

BOOK REVIEW

András D. Bán: *Hungarian-British Diplomacy 1938–1941: The Attempt to Maintain Relations*
(London–Portland, OR: Frank Cass, 2004)

András D. Bán's monograph is a study of the relationship between a small state and a great power during a time of international conflict. It captures the last great, if tragic, moment of Hungary's diplomatic service between the two world wars, as it struggled to balance between an all-too powerful and close Germany and an all-too passive and distant Great Britain. The book, divided into two large segments, first offers a linear narrative of diplomatic history, then surveys a number of structural factors constraining and influencing choices made by the players with which the reader has become acquainted in the first part. The sections are based on years of research in Budapest, London and the Hoover Institution in California, and thus rest on a wide array of printed and archival sources.

One should, however, not be deceived by the order of things. In Bán's view, neither aspect of international relations should be accorded primacy over the other. The young Hungarian scholar, who died prematurely at age thirty-eight in 2001, clearly perceived the constant interplay between structural and political factors and players, refusing to anchor his position at any single independent variable or some preferred causal mechanism. British-Hungarian relations are meant to be understood as the complex product of historical necessities, player preferences and identities, as well as the players' perceptions of the world. Structural and political factors of this complexity and range would indeed not fit into a single narrative framework or would greatly fragment the text by the constant switches between levels of analysis. Bán's choice of method is therefore both practical and productive, as long as one keeps in mind that the two sections are meant to be understood as offering a single picture together, and their dualism represents not a division in the world itself, but a constraint in the ways the historian can capture and conceptualize his or her subject matter. But just what is this single picture Bán offers?

The cover, dominated by a drawing of the destroyed Chain Bridge (a product of desperate German attempts to defend Buda and the western bank of the Danube), captures the essence of the book: it is the story of a path and a relationship derailed by the powers of history, the narrative of a course of events foreshadowing the fate of Hungary in the Second World War. Bán was of course a reserved historian, never venturing to boldly generalize from the historical mosaic he reconstructed, yet this intimation shines through the book. Hungary, the small East Central European state, under a fiercely anti-Bolshevik and authoritarian government, is seeking to maintain some degree of freedom of movement in the crucial moment when the sharpening antagonism of the real players should lead to a tightening of alignments, balancing on the part of great power blocks and bandwagoning on that of small states. The story of Hungarian-British relations between 1938 to 1941 is in this sense the story of an anomaly that history, tragically, corrected. Dependent on Germany both economically and politically (the main aim of every Budapest government being the radical revision of the 1920 Trianon Treaty), Hungary held on

to her ties to Britain, not without a degree of desperation, as she simultaneously failed to stop her slide towards the status of a German satellite.

The terrain chosen by Bán is therefore doubly interesting for the historian. It offers, on the one hand, an opportunity to re-historicise the era, in the sense of recreating the choices made and the context of those choices, rather than accepting, with an *ex eventu* reasoning, the outcomes that – obvious as they are – tend to cast the impression of determinism over historical processes. It also provides, on the other hand, an insight into the bureaucratic processes that yield foreign policy, revealing the fragmented, rather than monolithic, character of the respective national diplomatic establishments. For British-Hungarian relations could not have survived the first two years of the war the way they did, had a minority in the Hungarian foreign service and the political establishment not felt compelled to do everything in its power to prevent complete alignment with Germany. Their successes, however, were necessarily interim, as they ran against the grain of international events and the power shifts within the Budapest establishment alike. While these efforts may have made little difference in 1945, the postwar situation was not to be foreseen around 1940, and they must be evaluated with this in mind.

This stance may, in fact, be one of the chief virtues of the book. It reminds the student of history to free himself or herself, as best he or she can, of the knowledge derived from the ulterior temporal position of the observer, and devote considerable energies to recreating the historical situation with its complex interplay of perceptions, choices and processes. Bán's enterprise is, in this sense, true to the credo of classic historiography, seeking to capture both trend – Hungary's drift into German orbit – and the human labor as it manifests itself in history – in the efforts of diplomats of various sorts to counteract what they knew all too well to be happening.

The methodological conservatism of the book does not reveal itself to be a shortcoming of any sort. True, Bán had no interest in systematically investigating either the nature of the diplomat's perception of the world and the linguistic conventions that were as much the product of this mental image, as they were continuously recreating it. He also refrained from systematizing his findings in sketching the network he documented in the fashion of *Sozialgeschichte*. Yet these popular innovative approaches would have provided little value added, given that the aim of the research was to show how foreign policy was made by, and also formed those governing it. The chief contribution the book makes to our understanding of history is the way it captures the conflict between socio-cultural preferences and direct economic and political interests.

In the specific case on hand, as Bán reconstructs it, this interplay included, on the Hungarian side, the Budapest center of government, constrained by its revisionism and anti-Bolshevism, as well as the country's economic dependence on Germany; the thoroughly bureaucratic (in the Weberian sense of the word) diplomatic corps, and various NGOs and pressure groups operating in the field of foreign policy. Factors meriting a close look in Britain were also the establishment, interested civilian organizations and influential individuals, the Foreign Office, as well as the press and public opinion. Charting the history of communication between these players, Bán successfully recreates the foreign policy process, convincingly demonstrating that a committed minority in the Hungarian *corps diplomatique* persistently sought to enter into coalition with sections of the Budapest COG in order to hold on to a policy of balancing between powers in practice, while in theory they would have much preferred the – then utopian – British alignment of the country over bandwagoning with Germany. At the same time, Bán reconstructs with great delicacy the bureaucratic process in the Foreign Office, which never really became interested in Hungary due to its standardized procedures, which saw not the country trying to escape the German embrace, but a small state that would both economically and politically belong to the German zone of influence, and where therefore any major commitment,

such as trade and market-entry guarantees would in all likelihood prove to be an invitation for free-riding.

History has proved the FO right, chiefly due to the immediate or short-term benefits Germany was in a position to offer in the period, but also because German prestige, fed by Hitler's success story in the thirties, together with the traditional "Germanophilia" of segments of the Hungarian establishment, succeeded in undermining the legitimacy and the rationale of the balancing policy that had originated with István Bethlen's premiership in the twenties. Bán, as obvious in the above position, refuses to portray the German-Hungarian relationship as exclusively the product of Hungarian revisionism, he incorporates in his analysis the ideological and cultural affiliation of parts of the élite with Germany, if not with National Socialism specifically. He also shows that the economic ties to Britain were not quite as loose as usually – and summarily – portrayed in the literature; they in fact grew stronger during the thirties, even if Germany's leading position in Hungary's external trade was never seriously threatened.

All the minute detail presented by Bán contributes to a reevaluation of British-Hungarian ties. What used to be perceived as a forlorn hope, a utopian wish in the gigantic shadow of the Reich, is revealed as a minority alternative, albeit one that could not have mustered a winning coalition in Budapest, and the adherents of which were sober-minded enough to settle for a partial, rather than a full realization of their preferences. With this, Bán accomplishes his task of re-historicization: the British-Hungarian relationship in the period 1938–1941 is presented and analyzed in its own context, meticulously separated from both judgement and present-day knowledge. The strict adherence to the rules of his undertaking permitted Bán to modify the image of Hungarian foreign policy, showing the pro-British faction stronger than it would otherwise be supposed, yet without ever failing to document why the faction could neither represent its full program, nor muster a winning coalition in Budapest for a partial realization of it. Their failure removed the last alternative of complete alignment with Germany from the field of political consideration, sealed by Hungary's joining with the Reich in the overrunning of Yugoslavia in April 1941. At the end, the haunting image of the blown-up Chain Bridge returns to the mind of the reader, as Bán closes his work by the observation that "[e]verything that happened subsequently ... has to be seen as efforts in a situation in which Hungary was trapped ever since the spring of 1941".

How alternative is to be distinguished from utopia is hard to define, and the boundaries between the two are likely to be blurred. Yet Bán successfully presents to the reader a case where a utopia is revealed to have been an alternative at one time, albeit one that had very slim, if any, chances of being realized. It was an alternative nevertheless, since it had supporters in the establishment and Hungary possessed some degree of free movement in international relations back in 1938. The freedom of movement began to wane due to mounting German pressure and the arrival of the first payoffs for cooperation with the Reich, and so the alternative itself waned to a utopia. For this is how Bán – correctly, one might add – sees the futile wartime Hungarian attempts to preserve the semblance of cooperation with Great Britain in the eyes of the London government. It was not the desire of the moderate segments of the Hungarian establishment for cooperation that had vanished – but the freedom of movement that had still existed to some degree in 1938.

Gergely Romsics

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CONTENTS

<i>Bengi, László: Narratives and Fragments: Imre Kertész and László Márton</i>	251
<i>Bergman, Peter: Kertész among the Germans</i>	235
<i>Brandt, Juliane: Zum reformierten Konzept der Arbeit in Ungarn im 19. Jahrhundert</i>	39
<i>Dávidházi, Péter: Bedrängnisvolle Vergangenheit im Hafen der nachträglichen Redaktion – Schicksalsdeutung in Galeerentagebuch von Imre Kertész</i>	29
<i>Freifeld, Alice: The Terror of Cain: Return of the Deported to Hungary</i>	243
<i>Gács, Anna: Was zählt's vor sich hin murmelt? – Fragen über die Situation und Autorisation in der Prosa von Imre Kertész</i>	3
<i>Gerő, András: The Disintegrated Jew: Jew, Hungarian, Communist. An Identity Sketch</i>	179
<i>Gyáni, Gábor: Image versus Identity: Assimilation and Discrimination of Hungary's Jewry</i>	153
<i>Hatos, Pál: The Post-war Reformed Church in Face of Holocaust</i>	199
<i>Molnár, Gábor T.: Translatability and Tautological Structures – Tristram Shandy and Győző Határ's Hungarian Translation</i>	73
<i>Peremiczky, Szilvia: "Árpád and Abraham were Fellow-countrymen". An Outline of Jewish Literature in Hungary</i>	163
<i>Sanders, Ivan: Jewish Themes and Issues in Post-1989 Hungarian Literature</i>	213
<i>Szabó, Péter S.: The Christian Interpretation of the Concept of Labour and Social Progress in the Works of Ottokár Prohászka</i>	107
<i>Szegedy-Maszák, Mihály: National Literatures in the Age of Globalisation</i>	63
<i>Szemerkényi, Ágnes: The Appropriation of New Customs</i>	257
<i>Takács, Ferenc: Gyula Krúdy and Sindbad</i>	99
<i>Varga, Norbert: The Framing of the First Hungarian Citizenship Law (Act 50 of 1879) and the Acquisition of Citizenship</i>	127
<i>Varga, Zsuzsanna: Tradition and Subversion in Imre Kertész's Work</i>	223

BOOK REVIEWS

András D. Bán: Hungarian-British Diplomacy 1938–1941: The Attempt to Maintain Relations (<i>Gergely Romsics</i>)	271
Miklós Radnóti: Forced March (<i>Mihály Szegedy-Maszák</i>)	121

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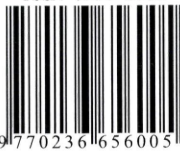
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