

## **The Search for a Casus Belli and the Origins of the Kassa Bombing**

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By early 1945 when most political observers in Europe realized that the defeat of Nazi Germany was imminent, all of Germany's former wartime allies had either declared neutrality or defected to the Allies. In fact, by this time only one country remained loyal to Hitler's Germany: Hungary. Even as the Red Army moved inexorably through Hungary, and even as Budapest was abandoned by the Hungarian government led by Ferenc Szálasi, Hungary still did not separate its fate from that of Germany. Only the final collapse of Hungary's military forces in Austria brought an end to the German-Hungarian wartime alliance. It is perhaps appropriate, then, to suggest that Hungary has to bear the ignominious title of Nazi Germany's "last satellite."<sup>1</sup>

By the same token, it can be argued that Hungary was also Nazi Germany's first ally. When Hitler came to power in 1933, the Hungarian Prime Minister, Gyula Gömbös, was the first foreign leader to honour him with a visit. Until the Italian-German rapprochement after 1936, Hungary's ties with Berlin were more cordial than that of any other European state.

It is clear, however, that these elements of the German-Hungarian relationship from 1933 to 1945 do not tell the whole story. Indeed, a former American ambassador to Hungary, J.F. Montgomery, wrote a book after the war that referred to Hungary as the "unwilling satellite," and many historians and chroniclers of interwar Hungary have adopted this thesis.<sup>2</sup> According to this view, Hungary was by no means an eager and willing accomplice of Hitler. Most Hungarian leaders, in fact, regarded Hitler as a vulgar, despicable man and Nazism as an abhorrent ideology. They agreed to cooperate on a limited basis with Hitler only because the Western Powers refused to consider revision of what Hungarians regarded as the totally unfair and unwise territorial provisions of the peace settlement after World War I.

According to this view, successive governments of the late 1930s and early war years were far from loyal allies of Hitler. They refused to join in aggressive action against Czechoslovakia in 1938 and acted honourably toward Poland in 1939. Moreover, during the war Hungary was the least reliable of Germany's satellites, constantly arousing Hitler's suspicions and anger. Not only was Hungary's military contribution kept to a minimum, but despite intensive pressure from Berlin, Hungary, in the heart of German controlled Europe, continued until 1944 to treat Jews with relative tolerance and to preserve certain elements of liberalism and parliamentarianism. This, it has been argued, hardly describes an obsequious, loyal ally of Nazi Germany, but rather a country that, given its geographic location and understandable zeal for a change in the territorial status quo, acted honourably and at times even thwarted Hitler's foreign and domestic programs.

"Unwilling satellite" or "last satellite?" As is the case with so many historical problems, there is truth in both these descriptions. The fact is that Hungarian society was deeply convulsed by the question of how to deal with Hitler's Germany. Many Hungarians were strongly attracted to the Third Reich, firmly believing that it would be victorious in the war, and they thus remained fanatically loyal to the bitter end. At the opposite pole were those Hungarians who, for a variety of reasons, viewed Nazi Germany with great distrust and even contempt. Many were convinced that Germany would not win the war. They thus struggled, as best they could in the circumstances, to ensure that Hungary's fate would not become entwined with that of Germany. These views were predominant among those conservative statesmen who occupied most of the highest positions of the Hungarian government in the late 1930s and the war years.

Perhaps the portion of Hungarian society in which pro-German and pro-Nazi sentiments were most pronounced was the officer corps. During the interwar period close ties were maintained between the Hungarian and German officer corps. They had fought "shoulder to shoulder" in World War I and looked forward to collaboration in a future war aimed at destroying the status quo and fulfilling the territorial aspirations of their two countries. These feelings of comradeship and a shared destiny were not appreciably diminished by Hitler's

coming to power in 1933. Some of the more traditional and conservative Hungarian officers were wary of intimate cooperation with Hitler's Germany but in the officer corps there was a growing general conviction that alliance with Nazi Germany was the only path to the restoration of a powerful, prosperous Hungary.<sup>3</sup> A handful of these officers were so eager to promote Hungary's linking up with the Third Reich that from 1938 on into the early stages of World War II they actively searched for a suitable *casus belli* that would draw Hungary into the conflict on Germany's side.

In his memoirs, Admiral Miklós Horthy, Hungary's head of state in the interwar period, asserted that Hungary's entry into World War II had been provoked by a staged bombing of the Hungarian city of Kassa carried out by German pilots. General Henrik Werth, the Hungarian Chief of Staff, who had been pressing the government to join in Hitler's campaign against Soviet Russia, was, according to Horthy, an "interested party" in the conspiracy.<sup>4</sup> This theory was accepted by many other members of Hungary's interwar conservative nationalist establishment. At the same time, and somewhat surprisingly, the conspiracy theory has also received wide, indeed nearly unanimous, support from Marxist historians of contemporary Hungary. In the one volume history of Hungary prepared by the most prominent historians in Hungary today, it is stated without equivocation that the bombing of Kassa was planned by the German and Hungarian general staffs in order to draw Hungary into the war.<sup>5</sup>

This is surely one of the rare instances in which Marxist historians have fully embraced one of Admiral Horthy's interpretations of an event in modern Hungarian history. This curious state of affairs becomes explicable when one recognizes the utility of the conspiracy theory for these ideological opponents. For defenders of the Horthy regime, and for Horthy himself, it provided a convenient way to transfer responsibility for Hungary's entry into the war away from the Hungarian government to the devious Nazi Germans and to certain unpatriotic Hungarian military officers, many of whom were of German ethnic background. Those historians of Socialist Hungary who have dealt with the Kassa bombing have laboured under another kind of restraint. They could not suggest that the bombers had in fact been Soviet, for this would malign the Soviet

Union, which has always denied responsibility for the bombing.

Supporters of the conspiracy theory have thus spanned the ideological spectrum. Yet, despite the wide acceptance of this theory, the supporting evidence has been surprisingly meagre. No official German or Hungarian government document relating to the alleged conspiracy has been uncovered. Moreover, if there was a conspiracy, everyone on both the German and Hungarian sides kept his silence during and after the war. No one ever stepped forward to admit complicity in the Kassa bombing at the postwar trials in Nuremberg and in Hungary, or in biographical sources. Thus, the theory of a conspiracy has rested largely on the testimony of three individuals. One was Ádám Krúdy, a Hungarian military officer who emerged after the war as the most famous eyewitness of the bombing. Krúdy asserted that the bombing was carried out by the Germans in aircraft that bore Axis markings. There are major inconsistencies in Krúdy's testimony, however, and in recent years his assertions have been discredited by several investigators, including Julián Borsányi and Nándor Dreisziger.<sup>6</sup>

The conspiracy theory has also rested in part on the testimony of two military intelligence officers, Rudolf Bamler, a high-ranking member of the German intelligence agency, the Abwehr, during the early stages of World War II, and István Újszászy, who in 1941 was head of military intelligence on the Hungarian General Staff. Újszászy was interrogated while in Soviet custody after the war. An alleged transcript of his statements pertaining to the Kassa bombing was submitted as evidence at the Nuremberg Trials. Újszászy stated flatly that certain German and Hungarian officers had manufactured the incident at Kassa in order to provoke Hungary to declare war. Újszászy's testimony, however, did not provide any convincing specific evidence. It is apparent that he did not have any first-hand knowledge of a conspiracy, and that his assertion was merely a hunch based on the suspicious behaviour of some of his colleagues. In any case, the reliability of his testimony is reduced by the nature of his interrogation, which may have been under duress.<sup>7</sup>

The testimony of Rudolf Bamler, who in 1939 was head of counterintelligence in the Abwehr, must also be treated with caution. At an East German historical conference in 1957, Bamler, himself not a historian, spoke about the role of German

military intelligence in the coming of World War II. As an example of the invidious activities of the Abwehr, Bamler referred briefly to the bombing of Kassa, which, he claimed, was arranged by the Abwehr in order to persuade the Hungarians to enter the war. Bamler made no mention of the participation of Hungarian officers in the conspiracy, although he did make the remarkable accusation that the President of Slovakia, Jozef Tiso, was aware of and abetted the conspiracy.<sup>8</sup> Bamler offered no documentation to support his assertions. Since Bamler in 1941 was no longer assigned to the Abwehr (he was the commander of an artillery regiment) it is unlikely that he was involved in the alleged conspiracy. It is possible that his story was based on information he had gained from his Abwehr colleagues, but this is merely a supposition, since neither at the historical conference nor later did Bamler elaborate on his brief and cryptic references to the Kassa bombing.

The theory of a German-Hungarian conspiracy has thus rested on a weak foundation of evidence, and in recent years some of the historians most interested in the Kassa controversy have discarded it as a likely explanation. Even in Hungary some historians have ventured to suggest that this traditional theory is flawed by inconsistencies and questionable supporting evidence.<sup>9</sup> Despite this historiographical trend, the purpose of this paper is to argue that the conspiracy theory remains both viable and plausible. Although startling new evidence bearing on the alleged conspiracy has not been uncovered, there exists certain intriguing circumstantial evidence bearing on the possible role of Hungarian officers in a plot to create a *casus belli* for Hungary's entry into the war. On the basis of this evidence it is possible to conclude not that Hungarian officers definitely helped stage a provocation at Kassa, but that certain of them were quite willing to do so and in fact had urged the Germans to create such a provocation on two separate occasions before June, 1941. To demonstrate this, one need not rely on the testimony of Krúdy, Újzászy, or Bamler.

In the past one of the weaknesses of the conspiracy theory has been the inability of investigators to discover any Hungarian officers who could be specifically linked with a conspiracy. Several individuals have been mentioned, but no convincing evidence has ever been uncovered. If there was a conspiracy, it has been argued, surely some Hungarian officers would have

been collaborating with German officials in Budapest. Two prominent German representatives in wartime Budapest, General Fütterer, the air attaché, and Otto von Erdmannsdorf, the diplomatic minister, have both denied in a convincing way any knowledge of a conspiracy hatched in Budapest. Skeptics also argue that a plot of this kind would have required that a large number of Hungarian officers participate. In interwar Hungary even the most confidential information had a way of spreading quite rapidly through informal channels. It seems inconceivable that a conspiracy on the scale of the Kassa bombing could have been kept a secret in Budapest not only during the war but up to today.

This phenomenon can be explained, however, if one assumes that the alleged conspiracy was carried out by only a handful of Hungarians and Germans skilled in military intelligence, and that the plot was devised and coordinated not in Budapest but in Berlin. The two most prominent Hungarian officials in Berlin in June, 1941 were Col. Sándor Homlok, the military attaché, and Döme Sztójay, a former General Staff officer who had been Hungary's minister to Germany since 1936. These two individuals may be regarded as prime suspects in the search for the Kassa bombing conspirators.

In the two decades before 1941, Sztójay and Homlok helped set the stage for close military cooperation with Germany. Their special area of expertise was military intelligence. Before 1918 Sztójay had been an intelligence expert assigned to the Habsburg General Staff in Vienna. His experience was put to good use in Hungary after the war, when Sztójay helped to establish an independent intelligence service and became its first director. From 1927 he served as military attaché in Berlin, where he fostered his personal ties with Germany's military élite. The culmination of his efforts was an important secret agreement signed by the German and Hungarian general staffs in 1932. It called for a coordination of German and Hungarian intelligence gathering operations, particularly with regard to Czechoslovakia as a likely opponent of the two countries.<sup>10</sup> From this point on German and Hungarian cooperation in intelligence matters was intensive. Nazi Germany did not ever establish such a frank and intimate relationship with any other country for the exchange of military intelligence.

In 1936 Sztójay was appointed Hungarian Minister in Berlin.

By this time he was fully convinced that Hungary's salvation lay in the closest cooperation, indeed even alliance, with the Third Reich. Sztójay felt increasingly frustrated, however, by the refusal of the civilian government, especially the Foreign Minister, Kálmán Kánya, to make any direct commitment to Hitler's Germany. Sztójay was so convinced of the validity of his views that he was willing to deviate from official Hungarian policy in certain matters and pursue his own policies. His deviations were encouraged by his friends on the Hungarian General Staff, to whom he reported regularly. As Europe edged toward a crisis in 1937 and 1938, Sztójay was working secretly behind the scenes, without the knowledge or approval of his superiors in Budapest, to convince the Germans that Hungary could and would participate in a joint action against Czechoslovakia. Whenever possible he pressed for German-Hungarian military staff talks to prepare for such a campaign.<sup>11</sup>

Sztójay's frustration over the circumspection of Hungary's civilian government was shared by many of his fellow military officers. By 1937 it was generally believed in the Hungarian General Staff that renewed war was certain and that a powerfully rearmed Germany was bound to emerge victorious in such a conflict. It was thus imperative that Hungary link its destiny to that of Germany before it was too late. Discontent in the General Staff was so great that in early 1938 serious thought was given to toppling Hungary's parliamentary system and installing a military dictatorship.<sup>12</sup> Prominent among these discontented officers was Col. Homlok, who during 1938 and 1939 was a general staff officer active in various matters relating to military intelligence and surreptitious activities of all kinds.

Homlok was able to establish close personal ties with high-ranking Abwehr officials, including Admiral Canaris.<sup>13</sup> As the crisis over Czechoslovakia heated up in the late summer of 1938, Homlok apparently was searching for a way to persuade his government to overcome its hesitations and join wholeheartedly in a German attack on Czechoslovakia. During high-level German-Hungarian talks in late August, however, Regent Miklós Horthy rejected Hitler's offer of a joint military campaign to dismember Czechoslovakia. It was in the aftermath of those dramatic talks that Homlok called on Col. Hellmuth Groscurth, head of Section 2 of the Abwehr, in Berlin on September 1. After asserting that Hungary in principle wished to join in the attack on

Czechoslovakia, Homlok made the following statement, which is recorded in Groscurth's diary: "The Hungarian Chief of Staff requests the creation of a *casus belli* for an attack on Czechoslovakia by the dropping of Czech bombs on Hungarian territory by German aircraft after seizure of the first Czech airports. The Hungarians wish to determine the timing of the bombing."<sup>14</sup>

It is certain that Homlok's request was made without knowledge of the civilians in the Hungarian government. Whether the Hungarian Chief of Staff, Jenő Rátz, had in fact authorized Homlok's approach to the Abwehr is unknown. No other mention of Homlok's initiative can be found in any other German or Hungarian document. It should be noted that Groscurth, who secretly opposed Hitler's aggressive policies, seemed to regard Homlok's plan as a verification of his suspicion that the Hungarian government did not want to join in the campaign against Czechoslovakia. Of course, events in September, 1938 proceeded in such a way that the opportunity for the Abwehr to fulfill Homlok's request did not arise.

Later in 1938 and early 1939 Homlok continued to pursue projects that directly impinged on Hungarian foreign policy. In the fall he presided over the attempt to infiltrate Hungarian guerrilla bands into Slovakia and Ruthenia in order to create disturbances and turmoil, thus setting the stage for the entry of Hungarian troops to restore order.<sup>15</sup> Homlok soon gained a reputation for ruthlessness and a willingness to use unorthodox and even illegal methods. There is some evidence to suggest that he engineered a series of provocations along the Slovak border in January, 1939, which greatly inflamed Hungary's relations with Czechoslovakia. These provocations failed to produce the desired result, namely Hungarian seizure of Slovakia, and among more moderate Hungarian officials Homlok was coming into disrepute as an irresponsible adventurer.<sup>16</sup>

Later in 1939 Homlok was appointed military attaché in Berlin. After the outbreak of the war he joined Sztójay in pressing the government in Budapest to abandon its neutrality and align itself with Germany in the war. A critical junction was reached in the spring of 1941, when Hitler decided to send his armies into Yugoslavia and urged Hungary to join in the attack. In their eagerness to seize this opportunity, Hungary's military leaders strongly recommended full cooperation with Germany.

The suicide of Pál Teleki, the Prime Minister, who opposed militant action, made the officers even more desperate. How could they overcome the shock over Teleki's suicide and persuade the Regent and Cabinet to accept Hitler's offer? A strategy was adopted to ask the Germans to create a suitable *casus belli* for Hungary, perhaps a Yugoslav provocation on the southern frontier. Such a proposal was presented directly to Hitler on April 4 by Sztójay and the Hungarian Minister of Defense, General Károly Bartha.<sup>17</sup>

It is not known what Hitler's reaction was to this Hungarian proposal. When the German attack began on April 6, however, some bombs were dropped on the Hungarian city of Szeged and elsewhere in southern Hungary by what were reported to be Yugoslav planes. Rumours spread immediately that the bombing was in fact German provocation.<sup>18</sup> No further information about these bombing raids, which bear some resemblance to the attack on Kassa, has been uncovered.

The second great crisis of 1941 came with the German attack on Soviet Russia in June. Sztójay was probably the first Hungarian to learn of the upcoming campaign. During a conversation with Sztójay in late March, Hitler strongly hinted that he had lost patience with the Soviet Union and that a German-Soviet confrontation was not far off.<sup>19</sup> In May, when it became clear that the German invasion was imminent, Sztójay dispatched several reports to Budapest in which he argued that Hungary, which had long enjoyed a reputation as a staunchly anti-communist state, could not possibly stand aside when Hitler's great crusade against Bolshevism began. In fact, Hungary would be well advised to volunteer its assistance beforehand.<sup>20</sup> Homlok argued along similar lines in his own report.<sup>21</sup>

In Budapest similar arguments were being presented by General Werth, the Chief of Staff. The Hungarian Cabinet and even the normally impetuous Regent were not eager, however, to embark on a military campaign that did not seem to have a direct impact on Hungary's national interests. In any case, the Germans were not asking for any major Hungarian assistance. As the Russian campaign unfolded on June 22, Hungary's military leaders were thus highly frustrated and depressed. By the next day, however, the situation had changed dramatically. The Wehrmacht's special representative in Hungary, General Kurt

Himer, now informed Werth that a voluntary offer of support by Hungary would in fact be welcomed by Germany.<sup>22</sup>

The Hungarian government, however, was still reluctant to take any significant military measures against the Soviet Union, and Hitler refused to make a direct request for Hungarian help, since this might eventually lead to Hungarian demands for territorial rewards. A stalemate was thus reached, and the German High Command, aware of the grumbling among the Hungarian officers, took the position that "if the (Hungarian) soldiers want to participate, they should persuade their politicians."<sup>23</sup>

In Berlin Sztójay and Homlok were almost certainly aware of the German military authorities attitude on June 22 and 23. It seems entirely plausible, indeed even likely, that when they were told that the Hungarian officers should persuade their government, Sztójay and Homlok concluded that this could no longer be accomplished through written exhortations. The crisis seemed to call for the kind of bold tactic that had been used by Homlok and Sztójay twice before, in September, 1938 and April, 1941 a request for a German manufactured provocation. It also seems probable that in making such a request Sztójay and Homlok would turn not to Hitler and Ribbentrop (who in any case were inaccessible at the Führer's headquarters), but to their friends in the Abwehr with whom they had worked intimately on many clandestine projects over the years. If this speculation is correct, the plot was thus hatched in Berlin shortly after June 22 and was carried out by Abwehr agents on June 26.

Several objections to this theory might legitimately be raised. For example, why have no official Hungarian or German documents concerning the conspiracy come to light? The answer would be that no such Hungarian documents would exist because the plot was hatched and carried out in Berlin. It may be that no Hungarians other than Sztójay and Homlok were aware of the conspiracy. Perhaps General Werth, the Chief of Staff, simply instructed Homlok to do what he could to persuade the Germans to help create a suitable *casus belli*. This would not have been unprecedented as we have seen, the Hungarian Minister of Defense had made precisely this request of Hitler in April, 1941. Werth may even have assumed the attitude so characteristic of leaders presiding over clandestine and potentially embarrassing operations he may have told Homlok to do what was necessary,

but that he should not report officially on the details of any provocation that was carried out. If this was the case, Werth himself may have been surprised by the bombing of Kassa, and he may not have been certain in his own mind that this was in fact a German provocation. In any case, Sztójay and Homlok would surely have been careful to keep the conspiracy a secret and to communicate with their German counterparts orally rather than in writing. It is also understandable that both men would have kept their terrible secret later in the war and especially after the war. Homlok was certainly capable of concealing the unsavoury projects in which he had participated. Early in the war he was to play a sinister role in a secret plan to gain German cooperation for the expulsion of Jews from Hungary. Homlok's actions served directly to undermine his government's policies and set the stage for the brutal treatment of Hungary's Jews in 1944. Yet Homlok's role in these events was not uncovered after the war, and Homlok carefully kept his silence and escaped any prosecution or notoriety.<sup>24</sup>

The absence of any surviving documentation on the German side can also be explained. The Abwehr was a highly professional organization that of course took rigorous measures to maintain secrecy in its clandestine operations. Those who participated in the conspiracy (the pilots of the bombers, service crew at the airport, etc.) were surely not told all the details of the mission. Probably only a small number of high-ranking Abwehr officers knew the full story, and some or most of them, including Canaris, may have died in the war. It should also be noted that most of the Abwehr's files and archives were destroyed in the war. Thus any written records relating to the Kassa bombing would likely have perished.

There remains a practical question, posed by Julián Borsányi in his book on the Kassa bombing. Could the Germans have planned and carried out the bombing of Kassa in just the few days between June 22 and June 26?<sup>25</sup> The answer is yes. The Abwehr had several posts and no doubt a number of officers and agents in Slovakia. Suitable aircraft of Russian design had been acquired during the seizure of Czechoslovakia in 1939.<sup>26</sup> Surely no more than one day would have been required to secure and prepare the appropriate planes on an airfield under Abwehr jurisdiction in Slovakia. It seems likely that the Abwehr had available reliable pilots who knew the terrain (perhaps Slovak

pilots) and could drop the bombs with some precision once the target was reached. The Abwehr had for some time conducted reconnaissance flights along and even across the Soviet frontier in this area. (Some of these flights apparently originated at a secret Abwehr air base in Hungary near Budapest.)<sup>27</sup>

The conspiracy theory outlined here is based only on circumstantial evidence. It is, however, a plausible explanation to the mystery of the Kassa bombing. Even if someday sensational and convincing new evidence is found that demonstrates that the responsibility for the bombing rests with the Soviet Union, or with the Slovaks or Czechs, it still would be possible to say that there were some Hungarians who were fully capable of instigating such a provocation and had tried to do so even before June, 1941.

#### NOTES

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