

Miklós Horthy and Edmund Veessenmayer: Hungarian-German relations after March 1944

Pál Pritz

However we may approach the problem, one thing remains certain: Miklós Horthy, Regent of Hungary, and Edmund Veessenmayer, commissioner plenipotentiary of the Third *Reich* to Hungary, were the key figures of the Hungarian-German relationship after 19 March 1944. Not that this relationship had been based on equal footing either formally or in its content; it was one in which the Hungarian party's room for manoeuvring became dramatically limited as time passed. Nevertheless, Horthy and Veessenmayer were the main protagonists; therefore, it is worthwhile to take a closer look at these two personalities.

While Miklós Horthy was the head of a state, Veessenmayer was only an agent of another head-of-state, plenipotentiary (invested with the power to make decisions on his own) though. Miklós Horthy's position as head-of-state was greatly limited by many factors. Most serious among them was the presence of the German army in Hungary which, however, abstained from occupying the whole country; thus, for example, the German troops had not penetrated into the region lying east of the Tisza River. They also did not occupy the capital city in a systematic manner, though they did not fail to put the strategically important points of Budapest under their control. Although the Hungarian army was not formally disarmed by the German forces, yet the confinement of Magyar troops to the barracks was humiliating enough in itself. To put up any resistance — no notable effort had been made by the leaders in charge of the Hungarian military to this effect — was out of the question.

Despite its incomplete occupation of Hungary, the German occupying force, however, was fully adequate for the Nazi leaders to achieve their political objectives. For example, when the German efforts to form a new Hungarian government seemed to have met with failure due to Horthy's repeated objections, then — despite the fact that Berlin had started to withdraw some of its occupying forces from Hungary soon after the occupation owing to the deteriorating situation on the fronts — on Veessenmayer's advice the German leaders did not hesitate to intimidate Horthy by threatening to send fresh troops to Hungary.¹

Horthy was also hamstrung by the internal political circumstances of Hungary. Though before he travelled to Klessheim to meet Hitler, Horthy had vowed that he would not part from his dearest immediate political associates, from Prime Minister Miklós Kállay in the first place, whom he had resolved not to dismiss under any German pressure, yet following the dramatically heated discussions held in the baroque palace near Salzburg, he could not but admit to himself that he would be unable to keep his word. He must have been smitten with strong remorse for his forced perfidy — he who was always so particular about a gentleman's given word.

Horthy was not a statesman in the proper sense of the word, but he was a clever man, because he refused to assume any role which he was — and he knew he was — unsuited for. It was on this account that he had essentially retired from the everyday politics back in the early 1920s, virtually coinciding with the appointment of Count István Bethlen as prime minister in 1921. Over the previous period, almost quarter of a century, he had worked with several prime ministers, with each of whom his personal and working relations had been different, but he was used to one thing, and this probably gave him a great deal of satisfaction, namely that — with the exception of Kálmán Darányi — they were all men of character and stature.

At the time, after the depressingly hard days following the mid-March turn and the nerve-racking negotiations concerning the composition of the would-be government, Horthy simply had to realize that he should rest content with the prime ministerial nomination of Döme Sztójay, the Hungarian ambassador to Berlin, a colourless and ineffective diplomat with a rather sketchy knowledge of the country's internal circumstances. From the country's point of view, he could by no means have expected any better result than that, because it was precisely he who had brought up Sztójay's name as candidate during the negotiations on March 20. Horthy's suggestion may have been motivated by several considerations. Perhaps he may have thought that Sztójay's activity for almost a decade in Berlin, which had been flawless from the Germans' point of view, would curry favour with the Nazis. He may also have considered Sztójay's nomination as an implicit message to "the other side" to make it clear that he was acting under pressure. By choosing a bureaucrat rather than a politician, he may have hoped to extract some "moral capital" for the country. Last but not least, Horthy may have thought of Sztójay's original vocation too; he had been a military officer, and the Regent might have assumed that the ex-soldier, imbued with military spirit and discipline, would obey him more readily than a civilian.

Horthy's capacity for decision-making was increasingly impeded by his age. He had completed his 75th year at the time and given his eventful course of life, he had long deserved some relaxation and rest. Under normal conditions, Horthy could certainly have been able to perform all the duties incumbent on a head-of-state. However, under the actual circumstances, ominous as they were, Horthy ought to have had not only a greater talent for statesmanship, but also the energy of his younger days.

In turning to a discussion of Veesenmayer, what appears at first sight is the fact that this German official — euphemized by his superiors as a diplomat — with his energy, extensive experience, comparatively wide knowledge, and his relatively youthful age (40), had been in the better position of the two from the outset. Reading his numerous reports, it also emerges that Veesenmayer was a clever and sharp-witted man. By 1943 his knowledge of the Hungarian situation — and of Hungarian history in general — had reached a certain stage which, in his view, enabled him to form judgements which appeared (at least to him) to be well-founded and authentic. At the same time, he failed to recognize the countless embarrassing contradictions hidden in the details, but it was these gaps in his knowledge that enabled him to form his opinions very rapidly and not get lost in the details or to let his actions to be slowed down. It should also be added that Veesenmayer was an outright fascist in his political thinking, to the extent that the idea of the superiority of the German nation over other peoples came quite natural to him. Being convinced of his own intellectual superiority as well, he also tended to select the available information in a way as to prove what he had conceived beforehand.

This is well shown by his voluminous report, prepared in December 1943, in which he propounded his opinion both of Hungarian history and of the concrete situation at the time.² As it appears from this document, Veesenmayer could form nothing but a disparaging opinion of anything that was Hungarian. In his judgment, since the defeat of the Hungarians by the Turks at Mohács in 1526,³ Hungary "has never had the necessary popular strength and revolutionary swing to fight its way to the status of a fully independent state. Therefore," he went on, "the Rákóczy-led revolution of 1703-1711 was essentially a revolt, rather than a real revolution."⁴ With his deep-seated feeling of the German superiority, he even went so far as to stain the memory of the Hungarian Revolution and War of Independence of 1848-1849. "The participation of Hungary in the events of 1848-1849 was made possible only by Vienna that had showed the way."⁵ Nor did he refrain from twisting the real meaning of the Kossuth-song,⁶ claiming that the whole tragedy and the basically passive demeanour of Hungary and the Hungarians were implicitly expressed by this song. Because — he suggested — Kossuth himself had to send his message twice to achieve some result: "if he sends his this message once more, we all have to go [to war] ..."⁷ Apparently, Veesenmayer did not draw on his own original sources when he listed the "facts" which he held to be suitable to dispute the historical accomplishments of Hungarians. Those alleged "facts" and various statements had been — and would be — so often formulated before and after him. Not knowing anything of the formation process of national identity, these views tended to attach an exaggerated significance to the mere facts of ethnic origin. Adopting these views, it was easy for Veesenmayer to enter into such explanations as "the Hungarian national anthem was composed by Erkel, a native of Cologne, almost all buildings of Budapest, including the bridges, were constructed by Germans. The most famous Hungarian painter [M. Munkácsy]

was also a German (Bavarian by origin), while [Hungary's] most outstanding poets were Slovaks." Giving credence to the propaganda slogans and false rumours spread by the Hungarian Nazi Arrow-Cross Men, Veesenmayer wrote that "until 1925, the Regent himself spoke only a somewhat halting Hungarian..., even now, when his temper runs away with him, he will speak German much sooner than Hungarian."⁸

Having formed such an image of Hungarians in general, Veesenmayer did not give better grades to the national resistance either. In his view, "what they (the Hungarians) call 'national resistance' is in fact a passive resistance to everyone, last but not least, to themselves." On the other hand, he termed the passive resistance as a resistance without risk, which the Hungarians tend to "cover with highfalutin words, taking maximum advantage of the higher capacity and better endowments of other ethnic elements." Completely ignoring the Hungarian war losses, especially the casualties of battles near Voronezh and generally the country's economic efforts during the war, Veesenmayer came to the summary conclusion that Hungary "cannot stand the tests" of the burdens of war. What he regarded as a "basic trait" of Hungarians was fear ("to say nothing of cowardice" — he wrote in a deliberately affected fashion, trying to make the impression on his readers in Berlin that what he put down in his reports were not some superficial generalizations, but the most precisely formulated statements). In his opinion, fear is a basic trait "which is characteristic of the responsible Hungarian politicians as well as of a good part of the Hungarian civilian masses".⁹

In regards to the Hungarian Jewry, Veesenmayer regarded the whole country — and tried to make it appear — as a great centre of sabotage. "The 1.1 million Jews," he wrote, — generously adding some 300,000 to their actual number — "mean as many saboteurs [of the Axis war effort], and at least the same, if not twice as much, is the number of Hungarians who as henchman of Jews are ready to help them to carry out their ambitious plans aimed at sabotage and espionage, and to camouflage those plans."¹⁰

After Veesenmayer had disparaged everything Hungarian on the one hand, and had strongly exaggerated Hungarian resistance to the Germans, on the other, it came quite logical to him to call for an energetic and prompt intervention in Hungary. The *Reich* cannot afford "the luxury," he wrote, "of leaving such a sabotage centre intact." After making many superficial and one-dimensional statements and uttering partial truths, however, Veesenmayer came to a conclusion which would be proved right by the subsequent events: "...it would be a constrained, though rewarding political task, if the *Reich* handled and clarified this problem. All the more so as this problem is not a military, but almost exclusively a political one. If the adversary is overcome with fear and cowardice, it will suffice to utter a clear word, a hard demand, supported by a reference to the German divisions and war-planes."¹¹

What explains the fact that, after so many erroneous findings and statements, Veesenmayer finally came to a sound conclusion? Presumably, the right answer to this question can be found in the contemporary structure of Hungarian

society and in the country's tragically difficult situation in the foreign policy field. Since the related problems are all widely known, it will suffice here only to refer to the stagnation of social progress in Hungary, to the unsound distribution of land, to the parasitic way of life and anti-innovation attitude of the upper classes, or to the crisis of the middle class, incapable of any renewal. It is misleading to state that it was difficult if not impossible to sustain the country's independence between the contemporary bolshevik Soviet Union and the racist German *Reich*. From the aspect of home affairs, it was not the equal rejection of fascism and bolshevism which caused the main problem. Because the fact is that contemporary Hungarian society showed much less aversion to racism than to bolshevism. On the other hand, in connection with bolshevism, it should also be emphasized that the regime was disinclined to open up not only in the direction of bolshevism, but also in that of anything which had to do with the political left or with the common people in general. Nor was it inclined to accept and adopt anything meritorious from the program of political democratization.

Regarding the foreign policy aspect of the problem, it may well be stated that the contemporary Soviet Union was not a real threat to Hungary. The country's difficulties in the foreign policy field arose from the lingering effects of the antecedents as well as from the consequences of the Trianon Peace Treaty. To substantiate all what he had reported, Veesenmayer thus summarized this problem: "In my opinion, this" — i.e. what he wrote earlier in the document — "will suffice to contain the adversary, because all along its borders Hungary has got not a single friend, but [only]... embittered enemies."¹²

It seems justifiable to suggest that what Veesenmayer first saw in Hungary were basically such phenomena as the lack of social progress, the unsolved social problems, and the absence of moral firmness of the social and political actors. As to the latter, he could often experience it himself, since his Hungarian informers did not refrain from revealing to him practically every secret of Hungarian political life. In addition, this free-flowing information was all interwoven with the informers' endeavours to denounce their own political adversaries or other disfavoured actors of public life. Thus was it that being informed of many — often too many — details, Veesenmayer could follow with close attention the entire public life in Hungary. All this encouraged him even more to accept as indisputable facts all the commonplaces which had formerly been widely disseminated throughout the Old and the New World by the anti-Hungarian propaganda of the Habsburgs, by the leaders of the nationalities living in Hungary, and later by the publicists and ideologists of the Little Entente powers.

This notion of Hungary, however, was not the only one in the *Reich*; it was rivalled by another conception, the beholders of which thought more of the country's military capacity. This was aptly illustrated by the diary notes which Fieldmarshal Baron Maximilien von Weichs had put down for his own use. As

is known, Weichs became the commander-in-chief of the German troops who marched into Hungary on March 19, 1944.¹³

Some ten days before the occupation, having been already charged with the operation, Weichs envisaged two possible solutions to the Hungarian problem. The first — the desired one — would have been political in nature. Weichs, who had immediately linked up this political version with the name of Prime Minister Béla Imrédy, set forth his proposals from a positive and from a negative standpoint. While *Luftwaffe* commander Hermann Göring was for the former, General Cuno H. Fütterer, the German air-attaché to Budapest, was for the latter.

Since in Weichs' conception the political version was definitely tied up with Imrédy's person, neither Göring's, nor Fütterer's view can be interpreted accurately. Namely, it is not clear whether or not Göring's positive answer was prompted by his relatively thorough knowledge of the Hungarian situation, which prompted him to believe that a military solution could be avoided. On the other hand, it is also conceivable that the similarly well-informed Fütterer's negative answer was not meant to reject the political solution, but he only wanted to question the feasibility of a solution which was so strongly bound to Imrédy's person. In this respect Fütterer was right as he was well aware of Regent Horthy's highly unfavourable opinion of Imrédy.

"If this endeavour happens to fail, or *will not take place* at all, then we shall march in and *attempt* to subdue the country by force" — as Weichs worded his opinion of the military version (*italics mine - P.P.*). It is worthwhile taking a closer look at this wording. The words italicized by me show aptly how intact Weichs believed Hungarian society and policy to be. It also appears that he had serious doubts about the possibility of the — otherwise desired — political solution, but he was also sceptical as to the success of the military version. This scepticism becomes rather manifest in his using the words "we shall... attempt" and by the tone of this wording.

As regards the second, i.e. the military version of Weichs's proposal, he visualised two possibilities:

"a) If the stronger part of the Hungarian army as well as part of the population joined us *as it seems to be presumed in high quarters*," the operation could be carried out rapidly and without casualties (*italics mine — P.P.*). Apparently, Weichs handled this possibility with a marked reservation: he seemingly did not attach a high probability to it, and the consideration of this possibility was dictated to him by the strict rules of a logical thinking process, and, of course, by his knowledge of the importance and high priority the "high quarters" were inclined to attach to this scenario. What Weichs covertly thought of the views in "high quarters," emerges from the tone of the above cited passage as well as from the whole context of this diary notes.

Weichs's reservations are explained by what he wrote in connection with the second possibility:

"b) This will not happen so. As I doubt myself the feasibility of a solution of the a) type. In this case, however, we must reckon with the great national pride of the (Hungarian) people." Von Weichs also knew well the wartime performance of Hungarians, along with the limits of their capacity. But it was not this, but the historically deep roots of the Hungarian people's strength that he really wanted to call attention to. Therefore, he immediately added: "... the failure of our troops along the Eastern front line should not mislead us. In other words, we think that we shall get into the same situation with the Hungarians as with the Italians." Weichs believed the traditions of the Hungarian War of Independence of 1848-49 to be still alive, and it was these living traditions that he considered as a decisive factor. "They (the Hungarians) will also fight for their country's independence to the very last. We must remember" — he warned himself as he made these notes for himself only — "those uprisings which the then strong Austrians were never able to suppress once and for all."¹⁴

The rest of the diary convincingly illustrates the sceptical thoughts of the general charged with the military leadership of the occupation:

We must reckon with a general uprising (in Hungary) following a very short-lived state of shock, in which the Jews and various communist-inspired elements will play a major role. This will be an immense drawback to us, because we shall be forced to suppress the resistance, and later, by the time of the occupation, major forces will have to be engaged for a longer time, which, under the circumstances, is not desirable at all.

Having been stationed in Belgrade until then, Weichs flew to Vienna on March 13 to direct the preparations for the German advance into Hungary. He was annoyed by the rumours leaked out, and by the "gossips whispered throughout Vienna", which spread to such an extent that even the chambermaids in his hotel talked about them. So his uneasiness about what he was afraid might happen could not ease off. Thus, when the die had been cast, he had to act, and in a manner that his actions should be as effective as possible. "If we did not act," he recorded in his diary on March 14, "the surprise effect of our action would be made questionable." He continued to fear the expected successful Hungarian counteractions: "it seems increasingly possible that (the Hungarians) will take counteractions, which we want to avert."¹⁵

The following day, on March 15, Weichs jotted it down in his diary that rumours about the occupation of Hungary were spreading "like an avalanche." From the time of Horthy's trip to Klessheim, scheduled for March 18, he inferred that "this 'issue' is likely to be settled by political means." Moreover, having received some new information, he came to the conclusion that "the Hungarian issue" was supposed to have been, from the very start, to be settled within the domain of politics. Hence he remarked that "they [the top political leaders] played a double game" with the soldiers. "They kept the whole thing from us, thus pressing us to take the preparations seriously." Weichs was correct again when he assumed that this double game was also meant to soften up the

Hungarians. "First: the great secrecy and camouflage. Secondly: showing only part of the cards to the Hungarians, spreading, at the same time, rumours about their impending occupation. Obviously, this is the way we can bring pressure on the Hungarians. Our marching in Hungary is the last trump in their intimidation. In other words: a repeated use of the Hacha-recipe.¹⁶ At the Führer's headquarters, Horthy will be pressed to reshuffle his government and to give orders to the effect that no resistance [to us] be put up. Accordingly, our action should be prepared so that it could be called off even at the last minute."¹⁷

It really happened so. After the heated discussions in Klessheim, which were very successful from Hitler's viewpoint, when the Regent's train left to return to Hungary, the Führer cancelled his order for war planes to fly over Budapest, for the occupation of the Buda Castle, and the disarming of the Hungarian army. All this meant that the size of the occupying force could be reduced. The division of German rangers assembled around Belgrade could stay there, the deployment of the armoured division transferred from the Western front became unnecessary, and Hitler could also send back to their bases his special corps originally stationed in Denmark.¹⁸

Much has been written about the reasons underlying the repeated success of the Hacha-recipe. This solution proved to be even more favourable from Berlin's point of view than had been imagined by the Nazi leadership originally. The fact is that, simultaneously with the "friendly" occupation of Hungary, the Czech-Moravian state ceased to exist: it was transformed into a protectorate in the Third *Reich*. In turn, this development made it possible for exiled Czech leader Eduard Beneš and his entourage to declare an outright resistance to German rule. Thus it came about that occupied Czechoslovakia became an "independent" state as a belligerent party fighting on the side of the anti-fascist Allied Powers. Meanwhile the occupied Czech lands could live their everyday life relatively undisturbed, though their economic capacity was fully utilized to serve the German war machine. Hungary, in turn, could retain so much — and only so much — of its independence as enabled it just to keep the state apparatus together and to be differentiated from the Czech-Moravian Protectorate. However, this entailed almost exclusively negative consequences — at least from the Hungarian point of view. To wit, the anti-fascist powers were not misled by these developments, were not beguiled by mere appearances. They invariably regarded the Hungary as a satellite of the Germans, the potential of which benefited only the Germans. As Veessenmayer accurately formulated it in his report: "Every Hungarian peasant, worker or soldier whose deployment will ease our burdens, will also add to the Führer's reserves within the *Reich*."¹⁹

This raises the question of why the Hungarian leaders were so much beguiled by an illusion? Much has been written on this problem as well. Yet hardly any work treated the problem as one deeply seated in the contemporary Hungarian historico-political thought. In this context it is worthwhile recalling a story about a theatrical performance in the *Vígyszínház* (a leading theatre in Budapest) in late February 1944. It was the first night of *Aranyszárnyak*

(Golden Wings), a drama by Ferenc Herczeg, the highly popular writer and playwright who at the age of 80 was regarded as the doyen of Hungarian writers. (Besides, this was the last premiere of the author's dramatic works in his life.) Trying hard to galvanize some life into this historical drama were such eminent actors and actresses as Pál Jávor (acting as Imre Thököly), Artúr Somlay (as Emperor Leopold of Habsburg) or Mária Lázár (as Ilona Zrínyi). But even their great talent failed to moderate the bombastic phrases of the drama. This colourless historical play only served to prompt the sociographer Zoltán Szabó, a harsh critic of Herczeg's work, to express his devastating opinion on the drama in the newspaper *Magyar Nemzet* (Hungarian Nation), passing, at the same time, a severe judgement on the stereotyped view of history held by a part — in fact, the major part — of the Hungarian middle class.²⁰

Herczeg's dramatic work was so anachronistic in its spirit that the writer István Örley, who accompanied his mother to the performance, was able to follow the play for only 20 minutes, after which he suddenly left his balcony box and went to the corridor where he could give free vent to his laughter. This premiere was a remarkable social event, everyone who really counted in Hungary at the time was there: the Regent, the Prime Minister, as well as the other members of the government. After the performance, uncomprehending the situation, Prime Minister Kállay asked István Örley why he had left his box. When Örley gave him the unusually frank answer, the astonished Premier expressed his consternation: "How dare you laugh at a historical drama that brings tears to the Prime Minister's eyes?"²¹

This story has been told here only to reveal Kállay's outburst. It seems to be a statement of key importance which casts light upon the view of history which doomed to failure those politicians who — full of good will and true determination — made efforts to steer the country's ship to safer and stiller waters. However, with such obsolete views it was impossible to organize a resistance to the impending German occupation, what they could achieve at best was a mere survival. Ferenc Keresztes-Fischer, Minister of the Interior, was unable to achieve even that much. His sense of reality and danger failed him and he did not go into hiding — unlike former Prime Minister István Bethlen. Keresztes-Fischer was aroused from his bed and was arrested by German security men on March 19. His lot was later shared by many others.

Continuity with pre-March 19 days was symbolized by Miklós Horthy alone. This continuity — as has been referred to above in another context — was meaningless under the circumstances, considering that the regime was unable to turn to the political left for support. Horthy and his followers rejected the criticism offered in connection with the "Golden Wings" in the same way Kállay did. Their only response to Örley's critique of Herczeg's play was that the following day Horthy's Cabinet Office cancelled its subscription to the *Magyar Nemzet*.²²

After Kállay resigned, the Regent could hardly meet the challenges presented to him by the new circumstances. This situation was described by

Veesenmayer in his brusque manner: "Horthy lies beyond measure on the one hand, and is physically incapable of performing his duties on the other. He keeps repeating himself within a few sentences, often contradicts himself, and occasionally his speech fails him."²³

When the new government had been formed, Horthy retired to the Buda Castle for months.²⁴ Obviously, he needed some rest, but what was more to the point, he wanted to demonstrate his keeping aloof from the new situation. Though in Klessheim the Germans had promised certain "guarantees" for the country's independence, but their style of negotiating and their persecution of the Hungarian opposition politicians left little doubt as to the real situation. It was also a meaningful sign of the times that when Dietrich von Jagow, who until then had been the German Ambassador to Budapest, informed the Hungarian government of his release from his duty, he did so through the Regent's Cabinet Office, rather than through the Foreign Ministry.²⁵ With this, von Jagow wanted to stress the fact that the occupation had been much more than a political action. It was generally known at the time that the diplomatic relations of independent states were maintained and managed through the foreign ministries and not through the offices of the heads-of-state.

There were indications that Veesenmayer had modified, to some extent, his opinion formed in December 1943, and began to think more of the potential of the Hungarian passive resistance. Of course, he did so in awareness of the successes of actions which had been taken largely on his initiatives. Barely a week after the occupation, considering the possible future course of the Hungarian army, he held it more practical to lay special emphasis on the spirit of *Kameradschaft* and *Waffenbruderschaft*, i.e. the tactics he thought should be used was not to disarm but to win over the Hungarian forces, because in the reverse case — he wrote:

there is the danger that:

- a) the government and the Regent retreat,
- b) a unified opposition, ranging from the left to the right, is formed,
- c) a passive resistance is developed, in which the Hungarians are highly experienced,
- d) it (the resistance) changes into a general strike,
- e) while the resistance is not expected to be strong, it will still engage German troops, thus instead of reducing the number of the occupying troops... even more troops would have to be withdrawn from the front.²⁶

The marked change in Veesenmayer's former train of thought appears conspicuously in point c), even more so in point d), but in point e) he is noticeably reserved again. Though the commissioner plenipotentiary somewhat moderated the severeness of his judgements, he was disinclined to change his ruthless attitude and his harsh style, in fact, his successes made him even more arrogant in his ways.

In early May Veesenmayer introduced Otto Winkelmann, commander-in-chief of the German police forces in Hungary, and *Gruppenführer* Wilhelm Keppler, his assistant, to Horthy. In his brief report on the 40-minute reception — according to which the conversation was going on exclusively between the Regent and the *Reichs* commissioner — Veesenmayer thus summarized the event: "I did not fail to make proper reply to any point raised, and I supplied him so exact data and information that he (Horthy) finally found it more appropriate to talk about the weather."²⁷

Veeseinmayer was an outright fascist, but the fascist ideology could not prevent him from looking at things quite rationally. He knew that no preference should be given to ideological expectations in the hard political practice. Therefore, holding sway over the internal affairs of Hungary, he never used his great influence to help to form a major, unified fascist party, in fact, he preferred to incite conflicts among the forces of opposition. Though he would have welcomed Béla Imrédy as prime minister, and made every effort to have him appointed, when he perceived Horthy's strong aversion to Imrédy, and realized that his own efforts to this effect would certainly fail, he tended to play off against each other, rather than unite those political forces which were acceptable from the viewpoint of the Third *Reich*. He regarded this behaviour as the most effective and promising one under the circumstances. Besides, he also took it into consideration that Regent Horthy, however much he might underrate him, still remained a central factor in the country's life whose removal could only lead to a chaos which could hardly be overcome by political means. So what remained to solve the problem was brute force, though it was utterly disadvantageous to the *Reich* being under the greatest military pressure at the time.

Curiously enough, we know it from Veeseinmayer himself that Horthy also recognized the essence of these tactics, so much so that in late April he began to make inquiries about the possibility of creating a right-wing and extreme right-wing union, by which he hoped to put some limits on the power of the commissioner plenipotentiary. Veeseinmayer, in turn, tended to play off against one another those turning to him for support, and he also abstained from promoting any negotiations aimed at a fusion of those political forces.²⁸

Though Veeseinmayer was a clever politician from the viewpoint of the Third *Reich*, it was still the actual circumstances of the contemporary Hungarian society that really backed up his political line. The stereotyped, empty and ranting phrases that characterized the historico-political thought at the time have already been referred to in this paper. Reference has also been made to the problem of the regime's inability to come to terms either with the democratic or with the popular opposition; the latter manifested itself, first of all, in the activities of the popular, peasant-oriented writers engaged also in the sociological study of village life. Hungarian society was not really conscious of the existing danger: if it had been, it would not have cherished such illusions as had been expressed by the populist writer László Németh in his speech at the Balaton-szárszó Conference of these writers and other progressive intellectuals in 1943,

envisaging the coming end of the war.²⁹ The missing awareness of danger also manifested itself in the complete lack of resistance to the German occupation. Historiography and historical publicism have often referred to the heroism of Endre Bajcsy-Zsilinszky's solitary act of resistance. Here, however, it seems appropriate to call attention also to the fact that this heroic politician was not arrested in secret, but was carried off quite openly, in full view of a number of bystanders staring in silence in St. John's square. This raises the painful question of what the wounded politician might have felt when, having been seized by the Germans, he hailed aloud an independent Hungary, and his exclamation found no response at all among the onlookers.

Even if this society was not really conscious of the danger, it was conscious of its fears. One of these fears originated in the first appearance of bolshevism in Hungary in 1919, when the short-lived Republic of Councils offered the Hungarian society a good opportunity to gain some experience. In the same way, the memory of the "White Terror" which was born in retaliation to the former, was also still alive in social consciousness. And now, as the front-line was drawing near, the fear of a "red" revenge was also growing.³⁰ Ultimately, it was again the Germans who benefited from all this, because the state apparatus had long been paralysed by the same fears, and failed to save the nation from the catastrophe, though it was still able to work smoothly when the German interests were concerned. Otherwise it could hardly have been possible to conclude the German-Hungarian economic agreement on June 24 1944, which almost resulted in the complete fleecing of the country of essential supplies and resources.

As regards the Jewish issue, the mechanism of fear worked much in the same way.³¹ The three anti-Jewish acts, which had been adopted earlier, continued to undermine the country's social cohesion. At the same time, it forced those responsible for those acts, to keep together and to side with the Germans. Thus it came about that there were many in Hungary who became losers and there were also many who benefited from this situation. The stakes were sometimes bigger, sometimes smaller, but those who benefited the most were undoubtedly the Germans again, otherwise it would had been inconceivable that the tragedy of masses of Jews could ensue within an very short time. In this context, it will suffice to mention that SS leader Adolf Eichman and his small group of "experts" would be reduced to a state in which they would have been incapable of action without the cooperation of the major part of Hungarian bureaucracy and the effective and often brutal assistance of the Hungarian gendarmerie, though in this respect the attitudes and activities of the Jewish Council should not be left unmentioned either.

After the German occupation of March 19 1944, the fates of Miklós Horthy and Edmund Veessenmayer became intertwined for a few months. Those months,

however, were decisive, fateful ones. The respective roles of these two men came to an end after the abortive Hungarian attempt at getting out of war in mid-October. From that time on, their lives took different courses. Horthy faced incarceration in a German concentration camp which was followed after the end of the war by permanent exile from his homeland. In the meantime, in the months after October 15th, Veesenmayer undoubtedly worked even more effectively than before; in fact, the German official's career reached its zenith in that particular period.

The Hungarian Regent's fate had been spectacularly intertwined with his country's life for a full quarter of a century, but the months between March and October 1944 constituted the most unsuccessful period of his entire political career. The role he and Veesenmayer played in the period discussed in this paper — or, rather, only touched upon in several respects — may be appraised not only from the point of view of effectiveness, but also from that of the consequences. And, considering their efforts in the latter respect, Veesenmayer's activity should be deemed to have been even more negative than it appeared at first glance, because he had helped to prolong the sufferings of not only the Hungarian, but also of the German people.

NOTES

¹The German occupation of Hungary and its antecedents, as well as the events of months preceding October 15, 1944 are analyzed by György Ránki, *1944. március 19* [March 19, 1944] 2nd. rev. and enlarged edition (Budapest, 1978).

²*A Wilhelmstrasse és Magyarország. Német diplomáciai iratok Magyarországról 1933-1944* [Wilhelmstrasse and Hungary. German diplomatic records on Hungary 1933-1944], Comp., ed. and supplied with explanatory notes by György Ránki, Ervin Pamlényi, Lóránt Tilkovszky, and Gyula Juhász (Budapest, 1968), pp. 743-751.

³In 1526 the advancing Turkish army, led by Suleiman the Magnificent, inflicted a decisive defeat on the allied Hungarian forces at the battlefield of Mohács. This defeat opened the way to the 150-year Turkish occupation of the southern and central parts of Hungary.

⁴*A Wilhelmstrasse és Magyarország*, p. 743.

⁵What would Veesenmayer have said if a Frenchman, following his logic, had considered the events in Vienna as having resulted from the fact that Paris "had showed the way"?

⁶A Hungarian patriotic song dating back to the early 1850s, commemorating the War of Independence of 1848-49, which has been popular and often sung ever since, especially on certain national holidays. Composed after the failure of the war when Kossuth was already in emigration, the passage of the song referred to here expresses the people's hope and desire that Kossuth would return to liberate the country from the Habsburg absolutism, and then he would ask "once more" for "regiments" to help him. The full passage in prose runs like this: "Lajos Kossuth has sent a message: he had run

short of his regiments, if he sends this message once more, we all have to go [to war] ...". So the words "once more" relate to Kossuth's expected return — much hoped-for by the people — to resume the freedom fight.

⁷A *Wilhelmstrasse és Magyarország*, p. 744.

⁸*Ibid.*

⁹*Ibid.*

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 745. Characteristically, in this particular context, Veesenmayer forgot about making disparaging comments on the Hungarian passive resistance.

¹¹*Ibid.*

¹²*Ibid.*

¹³*Maximilien von Weichs vezértábornagy feljegyzései 1944-ből* [Diary notes of Fieldmarshal Maximilien von Weichs from 1944] in: *Az 1944. év krónikája* [The Chronicle of the year 1944], *História Évkönyv 1984* [The 1984 Yearbook of the periodical *História*], ed. by Ferenc Glatz (Budapest, 1984), pp. 43-44. (These diary notes were found and then published by Peter Gosztonyi in the Hungarian-language Munich journal *Új Látóhatár* [New Horizon] No. 1, 1984; certain details were also published by him in the *História Évkönyv 1984* [The 1984 Yearbook of the periodical *História*].)

¹⁴*Weichs vezértábornagy feljegyzései*, p. 43.

¹⁵*Ibid.*

¹⁶Reference to Emil Hacha (1873-1945), Czech politician, who after the German occupation became the president of the German-created Czech-Moravian Protectorate. Later he was arrested as war criminal and died in prison.

¹⁷*Weichs vezértábornagy feljegyzései*, p. 43.

¹⁸Ránki, *op. cit.*, p. 123.

¹⁹A *Wilhelmstrasse és Magyarország*, p. 749.

²⁰*Magyar Nemzet*, 24 February 1944.

²¹The story was recorded and published by Áron Tóbiás relying on his conversation with Zoltán Szabó in London. *Magyar Nemzet*, December 24, 1993.

²²See the preceding note.

²³A *Wilhelmstrasse és Magyarország*, pp. 787-788, cited by Ránki, *op. cit.*, pp. 135-136.

²⁴Some claim that Horthy became quite passive, but such views are denied by the facts; however, a sort of reservation can really be observed in his attitude at the time.

²⁵A *Wilhelmstrasse és Magyarország*, p. 785.

²⁶*Ibid.*, cited by Ránki, pp. 140-141.

²⁷A *Wilhelmstrasse és Magyarország*, p. 838.

²⁸*Ibid.*, p. 848.

²⁹"The Hungarian people has lived to see the end of this war under much better conditions than that of the previous world war. Its war losses are minor now, its welfare is higher, and its ideology is ready." These frequently quoted words were also cited by Gyula Juhász in his paper "Az uralkodó eszmék zsákutcája" [The dead-end of the prevailing ideas], *História Évkönyv 1984*, p. 106.

³⁰*Ibid.*, p. 107.

³¹*Ibid.*