the 30s] (Budapest, 1968), 327. These thoughts are similar to those of Géza Herczegh's statement: "Hungary with a territory of 160,000 square kilometers was exactly so defenseless and exposed in the circle of Hitler and his satellites as the Hungary with a territory of 93,000 square kilometers within the claws of the Little Entente." (Herczegh, *ibid.*, 331.)
36. See, for example Gyula Kádár: *A Ludovikától Sopronkőhidáig* [From the Ludovika to Sopronkőhida] (Budapest, 1978).
37. It would be worth studying the consular reports from Prague between 1939 and 1944 and to follow to what extent they were known in Hungary.
38. Mentioning the argument that the peoples of Eastern Europe, regardless of being winners or defeated, shared the same fate after 1945 in the Soviet sphere of interests belongs to the after-life of the question. This view is true to a certain point only. If we only think of the territories set out by the peace treaties, then this statement can hardly be maintained. For the borders set out by the peace treaties have their great significance even today. Let it suffice to mention only the hard life of being a minority and the environmental catastrophes inflicted on neighbouring countries. This is why today's security policy has a much different content than it did between the two wars. It means that until there exists a unified Europe, and there is a unified environmental policy or protection, the question of the borders will remain. And even if the new order exists, the historical fact that this issue has been very important for long decades will not be changed.
39. László Teleki, *Válogatott munkái* [Selected Works] (Budapest, 1958), vol. II, 27.

40. Géza Herczegh writes that this truth was demonstrated again in April 1941. For “the nationalities of the historical country did not want to return, and no superpower wanted to restore the Hungary of St. Stephen.” Herczegh (1999), 330.
41. See Antal Czettler’s *A mi kis élet-halál kérdéseink. A magyar külpolitika a hadba lépéstől a német megszállásig* [Our Little Questions of Life and Death. Hungarian Foreign Policy from Entering into the War to the German Occupation] (Budapest, 2000) for the latest material on the question.