

# HUNGARIAN HISTORICAL SCHOLARSHIP AND NEW FINDINGS IN THE HISTORY OF 20TH CENTURY INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

LÁSZLÓ BORHI

Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Budapest,  
Hungary

The short twentieth century witnessed tectonic changes in the pattern of international relations. Old empires, which had shaped the face of world politics for centuries, collapsed or gradually declined into relative political and military insignificance. The phenomenal rise of the Soviet empire into superpowerdom was as unforeseeable as its rapid collapse. Together with the United States, the influence of which on world affairs is probably unparalleled since the Roman empire, the Soviet Union had the power to unleash a war that could have destroyed the human race.

The twentieth century saw the emergence of the total war, the scientifically designed destruction of human beings and nuclear terror. Germany's bid for hegemony in Europe threatened the survival of European civilization as we know it. In trying to explain this trajectory from the global perspective, historians are confronted with the basic question whether the great cataclysms were inevitable, whether the course of twentieth century history proceeded on a predetermined track? Historians of small powers view the same events from a different perspective. For them there is an inescapable question to answer: are small states masters of their own fate, or is their lot decided by the more significant actors of the international arena? This approach adds also to our understanding of the global scene. Often times the in depth examination of problems neglected by historians of great powers because of their seeming insignificance in the larger framework of global relations sheds new light on the causes of major events and can in fact significantly modify our view on the bigger, fundamental issues of international relations.

This paper will present three cases where the findings of Hungarian historians give significant new insight into our understanding of international relations in the short twentieth century – 1918–1990.

The first such case will be the origins of the post-World War I settlement in Central Europe, which is widely regarded as one of the chief culprits in the onset of the most destructive war in human history, the Second World War. The Versailles settlement engendered regional animosity and thus destroyed all hopes of

resistance to German economic, later military expansion. It is widely believed that the Versailles agreements, bad as they were could not have been made any better because of the complexities of the issues involved. This reasoning adds the element of inevitability to future developments. But was there no other way? Do new sources help us understand better why the international system created by the victors failed to replace the stability of the 1815 settlement and collapsed so easily?

1918 saw the emergence of a power vacuum in the territories between Russia and Germany. The victors attempted to fill that power vacuum without considering the interests of those two, only temporarily incapacitated great powers.

In their quest to explain the disastrous treaty imposed on Hungary, Hungarian historians have paid a great deal of attention to the settlement in the Danubian basin. A breakthrough in this research came a relatively short while ago, when related French diplomatic and military documents became available for research for the first time. The Hungarian pioneers of research in French policies toward the Carpathian basin were Magda Ádám, Mária Ormos, Zsuzsa L. Nagy, and Ernő Raffay.<sup>1</sup> Recently a group of historians have published approximately 1600 of the most important French documents related to the settlement in the Danubian basin – most of them hitherto unknown – in two volumes. These two volumes are a product of a decade of research and for the first time enable us to gain an insight into the ideas behind the peace settlement in Central Europe in their full complexity. The findings reveal more than the causes of Trianon, they reveal the very motives behind the arrangement in Central Europe. We find that the Allies and their local clients consciously built the settlement on hostility rather than cooperation. The Wilsonian principles of national self-determination were discarded even for territories where they were recognized to be applicable.

The status of the Danubian basin was decided by territorial committees with the participation of the victorious powers. Behind the political and economic arguments put forward by the two countries really calling the shots, England and France, there were considerations of Western security. Namely, the desire of Paris and London to hem in Russia and Germany among friendly states, which in the case of a war would be able to mobilize quickly, and efficiently and without political obstacles. A few examples will illustrate this point.<sup>2</sup> The American representative wanted Hungary to retain Csallóköz and the town of Sátorajújhely because their populations were overwhelmingly Hungarian. Although the French did not dispute this claim, they insisted that Csallóköz should belong to Czechoslovakia partly for economic, but mainly for strategic reasons. Namely, they wanted the full length of the Ipoly railway line to run through Slovakia because that line provided a direct link with Subcarpathian Ukraine and points east. Sátorajújhely was split between Hungary and its new northern neighbour, so that a critical railway junction connecting the railway line due east with the line due south should remain in Czechoslovakia. A strategically significant rail-

road carried the day regarding the Hungarian–Rumanian boundary as well. Until the March of 1919 the exact tracing of that line was still undecided. Here, as in Northern Hungary, strategic arguments overcame the ethnic principle. The Americans were inclined to award Szatmárnémeti, Nagykároly and Nagyvárad to Hungary on ethnic grounds. The British representative admitted that these towns had a Magyar majority. Nonetheless, he recommended that because of the Szatmárnémeti–Nagyvárad line, this area should belong to Rumania. The French representative, Laroche declared: “The security of the Rumanian frontier will not be assured if the Hungarians at the same time control both the Debrecen–Békéscsaba and the Szatmárnémeti–Nagyvárad lines.” Laroche added: “If the Germans were in conflict with the Poles or the Czechoslovaks, the Allies would be obliged, in order to reinforce these states, to count on the goodwill of Hungary and they would run the risk of experiencing the greatest difficulties.” Leeper of Great Britain argued that if the triangle on the north–eastern part of the line, which the Americans wanted to give to Hungary, did not become part of Rumania, then the lines of communication between Czechoslovakia and Rumania would be broken. The railway lines allotted to Rumania had to be linked up with the international railway network of the Allies. Thanks to the lines bound north–south and east–west through Slovakia and Rumania respectively, the Allies were theoretically able to mobilize from the Adriatic to the Baltic and right to Ukraine through friendly territory. In such a way they had the opportunity to project military power against Russia and even Germany from all directions in the protection of their allies in Central Europe. In the context of such strategic considerations the ethnic question was of secondary importance, especially as far as the former enemy was concerned. Already in 1919 it was recognized that the territorial losses would thrust Hungary into the arms of a *revisionist* Germany but it was hoped that with the help of security arrangements in Eastern Europe the revisionist menace there would be *contained*.

In such a manner the seeds of revisionism were knowingly sown from the outset, and the possibility of a regional cooperation was jeopardized. The eventuality of a new conflict was foreseeable from the cradle of the new European order and the victorious powers committed a blunder when instead of mitigating hostility they actually attempted to build a system to contain it. When in the mid 1930s Germany began to reassert itself in the region and the West found no strength and resolve to arrest her ambitions, the region collapsed like a house of cards under the weight of German pressure and regional hostility.

The German occupation of Hungary on March 19, 1944 among other things resulted in the deportation and destruction of the majority of the last intact Jewish population in Europe, a community of 825 thousand people. These Jews were protected from the policy of “Endlösung” by the Kállay–Horthy leadership and their fate was decided by Hitler’s decision to invade Hungary. Why did Hitler come to this resolve? The answer seems all too obvious: he got wind of the Hun-

garian manouvers to abandon the war and was forced to resort to this solution in order to maintain the flow of Hungarian goods like oil, bauxite and wheat and to secure Hungary against the advancing Red Army. Yet, there are several problems with this traditionally held view. Hitler had known about Kállay's manouverings since at least April 1943, but instructed the Wehrmacht's planning body to work out the plans for Hungary's military occupation only in the wake of Italy's surrender in September 1943. In Goebbels's words, so that such "Schweinerei" should not happen again. Yet, Hitler did not decide on occupation until late February 1944. Why did he wait so long? In the early 1960s it was noticed that the occupation plans were worked out for the western part of Hungary only, but not the Trans-Tisza region. In fact, Hitler made the occupation of the Trans-Tisza region contingent upon further developments. This would be illogical if the German aim had been to arrest the advance of the Red Army. In the late 1970s the work of the diplomatic historian Gyula Juhász shed light on this apparent contradiction and helped to explain Hitler's real motives.<sup>3</sup> From the works of British historians we now know that at the conference of Teheran in late December 1943 the Allies decided on Operation Bodyguard, a plan of deception to convince the Germans that the second front would be opened in the Balkans. Juhász found strong evidence that Hitler 'bought' the ploy and the wish to strengthen his empire's southern flank would account for his decision to occupy Hungary up to the river Tisza.

From Juhász's research we know that the political and military leadership of the Allies would have welcomed the German occupation of Hungary from at least August of 1943. They were guided by the belief that Germany would need to divert a few divisions from the western theatre for Hungary's military occupation. Therefore Hungarians were encouraged and blackmailed to make them take drastic anti-German steps in the hope that such steps would provoke a German invasion. On May 21 1943 György Barcza, who was on a peace mission in Switzerland was told by the representative of the Foreign Office that England did not expect Hungary to do anything that would provoke German occupation and that – in view of the consequences – "could not imagine Hungary jumping out." However, on August 5 1943 the same person warned the Hungarian diplomat that "Hungary should immediately follow the Italian example (i.e. jump out) shouldering the risks... if Hungary failed to draw the consequences of this situation it would mean that she was once more siding with the Germans. She would thereby lose forever her chance of being handled differently from Germany by the victors... *Hungary should take this step even at the risk of temporary German occupation...*" The same message was communicated to Barcza by the American representative Royall Tyler. He told Barcza that Hungary should withdraw all her troops from Russia and turn against the Germans as soon as Italy's surrender was announced. Otherwise, the Hungarians would share the terrible punishment to be imposed on Germany.<sup>4</sup>

In August 1943 the British deputy chief of staff prepared a memorandum according to which Hungary's capitulation would cause political and military crisis in Germany, and in case Rumania should follow suit, Germany would end up in a crisis that she could solve only by occupying Hungary. If Germany would take the risk and pull out troops from elsewhere to invade Hungary, the consequent weakening of her position in other theatres would be to Britain's advantage. The deputy chief of staff recognized that no help could be extended to Hungary. A high official of the Foreign Office, W. Harris thought that Hungarian capitulation should be announced simultaneously with the Allied landing in Normandy.<sup>5</sup> He wrote to Roosevelt that the Germans obviously attached great importance to the eastern front and would not hesitate to divert a major part of their strategic airforce to keep their positions there. He believed that the Germans feared the loss of Hungary, Rumania and Bulgaria. "When we remember what brilliant results have followed from the potential reactions in Italy induced by our military efforts" Churchill continued, "should we not be short-sighted to ignore the possibility of even greater landslide in some or all of the countries I mentioned? If we were able to provoke such reactions and profit by them, our joint task in Italy would be greatly lightened."<sup>6</sup> The American military leadership had a similar view of the situation and informed the president in November 1943 that Allied positions would be enhanced if Hungary or Rumania or maybe both would be eliminated from the war, even if they came under military occupation. Finally, the U.S. government officially called upon Rumania, Hungary and Bulgaria to jump out of the war.

Insofar as the Allies did their best to make Hitler occupy Hungary – which the Fuehrer did not seriously consider until February 1944 – they must share the responsibility for the the decimation of the Jewish community in Hungary and all the other consequences of direct Nazi rule there.

The driving force behind Soviet expansionism has been the subject of fervent dispute among politicians, diplomats, political scientists and historians for almost half a century. However, much of what has been said and written on the topic is no more than speculation, because until recently the archives of the Soviet zone have been by and large closed for research. As a result of cooperation between Hungarian and Russian historians three volumes containig hitherto unknown Russian primary sources have been published, which provide a unique glimpse into the Soviet decision-making process. The documents include the minutes of the CPSU Presidium and relate to the Hungarian crisis of 1956.

Was the Soviet military crackdown on the first struggle for independence behind the Iron Curtain predetermined? What was the *concrete* cause of the intervention? What does the Soviet response to the Hungarian Revolution tell us in general about the Soviet decision-making process, Soviet foreign policy, and Cold War international relations?

The CPSU Presidium devoted its October 28, 1956 session to the solution of the Hungarian crisis, based on information obtained from the members of the Soviet fact-finding mission in Budapest: Mikoyan, Suslov and Serov. The Soviet leadership was deeply divided on the course to take. The old Bolshevik hardliners: Kaganovich, Molotov, Voroshilov, Malenkov argued for putting it down. First Secretary Khrushchev on the other hand called for the support of the Nagy government. Prime Minister Bulganin and Minister of Defense Zhukov sided with his view. Zhukov recommended the withdrawal of the Soviet units from the streets of Budapest and grouping them in specified areas; Khrushchev promised a cease-fire. This was too much for the hard-liners. Bulganin, who switched sides, warned: "the people's democracy collapsed in Hungary, the party leadership ceased to exist."<sup>7</sup> The discussion was resumed on October 30. On that day Khrushchev abruptly announced that "a declaration must be accepted today on the withdrawal of Soviet troops from the people's democracies." Zhukov agreed with the withdrawal, "if necessary, from Hungary too." Khrushchev talked about redefining relations with the Hungarian government and declared his support for it. A declaration was thereupon accepted on the de-escalation of the Hungarian crisis "in the recognition of the fact that a continued stay of Soviet troops in Hungary may serve as a pretext for the sharpening of the situation." For this reason the Kremlin decided on negotiating a troop withdrawal from Hungary. This decision was maintained in spite of the fact that on the same day Nagy opened his government to non-communists and disbanded the political police.<sup>8</sup>

In the meanwhile the Suez Crisis erupted. On October 29 Israel attacked Egypt and the following day Britain and France issued an ultimatum threatening to invade. On October 31 they proceeded to bomb Egypt. The same day the CPSU Presidium met once more. Khrushchev declared that the previous decision on Hungary should be reversed and the initiative must be taken to restore order.<sup>9</sup> All members of the organ who were present signalled their approval. The Soviet leadership changed its earlier decision for no apparent reason. Why did the Kremlin decide to crack down so suddenly?

Several considerations pointed towards intervention. Hungary had been an enemy in World War II, and Soviet women and children were allegedly being killed in Hungary. The Soviet leaders were handicapped by an inability to analyze the situation because they were captive of their own vulgar Marxist ideology. Bloc countries like the GDR or Rumania urged military action, the Chinese switched to a hawkish position exactly when the Kremlin chose a conciliatory approach. Moscow was worried about Yugoslav and Western designs. It was thought that the imperialists "were bent on smashing the Socialist countries piecemeal." Yet, surprisingly little reference was made to the imperialists in the Presidium meetings. Khrushchev made an allusion that "if we withdraw from Hungary" the imperialists would attack. But this was on October 31 and no one had raised this problem only a few hours earlier. Did hard-liners gain the upper

hand overnight by convincing others that the situation was getting worse and worse? This would be plausible, but the decision not to intervene was made despite the October 28 analysis that the situation was critical in the light of the belief that an intervention might endanger the bloc's existence.

Although we know what led the Soviets to intervene in the long run, we still do not know why peace was not given a chance even for a day in the face of evidence that the use of force was by no means a foregone conclusion. The minutes of the fateful Politburo meeting give some guidance.

On October 31 Khrushchev uttered what I think is the crucial clue: "Besides Egypt we would give the imperialists Hungary as well." There is only one event we can put our fingers on between the Soviet decision *not* to intervene and *to* intervene: the joint British-French ultimatum and the ensuing bombing of Egyptian airfields. The sequence of events reconstructed based on newly available sources suggests that the British-French intervention in the Middle-East was the immediate cause of the Soviet decision to crush the Hungarian Revolution. Bulganin on his November 1 briefing to the Presidium referred explicitly to an external factor: "The international situation changed. If we do not take measures we will lose Hungary."<sup>10</sup>

What general conclusions can we draw from this case study? In Cold War international relations the aggressive action of western powers immediately entailed Soviet response. In this case Moscow responded with its own aggression in spite of the fact that the Suez region was not part of its sphere of interest. Both crises assumed an East-West dimension.

A close scrutiny of the Presidium's proceedings tells us something about the motivations of Soviet expansionism. The element of ideological messianism — detected in Soviet foreign policy by, among others, George F. Kennan — were wholly absent. In fact, Soviet responses were clearly pragmatic and were arrived at after a careful consideration of pros and cons. Moscow was not worried so much about the cause of communism as the possible loss of its strategic periphery and economic empire. The Kremlin was ready to accept even Nagy's coalition government as long as it seemed to be the best way to keep Hungary in the bloc.

The Kremlin leadership acted the same way as any other group of decision-makers. They did not enter the crisis with an a priori decision for action. Military intervention was not predetermined. Yet, their capability to handle the situation was hampered by their ideological self-indoctrination. Nonetheless this did not preclude a genuine debate on the course of action to take. It is hard to squeeze the actors into boxes but rough groups can be defined: The old guard — Molotov, Kaganovich, Voroshilov seem to have been the most hawkish. Khrushchev, Zhukov and Mikoyan, who were more favorably disposed to the West than others, favored a peaceful solution prior to October 31. Bulganin and Suslov clearly

wavered. Instead of a Leviathan monster, as the Kremlin leadership is usually conceived – we are dealing with human beings facing practical dilemmas.

The lesson for small powers was the same as the rest of the century had provided: in situations of international crises their fate is less dependent upon their own actions as the constellation of the international scene and the moves of great powers.

### Notes

1. Magda, Ádám *A kisantant és Európa, 1920–1929* [The Little Entente and Europe, 1920–1929] (Budapest, 1989); Mária, Ormos *Padovától Trianonig, 1918–1920* [From Padova to Trianon, 1918–1920]. (Budapest, 1984); L. Zsuzsa, Nagy *A párizsi békekonferencia és Magyarország* [The Paris Peace Conference and Hungary] (Budapest, 1965); Ernő, Raffay *Erdély 1918–1919* (Transylvania 1918–1919) (Budapest, 1987).
2. For the deliberations on the new Hungarian borders see: Magda, Ádám editor-in-chief, *Documents diplomatiques sur l'histoire du Bassin des Carpates*. Volume I. Octobre 1918 – Aout 1919. (Budapest, 1993).
3. See Gyula, Juhász “A német–magyar viszony néhány kérdése a második világháború alatt” [Some Questions of German–Hungarian Relations in World War II.]. *Történelmi Szemle* (1984) 1–2. 269–278.
4. The Macartney Papers, Bodleian Libray, Oxford. Box 5.
5. Gyula, Juhász *Magyar–brit titkos tárgyalások 1943-ban* [Hungarian–British Secret Talks in 1943]. (Budapest, 1978), 218–220, 294.
6. See Warren F. Kimball editor, *Churchill and Roosevelt: The Complete Correspondance*. Vol. 2. 498–499.
7. Rainer M. János and Viacheslav Sereda, eds. *Döntés a Kremlben, 1956. A szovjet pártelnökség vitái Magyarországról* (Decision in the Kremlin, 1956 – The Debates of the Soviet Presidium on Hungary). Edited by (Budapest, 1996), 35–46.
8. *Ibid.*, 51–57.
9. *Ibid.*, 62–65.
10. *Ibid.*, 69–72.