

## **An Attempt to Moralize Realpolitik: Reflections on László Borhi’s Article**

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László Borhi’s article “The Allies, Secret Peace Talks, and the German Invasion of Hungary, 1943–1944” explores the role of secret peace talks between the Western Allies (the United States and the United Kingdom) and Hungary as one of the potential causes behind the German invasion of the latter country on March 19, 1944. Borhi’s arguments—which have been rather widely appreciated as well as repeatedly critiqued in the Hungarian-language media in the first half of 2019, including by the author of these lines—thus focus on a *single factor* in what is a larger and more complex story.

While the connections between such secret talks—which, as Borhi rightly notes, were not all that secret to the Germans—and the decision to launch Operation Margarethe is certainly worth studying further, and the author does present some interesting evidence in this regard, he would have been well-advised to analyze Nazi Germany’s decision-making process more directly and in a more encompassing way. I claim that only such a broader analysis could have allowed him to make a convincing case about the reasons behind the March 1944 invasion of Hungary, an invasion of a fellow Axis state that had manifold and devastating consequences.

Additional factors behind Nazi Germany’s decision—the rapidly evolving situation on the Eastern Front, with the Red Army approaching the borders of Hungary; anti-Semitic obsessions as a factor in German calculations; broader regional issues such as, perhaps most importantly, Germany’s future possibilities to cooperate with and mobilize the resources of Romania; the recent “defection” of Italy as an intervening influence on German thinking, etc.—are all alluded to but not considered in depth. In other words, the article studies Allied–Hungarian negotiations and the former’s admittedly self-interested encouragement of Hungarian political illusions without aiming to establish the *relative weight* of this one factor as compared to several others.

A key conclusion of Borhi's article seems to be that "the German invasion of March 19, 1944 may have been triggered, at least in part, by the Führer's conviction that he was about to lose a crucial ally" (p. 96). As compared to some of Borhi's previously published assertions, this is not a particularly strong claim, nor does it offer a truly original insight. Borhi announces that "I had no inkling that seemingly disparate events—the secret peace initiatives, the Allied strategy to defeat Hitler, the German invasion of Hungary, and, indirectly, the Hungarian Holocaust—would all intersect" (p. 90). However, such connections have been studied by scholars before, not least by the recently deceased Randolph Braham, the former doyen of Holocaust historiography, on whose theses concerning Hungary's counter-productive negotiations with the Allies Borhi actually appears to draw. Unfortunately, Borhi's article does not discuss its exact relation to the existing secondary literature and, therefore, does not sufficiently explain what is novel about his findings.

According to my assessment, there are two issues that seem to distinguish Borhi's depiction from earlier professional ones: his refocusing the discussion on the Western Allies, and the moralizing impetus behind his arguments. Let me address both in turn.

It is indeed conspicuous how little the article analyses various Hungarian actors. The author briefly sketches the immense odds behind Hungarian attempts at a separate peace: "first, because of the sizable pro-German political forces in the country; second, because of the difficulty of making contact with Allied officials in neutral capitals; third, because of the fear that if the leadership in Berlin discovered the secret dealings, the country could be occupied by the German army; and, finally, because the Allies themselves were not sold on the importance of the peace initiatives emanating from Axis Europe" (p. 91).

I consider all these to be highly relevant observations. I also wonder whether more could not have been said about those who were nonetheless in favor of secret negotiations. Could we perhaps say that such people were—despite all their agreeable intentions and desirable goals—recklessly chasing dangerous illusions, and ultimately helped bring about the invasion of their country, with all its tragic and disastrous consequences?

While relevant Hungarian actors lack sharper contours on the pages of the article, Borhi makes rather strong claims regarding the Allies. For instance, he states that "Eventually, this position [to view

the German invasion of Hungary as a positive outcome and to try to time it to coincide with the Allied landing in Western Europe – FL] would guide Allied policies regarding the Axis satellites” (p. 92). It is clear that such a position, which aimed to provoke conflict between two Axis enemies, was based on rational premises.

At the same time, Borhi’s generalization that such a calculation indeed guided Allied policies requires more elaborate and substantial proof. How precisely did the Allies aim to encourage such an invasion, and what was the actual impact of their actions? Borhi touches on these questions and seems to suggest that the Allies exerted a large and perhaps even decisive impact. However, this is not conclusively proven, and in fact sounds unlikely.

Borhi’s refocusing on the Western Allies—i.e., away from Hungary’s ultimately counterproductive attempt to exit the war—holds the promise of an important addition to the scholarly literature. This refocusing, however, is executed in a rather problematic manner, as Borhi employs strangely moralizing language.

I am not convinced by the analytical value or even simple relevance of the conceptual opposition the article suggests between Hungarian negotiators’ “good faith” and the Allies’ (implied, rather than stated) bad faith or, let us say, scheming. (I should clarify that Borhi’s current English-language article admittedly does not really use such loaded labels, but his argument suggests such a moral critique, especially through references to the threatened but neglected Jews of Hungary. Borhi has also articulated such a moral critique in his earlier publications, most notably in his widely read and debated article that was published on *Index.hu* on the seventy-fifth anniversary of the invasion.<sup>1</sup>) It remains unclear to me what qualifies as “good faith” to the author and why; furthermore, we do not find out how he has established the difference between good faith, on the one hand, and scheming, on the other.

It seems to me that such a moralizing opposition is ultimately misleading, and even inappropriate. What I gather from the evidence is that the representatives of both Hungary and the Western Allies aimed to realize their respective national interests at a time of the greatest conflagration in world history. A crucial difference between them was that, whereas the Hungarian politicians and diplomats who wanted to exit the war and their country’s Nazi alliance had a very hard time figuring out how to achieve their central goal (and, as we know, they gravely failed in the end), helping to provoke a conflict between two of their

enemies seemed like a plausible strategy to the Western Allies, not least because of the rather short-sighted Hungarian willingness to negotiate with them. Moreover, such a potential conflict between Axis powers indeed appeared to be in their interest.

It is another matter that such Hungarian representatives, who were in an extremely difficult situation internationally and were probably short-sighted as well, were also in a vulnerable position in their own country, as pro-German forces remained dominant. Due to the latter factor—and contrary to the admittedly amoral hopes the Allies might have harbored—the German invasion starting on March 19, 1944 did not result in any major conflict, nor did the overall German war effort suffer. I would therefore be tempted to talk of a *rational, if provocative Allied miscalculation* regarding Hungary.

An issue Borhi's article leaves unaddressed concerns the political and military context of the so-called secret talks. The situation at the time was clearly asymmetrical. Even though in the very first paragraph of the article we read about "relative peace" in Hungary, Hungary was in fact an aggressor in World War Two; the "best-treated" Jews in the region were heavily discriminated against, and tens of thousands of them had already been murdered by 1943–44. As one of the aggressors facing imminent invasion by the Red Army and another defeat, Hungary was not exactly in a position to negotiate as an equal.

By 1943–44, segments of the country's elite were trying to reach out to their counterparts on the enemy side to ask for their benevolence and acquire some—unlikely—benefits. We might have a certain amount of sympathy for the ambitions of such members of Hungary's political elite (I certainly do), but we should also acknowledge that they took risks when they were highly unlikely to succeed. And that unlikelihood was not due primarily to the Western Allies' rational, if provocative scheming, but much more simply to the actual balance of forces in Central and Eastern Europe at the time.

Borhi's article is not focused on trying to account for the causes of the Holocaust in Hungary, nor does he discuss its main phase in the spring and summer of 1944. At the same time, the article does suggest rather direct connections between the German invasion of Hungary and the brutal destruction of Hungarian Jews, as well as, and more unusually, the country's subsequent Sovietization.

The former connection amounts to an especially moot question, since what I called above the rational Allied miscalculation clearly

acquires a strongly unfavorable moral dimension if we directly connect an (however partially) Allied-provoked German invasion to the genocide of local Jews. I would therefore like to briefly note here that the German invasion may have been, for lack of a more appropriate adjective, a necessary precondition, but it was not a sufficient precondition for the massive and utterly brutal extension of the Holocaust to the majority of Hungary's Jews in 1944. Scholars of the subject agree that only the proactive and highly efficient cooperation of Hungarian state institutions with their occupying Nazi German ally could have led to the deportation and murder of hundreds of thousands of Hungarian Jews in such a short period near the end of the war in Europe.

This in turn raises an intriguing problem of historical judgement. Prior to 1944, various concerned observers in Allied countries predicted that a German occupation of Hungary would lead to such a human-caused catastrophe, and Borhi's article offers relevant quotes in this regard; it did, but not exactly for the reasons such observers feared. What they should have feared as much as German Nazi plans to destroy the last, and despite significant losses, still largely intact Jewish community of Central and Eastern Europe was the power and fanaticism of Hungarian *génocidaires*. In other words, there were indeed people of good faith in Hungary in 1943–44, if perhaps too few and too naïve. More decisively for the genocide in 1944, however, there were also too many others with the worst intentions towards their discriminated fellow citizens, and they were clearly not directly triggered by the Western Allies but by a Nazi invasion they, in fact, viewed as an opportunity to carry out genocide.

In sum, László Borhi's article deals with an important and controversial subject. It presents some suggestive evidence, but frames its subject rather narrowly. Most importantly, the author could have provided a broader and more convincing analysis of the main reasons behind Germany's decision to invade Hungary in March 1944. This would have been necessary to establish the *relative weight* of secret talks in this decision and what specific impact the practices of the Western Allies had on Hungary and the war in Europe as a whole. Moreover, the article could have adopted a less moralizing tone, and tested more precise—not to mention appropriate—analytical categories than “good faith.”

## NOTE

1. László Borhi, “A szövetségesek provokálták ki a német megszállást, nem törődve a magyar zsidókkal” [The Allies provoked the German occupation, without consideration for the Hungarian Jews], Index.hu, March 18, 2019. [https://index.hu/techtud/tortenelem/2019/03/18/nemet\\_megszallas\\_1944\\_angolszasz\\_felelosseg\\_borhi\\_laszlo/](https://index.hu/techtud/tortenelem/2019/03/18/nemet_megszallas_1944_angolszasz_felelosseg_borhi_laszlo/).