

Peaceful Revision: The Diplomatic Road to War

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Anyone dealing with Hungarian foreign policy between the wars must dwell, however tedious it may be for his audience, on an old topic Hungarian revisionism and its relation to Hungary's eventual fate during and after the Second World War. Whether one accepts or rejects the view that the revision of the Treaty of Trianon was the *sine qua non* of the nation's "survival and independent existence,"¹ the fact remains that revisionism was the cornerstone of Hungarian interwar foreign policy. The government made no secret of its ultimate goal on the contrary, it preached the gospel of revisionism to anyone who would listen, repeating its message so often and with such fervor that many Westerners soon became convinced that "the Hungarian people were not quite sane on that subject."²

The zeal with which Hungary promoted the cause of revisionism was commensurate with the difficulty of the undertaking. István Bethlen, the man who laid the foundation of Hungarian interwar foreign policy, did not exaggerate when he claimed that although "this nation had gone through many catastrophes, never in her history did she face such a formidable task as the question of revision."³ The obstacles in the way of revising the Treaty of Trianon were enormous: the opposition of those who had benefited from the reorganization of East-Central Europe in 1919, the Great Powers' antagonism towards or lack of sympathy for the Hungarian demands, and Hungary's relative insignificance in economic, military and diplomatic terms. Without a general territorial reshuffle of the whole region between the borders of Germany and Russia, Hungarian revisionism did not have the slightest chance of success.

As peace began to give way to war, however, revision became a more realistic goal. The obstacles which had formerly blocked Hungary's revisionist path were no longer insurmountable, and the futile rhetoric of the past could now be replaced by

diplomatic maneuvering. Hungarian policy-makers took full advantage of the new situation. Spurred on by early diplomatic triumphs, they relentlessly pursued their revisionist aims. The result was total failure after the war the victorious Allies reimposed the same borders (with one minor change, and that to Hungary's detriment) which had been so odious to her in 1918 and which she had tried to change for more than two decades. The reason for this failure, it will be argued, was not that revisionism was an intrinsically mistaken notion necessarily leading to disaster. The problem was rather that Hungarian policy makers, obsessed with the desire to recover Transylvania, went beyond the limits of prudence and common sense.

When Bethlen began his active foreign policy in 1927 by signing the Italian-Hungarian treaty of friendship, he already believed that any reorganization of East Central Europe would most likely be affected by Germany and Italy.⁴ He did not, however, foresee that Italy's foreign policy would become increasingly adjusted to that of Germany and that Hungarian politicians would be confronted with a Germany which could—virtually single-handedly—redraw the map of Eastern Europe. The long-awaited opportunity for a major reorganization of the area seemed to be on hand, but, at the same time, the danger of German penetration into Eastern Europe was very real. The revision of the Trianon Treaty, always a complex problem, now seemed to be even more intricate given the nature of Germany's new regime and Hitler's ambitions for the *Lebensraum*. The question was how long Hungary could, as C.A. Macartney stated it, “pluck for herself the fruits which Germany's growing power brought within her reach, while escaping the dangers.”⁵

Between November 1938 and April 1941, Hungary took full advantage of German patronage and, in four different stages, doubled her size. Ethnically, these acquisitions were a mixed bag. Some were populated mostly by Hungarians. Others, such as Ruthenia, were almost wholly non-Hungarian in composition, while still others (for instance, partitioned Transylvania) had such a mixed population that any ethnic claim was dubious at best. Although important as far as world opinion at that time was concerned, the ethnic composition of these territories was not the determining factor in their final fate. As the second Paris Peace Conference proved, national self-determination could be

ignored as easily in 1946 as it had been in 1919. A favorable revision of Hungary's borders hinged, first, on the success of her foreign policy and, second, on the power relations affecting the small nations of East Central Europe.

Hungary's revisionist drive began auspiciously enough. Although the First Viennese Award was the result of Italian-German arbitration and not of the four-power guarantee which had originally been envisaged, the British government tacitly recognized the award as binding. In fact, the Foreign Office "received the news of it with satisfaction and even relief."⁶ The new Hungarian-Czechoslovak border devised by Germany and Italy was a bit more generous to Hungary than it should have been on the basis of strict observance of nationality, yet the ceded areas had an overwhelming Hungarian majority. Moreover, the British had already opposed the acquisition of the Csallóköz by Czechoslovakia in 1919, and the outdated strategic considerations invoked at that time to justify the border change were quite absurd by the late 1930s.

With the outbreak of the war, Hungary's prospects for retaining the ceded Slovak territories looked even brighter. While the newly-created Slovakia became a vassal state of Germany and eagerly took part in the Polish campaign, Hungary, to the great satisfaction of the West, remained neutral. As a result, sympathy towards Budapest, conspicuously absent earlier, began to grow both in Great Britain and in France. British diplomats, for example, repeatedly announced that "the British government did not tie herself to Mr. Benes' plans (concerning the restoration of Czechoslovakia) and (that) the main goal of the war...(was) to achieve a lasting peace based on solid foundations," thereby indicating that a Czechoslovakia reestablished within its former borders was not considered to be conducive to peaceful conditions in the area. The French attitude, although on the surface warmer to Benes, was essentially similar to that of Britain.⁷

Hungary's second territorial adjustment, the annexation of Ruthenia by independent military action, was a different situation altogether. On the basis of self-determination of nations, Hungary had no valid claim to the area since the majority of the population in Ruthenia was of Ukrainian stock and spoke dialects of Ukrainian. The lasting nature of this particular acquisition therefore depended entirely on the future

military and diplomatic status of the Soviet Union. At the time, however, the annexation was greeted with a certain amount of sympathy in the West.⁸ After the German occupation of Prague, both Slovakia and Ruthenia had declared their independence, and it was expected that both countries would soon become obedient servants of the German Reich. Slovakia fulfilled the expectations of the West, and Ruthenia, economically dominated by Germany, seemed headed in the same direction. The Hungarian action, which Germany had earlier opposed and which she now endorsed only grudgingly, advanced Allied interests. It prevented the creation of another German satellite and, by the same stroke, brought about a common border between Poland and Hungary.

While the first two territorial acquisitions were defensible at the time and likely to be accepted by Western public opinion later, the third border revision between Rumania and Hungary, sanctioned by German-Italian arbitration, marked the beginning of "an impossible situation," as Prime Minister Pál Teleki later realized.⁹ In spite of warnings from London, Paris, Rome, and Berlin, Budapest diplomats spent most of their energies on the Transylvanian question. Official statements to the effect that the question of Transylvania had to be settled "under any circumstances and at any price," indicated that, in spite of a very volatile international situation, the Hungarian foreign ministry was bent on an early diplomatic solution to an insoluble problem.¹⁰ Critics of this policy within Hungary—most notably, former Prime Minister István Bethlen, the chief architect of the doctrine of peaceful revision and himself a Transylvanian, and Kálmán Kánya, former foreign minister and the man responsible for Hungary's first successful revision—warned the government that the course it was pursuing was not only dangerous but also counter-productive. For the sake of a permanent and satisfactory arrangement, they argued, the Transylvanian question had to be shelved. Instead of a belligerent and antagonistic policy towards Rumania, Bethlen and Kánya suggested a *rapprochement* between the two countries.¹¹ But the government persisted with its plans to regain Transylvania.

In the wake of the German-Soviet non-aggression pact, the Hungarian government feared a Russian move against Rumania, either in conjunction with a similar move by Germany or in

defiance of Germany's interests. The details of the German-Soviet secret protocol were, of course, not known at the time, but both the Rumanians and Hungarians had a fair idea of its sinister bearings on the fate of Bessarabia. There was, for instance, the chance that a deal existed between Russia and Germany with a view to partitioning Rumania on the Polish model. In that case, Hungary would have found herself in the centre of the German orbit. A contrary possibility—i.e., a Russian-German falling out over Russia's future role in the Balkans, was no better: this would have resulted in war and, consequently, in the German occupation of Hungary. And if Russia attacked Rumania and Rumania resisted, Germany again would have marched through Hungary in order to defend the oil wells which the Rumanians had threatened to destroy. The only promising solution, to which the Russians often alluded, was an Italian-German-Russian settlement of the whole Rumanian question. Since the Russians were sympathetic if not encouraging towards the Bulgarian and Hungarian claims, an arbitration by the three powers, given later developments, might have saved some of Hungary's new acquisitions after the war. But the Germans ignored the Russian scheme.

In the meantime, the Hungarians were growing increasingly impatient to press their territorial claims against Rumania. But they met only resistance. The Western Allies, as during earlier diplomatic crises, argued that Hungary should do nothing. Neither France nor Great Britain wanted the extension of the war into the Balkans, and therefore they tried to persuade Hungary to postpone territorial revisions in the East until the end of the hostilities.¹² This time the Germans and the Italians also warned Hungary against reckless adventures in Southeastern Europe. The Italians gave friendly advice and tried to calm both Budapest and Bucharest. Ciano simply could not understand that "a country like Hungary, preoccupied with the German danger, (did) not seem to be able to see the danger of aggravating the crisis with Rumania, toward which the most dangerous ambitions of Berlin seem(ed) to point."¹³ For the time being, however, German ambitions in Rumania remained dormant. As long as the generous supply of Rumanian oil flowed freely to the German Reich, Hitler had no intention of upsetting the *status quo* in this area. The Germans therefore told Foreign Minister Csáky to do absolutely nothing to disturb the tranquility of Southeastern Europe.¹⁴

Under these conditions, Hungary decided not to move against Rumania. Yet Rumania was not convinced of Hungarian sincerity. During the winter of 1939-1940, Rumanian conscript workers died by the hundreds in a frantic effort to build a line of fortification against Hungary which Bucharest wits rightly or wrongly called the "Imaginescu" line.¹⁵ In return, the Hungarians mobilized two divisions and stationed them near the Rumanian-Hungarian border. It was a period of watchful waiting.

The uneasy calm was disturbed in April 1940 when the Hungarians heard from a reliable source that Germany planned to occupy the rest of Rumania in the event of a Russian move into Bessarabia.¹⁶ Although the information was incorrect and Hitler sternly told the Hungarians to bide their time,¹⁷ diplomats in Budapest became increasingly fearful of a German occupation of Rumania. They went so far as to ask Rome whether they could count on Italian help in case they put up armed resistance to Germany. The answer, of course, was negative.¹⁸ They also put out feelers in Great Britain, but the initial British reaction was also discouraging. London told Budapest in no uncertain terms that the British government believed neither in Hungary's military potential nor in her willingness to stand against the German flood.¹⁹ By May, however, the British Foreign Office became more cordial. While British diplomats made it clear that Hungarian cooperation with Germany would have very serious repercussions, they promised that if Hungary protested the German move across her territory, even if this action were followed by the establishment of a Hungarian Quisling government, Hungary would be placed in the same position which Denmark occupied *vis a vis* the Allies. If the Regent and the government went into exile, Hungary's chances of receiving favorable treatment after the war would be good.²⁰

At the end of May, impressed with the rapid German advances westward and fearing an early end to the hostilities, Stalin and Molotov decided to cash in their promissory note from Germany. On June 26 the Soviet government handed an ultimatum to the Rumanian minister in Moscow and demanded the cession of Bessarabia and northern Bukovina. Rumania, after ascertaining that no assistance was forthcoming from any other powers, had no choice but to submit.

At this point, Hungary made her first diplomatic mistake. She pressed Germany for the “fulfillment of her justified demands on Rumania.”²¹ In return for such a favor, Foreign Minister Csáky was “ready to grant Germany free traffic through Hungary.”²² The Hungarian territorial claims and her threatening talks of military action against Rumania met with extreme German displeasure. If Hungary moved militarily, Germany once again repeated, she would not only be abandoned, she would be severely punished.²³ After the German rebuff, the Hungarians gave up the idea of war, but they still pressed for a diplomatic solution.

Both Great Britain and the Soviet Union responded generously to Hungary’s diplomatic efforts. After July 2, when Rumania repudiated the British guarantee and moved over to the Axis camp, Great Britain no longer minded a “peaceful solution of territorial questions between Rumania and Hungary.”²⁴ The Soviet Union, being eager to have a hand in the future reorganization of the Balkans, also declared to the Hungarians that their territorial demands were justified and that the Soviet government was ready “to support these claims at a possible future peace conference.”²⁵ Hungary needed little encouragement, and soon direct Rumanian-Hungarian negotiations began. In view of the extravagant Hungarian demands and the Rumanian unwillingness to satisfy them these negotiations were bound to fail. With the breakdown of the negotiations, Germany, determined to preserve peace for the time being in Southeastern Europe, stepped in to arbitrate.

The Transylvanian case was radically different from that of Slovakia: there could be no diplomatic solution to the territorial differences between Hungary and Rumania. As István Bethlen noted in March 1940, “a final compromise with Rumania (could) occur only after a victorious war,” and even then only within the framework of a federal solution.²⁶ The Second Viennese Award was unsatisfactory both from the Rumanian and from the Hungarian point of view. The crux of the matter was that there was no such thing as a fair division of the disputed territories. More important, the Second Viennese Award alienated both the British and the Soviet governments. Although the British did not mind a peaceful solution to the Rumanian-Hungarian dispute, they very much minded the German-Italian arbitration. Although the Soviets considered some of the Hungarian demands

just, they were greatly annoyed by the obvious German determination to exclude the Soviet Union from the affairs of the Balkans. Hungary's short-term victory in Vienna did not bode well for the future.

As C.A. Macartney noted, Prime Minister Teleki did not "always possess an entirely sure political instinct...His Transylvanian ancestry and his studies had imbued him with a fixed belief that the only possible policy for Hungary was one of "balance"."²⁷ During the Rumanian-Hungarian crisis either he did not realize that this policy was no longer viable, or more likely, he came to the conclusion that after the great victory of the German armies in the West there would be nothing to balance. While in March 1940 he had made preparations for the establishment of an émigré government in case of need, in May he changed his mind and instructed the Hungarian minister in Washington to return the five million dollars deposited in New York for this purpose.²⁸ Perhaps along with many others, he underestimated the Allied determination to fight Germany. In any case, his decision to press for territorial adjustments at the expense of Rumania deeply indebted Hungary to Germany. Shortly after the territorial settlement in Vienna, Berlin launched its request for the transportation of German troops through Hungary on their way to Rumania, and naturally the request had to be granted. A few months later Hungary rushed to adhere to the Tripartite Agreement which eventually committed Hungary to war with the United States. Hungary was rapidly drifting into the German camp. The Yugoslav events of the following spring, gaining Hungary her fourth border revision and usually interpreted as the watershed in Allied-Hungarian relations, were only the logical extension of erroneous diplomatic decisions made during the previous summer.

NOTES

1. István Bethlen, "Előszó" (Foreword), *Bethlen István gróf beszédei és írásai* (The writings and speeches of Count István Bethlen) 2 vols. (Budapest: Genius, 1933) 1: 12.

2. John F. Montgomery, *Hungary; the Unwilling Satellite* (New York: Devin-Adair, 1947): 54.

3. Bethlen, "A békerevizió gyakorlati politikája. A Revíziós Liga Nagygyűlése, 1932. május 22." (Practical politics of peace treaty revision. The conference of the Revisionist League, May 22, 1932) *Bethlen István gróf beszédei*, 2: 375.

4. Bethlen was also certain that sooner or later Austria would join Germany. During his trip to Rome in April 1927, he learned that Mussolini shared his views concerning an *Anschluss* and, what is more important, saw "no instrument which could prevent such an outcome." Bethlen's notes on his conversation with Mussolini, April 4, 1927, Hungary

Országos Levéltár, *Iratok az ellenforradalom történetéhez*, 1919-1945, (Documents to the history of the counter-revolution) ed. Dezső Nemes and Elek Karsai, 4 vols. (Budapest: Szikra, Kossuth, 1953-1967) 4: 51.

5. C.A. Macartney, *Hungary; A Short History* (Edinburgh: The University Press, 1962): 226-7.

6. Barcza MS quoted in Macartney, *October Fifteenth; A History of Modern Hungary, 1929-1945*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: The University Press, 1957) 1: 303.

7. For the British attitude see Barcza to Csáky, September 5, 1939; Barcza to Csáky, November 23, 1939; for the French reaction see Khuen-Héderváry to Csáky, September 25, 1939, Hungary, Magyar Tudományos Akadémia, Történettudományi Intézet, *Diplomáciai iratok Magyarország külpolitikájához, 1936-1945*, (Diplomatic documents to Hungary's external affairs, 1936-1945) ed. László Zsigmond, ed. (Budapest: Akadémia, 1962-) 4: 491-2, 628, and 541. Henceforth cited as *DIMK*.

8. Barcza to Csáky, March 18, 1939; Barcza to Csáky, March 19, 1939; Pelényi to Csáky, March 31, 1939, *DIMK* 3: 614-6, 619, 684-6.

9. Richard V. Burks, "Two Teleki Letters," *Journal of Central European Affairs* 7 (1947): 69.

10. Béla Vágó, "Le second dicte de Vienne: Les preliminaires," *East European Quarterly* 2 (1969): 426.

11. Memorandum by István Bethlen on the probable peace conditions, no date but received in the Foreign Ministry on March 23, 1940, *DIMK* 4: 743-61.

12. See Barcza to Csáky, February 9, 1940, *DIMK* 4: 693-7, and Andorka to Csáky, March 6, 1940, *ibid.*, p. 272.

13. September 26, 1939, Galeazzo Ciano, *The Ciano Diaries, 1939-1943* (New York: Doubleday, 1946): 151.

14. Ribbentrop to Erdmannsdorff, September 8, 1939, Germany, Auswärtiges Amt, *Documents on German Foreign Policy, 1918-1945*, Series C and D, 18 vols. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1949-1966) D: 8: 29-30. Henceforth cited as *DGFP D*.

15. Robert L. Wolff, *The Balkans in Our Time* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1967): 192.

16. Draft of a memorandum to the British government, no date (most likely early April 1940), *DIMK* 4: 769-70. See also April 8, 1940, *Ciano Diaries, 1939-1943*, p. 223.

17. Hitler to Teleki, May 14, 1940, *DGFP D*: 9: 372-4.

18. April 9, 1940, Ciano, *Diaries, 1939-1943*, p. 234.

19. Barcza to Csáky, April 20 and April 22, 1940, Országos Levéltár, Szentiványi kézirat, pp. 73-4 and 450, quoted in Gyula Juhász, *A Teleki-kormány külpolitikája 1939-1941* (The external relations of the Teleki government), (Budapest: Akademia, 1964): 109.

20. Barcza MS quoted in Macartney, *October Fifteenth* 1: 400; see also Juhász, *A Teleki-kormány*, pp. 108-10.

21. Memorandum by Ernst Woermann, Director of the Political Department, June 27, 1940, *DGFP D*: 10: 38-9.

22. Carl Clodius and Otto van Erdmannsdorff to Foreign Ministry, June 28, 1940, *ibid.*, pp. 56-7.

23. Ribbentrop to Foreign Ministry, July 1, 1940, *ibid.*, pp. 85-6.

24. Barcza to Csáky, July 2, 1940 quoted in Juhász, *A Teleki-kormány*, p. 139.

25. Kristóffy to Csáky, July 4, 1940, quoted in *ibid.*, p. 128.

26. Memorandum by István Bethlen on the probable peace conditions, no date but received in the Foreign Ministry on March 23, 1940, *DIMK* 4: 754.

27. Macartney, *October Fifteenth* 1: 225.

28. For the details of this episode see John Pelényi, "The Secret Plan for a Hungarian Government in the West at the Outbreak of World War II," *The Journal of Modern History* 36 (1964): 170-7.