

# THE PARIS PEACE TREATY OF 1947

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The Paris Peace Treaty by which hostilities between Hungary and the Allied Powers were officially ended was signed on February 10, 1947. It consisted of eight articles covering territorial, military, economic, political and other terms. The paper focuses on the territorial decisions that restored the 1920 Trianon frontiers with a small rectification in favour of Czechoslovakia. The American, British, Soviet and French peace delegations were in complete accord that the 1920 Trianon boundaries should remain in force along Hungary's frontiers with Austria, Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia. With regard to Transylvania, however, a sharp discussion developed. The Western powers supported a compromise solution while the Soviet Union was opposed to any modification to the Hungarian–Roumanian frontier established at Trianon. Eventually the Soviet position prevailed. The decision was received with bitterness in Hungary but it did not cause hysteria. The majority in Hungarian society understood that neither a restoration of historic Hungary nor even a compromise solution based on ethnic principles was possible.

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The Paris Peace Treaty by which hostilities between Hungary and the Allied Powers were officially ended was signed on February 10, 1947 in the building of the French Foreign Ministry on the Quai d'Orsay. It restored the 1920 Trianon frontiers, with a small rectification in favour of Czechoslovakia. These basic facts are well-known. My goal with this short presentation is to explain how and why this decision was taken. At first the wartime and postwar foreign political perspectives and considerations of the decision-makers – the United States, Great Britain and Soviet Union – will be analyzed. In the second part of my talk I will focus on the Hungarian peace expectations. And finally, I am going to deal, very briefly, with some aspects of the peace treaty itself.

## I

The United States had essentially three long-term objectives concerning Hungary and the region usually called Eastern Europe. Firstly, to knit the states within the region together in viable and stable alliances, through federation or confederation. State Department experts considered this crucial, especially based on the considerations of security and economic viability. The security consideration meant that they wanted the region to be a bulwark against possible German or Russian penetration and even against joint Russian–German aggression, as had happened in 1939. The other main consideration, economic rationality, involved diminishing the social tensions and creating the basis for functioning democracies. Secondly, they also hoped to minimise national friction through a closer alignment of linguistic and political boundaries and such expedients as exchange of populations living near border areas. And thirdly, assisting democratic regimes to power in place of the dictatorships and authoritarian systems of the inter-war years also figured on their agenda.

In order to reduce the potential for national conflicts, the Americans advocated significant alterations to the Trianon frontiers along every segment except the border between Hungary and Austria. As boundary changes and exchanges of populations alone did not seem adequate to address the case of Transylvania, they considered that either the Székely area should additionally be granted wide-ranging autonomies from Romania or else, as an alternative to frontier changes, Transylvania as a whole should be reshaped as an independent state.<sup>1</sup>

The British experts arrived at recommendations for frontier changes that were very similar to the American proposals. They suggested the re-annexation to Hungary of border areas inhabited mainly by ethnic Hungarians, such as the Csallóköz, Partium and the northern section of Bácska. They too believed that reaching a mutually acceptable settlement on Transylvania was “by far the most difficult problem in the whole area”; and “... the most hopeful solution” to them appeared to be one in which Transylvania would become an independent political entity either as part of a confederal arrangement including both Hungary and Romania as members, or else as “a buffer state with complete independence.”<sup>2</sup> The implementation of a federative approach was as much integral to British plans as it was to the Americans. Through negotiations with exiled political representatives, the frameworks for both an East Central (Czecho-Polish) and a South East (Graeco-Yugoslavian) European confederation had already emerged during 1942. During his visit in Washington, D.C. in May 1943 Prime Minister Winston Churchill added a wish to see alongside these alliances “a Danubian Federation based on Vienna and doing something to fill the gap caused by the disappearance of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.”<sup>3</sup>

Whereas American and British ideas for the region can be looked on as the well-intentioned schemes of detached observers with no direct stake in the matter, the Soviet attitude was in line with the expansive strategies that Russia had been nurturing for centuries as a neighbouring Great Power. Consequently, it regarded the formation of any alliance of states on its western borders, especially one that might be under Anglo-Saxon tutelage, as inherently hostile and something to be rejected out of hand. The official Soviet position was set out in a memorandum that Vyacheslav Mikhailovich Molotov, People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs, communicated to the Western Allies in June 1943: "as regards the question of the creation of a federation in Europe of Poland, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia and Greece including Hungary and Austria – the memo emphasized – the Soviet Government are unwilling to pledge themselves as regards the creation of such a federation, and also consider the inclusion of Hungary and Austria within it as unsuitable."<sup>4</sup> During the Three Power talks held in November 1943 at Teheran, Stalin also indicated that, "It would be complete nonsense if, once Germany had been partitioned, one were then to create new combinations, whether Danubian or of any other kind."<sup>5</sup> This dispute was essentially settled by the decision made at the Teheran Conference to proceed with invasion plans for the Normandy beaches, rather than in the Balkans. By the end of 1943, both U.S. and British diplomacy had more or less agreed to let Stalin have his way in Eastern Europe. Consequently, the idea of any kind of regional cooperation between the Baltic and the Adriatic sea was considered with more and more reservation.

On the territorial issues in the west Stalin's minimal aim was to preserve the old Russian imperial frontiers, which were recognised in the 1939 Molotov-Ribbentrop pact. In time he was to add demands for part of East Prussia and "Transcarpathian Ukraine," that is Subcarpathian Ruthenia (Kárpátalja). The Soviet leadership rejected Hungarian revisionist claims in other areas, as well. This approach was usually justified by Hungary's role in the war. In the case of Transylvania, however, even the Soviet attitude was somewhat permissive. In return of Bessarabia, which was considered in Moscow as integral part of the Soviet Union, the majority of Soviet decision makers were ready to compensate Romania with Transylvania. Some experts and foreign political advisers, however, considered the possibility of an independent Transylvanian state, as well. They cynically assumed that such a state "would remain a bone of contention between Hungary and Romania" and thus would not survive "without the constant patronage of one of its neighbours, which in this instance would be the Soviet Union."<sup>6</sup>

The USSR would have preferred to obtain agreement on the issue while the war was still in progress and to incorporate into the Romanian armistice terms an assurance that after the war, in exchange for Bessarabia, the Romanians would

recover "Transylvania or the greater part thereof." However, due to British and American objections, the wording that ended up in the actual agreement included a proviso that this was "subject to confirmation at the peace settlement."<sup>7</sup> The British and American governments expressed no comparable reservations about the border issues between Czechoslovakia and Hungary or Yugoslavia and Hungary. After the German occupation of Hungary without any Hungarian resistance in March 1944 and the Arrow-Cross *coup d'état* in October 1944, which was legalized by Admiral Horthy, the Regent, the previous pro-Magyar sympathy among Western Powers diminished further. In fact, by the end of the war they were inclined to accept the *status quo ante bellum* as proposed by the Soviet side.

At the Potsdam Conference of the Big Three in July 1945, the American delegation proposed, and the others accepted, the establishment of a Council of Foreign Ministers of the five principal victors: the Soviet Union, the United Kingdom, the United States, China and France. Its task was to produce draft treaties for ex-enemy states including Hungary. The first session of the Council of Foreign Ministers met in London in September 1945. The Hungarian border issue was discussed on September 20. The American, British, Soviet and French delegations were in complete accord, without any discussion, that the 1920 Trianon boundaries should remain in force along Hungary's frontiers with Austria, Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia. With regard to Transylvania, however a sharp discussion developed.

The British Foreign Secretary, Ernest Bevin and US Secretary of State James Byrnes argued that no decision should be taken until there had been a chance to assess the respective claims of the two states. This recommendation was initially supported by France's foreign minister, Georges Bidault, as well. Molotov, the Soviet delegate, however, was stubbornly opposed to any modification whatever, even symbolic, to the Hungarian-Romanian frontier established at Trianon: "... the bulk of the population of Transylvania, Molotov argued, was Roumanian, though there were many Hungarians and some Germans. These nationalities were closely intermingled, and it was impossible to draw a line which would not leave many Roumanians in Hungary and many Hungarians in Roumania." As the debate was winding up, Bidault accepted Molotov's arguments and switched to supporting the Soviet view. Bevin now stayed silent, leaving Byrnes alone at the end of the session in insisting that a border strip of approximately 3,000 square miles should be returned to Hungary. About one half million Magyars were living in this area.<sup>8</sup>

Since the matter had not been resolved, it was deferred for further consideration by the foreign ministers' deputies. Their meeting took place the following year, in April 1946, again in London. Two months prior to this, the British Foreign Office had made up its mind that it was now in favour of retaining the Trianon borders between Hungary and Romania. Having lost the support of Britain as

well as France and wishing to avoid “unnecessary” confrontations with the Soviet Union, the Americans moderated their own position. They still would have liked to see the Romanian and Hungarian governments “directly negotiate with one another over an adjustment of the border which would significantly reduce the numbers of inhabitants living under foreign rule,” but even that was unacceptable to the Russian delegate. The final decision, taken at the next session of the Council of Foreign Ministers, held in Paris on May 7 1946, was that Hungary must accept the Trianon borders with Romania as well as Austria, Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia. Had they had British and French support it is possible that the Americans would have insisted on at least a token compromise. Alone as they were, however, they judged the matter to be a lost cause, and did not want to further test Soviet-American relations, which were strained enough as it was.<sup>9</sup>

## II

The new, post-war Hungarian government, based on the pre-war left-wing opposition, had not imagined that the Allied powers would decide on the country's borders without any consultation with the involved parties. As in 1919–1920, it was taken for granted in Budapest that thorough preparations for a peace settlement made sense, and most people hoped for some form of border revision, at least along the frontier with Romania, if nowhere else. In order to win over support for this, Prime Minister Ferenc Nagy led a series of delegations to the capital of each the Great Powers between April and June 1946.

The first stop of the Hungarian pilgrimage was Moscow where talks were held between April 9 and 18. Taking into consideration the post-war realities, the Hungarian delegation presented revisionist claims only against Romania. The maximal Hungarian demands included annexation of a territory of 22,000 square kilometers to Hungary. This was not more than one fifth of Transylvania and had a population of 1.5 million. The minimal version envisioned a territory of 12,000 square kilometers with a population of almost one million. In the second case the ethnic Hungarians constituted a slight majority whereas in the larger claim they amounted to about one third of the total. The delegation was received cordially by the Soviet leadership. Stalin did not even raise any objections to Hungary raising the issue of adjustments to its border with Romania, and Molotov went so far as to urge the opening of bilateral negotiations on the matter directly with the Romanians. Neither Stalin nor Molotov gave the slightest hint about what had been going on at the Council of Foreign Ministers, or what the Soviet position was in reality. So that the members of the Hungarian mission were left with the false impression that the Soviet Union not only had no objection but even backed the country's territorial claims against Romania. Thus, the resolution of the May 7 Conference

of Foreign Ministers, which was not kept secret, came as a complete shock to politicians and the general public alike in Hungary. Foreign Minister Gyöngyösi even wanted to fly back to Moscow in order to have some explanation. Finally, his more experienced colleagues persuaded him that it would be pointless.<sup>10</sup>

The next station of the Hungarian delegation was Washington, where they arrived on June 8. Here too the reception was warm and much more honest. The exchanges with the Americans left Prime Minister Nagy in no doubt that the Soviet leaders had played a double game and deliberately misled the Hungarians. Secretary of State Byrnes explained “how the question of Transylvania had slipped entirely into Soviet hands, and that the decision of May 7 was entirely at their insistence.” He added, “If the Soviet government would undertake to introduce the Transylvanian question again, the United States was ready and willing to support Hungary’s position.” Knowing the Soviet position, this meant that Washington regarded the issue closed: the Trianon borders between Hungary and Romania would stay in place.<sup>11</sup>

The Hungarian delegation was received in London on June 21–22. British Prime Minister Clement Attlee and the leaders of Foreign Office also made it clear that there was nothing to be gained by pursuing the issue of Transylvania any further in view of the “Russian attitude.” They only promised that “if the two governments could reach agreement, they would have the support of His Majesty’s Government.” In addition to that they emphasized the importance of seeking peaceful accommodation and economic cooperation with their neighbours.<sup>12</sup>

On the return journey from London, the Hungarian delegation stopped off in Paris on June 25. This, however, proved even less productive than the talks in Washington and London. Georges Bidault made it clear that France was in no position to assert its will on any of the big issues of the day. During their stay in Paris, the Hungarian politicians also had the opportunity to meet with Molotov again. Interestingly enough, he acted as if he had forgotten about the Soviet attitude adopted two months earlier in Moscow. He simply tried to shift all the blame for the May 7 decision onto the Americans. Thus, the Hungarian mission arrived home at the end of June 1946 empty-handed.<sup>13</sup>

### III

In spite of the lack of foreign support the Hungarian delegation to the peace conference, which opened in Paris on July 29, submitted territorial claims against Romania. Foreign Minister Gyöngyösi demanded the annexation of a territory of 22.000 square kilometers to Hungary that is the maximal proposal presented in Moscow a few months earlier. In addition, he also proposed territorial autonomy for the Székely lands. On American advice, this territorial claim was scaled back



within a few days to a demand for 4,000 square kilometers but even this failed to gain the backing of any of the Great Powers. The Hungarian-Roumanian border dispute was closed by the Peace Conference on September 5, 1946.<sup>14</sup>

Transylvania, however, was only one of the territorial issues related to the Hungarian borders that was considered in Paris. The possibility of a slight modification of the Czechoslovak-Hungarian border was also discussed. However, this question was raised not by the Hungarian, but the Czechoslovak delegation. The Czech and Slovak politicians renewed a 1919–1920 demand for five villages that stood on the Hungarian side of the Danube opposite Pozsony/Bratislava. This claim was based on strategic considerations. Largely on American insistence, the conference accepted the territorial claim only in part, awarding just three villages to Czechoslovakia – a total of 43 square kilometers of land.<sup>15</sup>

The settlement of the territorial issues was covered by Article 1 of the treaty text, with seven further articles covering military, economic, political and other terms. The military provisions enjoined Hungary to limit the strength of its military capabilities. The financial terms obliged Hungary to pay war reparations to a total value of 300 million American dollars, two thirds of which were to go to the Soviet Union and one third to Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia. The only provision that could be seen as favorable to Hungary was Article 4, which stated that “Following the ratification of the present Treaty, all Allied armed forces are to be withdrawn from Hungary within 90 days” except those “need[ed] for the Soviet army to maintain its lines of communication with the Soviet zone of occupation in Austria.” This stipulation, however, was implemented with some delay: as we all know, the last of the Soviet troops left Hungary in 1991.<sup>16</sup>

The Paris Peace Treaty, as I have already mentioned at the outset, was signed on February 10, 1947. Although it naturally provided no cause for rejoicing on anybody’s part in Hungary, it also provoked none of the bitterness and hysteria that had accompanied the signing of the Trianon Treaty in 1920. The segments of the Hungarian society sensitive to the nationalities question realized and had begun to accustom themselves to the fact that not only integral revision was unimaginable, but even a fair compromise solution, a revision based on ethnic principles was out of question. For Hungary, as István Bibó, a leading figure of the peace preparations suggested, only two courses of action were left: to avoid “mutual hatred” by setting an example of “staunchness and moderation between small nations” and at the same time to show and adopt a sense of responsibility “for the fate of Hungarians living outside the frontiers.”<sup>17</sup> Others came to similar conclusions. The most significant among them was Gyula Szekfű, leading historian of the interwar period. In the future, he would write in his famous, or perhaps infamous, 1947 book, “we must give up the struggle and propaganda for revisionism once and for all”; and “the sole wish” that Hungary might address to the neighbouring states, he emphasized, was “honorable observance of the civic rights of

Hungarians living in their midst and their humane treatment.”<sup>18</sup> The way out of the quandry that was advocated by these two outstanding representatives of Hungarian intellectual life – one of conservative interwar Hungary and the other of the democratic postwar Hungary – more than half a century ago is still valid to this day.

### Notes

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8. FRUS, *Diplomatic Papers 1945*. Vol. II. *Council of Foreign Ministers* (Washington, D.C.: USGPO, 1967), 275–280. Cf. Mihály Fülöp, *La paix inachevée* (Budapest: MTT, 1998), 68–69.
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11. Ferenc Nagy, *The Struggle Behind the Iron Curtain* (New York: Macmillan, 1948), 227–228.
12. Public Record Office, London. Foreign Office, 371/59025.
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18. Gyula Szekfű, *Forradalom után* (Budapest: Gondolat, 1983), 69 and 203.