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# HUNGARIAN STUDIES

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# MAJOR TRENDS IN HUNGARIAN FOREIGN POLICY FROM THE COLLAPSE OF THE MONARCHY TO THE PEACE TREATY OF TRIANON

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Hungarian foreign policy from the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy in November 1918 to the Peace Treaty of Trianon of June 1920 concentrated on maintaining Hungary's integrity and finding ways to break out of the international isolation in which the newly independent state found itself. Such were the aims of the regimes that followed each other in succession, and which are identified with the names of Mihály Károlyi, Béla Kun, and Miklós Horthy.

Keywords: Peace Treaty of Trianon, Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, Allied powers, Transylvania

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In World War I the dismantling of the multinational Austro-Hungarian Monarchy became one of the major war aims of the Allied powers by 1917. This policy was driven by the need of the Allies to undermine the home front of the enemy, and thus to bring about victory. It was ideologically justified by the principle of self-determination. President Wilson's "Fourteen Points," announced in January 1918, and soon after accepted as the publicly held war aim of the Allies, put dampers on these recently held goals. Article ten only spoke of autonomous development of the nationalities within the Dual Empire. By June 1918, however, even Wilson had come around to the previous position of the Allies, concluding that the Dual Monarchy had to go, as it was wished and willed into disappearance by the nationalities of the empire.<sup>1</sup> This revised war aim of the US president, however, did not find its way to the media at that time.

The impending defeat led the Austro-Hungarian Foreign Minister István Burián to propose peace negotiations with the Allies on the basis of the "Fourteen Points."

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The appeal reached Washington on October 7, 1918. Emperor Charles also took his cue from point ten of Wilson's war aims, and on October 16, 1918, announced the reorganization of his Austrian realm on the basis of ethnic and federal principles. He called on the various ethnic groups to set up national councils in order to bring about his sought after restructuring within the imperial confines.<sup>2</sup> The American reply came on the following day, pouring cold water on Burián's peace overtures and on Charles's reorganization plans. The imperial government was informed that the US recognized the Czechoslovak National Council; Wilson was thereby "no longer at liberty to accept mere 'autonomy'" of the Austro-Hungarian nationalities "as basis for peace."<sup>3</sup> The US message turned Charles' declaration into a symbolic date for the collapse of the Dual Monarchy, which had been created in 1867. On the same day in the Hungarian Parliament, István Tisza, who as Prime Minister of Hungary had voted for war in the Imperial Council in July 1914, admitted that the Dual Monarchy had lost the war.<sup>4</sup>

The Hungarian National Council was formed in Budapest on October 25, headed by a parliamentary opposition leader, Count Mihály Károlyi. The council was supported by three parties, the Social Democratic Party, the Károlyi Independence Party, and by the Radical Party. The last was under the leadership of the sociologist Oszkár Jászi, who specialized in the nationalities problem. It was he who had penned the council's twelve point program that included a call for the creation of an independent Hungary. It also outlined a foreign policy for such a Hungary. It featured the repudiation of the German alliance, and a demand for an immediate end to the war. It also favored recognition of the "newly created Ukrainian, Polish, Czech, South-Slav and Austrian states" and close economic and political cooperation with them. The program even outlined the need for the establishment of embassies abroad, to be led by reputable Hungarian democrats whose major responsibility was "to stress ties between the Hungarian and sister nationalities out of their common interest." In the spirit of the "Fourteen Points," the councils' last point spoke of the need to send to the expected peace conference representatives who favored disarmament and supported the establishment of strong international organizations.

It is significant to note, however, that the council was only willing to recognize the Czech, and not the Czechoslovak state. This indicated that the council had no problem with contemplating a future Austria shorn of some of its Czech, Slovene and Polish territories. As for Hungary, however, it was willing to part only with the autonomous kingdom of Croatia. Indeed, the program stressed, "In a new Hungary the distinction between the nation and the nationalities would lose its malignant significance. The country would change into a brotherly alliance of equal peoples who would support integrity based on common economic and geographic interests and not on national jealousies."<sup>5</sup>

On the night of October 30-31, a revolution of soldiers forced Archduke Joseph, the *homo regius* of Emperor-King Charles, to appoint Károlyi as prime minister—not because he was a party leader in Parliament, but on the basis of his being the president of the National Council.<sup>6</sup> In his newly-formed cabinet Károlyi took the portfolio of Minister of Foreign Affairs and adopted the foreign policy program of the National Council as a guideline for the revolutionary government. Károlyi assumed that with an international reputation as an anti-war politician, his leadership at the helm of the Foreign Ministry could be translated into successful foreign policy. Thus, he bet the prestige of the government on Allied support, which, in fact, failed to materialize.

On October 28, the Chief of the Austro-Hungarian General Staff Artur Arz von Straussenburg ordered immediate armistice negotiations. On November 1, the Allies communicated their terms. On the same day the Hungarian government denied the Dual Command's right to negotiate on Hungary's behalf. Yet on November 3, when the military representatives of the already defunct Dual Monarchy signed the armistice, the Allies considered its terms to be binding on both Austria and Hungary.<sup>7</sup> The Hungarian government nevertheless sought a separate armistice, hoping that such an agreement would mean its recognition by the Allies. It was with that in mind that a Hungarian delegation, headed by Count Károlyi, went to Belgrade on November 8. Its aim was to negotiate another armistice with the commander in chief of the Allied Army of the Orient, the French General Louis Franchet d'Esperey. Although military occupation of Hungarian localities by Allied troops were spelled out in the draft treaty, Article 17 guaranteed that the Hungarian kingdom would be under Hungarian jurisdiction. This article seemed to fulfill the Hungarian goal of preserving the country's integrity, and the delegation departed from Belgrade with a feeling of success. On the twelfth, however, the Hungarians were informed that the Allied Supreme Council in Versailles considered the Convention of Belgrade of purely military character with no political significance. This meant that the treaty did not represent Allied recognition of the Hungarian government. Actually, the victors never recognized the Hungarian government, which was initially headed and later presided over by Károlyi, during its almost five-month existence. The convention was signed on November 13, and became an appendix to the Armistice of Padua.<sup>8</sup> On the same day King Charles abdicated, and on the sixteenth the Hungarian People's Republic was promulgated.

Hungary's lack of recognition by the Great Powers gave an opportunity to Hungary's neighbors to use force, and to take some of Hungary's territory in November and December 1918. The nationalities' right to secede on the basis of self-determination justified their interventions. The Hungarians, on the other hand, insisted that the question of frontiers would have to wait until the upcoming peace

conference. Naturally, Hungary expected Allied backing for the democratic republic's goal to maintain its integrity. At this point the Hungarians could not imagine that the new state would be treated as a defeated power and would not be invited to the bargaining table in Paris.

As mentioned earlier, the Hungarian National Council's original declaration counted on democratic representatives to spread the good name of the new Hungary, whose aim was to have its nationalities coexist in a so-called "Eastern Switzerland." Yet Hungary managed to gain ambassadorial accreditation only to one country - the Republic of Austria. To stress his government's democratic character at a time when women were about to receive the suffrage in Europe, Károlyi sent a feminist representative to Switzerland. This was viewed by the Swiss government as an affront to the status quo. In fact, women received the vote there only in 1971. On November 29, 1918, Károlyi's step was decried by the French Foreign Minister Stephen Pichon as an impudent act. He indicated that it gave Károlyi's government "an ultra-democratic façade, though its unique goal is to maintain the enslavement of its non-Hungarian nationalities."<sup>9</sup> Pichon's view indicated that France had no interest in maintaining Hungary's integrity. Hungary remained isolated, and the Allies continued their wartime blockade. On January 18, 1919, the Paris Peace Conference opened without the presence of the defeated powers. Hungary was among the missing.

Much of Hungary's territory was occupied by its neighbors, who resolved to make their provisional conquest permanent at the negotiating table. French policy was hostile, while the other Great Powers seemed indifferent at best. On February 26, in order to put a stop to Romanian-Hungarian flare-ups, the Council of Ten in Paris adopted a neutral zone between Hungary and Romania. This would have forced the Hungarians to withdraw to a demarcation line that was reminiscent of the borders of the 1916 Treaty of Bucharest. This treaty accorded Romania not only multi-ethnic Transylvania, but also a huge chunk of purely Hungarian inhabited lands in return for joining the war on the Allied side. On March 20 the decision was handed to the Hungarian government in the form of a forty-eight-hour ultimatum. Coming from the Peace Conference, the document was seen by President Károlyi as the ultimate defeat of the government's effort to overcome its isolation and to hold on to Hungary's integrity.

Instead of accepting the ultimatum, Károlyi decided to call for the resignation of his prime minister and the government. He also intended to resign. He planned to transfer power to the Social Democratic Party, which was the only mass party in Hungary. He hoped that the socialists would be supported by the Socialist International, which, at its February Congress in Berne, had denounced a dictated peace and called for self-determination based on plebiscite or referendum. At the same time, he advised the socialists to seek the passive support of the commu-

nists, so that Hungary would not be attacked by the Soviet Russian Red Army,<sup>10</sup> which was reported to have some of its units nearing Hungary's frontier."

The socialists, however, went one step further. On March 21 they fused with the communists, and issued a joint communique declaring that they would take power. The concluding sentence indicated the new direction in Hungary's foreign policy: "For the assurance of proletarian rule in the struggle against Entente imperialism, a complete military and ideological alliance must be achieved with the Soviet Russian government."<sup>12</sup> During the same night they set up the Revolutionary Governing Council. Its president was the socialist Sándor Garbai, but real power was in the hands of the communist Béla Kun, the commissar of foreign affairs. Kun, a former prisoner of war in Russia had achieved distinction during the Bolshevik revolution and the civil war, had founded the Hungarian section of the Bolshevik Party there, and was a trusted comrade of Lenin. In November 1918 he returned to Hungary with two hundred supporters and founded the Hungarian Communist Party.<sup>13</sup> As commissar of foreign affairs, he was counted on to bring Soviet Russia to Hungary's side. Thus, unable to break out from its isolation by courting the West, Hungary embarked on pursuing the same goal by turning to the East.

On March 22 the Revolutionary Governing Council issued its first manifesto, which declared the creation of a Soviet Republic, whose government

will organize a gigantic proletarian army that will strengthen the dictatorship against the Hungarian capitalists as well as the Romanian boyars and Czech bourgeoisie... and offers the proletariat of Russia a military alliance.<sup>14</sup>

Thus, the major foreign policy aims of the Hungarian Soviet Republic were the same as its predecessor's: to break out of its isolation and to preserve Hungary's integrity. The latter, however, was coated in terms of proletarian internationalism.

On April 16, the communist daily *Vörös Újság* declared that the Hungarian Soviet Republic did not recognize the existence of a nationality question. It did not consider the non-Magyar speaking citizens of Hungary to be nationalities and believed that transforming the republic into a federal state would solve the language problem. On June 29, 1919, the state came to be called the Federated Socialist Soviet Republic of Hungary in the new constitution. Kun clarified the constitution by explaining that the right of secession was not mentioned because it was deemed unnatural in a proletarian state.<sup>15</sup>

Hungary's expectation to have Soviet Russia's help in fighting against Hungary's neighbors, who had Allied backing, proved illusory. Already on March 22, when Lenin was officially informed that Soviet Hungary was offering a defensive-offensive alliance to Soviet Russia, he replied only by sending his greetings

and left the proposal unanswered.<sup>16</sup> He failed to support a full scale Red Army push to unite with the Hungarians, although Commissar of War Leon Trotsky favored this strategy. Instead, Lenin chose Stalin's strategy to divide the army and make simultaneous pushes in the Ukraine and Siberia.<sup>17</sup> On April 11, Kun reported to the Revolutionary Governing Council that he had sent messages to the Soviet Russian Commissar of Foreign Affairs Gregorii Chicherin and to Lenin asking them when the two Red Armies would be unified on one front, and proposing that the Russian Red Army make an incursion into Transylvania at Máramaros (Maramureş).<sup>18</sup> On April 21, Kun fired off an impatient message to Lenin, asking why the Soviet leadership paid attention only to the Ukraine and Russia, and not to Hungary. Kun noted: "We always believed that the Red Army would come to our assistance. ... The Romanians and the Czechs are on the move."<sup>19</sup> Not receiving any reply, he appealed to Lenin again on the 27<sup>th</sup>: "Unification with Soviet troops through Galicia is a question of life and death for us... We are in a desperate situation, without an army. If you do not help us, we will share in the fate of the [Paris] Commune."<sup>20</sup> Help, however, did not come. Lenin considered the conquest of the Ukrainian Donets Basin more important than Khristian Rakovskii's plan of linking the Russian Red Army with the Hungarian through Romania.

Soviet Russia also failed to deliver less tangible, symbolic support, which was sorely needed by the Hungarian Soviet government. For example, in spite of repeated requests, the Soviet government never sent an official ambassador to Budapest. Nor was Nikolai Bukharin sent to the party congress as a morale booster, as was requested of Lenin by Kun.<sup>21</sup> It seems that Lenin was preoccupied with the Russian revolution at the expense of world revolution.

On August 1, 1919, the Hungarian experiment with communism came to an end. In his farewell speech to the Budapest Workers' Council Kun admitted that the Soviet Republic had failed militarily, economically and politically.<sup>22</sup> Invaded by the armies of the neighboring states, the government had proved unable to preserve Hungary's integrity. The failure of Soviet Russia to come to Hungary's aid also indicated that the government was unable to escape from its isolation.

After the collapse of the Béla Kun regime the new People's Republic of Hungary attempted to recapture the days of the Károlyi regime. It returned socialized property to private ownership, and abolished all socializing institutions.<sup>23</sup> The new government, headed by the socialist Gyula Peidl expected to seek Allied support, but four days later, on August 6, it was overthrown. In the shadow of the Romanian occupiers, István Friedrich formed a government. Friedrich tried to have a coalition cabinet, but it was not to the liking of either Horthy or the Romanians. In October the Paris Peace Conference sent Sir George Clerk to Hungary with the goal of putting an end to flux and to having a government in Budapest that could accept the peace treaty. On November 14, the Romanians withdrew from Budapest and a few days later, the counterrevolutionary National Army,

organized in French and Romanian-occupied Szeged, entered Budapest with Admiral Miklós Horthy leading the troops. That same month István Friedrich was replaced with the clerical Károly Huszár, who was backed by Horthy's forces. On November 25, 1919, in the name of the peace conference, Clerk recognized the government. For the first time since October 31, 1918, Hungary had a government that was recognized by the Western Great Powers. Hungary was on the threshold of breaking out of its isolation. Back in Paris, on December 1, 1919, Sir George could report that the Hungarians wanted to collaborate with the Allies and wished "to prove their good intentions."<sup>24</sup>

In January 1920, corrupt parliamentary elections were held under the watchful eyes of the National Army. When on February 3, 1920, the Conference of Ambassadors in Paris expressed its objection to the restoration of the Habsburgs in Hungary, it was an implicit signal that the Great Powers favored Horthy leadership over Hungary.<sup>25</sup> On March 1, 1920, Admiral Horthy, who since November 1919 had been de facto leader of the country, was "elected" regent of the Kingdom of Hungary by Parliament. It was under his stewardship that the Hungarian peace delegation was summoned to Paris to accept the preliminary terms of the peace treaty on January 15, 1920. The head of the delegation, Count Albert Apponyi, presented several notes that reflected that the counterrevolutionary Horthy regime was as insistent on territorial integrity as its revolutionary predecessors were. In one of them he declared: "The overwhelming majority of the ethnic groups in Hungary, even if incited to action by some leaders, had never desired to break away or separate themselves from the country to which they had centuries-old ties."<sup>26</sup> The Allied representatives were not won over to the Hungarian position by Apponyi's eloquence. Further resistance to the Carthaginian peace terms threatened international isolation.

In March, however, a glimmer of hope appeared, indicating Hungary could reverse the proposed peace terms and break out of its isolation. This was related to some changes in the French political leadership. The new premier and foreign minister, Alexandre Millerand, and the Quai d'Orsay's general secretary, Maurice Paléologue, seemed to believe in a restructuring of Eastern Europe that assigned a role to Hungary. For the sake of stability Paléologue favored a Danubian *Zollverein* for the lands of the defunct Dual Monarchy. In this new constellation, Hungary was seen as having a central role due to its geography and economy. The Hungarians, however, were unwilling to come to terms unless France supported, among other points, the reannexation by Hungary of some of the territories they were about to cede de jure, but already had lost to force by its neighbors. Autonomy for the Hungarians and Saxons in Transylvania that had been taken by Romania was also demanded.

On May 5, 1920, in the midst of Franco-Hungarian negotiations, the final peace terms were handed to the Hungarian peace delegation. The Allied and Hungarian

government representatives signed the treaty on June 4, 1920, at the Trianon Palace in Versailles. The Hungarian National Assembly ratified it on November 15, 1920. By August the Franco-Hungarian negotiations hit an impasse. Political considerations prevailed in Paris, as most French decision-makers did not wish to upset Hungary's neighbors. The news of a possible Franco-Hungarian rapprochement prompted a Czechoslovak-led Little Entente with Yugoslavia, which was joined by Romania later.<sup>27</sup> By 1920-1921, the cost for Budapest's attempt to break out of isolation by improving relations with a victorious Great Power was its virtual encirclement and isolation by the small powers: its neighbors.

The Treaty of Trianon reduced Hungary's territory and population to one-third of its pre-armistice size - from 283,000 km. square to 93,000 km. square and from 20.8 million to 7.6 million people. Approximately 3.2 million ethnic Hungarians found themselves outside of Hungary's borders. The Horthy regime was forced to accept the new realities and, as the Franco-Hungarian negotiation indicated, was willing to think in terms of limited revisionism. Yet, responding to the so called Trianon shock of the Hungarian nation, it embraced a public policy stressing integral revisionism. The rallying cry of the Hungarians became "*nem, nem, soha*" [no, no, never], a slogan that had first been coined by the propagandists of the revolutionary Károlyi régime.<sup>28</sup> It became the sound bite for the counter-revolutionary Horthy régime. These avowed intentions, however, put Hungarian foreign policy into a straightjacket.<sup>29</sup> This meant that during the interwar years a true breakout from international isolation could have been and was achieved only via the support of other revisionist powers, first Fascist Italy and later Nazi Germany.

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