

Hungary's dilemmas in the Second World War

Dylematy Węgier podczas II wojny światowej

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EUROPA ŚRODKOWO-WSCHODNIA 1944: KONIEC ZŁUDZEŃ?

TRAKTAT W TRIANON
ZBROJNA NEUTRALNOŚĆ
TAJNE NEGOCJACJE POKOJOWE
OKUPACJA NIEMIECKA
OKUPACJA SOWIECKA

TREATY OF TRIANON
ARMED NEUTRALITY
SECRET PEACE NEGOTIATIONS
GERMAN OCCUPATION
SOVIET OCCUPATION

Abstrakt

W opracowaniu zarysowano sytuację polityczną i politykę zagraniczną na Węgrzech podczas II wojny światowej oraz przedstawiono czynniki, które najpierw ukształtowały strategię tzw. zbrojnej neutralności Węgier, a następnie ich zaangażowanie w II wojnę światową. W jaki sposób traktat z Trianon zdeterminował program polityczny i politykę zagraniczną Węgier? Jakie były cele strategii zbrojnej neutralności premiera Telekiego Pála w momencie wybuchu wojny? Dlaczego i w jaki sposób Węgry ostatecznie przystąpiły do wojny przeciwko Związkowi Sowieckiemu po stronie Niemiec? Jak rząd Miklósa Kállaya rozpoczął tajne negocjacje pokojowe z mocarstwami anglosaskimi w ramach przygotowań do wycofania się z wojny? Dlaczego strategia Budapesztu stała się iluzoryczna po konferencjach w Casablance i Teheranie? I wreszcie, czy interesy zachodnich mocarstw mogły odegrać rolę w niemieckiej okupacji Węgier? Niemiecka inwazja na Węgry 19 marca 1944 r. zniszczyła niezależną węgierską państwość, zamieniła kraj w teatr wojny i przypieczętowała tragiczny los węgierskich Żydów, torując drogę do Holokaustu na Węgrzech. Jak zareagowały siły antynazistowskie na Węgrzech? Dlaczego próba zakończenia II wojny światowej przez gubernatora Horthy'ego zakończyła się niepowodzeniem? Jaki był stan Węgier i społeczeństwa pod koniec wojny? I wreszcie, w jaki sposób sowiecka okupacja wojskowa zdeterminowała przyszłość kraju, który znalazł się w sowieckiej sferze wpływów?

Abstract

The aim of the study is to give an overview of the political and foreign policy situation in Hungary during the Second World War and to present the factors that firstly shaped Hungary's strategy of so-called "armed neutrality" and later its involvement in the war. I will address questions such as how did the Treaty of Trianon determine Hungary's political agenda and foreign policy manoeuvres? What were the objectives of Prime Minister Teleki Pál's strategy of armed neutrality at the outbreak of the war? Why and how did Hungary finally enter the war against the Soviet Union on the side of Germany? And soon afterwards, how did the government of Miklós Kállay initiate secret peace negotiations with the Anglo-Saxon powers in preparation for the withdrawal? Why did Budapest's strategy become illusory after the Casablanca and Tehran conferences? And finally, could Western power interests have played a role in the German occupation of Hungary? The German invasion of Hungary on 19 March 1944 destroyed the independent Hungarian statehood, turned the country into a theatre of war and tragically sealed the fate of Hungarian Jewry, paving the way for the Holocaust in Hungary. How did the anti-Nazi forces in Hungary react? Why did Governor Horthy's attempt to exit the Second World War fail? What condition was the Hungarian state and society in by the end of the war? And finally, how did the Soviet military occupation determine the future of the country, which had fallen into the Soviet sphere of interest?

FROM "ARMED NEUTRALITY" TO DECLARING WAR

When studying Hungary's involvement in the Second World War, one must inevitably examine the termination of the First World War and the events that followed¹. As a result of the defeat and collapse of the multi-ethnic Austro-Hungarian Empire in the Great War, Hungary was transformed from a constituent of a Central European power into a "small state". The Treaty of Trianon, signed in 1920 after the Paris Peace Conference, declared the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, and as a result, the "historic Kingdom of Hungary" lost more than two thirds of its territory and almost two thirds of its population. In addition to the ethnic minorities, 3.3 million Hungarians found themselves outside the new borders too. It followed from the territorial changes that the economic consequences of the peace were similarly drastic for Hungary. The severity of the peace

¹ Among the vast literature on the subject in English, see M.D. Fenyo, *Hitler, Horthy and Hungary. German-Hungarian Relations, 1941-1944*, New Haven and London 1972; C.A. Macartney, *October Fifteenth: a History of Modern Hungary, 1929-1945*, Edinburgh 1956-1957; D.S. Cornelius, *Hungary in World War II. Caught in the Cauldron*, New York 2011. For recent summaries with a different approach in Hungarian, see S. Szakály, *Volt-e alternatíva? Magyarország a második világháborúban (Magyarország története 19)*, Budapest 2010.

settlement was unprecedented in modern European history. Not surprisingly, contemporary Hungarian elites agreed that Hungary has not suffered such a catastrophic loss since the Ottoman conquest in the 16th century, and almost the entire Hungarian society, including its most diverse political forces, considered the partition of historic Hungary as a humiliating and unjust decision. The Treaty of Trianon entered the realm of collective memory as a national tragedy.

The goals of revising the terms of the Peace Treaty of Trianon were thus almost unanimously supported by the Hungarian society as a whole. The creation of international conditions under which the revision of Trianon could become possible became the primary of Hungarian politics². While Hungary sought to regain its territorial integrity, in the successor states, which were growing at the expense of Hungary, the maintenance of the new status quo and the denial of revision dominated the political objectives. These conflicting objectives were in themselves an obstacle to a compromise, and Hungary's relations with its neighbours were dominated by this conflict throughout the period.

The sovereignty and room for manoeuvre of the new Hungarian state was limited by the military and economic aspects of the peace treaty, the tense relations with the successor states, as well as the limited interest of the Entente powers in the region. By the mid-1930s, it had become clear that Hungary, in order to achieve its revisionist goals, could hope for support from the powers that were also dissatisfied with the Versailles solution³. The realignment of the great powers in Europe, which brought about an extraordinary strengthening of the positions of Germany and Italy, soon led to significant changes in the balance of power in Central Europe. This was clearly demonstrated by the foreign policy crises of 1938 – the annexation of Austria, followed by the Sudeten Crisis, the Munich Agreement, and the gradual disintegration of the Czechoslovak state. For the time being, the Western powers guarding the Treaty of Versailles did not try to stand in the way of German territorial ambitions. Nevertheless, the Anschluss was also a milestone for Hungarian foreign policy. For two decades, Budapest had been trying to win the support of the powers seeking to change the Versailles peace system for its revisionist aspirations, while at the same time striving not to lose the goodwill of Western democracies, especially Great Britain, which were guarding the status quo. The deeper the divisions between the opposing sides, the more difficult it was to achieve this objective, and therefore any event that could have deepened

² For more details, see I. Romsics, *The Dismantling of Historic Hungary: the Peace Treaty of Trianon, 1920*, trans. M.D. Fenyo, New York 2002; M. Zeidler, *Ideas on Territorial Revision in Hungary 1920–1945*, Boulder, 2007; S. Szakály, *Volt-e alternatíva?*...

³ For more details, see P. Pritz, *Hungarian Foreign Policy Between Revisionism and Vassalage*, "Foreign Policy Review" 2011, Vol. 8, pp. 98–105; M. Zeidler, *Ideas on Territorial Revision...*



the conflict between the rivals also placed Hungarian foreign policy in an increasingly difficult position. Moreover, the Anschluss posed a certain threat from quasi-allied Germany itself, since the German minority in Hungary could now have been a target for further Nazi expansion. In the view of the Hungarian government, territorial revision was by then not only a tangible possibility but also an increasingly urgent task, since in the new European order that was taking shape – especially in the event of war, which was becoming increasingly inevitable – Hungary had to increase its weight and influence in the Danube basin, even vis-à-vis Germany⁴.

The series of peaceful revisionist successes, which were mainly achieved by international arbitration courts, opened for Hungary in the autumn of 1938 by the First Vienna Award. It was a direct consequence of the previous month's Munich Agreement, which resulted in the partitioning of Czechoslovakia. Germany, as well as Italy (with the tacit consent of Great Britain and France), enacted an ethnic revision and returned to Hungary some 12,000 km² of territory in southern Slovakia which was mostly Hungarian-populated. In March of 1939, after the disintegration of Czechoslovakia with Hitler's secret approval, Hungary occupied the area of historical Transcarpathia/Carpathian Ruthenia (officially known as Carpatho-Ukraine since December 1938), thus advancing Hungary's territory northward, up to the Polish border. Six months later in September 1939, after the German invasion of Poland, the government of Pál Teleki opened this border, through which tens of thousands of Polish civilian and military refugees entered Hungary. The Teleki government provided aid for the escape, and re-deployment, of virtually entire military units. When the Second World War broke out, Prime Minister Teleki sought to establish the government's foreign policy by declaring "armed neutrality", and initially he succeeded in keeping the country out of the war⁵. Moreover, the Teleki government denied the Germans' request for the use of northern Hungary's railways for operations against Poland. Furthermore, within the Ministry of the Interior, under the direction of József Antall Sr., a special office was opened for Polish refugees.

The spring of 1940 was marked by the German victories in the Blitzkrieg, and Hungary's room for manoeuvre became even more limited with regard to foreign policy. The successes of the revision further convinced the Hungarian political and military leadership that the way forward was to continue to support the German-Italian alliance. However, despite the overwhelming German military force, the country managed to keep itself

⁴ S. Szakály, *Volt-e alternatíva?*...

⁵ For Pál Teleki's political career and foreign policy, see B. Ablonczy, *Pál Teleki (1879–1941). The Life of a Controversial Hungarian Politician*, New Jersey 2006; G. Jeszenszky, *Hungary in the Second World War: Tragic Blunders or Destiny?*, "Hungarian Review" 2014, Vol. 2; C.A. Macartney, *October Fifteenth...*

out of the European war, although in the summer of 1940 it came close to an armed conflict with neighbouring Romania. When on 28 June 1940 the Soviet Union invaded Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina, which had been incorporated into Romania after the First World War, the Hungarian government, referring to the Soviet precedent, decided to escalate its efforts to resolve “the question of Transylvania”, even by military means. The Axis powers, however, did not support the use of arms to decide disputes between their allies, and the issue was finally submitted to German-Italian arbitration at the request of Romania. The tribunal which sat in Vienna on 30 August 1940 awarded to Hungary an area of 43,104 km² and 2,633,000 inhabitants, 51.4% of which were Hungarian and 42% Romanian. Southern Transylvania with 400,000 ethnic Hungarians remained under Romanian sovereignty. The treatment of minorities subsequently became a source of tension between the two countries.

Hungary became an important player in Central Europe and a strong ally of Hitler’s Germany thanks to the territorial annexations and the significant loss of territorial, political, military and economic power of the neighbouring countries. For this reason, despite his successes in territorial acquisition, Teleki was concerned about the way in which it was implemented and its possible political consequences. The Prime Minister was also wary of any hubris resulting from the successes of the revision, and feared the pressure of public opinion. During the autumn, largely at the behest of Germany, several domestic and foreign policy moves were made that coincided with the demands of the domestic far-right. Thus, among other things, bilateral economic agreements were amended in Berlin’s favour. The Prime Minister began to prepare the third anti-Jewish law and a constitutional reform based on the model of the corporative system. Hungary became the first country in the region to join the three-power German-Italian-Japanese agreement.

Meanwhile, aware of the changes in the relations between the two major powers in the region, the German Empire and the Soviet Union, and the increasing geopolitical pressure, Teleki sought to preserve the country’s relations with the West and maintain the delicate international balance. Above all, he sought to prevent a direct confrontation between Hungary and Britain. Nevertheless, since London had previously indicated that although it was not involved in the Vienna decision, it was not opposed to it, but had made it clear that concrete military cooperation with Germany could not be without consequences. For Hungarian policy-makers, the last option for widening the scope of foreign policy was to veer closer to Yugoslavia. The Axis powers also supported their rapprochement: Budapest could act as a bridge to Belgrade. On 12 December 1940, the two countries signed the Treaty of Perpetual Friendship. Moreover, Germany, which was preparing for war against the Soviet Union, wanted to have a secure



backing, and it tried to lure the remaining “sovereign” states onto its side by way of treaties. This is what occurred on 25 March 1941 with Yugoslavia, which, like Hungary, joined the Tripartite Pact.

On 27 March, however, a military coup in Belgrade overthrew the government that had signed the treaty, placing the German Balkan wing in danger. Hitler ordered an attack on Yugoslavia the same evening, and in a message to Miklós Horthy, the Governor of Hungary, recognised Hungarian territorial demands and requested his consent to the transit of German forces and the involvement of the Hungarian forces in the manoeuvres.

The Hungarian political and military leadership found itself in an impossible situation, having signed the Hungarian-Yugoslav Treaty of Perpetual Friendship only a few months earlier. Prime Minister Teleki was well aware that yielding to German pressure would not only imply an even stronger commitment to the Third Reich but also represent a complete turn against Great Britain, which the conservative Hungarian elite, who favoured the British, wished to avoid. Thus, the greatest weakness of Teleki’s policy of neutrality became apparent: he was trying to maintain the cautious revisionist results, preserve relations with the West, safeguard the country’s independence and stay out of the war, all at the same time. Yet the country’s geopolitical position did not allow it to avoid taking an open position between the two power blocs in Europe. And in each case, the Hungarian government had to pay for the revisionist results by severely limiting its own room for manoeuvre in foreign policy⁶. Hitler’s aim in forcing Hungarian military cooperation was precisely to create a politically unambiguous situation. The Hungarian Prime Minister initially tried to achieve the impossible and reduce the weight of military involvement against Yugoslavia by imposing a number of conditions, but the British declaration of war seemed inevitable. The insoluble dilemma was to be symbolised by the suicide of Prime Minister Pál Teleki on 3 April 1941, which was due as much to the politician’s weakened state of nerves as to his realisation of the hopeless situation.

After the end of the Yugoslav operation, Hungary came close to war again. It became increasingly clear that the outbreak of war between Hitler’s Germany and Stalin’s Soviet Union would only be a matter of time. The German offensive, which began on 22 June 1941, was soon joined by countries in friendly relations with Germany, such as Italy, Romania, Finland, and Slovakia. While the Hungarian political leadership would have preferred to stay out of the war, a significant section of the military leadership, led by General Henrik Werth, the Chief of the Hungarian

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⁶ S. Szakály, *Volt-e alternatíva?...*; see also K. Ungváry, *Kiugrás a történelemből*, Budapest 2022.

Army, was in favour of participating in the invasion. Werth's position was strongly influenced by the assumption that German operations would result in a swift and complete triumph. In his opinion, after the German leadership had repeatedly stated that the territorial questions would be reopened, the Kingdom of Romania and Josef Tiso's Slovakia, which supported the German militarily in the so-called "crusade against Bolshevism", would demand territory from Hungary, which stayed out of the war. For its part, Hungary would probably not have been able to withstand a military attack, especially with German support for Slovakia and Romania.

On 26 June 1941, an unprovoked bombing raid was carried out on the town of Kassa (today Košice, in Slovakia) in north-eastern Hungary, which, according to contemporary accounts, was an operation conducted by the Soviets. The details of the attackers, the type of aircraft, etc., are still unclear. Nevertheless, this attack gave the Hungarian military and political leadership the pretext to place the country on the list of countries already involved in the war against the Soviet Union. Thus, Hungary effectively entered the war at that time⁷.

Although Hungary, because of its geopolitical position, could hardly have avoided becoming involved in the events of the Second World War in the Central European region or being affected by the consequences of the conflict between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, its unilateral entry into the war against the Soviet Union was by no means a necessary step. Hungary became a belligerent party without having any interest in joining the war, and the strategic vision of the Hungarian political leadership did not include participating in it. In addition, in the years before the Second World War, one of the axioms of the Hungarian political leadership was that Hungary had no interest in the dominance of Nazi Germany in Central Europe, the so-called "Pax Germanica"⁸. The political elite with its Anglo-Saxon orientation feared the totalitarian nature of Nazism and sought to preserve both Hungary's room for manoeuvre and Britain's sympathy. At the end of June 1941, the Hungarian Army launched operations with the so-called Carpathian Group of Lieutenant General Ferenc Szombathelyi. While the Hungarian troops were fighting on the territory of the Soviet Union, there was also a struggle occurring in domestic politics. Henrik Werth, who had been increasingly demanding greater participation in the war, was relieved of his duties, and Szombathelyi, who had been campaigning for the preservation of military forces for the post-war period, was appointed to head the General Staff. From then until the end of the war, Hungarian policy was to place as few forces as possible at the disposal of the Third Reich.

⁷ S. Szakály, "...zwischen Ungarn und der Sowjetunion ist der Kriegszustand eingetreten. Ungarns Eintritt in den Krieg gegen die Sowjetunion, "Hungarologische Beiträge" 1996, Vol. 7, pp. 85-100.

⁸ K. Ungváry, *Kiugrás a...*



However, the course of the war, which saw the failure of the Eastern Blitzkrieg plan and the defeat of the German troops near Moscow, led to the Germans insisting on an ever greater proportion of Hungarian participation. In January 1942, the German Foreign Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop, who had arrived in Hungary, demanded the deployment of the entire Hungarian force. Essentially, Hungary had two options: either to resist Germany and become one of their subjugated states, or to comply with the German demands and try to withdraw at the right moment. As a result of fierce debates, the Hungarian government promised to send the 200,000-strong 2nd Army to the front, which Germany had to equip in part. In the meantime, the amount of economic aid to be given to the Third Reich also increased. An increasing share of the country's raw material and food production was being used to support the German war machine, while the level of compensation was decreasing⁹. On the other hand, the Russian-British-American anti-Hitler coalition was also rapidly growing stronger.

In December 1941, the European war became a worldwide war. Britain declared war on Hungary, and Hungary considered itself at war with the United States. The "half-hearted Hungarian declaration of war", however, was not taken seriously by the US government until mid-1942, and it was considered a forced action by a country with limited sovereignty.

SECRET PEACE ATTEMPTS AND DILEMMAS

After the defeat of the Wehrmacht in Moscow, it became increasingly clear to Hitler's allies that the Germans could lose the war. The head of state Miklós Horthy dismissed László Bárdossy from his post and appointed Miklós Kállay as Prime Minister. A follower of István Bethlen, the influential ex-Prime Minister committed to the Anglo-Saxon orientation, Kállay replaced Bárdossy with the task of restoring the country's sovereignty. The new line soon unfolded, and from the summer of 1942 peace efforts were initiated, mainly with the British and the Americans, but later, to a lesser degree, with the Soviet Union as well¹⁰.

The pro-Western Hungarian elite led by Kállay was driven by the hope of a gradual withdrawal from the German alliance, with a concomitant

⁹ S. Szakály, *Volt-e alternatíva?*...

¹⁰ For the foreign policy of the Kállay government, see *Magyar-brit titkos tárgyalások 1943-ban*, ed. G. Juhász, Budapest 1978; A. Joó, *Kállay Miklós külpolitikája. Magyarország és a háborús diplomácia*, Budapest 2008; T. Frank, *The "Anglo-Saxon" Orientation of Wartime Hungarian Foreign Policy: The Case of Antal Ullstein-Reviczky, "Diplomacy and Statecraft"* 2015, Vol. 4, pp. 591-613; L. Borhi, *Secret Peace Overtures, the Holocaust, and Allied Strategy vis-à-vis Germany*, "Journal of Cold War Studies" 2012, Vol. 14, p. 29-67.

reconciliation with the Western allies and the restoration of the country's independence and neutral status, while it could not openly confront Germany without incurring serious consequences. Members of the democratic opposition to the Horthy regime also warned the Prime Minister against provoking the Germans. Kállay's insoluble dilemma was how to resist the German demands while avoiding occupation at all costs. The most sensitive issue was the fate of Europe's largest intact Jewish community, which at that time, despite strict anti-Jewish laws, was living in Hungary under considerably more favourable conditions than in the German-occupied countries of Europe¹¹. Thus, while the government made pro-German gestures to dispel suspicion, the Germans were distrustful of Kállay from the outset and wanted to have an increasing say in Hungary's internal affairs. When Governor Horthy met Hitler at the Austrian palace of Schloss Klessheim in April 1943, the latter demanded greater efforts from the Hungarian side to win the war, besides strongly objecting to the tentative steps taken by Hungary towards the Western Allies and demanding a radical solution to the "Jewish question" from the Hungarian head of state. The Kállay government, while taking several discriminatory measures against the Jews, consistently rejected German demands for the Jews to be herded into ghettos, as well as the yellow star badge and deportations, requested by the Germans regularly since the autumn of 1942.

In the meantime, the Hungarian government led by Kállay tried to establish contacts with the Western Allies through various secret channels and to explore the options of a possible withdrawal from the war. From the summer of 1942, peace negotiations began, mainly with the British and the Americans, and later, with a lesser emphasis, with the Soviet Union, as well. In the complicated history of the peace endeavours launched by Hungary towards the Anglo-Saxon powers, the government's actions were also intertwined with secret service manoeuvres. However, Anglo-American diplomacy and intelligence pursued entirely different objectives from those of the Hungarian government, which was seeking a political way out. Hungarian foreign policy hopes were fuelled by the Allied disembarkation in Africa in November 1942, and their control of the south-western Mediterranean coast increased the probability of an invasion of Italy or the Balkans. From the autumn of 1942, new channels of communication were established with the Western Allies in preparation for armistice negotiations. On Kállay's orders, attempts were made to establish contacts in almost all neutral countries, involving public figures, politicians, and diplomats alike. The best-known mission in public memory was that of the Nobel laureate scientist Albert Szent-Györgyi to Turkey.

¹¹ L. Borhi, *The Allies, Secret Talks and the German Invasion of Hungary, 1943–1944*, "Hungarian Studies Review Volume" 2019–2020, Vol. 46–47, pp. 95–107.



The hopes of Kállay and of Hungarian diplomacy were based on two illusions that proved to be equally false. On the one hand, the Hungarian political elite initially trusted in consensual peace. On the other hand, the country's leaders considered capitulation feasible in the event that the British or American troops reached the border, in order to avoid a German invasion and its tragic consequences. This would have required an Allied disembarkation in the Balkans¹².

However, the Western reception of the Hungarian peace efforts was somewhat ambivalent for a number of reasons. Roosevelt and Churchill had already announced the principle of unconditional surrender at the Casablanca Conference in January 1943, in order to keep the Soviet Union on the Allied side in the war, but they were also aware that this would make it considerably more difficult for Germany's allies to break with Hitler. It also meant that the Western powers made any peace negotiations known to Moscow, and in March 1943 the Soviets expressed their opposition to the Western powers' separate peace negotiations with the satellite states.

A foreign policy based on the assumption of a (Western) Allied invasion of southern Europe and the appearance at the Hungarian border (thus avoiding either a German or a Soviet occupation) had a realistic basis until the summer of 1943. However, at the end of August, Churchill and Roosevelt decided to land in Normandy, France, and the plan for an invasion of the Balkans was dropped from the agenda. At the Allied Powers' conference in Tehran in late November and early December, a political decision was taken to open a second front in Western Europe, which most probably became known in Budapest as well. What certainly vexed Kállay was that the enforcement of Moscow's interests would prevail over the sovereignty of small states.

In the meantime, in September 1943, the Hungarian government's representative in Istanbul secretly accepted the preliminary (but no longer realistic) terms of an armistice with the Western Allies, the publication of which was to be timed with the Western troops reaching Hungary's borders, thus opening the possibility for Hungary to withdraw from the war.

There were several reasons why the negotiations stalled. The Kállay government perceived that, in the given balance of powers, there would be no realistic possibility of confronting the Germans, and that Hitler's army was still strong enough to prevent any such turnaround. The country would become a theatre of war under German occupation, with all the consequences that would entail. However, the Western powers judged Hungary and the government's actions, and considered the Allies' policy towards Hungary solely on the basis of how much closer it would bring them to an ultimate victory over Nazism. Hence the fact that various

¹² A. Joó, *Kállay Miklós külpolitikája...*; see also T. Frank, *The "Anglo-Saxon"...*, pp. 591–613.

peace proposals were made to the Hungarian government through different intelligence channels and in different diplomatic arenas. The period between the autumn of 1943 and the German invasion in March 1944 was a period in which the information war of the secret services had a decisive influence on the fate of Hungary¹³. The latest archival research shows that by December 1943 there was a change in the Allied policy towards Hungary. Paradoxically, Hungarian peace missions began to be taken seriously as the Normandy invasion approached. The aim of the American military leadership was to draw as many German forces as possible into the Balkans, even at the cost of driving Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria to withdraw together, thereby provoking a German invasion of the country. It was considered that this would facilitate the forthcoming Operation Overlord in Normandy¹⁴. In addition, Hungary's position was not helped by the fact that both Moscow and Berlin were aware of the country's secret peace efforts.

In the meantime, in December 1943, German preparations for the invasion of Hungary were already underway, and Soviet forces were also moving closer to Hungary's borders.

1944: THE GERMAN OCCUPATION OF HUNGARY AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

As a result of the German invasion on the night of 18 and 19 March 1944, the Kállay government resigned. Edmund Veesenmayer was appointed as Germany's representative in Hungary. The German secret service arrested the members of the Hungarian democratic opposition, hundreds of anti-German economic and political leaders and officials, who were unwittingly preparing the country's integration into Stalin's Soviet Union. They ousted the clearly anti-German Kállay government. In its place, they brought to power a puppet government under Döme Sztójay as Prime Minister, which unconditionally supported German interests and which ceded the country's sovereignty to the Third Reich. The Sztójay government broke with the policies of its predecessor and delivered the last intact European Jewish population to the Nazis. After the German invasion, the deportation of Hungarian Jews began, with the cooperation of Adolf Eichmann's Sonderkommando and the Hungarian administration that was led by the

¹³ E. Barker, *British Policy in South-East Europe in World War II*, London 1976; L. Borhi, *Secret Peace...*, pp. 29–67; *From Hitler's Doorstep. The Wartime Intelligence Reports of Allen Dulles 1942–1945*, ed. N.H. Petersen, Pennsylvania 1996, pp. 128–129; T. Meszerics, *Undermine, or Bring Them Over: SOE and OSS Plans for Hungary in 1943*, "Journal of Contemporary History" 2008, Vol. 43, pp. 195–216.

¹⁴ L. Borhi, *Secret Peace...*, pp. 29–67.



collaborationist new government¹⁵. Within a few weeks between late spring and early summer of 1944, about 450,000 Jews from the Hungarian countryside outside Budapest were transported to Auschwitz where most of them were killed. Hungarian society followed very different patterns in its attitudes towards the Holocaust. Apart from being detached, being intimidated, seeking material gain, or even sympathising and collaborating with the anti-Semitic ideas, there were many people during the Holocaust who secretly strove to save people at the risk of being caught¹⁶. Alongside the better known stories and figures of diplomatic or ecclesiastical rescue, attempts by civilians to help the persecuted are less researched and more difficult to uncover.

With the German occupation, the armed forces and the security organisation (the Gestapo) of the foreign power appeared in the country, creating a radically new de facto resistance situation for the anti-Nazi forces. For the groups that comprised the independence movement, the primary task continued to be to withdraw the country from the war, but this was extended to include opposing the Sztójay government (which was becoming increasingly intertwined with the Germans), resisting the occupying authorities and armed forces, dampening the anti-Jewish measures, preventing the deportation of Jews and, increasingly, saving lives. The anti-Nazi forces, with a wide range of ideological backgrounds and motives, began to organise themselves, in completely different time and space coordinates, and with differing forms of political and armed resistance¹⁷.

After the German occupation, the forces that sought to break with the German alliance had an increasingly important secret network in the Hungarian state administration. The underground Hungarian Independence Movement (Magyar Fuggetlensegi Mozgalom, MFM), which was led by a diplomat, Domokos Szent-Iványi, was formed as an organisation of anti-German state officials, intellectuals, and military officers. It was in contact with the resistance groups operating completely underground and closely cooperated with the so-called “Breakout Bureau”, which was run by Miklós Horthy Jr.¹⁸

¹⁵ On the tragedy of the Hungarian Jewish community and the vast literature on the Holocaust in Hungary, see Z. Vági, L. Csősz, and G. Kádár, *The Holocaust in Hungary: Evolution of Genocide*, trans. Z. Zvolenszky, Lanham, 2013; R.L. Braham, *The Politics of Genocide: The Holocaust in Hungary*, Vol. 1–2, New York 2016.

¹⁶ Z. Vági, L. Csősz, and G. Kádár, *The Holocaust in...*

¹⁷ Á. Bartha, *Véres város*, Budapest 2021; Á. Bartha, *Anti-Nazi Politics in Hungary during the Second World War*, “Totalitarian and 20th Century Studies” 2020, Vol. 4, pp. 498–514.

¹⁸ D. Szent-Iványi, *The Hungarian Independence Movement 1939–1946*, Budapest 2013; N. Székér, *German pressure and secret societies based on the example of the activities of the Hungarian Fraternal Community and the Hungarian Independence Movement* [in:] *The Hungarian World 1938–1940*, eds S. Rási, L.T. Vizi, Budapest 2021, pp. 217–240.

After 19 March 1944, Hungary, which until then had experienced little of the war directly, became a theatre of war. The Soviet Red Army troops in Transylvania reached the then Hungarian border in the valley of the River Uz on 18 August 1944. By this time, the governor, Miklós Horthy, who had become more assertive in domestic politics and had abandoned his previous passivity, decided to take a major step. On 6 July 1944, when most Jews outside the capital had already been murdered, Horthy gave the order to halt the deportations, partly yielding to international pressure from the West and the Vatican, and began negotiations with his closest associates to form a possible new government.

The decisive impetus came with the Romanian breakout on 23 August 1944. Romania, after its desertion, threatened Hungarian territory in conjunction with Soviet forces and by the end of August 1944, enemy operations moved into Hungarian territory. Horthy dismissed the Sztójay government on 29 August and appointed a new one, led by Colonel General Géza Lakatos, whose main task was to prepare and implement the country's exit from the war. At the same time that the new government was established, Horthy resumed negotiations for an armistice and a Hungarian withdrawal, and with great reluctance accepted that the peace should be negotiated not with the Anglo-Saxon powers but with the Soviets, who were advancing to the line of the Carpathians.

Thanks also to the efforts of the MFM, on 28 September a delegation travelled to Moscow. It was led by Colonel General Gábor Faragho and included Géza Teleki (the son of Pál Teleki) and Domokos Szent-Iványi. The delegation signed a preliminary armistice agreement on 11 October, which returned Hungary to its borders of 1937, meaning that in exchange for peace, Hungary had to forfeit all its revisionist results. The negotiations of Faragho led to the final stage of organising Hungary's withdrawal from the war, although the action was severely hampered from the very first minute by the kidnapping of Szilárd Bakay, the garrison commander of Budapest and one of Horthy's closest confidants, by the Gestapo on 8 October. A further obstacle was that some of the officers of the Royal Hungarian Army openly sympathised with the Germans, and that loyalty was presumably stronger than their loyalty to Horthy¹⁹.

Even after the signing of the agreement, Horthy hoped that it would be possible to implement it in such a way that the Germans would accept the Hungarian withdrawal and leave the country without bloodshed. However, this proved to be a naive assumption.

On 15 October 1944, Horthy made an unsuccessful attempt to pull out from the Second World War. The operation planned on the basis of the Romanian model was a complete failure due to the resistance of some officers

¹⁹ S. Szakály, *Volt-e alternatíva?...*; see also K. Ungváry, *Kiugrás a...*



of the Royal Hungarian Army, indecisiveness, and contradictory orders, as well as preventative actions taken by the Nazi secret service²⁰. The tragically unsuccessful attempt to escape provided the Nazis with an opportunity to bring to power their allies in the far-right ultranationalist Arrow Cross Party. On 16 October 1944, Horthy, under duress, appointed Ferenc Szálasi, the leader of the Arrow Cross, as Prime Minister, at the same time relinquishing the exercise of his powers as head of state and transferring them to Szálasi, who continued the war on the German side, declaring that he would fight to the end. Veesenmayer had been able to persuade the governor to legalise the coup d'état by giving his "word of honour" to release Horthy's son who had been kidnapped by the Germans.

The establishment of the Arrow Cross dictatorship marked a radical break with the Hungarian practice of public law of the time. The Arrow Cross seized power, and the bloody terror that was to last for nearly seven months began. Brutal and mass executions became a daily occurrence. Half of Budapest's Jewish community of approximately 200,000 persons, that is between 90,000 and 95,000 people, were murdered.

On 9 November 1944, the Liberation Committee of the Hungarian National Uprising (Magyar Nemzeti Felkelés Felszabadító Bizottsága, MNFFB), the most prominent body of Hungarian resistance, was formed under the leadership of Endre Bajcsy-Zsilinszky.

The committee, which comprised resistance groups from various political backgrounds, was established to launch an armed uprising in Budapest in collaboration with the Red Army, and also sought to legitimise itself as a state power, besides even attempting to enter the diplomatic arena. However, none of this could be achieved, as on the night of 22 and 23 November, virtually the entire military general staff was betrayed and liquidated by the Arrow Cross militia. This tragic ending was a direct consequence of the conspiratorial imprudence of the officers who, because of the proximity of the front, had been in a hurry to expand the organisation²¹.

The special body of the Arrow Cross police, the National Accountability Organisation which dealt primarily with political prisoners and resistance fighters, arrested and executed Bajcsy-Zsilinszky and his fellow officers, who had attempted to organise armed resistance against the Arrow Cross and the Germans. What is more, Budapest became the scene of one of the most devastating urban battles of the Second World War: during the siege of Budapest, with the city surrounded by the Red Army, from 24 December 1944 to 13 February 1945, 35,000 civilians and approximately 80,000 Soviet

Even after the signing of the agreement, Horthy hoped that it would be possible to implement it in such a way that the Germans would accept the Hungarian withdrawal and leave the country without bloodshed. However, this proved to be a naive assumption.

²⁰ C.A. Macartney, *October Fifteenth...*; see also K. Ungváry, *Kiugrás a...*

²¹ Á. Bartha, *Véres város...*; see also Á. Bartha, *Anti-Nazi Politics...*, pp. 498–514.

soldiers and 50,000 German soldiers lost their lives. The fighting, which lasted some seven months in total, ended in April 1945 with the Soviet occupation of the entire territory of the country.

The war caused considerable destruction. The total loss of life in Hungary was estimated at 900,000, including the deportation of some 500,000 Hungarian Jews in the spring of 1944. The war ended with the loss of 40% of the national property and territory of the entire country as it stood following its acquisitions from the Vienna Awards.

THE SOVIET OCCUPATION OF HUNGARY AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

After the Second World War, Hungary's fate was fundamentally determined by two factors: its defeat in the war and the Soviet military occupation. The tragic events of 1944 destroyed the last vestiges of Hungarian political independence. By the beginning of 1945, the country was virtually split in two. The German-occupied capital and the western part of the country endured the last months of the Arrow Cross dictatorship, while the eastern part of the country had to start reorganising life under the control of the Red Army, which had liberated the country from the German occupation and the Arrow Cross' reign of terror, but remained in place as an occupying power. The war left the country in ruins and devastation, and the machinery of the Hungarian state essentially disintegrated, and the organised life of society almost completely fell apart²².

The invasion of the Red Army brought a series of individual and collective traumas for the masses of Hungarian society from the very first moment: the abduction of more than 600,000 Hungarian citizens, including at least 200,000 civilians, women and children as prisoners of war. Some 200,000 of these deportees and prisoners of war died in Soviet camps. It is estimated that between 100,000 and 200,000 Hungarian women were raped (in many cases repeatedly)²³. The victims of the war also included masses of refugees that became stateless, victims of ethnic cleansing, and communities of displaced persons who were stigmatised as collectively guilty. 120,000 Hungarians from Czechoslovakia, 100,000 from Romania, 20,000 from Transcarpathia and 65,000 from Yugoslavia arrived in the present territory. The 1946 Czechoslovak–Hungarian population exchange

²² For the history of Hungary after 1945 and further references, see L. Borhi, *Hungary in the Cold War – Between the Soviet Union and the United States*, Budapest–New York 2004; *Remény és realitás – Magyarország 1945*, eds Z. Horváth, R. Kiss, Budapest 2017; S. Bottoni, *Long Awaited West – Eastern Europe Since 1944*, trans. S. Lambert, Bloomington, 2017.

²³ *Gulag-Gupvi. The Soviet Captivity in Europe*, eds R. Kiss, I. Simon, Budapest 2017; A. Pető, *Elmondani az elmondhatalmat. A nemi erőszak története Magyarországon a II. világháború alatt*, Budapest 2018.

agreement resulted in 60,000 Slovaks moving to Czechoslovakia. The number of Germans expelled from Hungary was 190,000.

Beyond exploring the history of the direct experience of Soviet occupation and the post-war migration waves, a much-discussed and complex issue of recent times is the process of Sovietisation and Stalin's plans for the region and for Hungary in particular. Hungary did not regain its sovereignty, but in international legal terms once again found itself under military occupation and, as a result of the great power sharing that divided Europe, became part of the Soviet sphere of interest. However, unlike in the cases of Czechoslovakia, Poland, or Romania, where Stalin called for immediate Sovietisation, in Hungary the process was based on the principle of so-called gradualism. Its direction was always secured by the occupying Soviet army and the Soviet-dominated Allied Control Commission. The new state and political regime was shaped by a series of rapid and drastic Soviet military and political interventions²⁴.

Particularly noteworthy in this context are the arguments that the Soviet Union, from the very first minute of the occupation, actually implemented a process of planned, stealthy economic colonisation, undermining the economic pillars of Hungary's independence. The vast sums paid out to the Soviet Union as war reparations essentially served as a means of rapid economic gain for Moscow, as well as a means of political conquest. The economic pillar thus preceded the political pillar in the process of Sovietisation of the country.

It took several years to fully establish in Hungary the Communist regime that came to power with Soviet support. The Communist Party emerged from years of operating underground, from the very beginning with only a few dozen members, and with effective Soviet support, succeeded in gaining power to a degree far exceeding its real social support. Yet there was an endeavour, on the surface, to establish a democratic, multi-party parliamentary system. In November 1945, the Independent Smallholders' Party, which was a right-wing umbrella party, won a secure majority of 57%, which would allow it to form a government, but Soviet intervention forced it to form a coalition with the left wing. As a result, key institutions such as the Ministry of the Interior and the political police, the new military secret service, the new judicial system based on the People's Court of Justice, and the Economic General Council, which controlled the economic ministries and in fact laid the foundations for a Soviet-style centrally planned command economy, were or remained under Communist control. Thus, in the post-Second World War years of fresh start, in essence, two radical changes of political regime took place in parallel and at a rapid pace. On the one hand, the political forces proclaiming the democratic

²⁴ L. Borhi, *Hungary in the Cold...*; S. Bottconi, *Long Awaited West...*

transformation of the country emerged as a genuine political alternative. While fighting fierce political battles with each other, they were together in rejecting the previous regime and proclaiming a radical change. On the other hand, the Soviet invasion set in motion the rapid establishment of the conditions for the totalitarian rule of the Communist Party and the Sovietisation of the country from the outset, which initially took place behind the democratic scenes and was then implemented increasingly in the open.

The transformation of the political framework after 1945 was accompanied by radical and often violent local changes of elites and property. The deepest debate was generated by the question of property, especially land ownership. Land distribution, while providing a radical solution to a centuries-old problem, in its concrete form actually served the power interests of the Communist Party, rather than the creation of a truly viable land tenure structure²⁵. In this regard, it is important to note that the expropriation of land without compensation also rendered it impossible for the churches with the greatest social influence, especially the Roman Catholic Church, to function as before, since the basis for their economic autonomy was removed, leaving them at the mercy of the state.

This also posed serious challenges for churches that were in various ways associated with the previous regime. The scale and speed of the political changes would have created the potential for conflict even under democratic conditions. Entailing several open problems, the reorganisation of the relationship between church and state on the basis of mutual co-operation was also set from the outset on a forced course. The policy of the Communist Party, which held real political power, was aimed at breaking up religious tradition and driving out churches, which were seen as ideological and political opponents.

The radical change of elites was also facilitated alongside the purges in the public administration by the establishment of the so-called People's Courts in the post-1945 system of special political courts. The People's Courts were originally established to try genuine war criminals. However, as a growing number of case studies reveal, the Communist Party also used this judicial forum from the outset as a means of dealing with its political and public rivals under the pretext of "eliminating the remnants of Fascism", thereby committing numerous unlawful acts²⁶.

From the very first moment, the Communist leaders returning from exile in Moscow, with the help of the occupying authorities, sought to seize

²⁵ J.Ö. Kovács, *The Struggle for Land: Social Practices of the Veiled Communist Dictatorship in Rural Hungary in 1945* [in:] *NEB Yearbook 2014–2015*, eds R. Kiss, Z. Horváth, Budapest 2016, pp. 11–31.

²⁶ D. Szokolay, *Political Justice and People's Courts in Post-War Hungary (1945–1950) in the Research of Hungarian Historian*, "Totalitarian and 20th Century Studies" 2022, Vol. 6, pp. 200–227.



total power. Still, in 1945, there was an alternative independent elite in the country, which, despite its different views, saw the way forward in a democratic state. The hope for democratic Hungary had the internal conditions, but the realities of great power politics did not give it a chance. Finally, in 1947, the Communist Party saw that the time had come for finally crushing its greatest political opponent, the Smallholders' Party, with a series of show trials. Ferenc Nagy, the Prime Minister, and Béla Varga, the speaker of the House (of Parliament), were forced into exile, and by the beginning of 1948 the conditions were ripe for the Communist Party to seize full power. The dynamics of this process and its shifts in emphasis are still key points of debate in any historical interpretation of the events of 1945.

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